

The Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer: Examining the Creation of an “American Tradition”

In a nation composed dominantly of immigrants, or people who are not “from” here, one can expect the cultural heritage in general, and the musical heritage in particular, to be based on the many strands of immigrant tradition. At some point, however, that which was brought from the old country begins to “belong” to the children of the immigrants, who pass this heritage on to their children. These strands are the woof that is woven into the warp of the new land—a process that continues until the tradition rightly belongs to the new setting as well.

This is the case for the Appalachian Mountain (or fretted, lap, plucked, strummed¹) dulcimer. This instrument has been called by some “The Original American Folk Instrument.”² Because other instruments have also laid claim to this appellation (most notably the banjo), this paper will explore whether or not it deserves such a name by describing the dulcimer, exploring its antecedent instruments, or “cousins”, tracing its construction and use by some people associated with the dulcimer, and examining samples of the music played on the instrument from 3 distinct periods of its use in the 20th century.

What is the dulcimer? The Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer³ consists of a diatonic fretboard which is mounted on top of a soundbox. It is generally strung with three or four strings arranged in a pattern of three (with one pair of strings doubled and close together, to be played as one.) Its strings are strummed or plucked either with the fingers or a plectrum while the other hand is fretting the strings at different frets using either fingers or a wooden stick called a “noter.” The shape of the body or soundbox varies from hourglass, boat, diamond and lozenge, to teardrop and rectangular box style. The strings are tuned in various combinations, normally so that the melody can be played on the strings closest to the player and the other strings are allowed to ring in open drones.

Did the Appalachian Mountain dulcimer come from Appalachia? The short answer is: No and yes. Riding a third swell of twentieth-century enthusiasm for American folklore, Charles F. Bryan wrote an

¹ The several “first” names are descriptive of the dulcimer are descriptive of the instrument’s construction, playing position or playing style.

² For example, contemporary mountain dulcimer Larry Conger made this statement in concert at the 3rd Annual Colorado Dulcimer Festival, February 3, 2006. Larry is the 1998 National Mountain Dulcimer Champion.

³ This is in distinction from the Hammered Dulcimer, another instrument in the zither family, but with no connection to the subject of this paper, except for a common last name—like two unrelated people named *Smith*.

article about American folk instruments for the *Tennessee Folklore Bulletin* in 1952. Lamenting a lack of study by musicologists about the instruments upon which people play folk music, Bryan began his inquiry by sharing his findings about the dulcimer.⁴ One key observation he made is that dulcimers tended to be “half fretted” or “cross fretted.” That is, the frets either extended under just the first string or all the way across the fretboard.⁵

His rather short article became a primary source for Charles Seeger’s more thorough treatment in a 1958 article in *The Journal of American Folklore*. Bryan did not seek an answer to the question of where the dulcimer came from, using his article more for descriptive purposes. Seeger, however, was responding to what appear to be widely held notions that the dulcimer is an instrument which originated on American soil. His approach is that of a trained musicologist, using academic references and framework⁶. He concludes, based on his knowledge of European organography, that the Appalachian dulcimer is a fretted zither (*Griffbrettzither*) which is “a well-defined subclass upon which the melody is played on one string (or several in unison or even parallel thirds) while others sound as drones.”⁷ He concurs with his sources and argues for a European provenance of the instrument.

Charles’ interest in dulcimers and American folk music was not purely academic. He and his wife, Ruth Crawford Seeger, had been caught up by folk music in the nineteen thirties. Together with daughter Peggy, he reminisced in a 1988 interview with Ray Wilding-White:

We discovered the Anglo-American folk music at the same time in the early thirties and were both carried away with it. It was partly the reaction to the depression in which we were very much embroiled, and it might be partly a sense of the increasing pointlessness of the composition of those days. I think she felt as I did that the fine art of composition, the great tradition of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and so forth down to Bartók, had practically exploded into many pieces sometime around the first World War, and her turn to folk music I think was probably in a single line from a certain amount of disappointment in the trend of the compositions of the twenties.⁸

⁴ Charles F. Bryan, “American Folk Instruments I-The Appalachian Dulcimer,” *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (March, 1952), 2.

⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶ Charles Seeger, “The Appalachian Dulcimer,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 71, No. 279 (Jan – Mar., 1958). Seeger extensively quotes other articles from 1917-1937, as well as contemporary reflections in the 1950s.

⁷ _____, “The Appalachian Dulcimer,” 43. These are represented in northern Europe by “the Icelandic *langspil*, Norwegian *langeleik*, Swedish, *hummel*, Danish *humle*, Lowland *Noordsche balk*, German *Scheidholt*, and the French and Belgian *bûche*, or *epinette des Vosges*.” Alternate spellings for the German version are: *scheitholz* and *scheitholt*. Charles is the father of Pete Seeger.

⁸ Ray Wilding-White, “Remembering Ruth Crawford Seeger: An Interview with Charles and Peggy Seeger,” *American Music*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Winter, 1988), 443.

Ruth, who had once been a composition student of Charles', turned completely away from her original symphonic and piano compositions and spent most of the rest of her musical life immersed in folk music.

Her daughter, Peggy, reflects,

...it wasn't only a disappointment with formal music, but a wonder that really seems to reside in the average formal musician that folk musicians can do what they do [*i.e.*, *improvise*, italics in original]. I think the person who has had a classical formal musical education being presented with a music which is seemingly spontaneous and innocent, almost back to the Adam and Eve of music, is tremendously stimulating. The sense that I got from my mother was not one of being disappointed with formal music, but of being fascinated by folk music, and she brought this fascination back into classical music because she seemed to me to have a deep love for both kinds of music and a deep faith in both kinds of music, that they could exist completely side by side and that she could exist as a single person doing them both.⁹



Ruth Crawford Seeger is pictured here playing a mountain dulcimer with her children, Mike and Peggy, playing harmonicas and husband Charles playing Guitar.¹⁰

From Peggy's testimony, we can also get a glimpse of the kind of re-awakening and renewed desire to preserve and treasure American folk traditions that was beginning to take root at that time in history. This was in part because of the dislocation and disillusionment of the post-war era, and the world-wide influenza epidemic which followed; but specifically in the nineteen thirties, it was a response to the Great Depression.¹¹ That two people who were part of the American academic music establishment embraced these folk traditions testify to both their power and to the ongoing process of adoption.

But from where in Europe did the dulcimer originate? In the first twentieth-century wave of interest in American folklore, songcatcher Josephine McGill had noted that mountain dulcimers among the people of the Cumberland mountains in eastern Kentucky in 1914 more closely resembled the "eighteenth

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Peggy Seeger, "Ruth Crawford Seeger," *Peggy Seeger Website*, accessed March 1, 2006, <http://www.pegseeger.com/html/rcsindex.html>

¹¹ Wilding-White, "Remembering Ruth Crawford Seeger," 452.

century German zither than...any other known instrument.”¹² Seeger quoted Henry Mercer’s¹³ published study of Pennsylvania German zithers in 1958, noting these connections. But it wasn’t until the mid-1970s Ralph Lee Smith and Allen Smith (unrelated to each other) independently established physical confirmation of this. Their research was focused on locating instruments built prior to 1940 (before the urban folk revival took hold) and finding dulcimer builders who were still building instruments in the “pre-revival” style. By this they meant instruments that were half fretted, and built according to patterns that were passed down through generations.¹⁴ Their observations led Ralph to agree with scholars and conclude “...the mountain dulcimer developed as a modification of the scheitholt.”¹⁵

Thanks to Mercer’s catalogue of scheitholts, and the locations in which Allen Smith and he have uncovered both scheitholts and dulcimers, Ralph Lee Smith locates the scheitholt’s arrival to the United States among the German immigrants who settled first in Pennsylvania. His actual research has been unable to locate any extant instruments that can be dated earlier than 1832.¹⁶ Smith further suggests that the instrument was carried with German immigrants who migrated from Pennsylvania down the Shenandoah River valley, and followed the various wagon roads through the passes into Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia and the Carolinas. His *The Story of the Dulcimer* tells this tale in much more detail.¹⁷

