

# Traditions

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♥ Hammered Dulcimer







*Cover photograph: Lilah Gillett of Overland Park has grown up with a long-standing family tradition of hammered dulcimer playing.*

*Back photograph: All types of music can be played on dulcimers, including square dance music, waltzes, hymns, and popular songs.*





*Playing a fast tune requires practice. The key to playing fast is to strike one note with one hand and the next note with the other hand and so on.*



We know the dulcimer was brought from England to America with the first colonists. It was mentioned in a log book of a ship bound for Jamestown in 1609. Today, however, it is obvious that dulcimers have come to America from many cultural backgrounds. While these instruments are similar, they have been called by different names and vary in use and design. The Hungarians, Slovaks, and Romanians called their instrument a *cimbalom*. It was a very elaborate dulcimer and was used by Hungarian gypsies and played in concerts. The Volga Germans still play their *hackebrett* in polka bands in the Midwest. The Greek *santouri*, Chinese *yang ch'in*, and Ukrainian *cymbaly* are also names for similar instruments. Although these traditional names are occasionally still used, the common name for this instrument today is dulcimer after the Latin and Greek words *dulce* and *melos*, which combine to mean *sweet tune* or *sweet melody*. The term hammered dulcimer is often used since small mallets or hammers are used to create the sound.

Dulcimers became common instruments in the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because of the dulcimer's portability and simplicity, it was much more practical than the piano for many settlers. Dulcimers were often built at home or in small woodworking shops, and written records about the instrument were scarce until the mid-1800s. Since there were so many makers, there were many variations in design.

Beginning in the 1840s, factories in New York were producing large numbers of standardized dulcimers. They hired salesmen to travel all over the country and into Canada playing and selling dulcimers from \$12 to \$50 a piece. Often they would be paid in cattle, and when they had sold all of their instruments, they would go to Chicago, sell the cattle, and return home.

Despite all of the dulcimer making and playing in nineteenth-century America, the dulcimer's popularity began to decline by the 1890s and even earlier in New England. Several factors caused this to happen. One of the dulcimer's main advantages was that it was portable. With the improvement of American shipping and transportation after the Civil War, this advantage became less important. At the same time, prices for pianos dropped so many more people could afford to have one. Music education was being introduced into the public schools by this time, and teachers were taught to concentrate on the classical styles of music. Therefore, people began to feel that dulcimers were less sophisticated than the piano or violin.

This decline was reflected commercially by the large mail order companies. Sears, Roebuck and Co., for example, stopped advertising dulcimers around 1903. Dulcimer-making shops went out of business. By World War I, people turned to the guitar, mandolin, and piano, which were endorsed by educators and the media as being preferred for popular music.

However, some dulcimer players continued to perform and keep the traditional music alive. In the 1920s Henry Ford helped to extend the popularity of dulcimer music. As a young man he had been charmed by the dulcimer. In 1924 he established Henry Ford's Early American Orchestra which consisted of a violin, double bass or tuba, dulcimer, and *cimbalom*. Ford held the belief that older music styles promoted what he considered the virtue of old-fashioned morality. His orchestra played regularly at square dances for the employees of Ford Auto Manufacturing.

By the 1960s dulcimer players began to perform at folk festivals, and an increase in the instrument's popularity took place. Some credit Elgia C. Hickok (1894-1967), a traditional player from Sears, Michigan, who appeared at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival, for the renewed interest in the dulcimer. Hickok was founder of the Original Dulcimer Players Club, organized in Michigan in 1963.

In the past twenty years the dulcimer has become more visible in many parts of the country. Dulcimer players have performed at folk festivals and concerts, and modern dulcimer recordings are easily available.

## DULCIMER MUSIC

All types of music is played on the hammered dulcimer, including square dance music, waltzes, hymns, and popular songs. Historically in America, dulcimers were most often played at dances. Therefore, much dulcimer music is dance music or fiddle tunes such as reels, jigs, waltzes, and schottisches. Songs such as *Soldier's Joy*, *Durang's Hornpipe*, and *Speed the Plough* are all popular dulcimer tunes.





