

# THE HURDY-GURDY

The hurdy-gurdy, (wheel fiddle, *vielle à roue*) is one of the few string instruments with a keyboard. Its trademark is the wedge-shaped wheel that creates the sound in place of a bow. It is installed into the body and touches the catgut string clamped over it. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the strings consisted of two unisono melody strings and four drone strings that could be connected as desired. The melody strings are truncated by the tangents that are applied and enclosed in a box as a sort of keyboard instead of the fingerboard. Consistent wheel movement creates a continuous sound, jerky movement of the crank gives rise to rhythmic accents, and by accelerating and slowing down the wheel movement, dynamic nuances are produced. Because of its resonating drone, the hurdy-gurdy is reminiscent of the bagpipe and *musette*.

Musical usage of the hurdy-gurdy was shaped by a history of social changes: The instrument is already documented to the 10<sup>th</sup> century under the name »organistrum«. In the Middle Ages it served as accompaniment to the player's singing, mostly in a plain drone, or *bourdon*, style. As these practices became utterly improper, the hurdy-gurdy devolved into a beggar's instrument;

in 1619 the composer and music theorist Michael Praetorius speaks of the »farmers' and beggars' fiddle«.

The instrument, along with the French shepherds' *musette*, enjoyed a revival among the French aristocracy in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The instruments of Georges Louvet (cat. no. 407 and 5804; see back for illustration) arose from this social environment. The precious inlay of ivory and ebony, the tortoiseshell and ebony inlaid work, the thorough lettering and other features prove these chromatic hurdy-gurdies to be instruments of the upper classes. However, the hurdy-gurdy most likely from Bohemia and with the lettering »Carel Bimer« (cat. no. 4058), is a typical folk music instrument from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the massiveness and modesty of which represent an entirely different instrumental realm than the stately rococo instruments with lacy inlays.

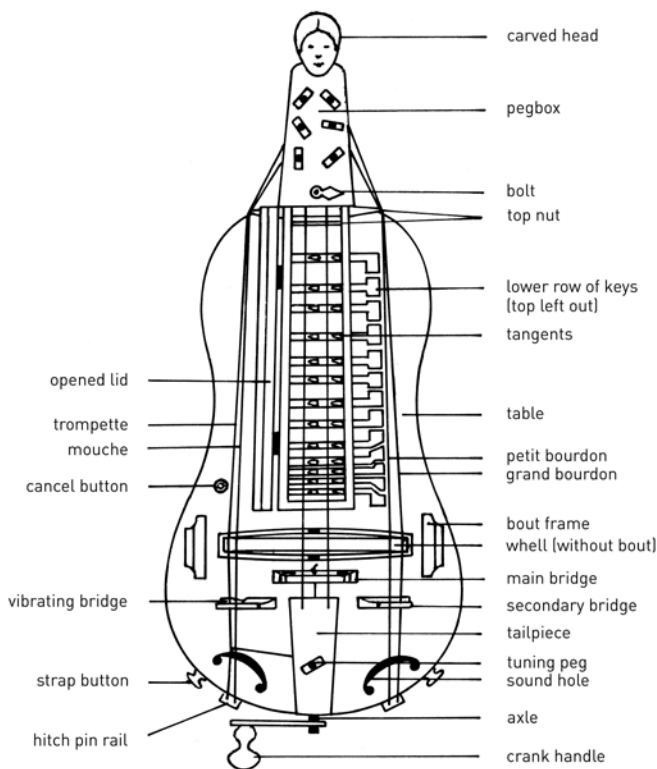
Over the centuries the hurdy-gurdy has played a crucial role in folk music, especially in Southern France.

When Franz Schubert composed his song cycle »Die Winterreise« in 1827, the hurdy-gurdy had already sunk to being a stereotypical instrument of beggars. Schubert's »Leiermann« – the title of the last song in the cycle – is not about a barrel organ player but a



Hurdy-gurdy, Carel Bimer, Bohemia, 18<sup>th</sup> century, cat. no. 4058. Box shape: one melody string and three drone strings; fine-tuner shaped like a sitting man, clamp shaped like a dog © MIM, photo: Anne-Katrin Breitenborn





Structure of a hurdy-gurdy © MIM, illustration: Olga Adelmann



Hurdy-gurdy, Georges Louvet, Paris, 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 18<sup>th</sup> century, cat. no. 5804 © MIM, photo: Harald Fritz

beggar who spins the wheel of the hurdy-gurdy with rigid fingers. The composer has wonderfully and easily imitated the special sound of the instrument: The vocals are continuously accompanied by a fifth bourdon. The unruly noise made by the first turn of the wheel is implied by an ornament. Yet only on a piano from Schubert's time with a bassoon pedal – such as the fortepiano from Josef Brodmann (cat. no. 312) – can the full imitation of the piano accompaniment be illustrated. The bassoon pedal is a bar wrapped in parchment which, when activated with a pedal, can be placed atop the bass strings. This creates a buzzing sound reminiscent of the hurdy-gurdy.

One special form of the hurdy-gurdy is the orgelleier (lira organizzata). Contained inside it are bellows that can be moved with the foot via a cord coming up through the floor. The instrument attributed to César Pons (cat. no. 2609) has two pipe registers made of wood in a triangular shape in the manner of a panflute, and which lie atop each other on top of the instrument. One register sounds in harmony with the tones of the melody strings, the other sounds an octave higher.

Joseph Haydn wrote numerous concertos and nocturnes for the orgelleier at the order of Ferdinand IV of Naples, son-in-law of Maria Theresa. He himself preferred to play this curious instrument. As there are

no longer any virtuosos of the orgelleier, today they are replaced during Haydn compositions with flutes or a positive organ, whereby the specific and continuous sound of the string drone naturally cannot be achieved. Detailed descriptions of the instruments can be found in the *Katalog der Streichinstrumente* by Irmgard Otto, in cooperation with Olga Adelmann, published by the Staatlichen Institut für Musikforschung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin 1975.