

Renaissance Instruments

Hurdy-gurdy



Though the hurdy-gurdy had almost completely died out in popularity during the 20th-century, it was once a very popular instrument. The first evidence of the earliest form was found in the 12th-century, though its exact origins are unknown. By the 17th-century, it was being played all over Europe, particularly by the peasant class.

While holding the instrument on their lap with the help of a strap, the player turns a crank with their right hand which rotates a wheel inside the main body of the instrument. This wheel is covered with resin to help vibrate the strings as it rubs against them. There are typically between three and six strings. The top string plays the melody while the others play a drone. The player uses their left hand to play the melody by pressing keys on the keybox, which looks somewhat like a piano keyboard. One of the hurdy-gurdy's defining features is its rhythmic pulsation. This is created by a "buzzing bridge" which moves back and forth as the crank is turned by the player.

Listening example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHmML7bu-iM>

Harpsichord

The harpsichord was one of the most important keyboard instruments during the 16th to 18th centuries, until it was replaced in popularity by the new pianoforte which was capable of producing different dynamics. The earliest harpsichords that have been discovered come from 14th century Italy. These simpler early



models eventually led the way to very ornate ones with elaborate decorations painted onto their lids. The harpsichord flourished both as a solo instrument and as an accompanying instrument in ensembles.

At first glance, the harpsichord looks like a small grand piano, with a wing shape. Unlike the piano whose strings are hit by hammers, however, the harpsichord's strings are plucked by a plectrum made of either quill or leather. The sound is then quieted with a cloth or felt damper.

Listening example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryQ2WjmcYWI>

Lute

The lute flourished from medieval times until the 18th century, played by everyone from common people to royalty. It is a descendent of the Arabic instrument called the oud, which came to Western Europe when the Arabs occupied Spain from the 8th to 15th centuries. The instrument came in a variety of sizes and pitches, though all have similar features. They have pear-shaped bodies, rounded backs, and pegs that are bent back at a nearly ninety-degree angle.

The lute is tuned with pairs of two strings on each pitch, which are called courses. The earliest lutes had four courses, though by the 18th century, they had up to thirteen. Lute players either improvised chords over a notated figured bass line or read from tablature. By the end of the 15th century, players began plucking with their fingers instead of with a plectrum, allowing for multiple musical lines to be played at once. This was revolutionary and changed the way the instrument could be used. With the possibility of polyphony, as well as the relatively small sound, the lute was often used by singers to accompany themselves.

Listening example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8P5CTIGadE>



Guitar

The predecessor of the modern guitar first originated in Europe in the 15th century as a member of the lute family. Like the lute, they sometimes had rounded backs, were strung with gut strings, and had a decorative rose – an ornate vent to allow the sound to project – instead of an open sound hole. These early models were much



smaller than today's guitars and their strings were often tuned in courses, like the lute. Along with the lute, the guitar was plucked with the fingers to make polyphonic music.

The number of strings varied, until the late 18th and early 19th centuries when the current model of six strings started to gain popularity around Spain, France, and Italy. Like modern guitars, these had frets, though they were usually gut frets that were tied in place around the neck. By the later 19th century, the wooden pegs were replaced with machine heads, the frets were fixed in place, and the guitar now had an open sound hole and a flat back, as we are familiar with today.

Listening example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-37yAt8HD6c>

Recorder



The recorder came into popularity during the Middle Ages, went on to become the most important wind instrument during the Renaissance, and still held importance throughout the Baroque period. The name originates from the Latin word *recordari*, meaning 'to remember'. Thus, a recorder was a 'rememberer' or a relater, such as a minstrel, and therefore, his instrument.

Recorders come in different sizes and pitches that correspond with vocal ranges. All sizes include a whistle mouthpiece, a thumb hole on the back, and seven finger holes on the front. They were originally carved from one piece of material, usually wood, though by the 17th century, a method was devised so that it could be taken apart into three joints: head, middle, and foot. The recorder was played by all kinds of people throughout centuries, from the working class to royalty. The English King Henry VIII was himself a keen amateur player. During the Renaissance, like today, they were often used in music education.