*Lilah Gillett teaches many students how to play the dulcimer. Barbara Learned of Lawrence has studied with Lilah.*

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Several nineteenth-century musicians published dulcimer tune books offering their own instructions which included traditional tunes arranged for the dulcimer. Some of these tunes are still played today. Interestingly, most dulcimer players did not read music, and continued to "play by ear," learning by "picking it up" from older players. Once the tuning of the dulcimer is understood, finding melodies is achievable.

In the late 1800s the dulcimer was popular at square dances and was usually played in conjunction with a fiddle. However, the dulcimer could be heard with almost any combination of instruments such as piano, guitar, or banjo. Some dulcimer players only played chords, while others played the lead as well.

### REGIONAL STYLES OF DULCIMER PLAYING

There is no doubt that the interpretation of a tune is influenced by the country of its origin. For example, English music tends to have an elegance in its simplicity and courtliness. The song *Prince William* demonstrates this principle. Irish music tends to be quick and light, as well as more melodic than chordal. The music of Scotland tends to be more haunting than Irish music and is played at a slower pace.

In the United States the musical styles from many countries come in contact with each other. However, because of the nature of traditional music, regional playing styles emerge. The states in which the dulcimer had its greatest popularity initially included New York, Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. However, dulcimers eventually spread to most parts of the United States. Since dulcimer playing was so wide and the music was passed on from player to player, no standardized style of playing emerged. Instead, regional playing styles emerged.

Players in Michigan, northern Ohio and Indiana favor a playing style with strong chording including melody with harmony notes. The use of *arpeggios*, meaning the tones of a chord are played in succession and not simultaneously, is also part of this regional style. This results in a continuous flow of sound accompanying the melody which at times is played on another instrument such as a fiddle. West Virginia players are more heavily influenced by banjo style music which results in a more straightforward melody. Long notes are obtained by repeated attacks with alternating hammers. In New York, dulcimer music features a wide dynamic range with a complex melody line.

In Kansas, dulcimer music is characterized by strong rhythm with melody and rhythmic bouncing of hammers. The hammered dulcimer is closely associated with the Germans from Russia, or Volga Germans. These are people whose ancestors left Germany to



settle in Russia under the reign of Catherine the Great. In return for farming the Plains of Russia they were given special privileges, such as free land and exemption from taxes and military service. In later years when these privileges were revoked, many of these Germans immigrated to the American West, including Kansas.

Among Volga Germans the hammered dulcimer is used to play dance music, particularly the traditional music associated with the *Hochzeit* or wedding customs. This music, like other forms of folk music, is passed down from generation to generation without the benefit of written documentation. The use of the dulcimer began to fade when more weddings began to be held in large halls. It is difficult for a dulcimer to project enough sound to fill a large hall. Gradually the dulcimer has been replaced by the accordion. However, some dulcimer music can still be heard at a traditional *Hochzeit* where one of the most requested songs of brides and grooms is the *Westphalia Waltz*.

Unfortunately, regional styles are all but disappearing. This can be attributed to the availability of albums and tapes, and from festivals and workshops where dulcimer players learn new material and techniques, producing a more homogenized style of playing. Contests also lead to the standardization of playing styles.

## THE INSTRUMENT

The basic shape of the dulcimer is trapezoidal, however, there were many regional and individual variations in America. In general these instruments are 30-48 inches long, 12-24 inches in width, and 2-6 inches in depth. Brass or steel strings can number from 40 to 120, with the average instrument having about 60. Dulcimer strings are arranged in groups or *courses* of 2-6 strings each, and the strings of each *course* are tuned to the same pitch. All strings run lengthwise across the instrument.

The dulcimer has two sets of string *courses*, the treble and the bass. The treble *courses* cross over the treble bridge, which is a carved strip of hardwood about an inch high. This bridge is near the center of the instrument. The treble strings are tightened over it, causing the shorter strings on either side to sound at higher pitches. The bass *courses* pass through



*Elsie Gillett's father, Elsie C. Michok, organized the "Original Dulcimer Players Club" in Michigan. Elsie has continued this tradition by founding the Prairie Dulcimer Club which is a chapter of the Original Dulcimer Players Club of Michigan.*



holes carved in the treble bridge and over the bass bridge at the side of the soundboard. For these *courses* the full length of the string sounds, so the pitch is lower. The bass bridge also has carved holes that allow the treble *courses* to pass through. The two sets of strings form a crisscross pattern. Pins on each side of the instrument hold the strings in place.

Dulcimers are usually tuned with a fifth interval between notes on either side of the treble bridge. When the bridge is properly placed, tuning a note on one side of the treble bridge will automatically tune the opposite side to the proper fifth interval.

Hammers have been made from many different materials, and many dulcimer players experiment with making their own hammers to achieve the exact feel and sound desired. Bent pieces of cane or curved sticks are the simplest form of hammers. Today, most hammers consist of thin handles with knobs on one end. A hammer with a plain wooden knob gives a sharp sound. To create a softer, mellower tone, a hammer with the knob covered in leather or padded felt can be used. Hammers are usually held between the thumb and forefinger or between the forefinger and long finger of each hand. In striking the strings, it is best to strike fairly close to the bridge. When hammers are held firmly, but not tightly, they will rebound cleanly off the strings if struck sharply. When the hammers are held a bit more loosely, they will rebound several times, producing the rolls that can characterize dulcimer playing.

The dulcimer can have a soft and gently haunting sound when played in the minor keys. It can also have a driving sound which is evident in some reels and ragtime songs. The tone of the dulcimer is intriguing because it incorporates both the sounds of string and percussion instruments.

## CONCLUSION

Dulcimer playing, just like other forms of folk music, is ever changing. Since traditional music is passed on from parent to child and neighbor to neighbor, it is adapted and embellished over time. Folk music is not so much the composition of one musician as it is the sum total of the aesthetic choices made by all of the musicians who have played the song.

Most traditional players are delighted at the renewed interest in the dulcimer. Much like in the past, masters of the dulcimer are passing their skills on to interested students. As traditional performers meet and trade tunes with a younger generation of musicians, dulcimer music can not help but change. Many of the distinct regional styles, which survived because of their isolation, have begun to disappear. As styles merge, a more unified American dulcimer style is becoming apparent. Although the fading of some traditional styles could be viewed with concern, it does ensure the survival of the dulcimer for the future.

