

Survival of Instrumental Types around the Baltic
Jeremy Montagu

I have for many years been fascinated by the survival of a surprising number of early mediæval instruments around the Baltic. I am not sufficiently a social anthropologist to know why in some areas people seem to give up their folk instruments without much hesitation and in others to retain them. Why do pipe and tabor still flourish in southern France and northern Spain, although they have vanished in the rest of Europe, even though once they were the universal one-man dance band? Why are shawms used today only in southern and ex-Ottoman Europe when once they were the most important outdoor melodic instrument throughout Europe? Why did England abandon its many different regional types of bagpipe, whereas they still flourish all over France and southern and eastern Europe? Why does the hurdy-gurdy still exist in France, Germany, Hungary, and Poland, and not elsewhere? And so forth – and these examples are not alone.

My subject today is the survival of a rather earlier instrumental stratum than these. All the foregoing are of late mediæval date, the pipe and tabor and bagpipe thirteenth century, the others fourteenth or later, and the hurdy-gurdy, in the form in which it survives, renaissance at the earliest, and mainly baroque. The instruments I want to talk about now are from the tenth and eleventh centuries and, with two later exceptions, even earlier.

One could be much earlier, the simplest form of the panpipe, perhaps even earlier in musical history than the panpipe itself. The only areas in which, so far as I know, the disjunct syrinx occurs are among the Venda of South Africa, from which our own John Blacking reported them, and in Lithuania. Where else do we find a group of people, each with one or two pipes, playing music in hocket? Come to think of it, I do know two other examples, though neither of them with end-blown flutes: one the nineteenth-century Russian horn band, a wholly artificial ensemble only made possible through slavery, and the other handbell ringers in many areas. But nowhere else the disjunct syrinx.

We know that the lowland alphorn goes back at least to the tenth century because we have Saxon illustrations of long horns. There is no firm evidence for their

material, but they look more like wood than metal, and they are of a shape that, like those used in the Polish and Western Russian marshes, are likely to have been made in the same way as an alphorn: a young tree split, hollowed, and reunited but, unlike a highland alphorn, not then covered with a close lapping of bark. This is because, in the marshes and lowlands, water is plentiful and the seams between the two halves can be sealed by soaking the wood by dropping them down a well, like the Dutch midwinterhoorns which I published many years ago in the *Galpin Society Journal*, or in a ditch or even in the bathtub. I think the survival of these instruments is more easily explained than for those that follow, simply as the practicality of a signal instrument in areas of isolation, whether of farms in marshy areas, where horns don't need a cover, or in mountains, where they do, as we see in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Tibet, and the South American Altiplano. Our other instruments are more problematic.

The mediæval iconographic evidence for fingerhole horns is slightly later, though this is no clue for dating their origin. We see one of them in a manuscript of around 1075, on eleventh-century stone carvings, and they are still used today. Whether like Swedish instruments, and those that Jan Ling has published, they used hand-stopping in the Middle Ages as well as fingerholes we cannot know – certainly we do see hand-stopping in another mediæval manuscript of rather earlier date, around 800. I have found no later trace of a horn with fingerholes anywhere in Europe save around the Baltic, until its reappearance as a wooden instrument, the cornett, which was the great virtuoso instrument of the Renaissance, surviving into the Baroque and, until recently, in European Russia as the rozhok.

The bowed lyre (Otto Andersen called it a bowed harp, but just like the instrument of King David in the Bible, a lyre it is and a harp it is not) appears in a number of manuscripts of similar date. Plucked lyres were common earlier, both in other manuscripts and as archæological relicts at Sutton Hoo in the sixth century and elsewhere, and earlier still throughout the Classical world of Greece and Rome. The bowed lyre did reappear later, in a variant form with a central fingerboard, in the fourteenth century and again in the fifteenth, and of course as the Welsh crwth. The Scandinavian form is much closer to the early mediæval, for even when the hand-hole is divided by a central bar this, according to Otto Anderson, was never used as a fingerboard in the sense of pressing the string to it.

Of my two later instruments from the seventeenth century, one has been described in great detail by Jan Ling, and it appears also in Praetorius's *Syntagma Musicum* of 1619. The earliest form of the instrument is little later than the bowed lyre and fingerhole horn. In the eleventh century it was a two-man instrument, one turning the wheel and one rotating up and down the levers under the strings which fixed their sounding length. It was called *organistrum*, both because it played *organum*, a single strand of melody in parallel fifths, fourths, or octaves, and because it was similar to the contemporary organ, where one man pumped the bellows and another slid the key levers in and out. A smaller thirteenth-century one-man version was the symphony. Praetorius illustrates all three forms of hurdy-gurdy: the one we know still under that name or as the *vieille à roue*, the strings bowed with a wheel and stopped with sliding keys; another form, also wheeled, but with a fingerboard like that of any other necked stringed instrument so that the strings are stopped with the fingers, not with keys; and the form that survives in Sweden, the strings bowed with a bow and stopped with sliding keys. It is fairly easy to guess why the second form died out – holding it steady enough not to displace the stopping fingers could well be difficult while turning the wheel. But why did the bowed-and-keyed fiddle vanish everywhere save in Sweden?

My last has a more shadowy existence altogether – was there ever a treble form of *viola d'amore*? There are some English indications in the Elizabethan period, though no concrete evidence. Why the violin with sympathetic strings died out everywhere save in Hardanger, whereas the alto form lived on into the nineteenth century and is still somewhat with us, we do not know. It could be that the sympathetic resonances were felt to be too high in the treble form, whereas those of the alto were better placed in the audible spectrum and thus more attractive to players and listeners.

The body-shape of this instrument is also of considerable interest, for one asks also why does the baroque violin survive in Hardanger and nowhere else, save as a very rudely constructed folk instrument in México: the short straight neck; the wedged fingerboard (modern violin necks are canted back and therefore the fingerboard follows the plane of the strings without need for a wedge – the neck of the baroque violin, like that of the Hardanger, continues in the same plane as the top of the ribs so that the wedge is needed to tip the fingerboard up to follow the strings); the flatter curve of the bridge, characteristic of the use of a lighter and less highly-

tensioned bow; the high arching of the belly and the back – this arching was typical of the earlier violin makers before Stradivarius popularised the flatter belly with its more penetrating tone quality which was needed to balance the newly-introduced oboe rather than the gentler recorder; and the use of a *crémaillère*, a metal bridle slipping into one of a series of notches, instead of a screw to tension the bow hair.

This seems to me to be a statistically significant cluster, a greater number of surviving early instruments than one could find in any other cultural area and, without being able to produce any answers to the question of why or how it should be so, I simply present it as a phenomenon.

A paper given at a European Seminar in Ethnomusicology in Rauland

© Jeremy Montagu 2017