The question remains. If the instrument did not come from American soil, can it still be called “An American Original?” Here lies the tale of what I consider to be an American story of cultural sharing or interpenetration. The dulcimers that the Smiths found throughout Appalachia were not in the hands of Germans but mainly in the hands of people of Scottish and Irish descent.¹⁸ Many people even assumed that the instrument was of Scotch-Irish descent because it was played by people of those traditions. John Jacob

¹² Josephine McGill, “The Kentucky Mountain Dulcimer,” *The Musician* (January 1917), reprinted in *Folk Songs of Old Kentucky: Two Song Catchers in the Kentucky Mountains, 1914 and 1916, with Arrangements for Applachian Dulcimer* (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 2003), 14.

¹³ Henry C. Mercer, “The Zither of the Pennsylvania Germans,” *A Collection of Papers Read Before the Bucks County Historical Society*, V (1926), 482-97, quoted in Seeger, 49.

¹⁴ Allen Smith, “Thoughts on the Appalachian Dulcimer,” *Blue Ridge Folk Instruments and Their Makers: An Exhibit of the Blue Ridge Institute Museum, Ferrum College* (Ferrum, Virginia, 2003), 22.

¹⁵ Ralph Lee Smith, *Appalachian Dulcimer Traditions*, American Folk Music and Folk Musicians, No. 2 (Lanham, Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997), 4.

¹⁶ Ibid. Smith is quoting L. Allen Smith, *A Catalogue of Pre-Revival Applachian Dulcimers* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 46-47.

¹⁷ _____, *The Story of the Dulcimer* (Cosby, Tennessee: Crying Creek Publishers, 1986), 5-8.

¹⁸ Mercer notes that he could not find any living scheitholt players in the early 1900s. Ibid, 20.

Niles asserted an English and Welsh antecedent.¹⁹ What explains this transfer from one cultural group to another? The next immigrant group to settle beside the migrating Germans along the American frontier were the Ulster Scots, or Scotch-Irish.²⁰ I submit that the process by which an instrument of foreign origin becomes assimilated into and shared between local cultures is what helps that instrument become an adopted or “naturalized” American instrument. We will examine the experience of Jean Ritchie, of Scotch-Irish ancestry, as an example.

A native of Viper, Kentucky, Jean is the youngest in a family of 14 children. She acknowledges that many among her family and acquaintances in Kentucky were balladeers (unaccompanied singers), rather than singers with accompaniment, but she also remembers a dulcimer always being in her home, played by both her mother and father. And her father could not recall a time before dulcimers in the Kentucky mountains.²¹

In 1952-53, she traveled with her husband, George Pickow, throughout Great Britain on a Fulbright scholarship, collecting folk songs and seeking the ancestry of her beloved family instrument. To her surprise, she could find no one in the countryside, no folk musicians or singers who had any memory of a diatonic, fretted instrument, and no museums with preserved examples. What she had always believed to be a long family history with this instrument, apparently had begun among people other than her blood kin!²²

The dulcimer, with its accompanying droning sound, does resemble the sound of bagpipes for many people, even today. It is not too hard to imagine a scenario in which the Scotch-Irish, new to the country, hear a familiar sound on a German instrument and begin to play and sing their traditional music on it, embracing the folklore of their neighbors and in so doing, giving voice to the music of their own soul. This is an excellent example of cultural sharing which is a common part of the American experience.

During the Great Depression, one of the results of a second swell of interest in American folklore was an event like the 4th Annual American Folk Song Festival in Ashland, Kentucky in June 1934.²³ Under the direction of Jean Thomas, local musicians and singers were recorded for the Library of Congress and

¹⁹ Seeger, “The Appalachian Dulcimer,” 43.

²⁰ Ralph Lee Smith, *The Story of the Dulcimer*, 8.

²¹ Jean Ritchie, *The Dulcimer Book* (New York: Oak Publications, 1974), 7.

²² *Ibid*, 11. Jean writes, “I had to admit then, that our dulcimer was probably not of English, Scottish or Irish extraction.”