Listening example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXkRgUvY6PM>

Viola da Gamba

The viol family shares some similarities to the violin family. And indeed, the *viola da gamba* (meaning leg viol) looks quite similar to the cello in that it is played with a bow and held between the player's legs. Unlike the modern cello,



however, it has frets like a lute or a guitar, and is therefore sometimes classified as a bowed lute. It also comes in a family or consort of different sizes that correspond with vocal ranges.

Most viols typically have six strings, though the 18th and 19th centuries saw the rise of a four-string instrument called the bass viol. With its relatively quiet and reedy tone, the *viola da gamba* was one of the most popular instruments during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, both as a solo instrument and as a chamber group member. Throughout the 17th century and onwards, the viol family was gradually replaced in popularity by the violin family, which was capable of louder playing.

Listening example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvpU3UYtVmI>

Shakespeare's Songbook – Composers

John Coprario (c. 1570-1626)

- John Coprario, composer, viol player, and teacher, was born with the last name Cowper, but changed it to the Italianised version after spending so much time in the country as a young man.
- He often played the lyra viol, which was a small bass viol that was popular in England, and was one of the first composers to write out lessons (or exercises) for the instrument.
- He worked first as a resident musician and composer for the Earl of Salisbury before going on to becoming composer-in-ordinary to King Charles I in 1625.
- Coprario wrote a textbook manuscript called *Rules How to Compose*.
- His most celebrated works are fantasias, described as instrumental madrigals, for five or six voices.

William Cornysh (d.1523)

- William Cornysh is believed to be from Westminster, where his father, a man by the same name, may have been a church musician at the cathedral.
- He was a true Renaissance man, working as a poet, a dramatist, a musician, and a composer.
- From 1493 onwards, he was paid as an entertainer in the royal court.
- He went on to work as a member of the Chapel Royal, the group of performers of sacred music in the English court. Here, he acted as the Master of Children, looking after the education and general welfare of the young choristers.
- With the court, he travelled to France, played at King Henry VII's funeral, and at Henry VIII's coronation.
- He is best known for his secular part songs.

Thomas Morley (c.1558-1603)

- Thomas Morley was the most influential figure in Elizabethan madrigals, as a writer, editor, and composer.
- He was born in Norwich where he was likely a chorister at the cathedral. He later went on to work at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. In 1596, he went to work at St. Helen's, the same parish where Shakespeare was living. He also worked as a member of the Chapel Royal.
- He started as a composition pupil of English composer William Byrd, before going on to complete a Bachelor of Music degree at Oxford University. His earliest compositions are motets that imitate the master.

- He brought the Italian style of madrigals into popularity in England after editing and translating two anthologies of Italian music.
- During the last decade of the 16th century, he held a monopoly over music printing in London and began the rapid expansion in the production of printed secular music in the area.
- In 1601, he edited a compilation of madrigals written by himself and twenty-two other composers called *The Triumphs of Oriana*, in honour of Queen Elizabeth I.
- Like John Copriaro, Thomas Morley wrote a textbook on composition, called *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597).

Renaissance Music

When discussing musical trends, the Renaissance period is generally described as spanning from 1430 to 1600. This cultural transformation began in Italy, spreading north after 1500. The word “renaissance” means rebirth, signifying the growth of intellectual activity by individual thinkers who were reacting against the Middle Ages. They developed humanism, the study of classical antiquity, with particular interest in the works of Plato.

From here on, music was no longer thought of as only pure science, but also as a major form of expression. Composers started to borrow very heavily on literature and the visual arts. It was also very common for composers to borrow from or quote other composers in their work without giving them credit, though the idea seems strange to us today. Polyphony, two or more voices moving independently, became very popular in both sacred and secular music. The period saw the beginnings of commercial music printing and therefore a larger audience for new music.

Elizabethan Madrigals

The Italian genre of madrigals gained popularity in England as they were translated into English. Composers in the country then began writing their own madrigals, often setting English sonnets. These were generally adaptations of the lighter styles of Italian madrigals. Both often had three to four voices, dance-like rhythms, and a reduced harmonic vocabulary. Madrigals are polyphonic pieces, meaning that the voices move independently of each other.

Part Song

The part song differs from the madrigal in that it is not polyphonic, but homophonic, meaning the voices move together. The singers are usually unaccompanied, with the melody in the highest voice.

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