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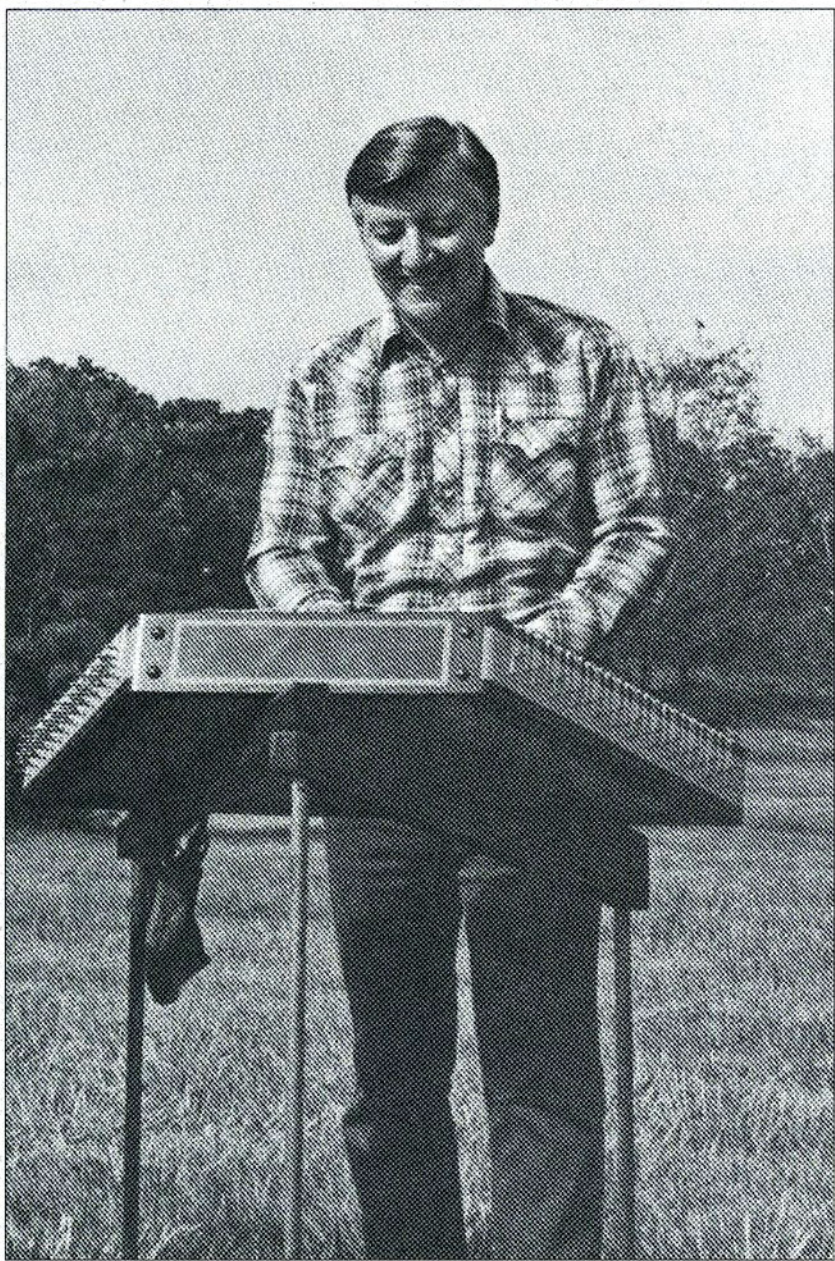
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*Harvey Prinz, formerly of Overland Park, became interested in building dulcimers as a hobby and has become well-known for his instruments.*



# Home On The Range

Key of D

3/4

A A D E F# D C# B G G G F# G

F# D D D C# D E# E A A D E

F# D C# B G G G G G F# E D

C# D E D D A C# G# F# E

F# F# A A D D D D C# D E#

E A A D E D D C# B G G

G G G A E D A D E D D

# Soldier's Joy

Key of D

2/4

F# G A F# D F# A F# D F# A D D G# D

A F# D F# A F# D F# G E E F# G A F# D F# A F# D F#

A D D G F# G F# D E G E C# D D D

D E F# D F# A G F# E C# E G# F# E C# E G# F# E

F# D F# D F# A G F# E D D# B A G F# D F# D A G F#

E C# E C# A G F# E F# A F# D E G E C# D D D



## TRADITIONS

Kansas has a rich and diverse folk art heritage. Within the state, artists continue to practice art forms that are passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. Our folk arts are traditional in that they are part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. No set time period is necessary, however, for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, an art form must have existed long enough to enable variations to develop. Once something is "in tradition" it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead local variants can be found.

Folk art is community bound. We all belong to many groups or communities throughout our lifetimes. Ethnic, religious, occupational, and familial are but a few of the communities in which we maintain memberships. To provide continuity in our lives, some communities extend over time and distance thereby creating a traditional culture. The folk arts of a group have been selected and supported by a number of people within the community. A folk art is the product of a series of choices made by individuals which in turn have been accepted by the group. Folk culture therefore represents the sum total of a community's choices, linking the present to the past.

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NATIONAL  
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THE ARTS

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