

INSTRUMENTS FOR BEGGARS AND PEASANTS

Bagpipe, hurdy-gurdy, scheitholt and more

In the 13th century a schism made its way through the musical instruments of Europe: Genteel aristocrats and the nobility wished to set themselves apart from the art of craftspeople and farmers. Furthermore, the newer and »educated« polyphony of certain instruments was now being contested as they turned into specific »folk instruments«; Michael Praetorius, in his *Organographia* of 1619, speaks of »instruments for beggars and peasants« (p. 57).

Among the older polyphony is the bourdon, or playing music with consistent and unchanging notes, such as we hear with the bagpipe. However, the scheitholt (known in France as the *épinette des Vosges*) played bourdons as well: One of the three or four brass strings on this zither is marked with »frets« – small bridges for noting the tone steps; the player uses a little stick to press the string down onto a specific fret, thus creating

the melody. Regarding this manner of play, Praetorius says that all the strings have to be strummed down near the bottom continually with the right thumb. By applying this simple technique the player creates melody and accompaniment, whereby the latter consists of the consistent notes (keynote and fifth) of the strings not touched by the bow.

This is one of the trademarks of newer European folk music: The player produces stunning effects via a relatively simple procedure based on the nature of the instrument. Millennia ago, when a wind player first put two or three instruments up to his mouth simultaneously, this undoubtedly earned the respect of a grateful audience. The bagpipe has been documented as far back as Roman antiquity, which initially did not allow for any sounds other than those the player could already make with several instruments; yet it simplified playing in that the »bag« (often sheep or goat hide) formed an air cell that the player previously had to create with their cheeks. Now there are more than three instruments that can be created with animal hide. The famous Scottish bagpipe has four pipes: one held down for the melody, three left standing for the drone, or bourdon. The player blows air into the bag through a fifth pipe; the pipes are sealed by a one-way valve as the player presses the hide with their elbows. This prevents the air from flowing back, but rather it must pass into the pipes. These are always »shawms«, i. e. reed instruments. From the structure of the melody and drone pipes alone there are some ten different types of bagpipes, from Indian instruments with only one pipe, the stately French musette with two pipes (enhanced by an extension of the tonal range), up to six retunable bourdons in a »canister«.

One testament to the usage of the hurdy-gurdy is Schubert's song »Der Leiermann« from his cycle »Die Winterreise«. The left hand of the piano accompaniment is limited to striking a fifth; it mimics the sound of the drone strings of a hurdy-gurdy. The player of this instrument uses a crank to turn a wheel, which strikes multiple strings at a time. One string (or two for a stronger sound) may be played melodically with a sort of keyboard. The remaining strings, which can be turned off as needed, function as a drone, and one of them also beats a »snare fret« on the soundboard. Via lightning-quick changes in the speed of spinning, the player and the fret produce accents that are then frequently applied to every tone of the melody.

Of course, operation such a complex musical device was not only a feature of artistry but for the player it



The Hurdy-Gurdy Player, Georges de La Tour (1593–1652), INV340, Nantes, musée des Beaux-Arts © RMN-Grand Palais / Gérard Blot