²³ Jean Thomas, “The American Folk Song Festival,” *American Speech*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Feb., 1935), 36-37.

their music was preserved in the *Jean Thomas American Folklife Center* of the Library of Congress.²⁴

These remain the earliest known recordings of mountain dulcimer players in the United States.

Just after this time, Jean Ritchie was living and working as a social worker in New York City. There she played and sang her family's music (as well as her own original songs) accompanying herself on mountain dulcimer, first for her school children, her afterschool programs at the Henry Street Settlement house, and later for Carl Sandburg and Hudie Leadbetter. In the right place for the growing urban folk revival, Jean played her dulcimer on several New York Stages and weekly on Oscar Brand's radio show for nearly a year.²⁵

Folklorists like John Jacob Niles and players like Jean Ritchie helped to spark the Urban folklife revival in the 1930s and 1940s. It was largely due to Ritchie's influence that people in New York City were aware of dulcimers. Interest in her music and instruments grew and she referred people who wished to order dulcimers to her cousin Jethro Amburgy and friend Homer Ledford back home.²⁶ Eventually she and her husband and his father, Morris, began to build instruments to meet the urban demand for dulcimers. Now the instrument has passed from culture to culture and from the rural mountains of Appalachia to the biggest city in the country!

Lucy Long presents three reference periods for the development of the dulcimer from an organological perspective: "...transitional (1700 to mid-1800's), pre-revival or traditional (mid-1800's to 1940), and revival or contemporary (after 1940.)"²⁷ For the purposes of this paper, we will use the reference periods presented by Ralph Lee Smith for examining playing styles on the instrument. The Traditional Period is from its appearance until about 1950. During this time, design changes and playing styles were focused on melody playing with drone accompaniment. The Post World War II Urban Revival, beginning in 1950, brought the instrument from the mountains into contact with the wider American culture where it was adopted and adapted. (Besides building instruments with full frets, additional frets were added and people began to explore new playing styles.) A renewed interest in the dulcimer's history and vigorous

²⁴ Ralph Lee Smith, *Appalachian Dulcimer Traditions*, 11.

²⁵ Jean Ritchie, *Jean Ritchie's Dulcimer People* (New York: Oak Publications, 1975), 11.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 12.

²⁷ Lucy M. Long, *A History of the Mountain Dulcimer* (Sweet Music Index)
<http://www.bearmeadow.com/smi/histof.htm>.

conversations about its future began in 1970 and continue to the present with many players stretching the limits of a modal instrument.²⁸

We will listen to six examples of dulcimer playing from these periods. These will also demonstrate the traditional styles of playing noted by Bryan and Seeger.²⁹

TRADITIONAL

“The Pateroller Song”, played by Uncle Tom West, was recorded at the 4th Annual American Folk Festival, in Ashland, Kentucky, June 1934.³⁰ This tune is also known by its historical (and racist) name “Run, N____, Run,” which is how Uncle Tom introduces it. (That alone can argue strongly for an American identity for at least the tune!) West demonstrates the playing of an instrumental tune. All the strings on his dulcimer are tuned to a unison “A” (approximately) and his playing style is using a wooden noter while strumming in a rhythmic pattern that matches the melody of the tune. In this tuning, the scale starts at the zero fret, or the open melody string(s). Normally, this produces a Mixolydian scale (with a flatted seventh step), but this tune utilizes a gapped scale that omits that tone.³¹

Also recorded at the American Folk Festival is “Ground Hog” played by Curtis Dartey. Like the above example, Curtis is playing his dulcimer with a wooden noter, and but his dulcimer strings are tuned to a unison pitch or E E E. His scale begins at the third fret (A) while the other strings drone below the tonic at the fifth step of the scale. Here an antiphonal style of playing is utilized. Curtis alternates playing the Ionian melody with drone strumming and singing the song unaccompanied.³²

URBAN REVIVAL

Jean Ritchie’s recorded examples belong in the Urban Revival period because these two recordings were made in 1963 by George Pickow on location at Folk City, a Greenwich Village club in New York City.³³ While Jean is heir to the traditions of ballad singing and dulcimer playing and was raised in the traditional period, she also makes use of varied tunings, and a non-traditional style of playing dulcimer: singing the melody and playing a harmony at the same time. The tunes which come from her

²⁸ Smith, *Dulcimer Traditions*, 1.

²⁹ Bryan, “American Folk Instruments”, 4 and Seeger, “The Appalachian Dulcimer,” 42.

³⁰ Jean Thomas, “The American Folk Song Festival,” 36.

³¹ Uncle Tom West, “The Pateroller Song,” *Jean Thomas American Folk Song Festival Collection*, American Folklife Center (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1934), AFS 291A.

³² Curtis Dartey, “Groundhog,” *Ibid*, AFS 302A1.

³³ Joe Wilson, liner notes to *Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson at Folk City* (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 1990) #SF 40005.

family's traditions have undergone some changes as she was embraced and celebrated by the urban audience and luminaries in the urban folk revival over the 16 years since she was first invited to play for an audience in New York City.³⁴

The first example is "Over the River Charlie" played in a minor mode tuning (1-5-8-4, called Dorian) E B e A. (Jean's normal dulcimer set-up is a four-string arrangement tuned to 1-5-8-X with the string closest to the player re-tuned for different modal scales.)³⁵ The Dorian scale starts at the fourth fret. Jean also plays with a noter and drone strumming, but in this recording alternates playing the melody with playing a new harmony whenever she sings the melody and improvising with the melody when playing instrumentally.³⁶

The second example of Jean's playing is "What'll I Do with this Baby-O?" In this song she has tuned her dulcimer 1-5-8-5 or E B e B. In this tuning her Ionian scale starts at the third fret with matching drones. Here the dulcimer and fiddle are playing with singing and a rhythmic stomping that keeps the beat. She recalls this combination as common instrumentation for dances.³⁷

AFTER 1970

Larry Conger is one example of a contemporary player. Larry hails from Tennessee and plays instrumental fiddle tunes, as well as classical themes, hymns and original tunes. Here he plays "Shortnin' Bread" in a style that involves fingering and playing the melody across all three strings, using the articulation techniques of hammer-ons and pull-offs plus rhythmic tapping on the soundboard. He also makes use of chordal accompaniments and uses closed position chords (chords that have no open ringing or droning notes.) Conger's treatment of this traditional tune also utilizes a swing rhythm that comes from popular music, rather than the traditional music sphere.³⁸

Quintin Stephens is another example of a contemporary player. He is a protégé of Robert Force and Al d'Ossché, a duo who played 6-string dulcimers while standing (held like a guitar, but played over the top of the body). The Force/d'Ossché duo were also known for their non-traditional melodies and

³⁴ Ritchie, *Jean Ritchie's Dulcimer People*, 9.

³⁵ Interview with the author, *Tufts Auditorium, Swallowhill Music Association* (Denver, Colorado) November 6, 1998.

³⁶ Jean Ritchie, *Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson at Folk City* (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 1990) #SF 40005, track #4.

³⁷ *Ibid*, track #13.

³⁸ Larry Conger, *Kelly's Fancy* (Highland House Productions, 1999), track #14.

driving, rhythmic approach to dulcimer music.³⁹ Quintin carries on in this “tradition” and takes it several steps further with his two-handed tapping techniques as evidenced in his original tune “Event Horizon”. Stephens also plays a 6-string dulcimer (three pairs of doubled strings, tuned DD AA dd) while standing.⁴⁰

While the Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer does not originate in the United States, the process by which the German *Scheitholz* and its European cousins became transformed into this instrument is one of the things that make it authentic to this country. The cultural interpenetration or sharing between German and Scotch-Irish immigrants is another argument in favor of calling the Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer an American instrument. The adoption of other musical styles by the players of the instrument shows that the dulcimer is involved in the steps of enculturation by which the possessions and traditions of immigrants are embraced by the generations after the immigrants’ arrival. However, because this process has also happened with other folk instruments, to be accurate, we must modify the description and call the Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer “*An American Original Folk Instrument.*”

³⁹ Albert d’Ossché died in 1990.

⁴⁰ Quintin Stephens, *Under the Porch Light* (Blaine Street Recordings, 2003) BSR 304, track #10.

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