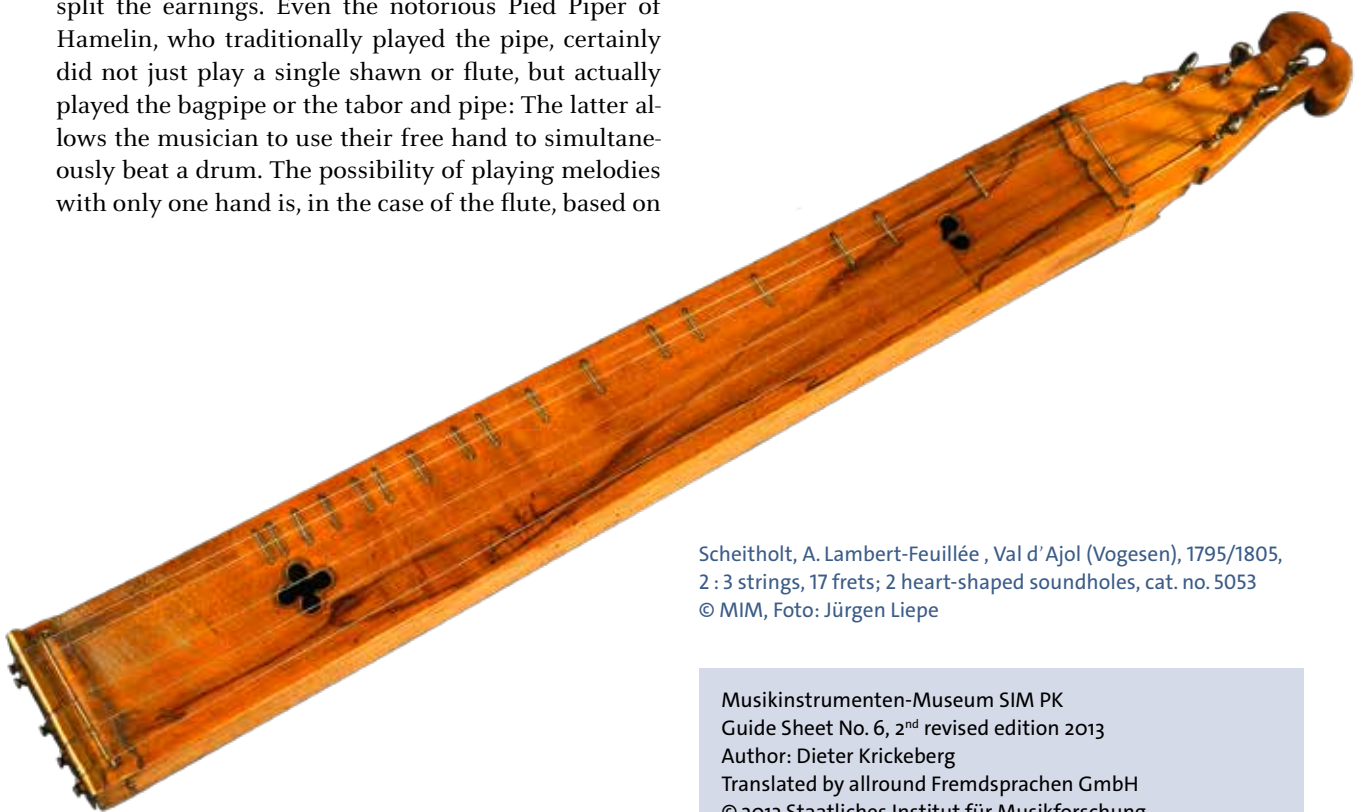


Zampogna (bagpipe), Southern Italy or Sicily, cat. no. 5215
© MIM, photo: Jürgen Liepe

was also about providing the playing public with the sound of an entire musical group without having to split the earnings. Even the notorious Pied Piper of Hamelin, who traditionally played the pipe, certainly did not just play a single shawn or flute, but actually played the bagpipe or the tabor and pipe: The latter allows the musician to use their free hand to simultaneously beat a drum. The possibility of playing melodies with only one hand is, in the case of the flute, based on

the technique of overblowing: Should the player blow harder into their instrument, the ton jumps into the higher fifth; if c is the lowest tone, the flautist reaches d, e and f with the three finger holes of the flabiol. When overblowing, g, a, h and the higher C are made with the same holes.

Some of the most important folk instruments are the violins, referred to in Norway as »felen«. The felen from the Hardanger region have sympathetic strings like the viola d'amore. The flat bridge of the felen facilitates the simultaneous playing of multiple strings. Grieg was especially inspired by the violin music of the farmers of his homeland, and also owned a Hardanger violin which is currently preserved in our museum (cat. no. 4446). 19th-century composers' affection for the folk music of the homelands had nothing more to do with the condescension expressed by Praetorius when he speaks of the ability of the bowed clavier to imitate other instruments (*Organographia*, p. 70): »It can be played in the manner of a hurdy-gurdy and can sound like bagpipes and shawms: This can provide enjoyment for women and children/who do not pay much attention to music otherwise/as well as for the nobility/once they have had a little to drink.«



Scheitholt, A. Lambert-Feuillée, Val d'Ajol (Vogesen), 1795/1805,
2 : 3 strings, 17 frets; 2 heart-shaped soundholes, cat. no. 5053
© MIM, Foto: Jürgen Liepe

Musikinstrumenten-Museum SIM PK
Guide Sheet No. 6, 2nd revised edition 2013
Author: Dieter Krickeberg
Translated by allround Fremdsprachen GmbH
© 2013 Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung
Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin