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# THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER

BY CHARLES SEEGER

**T**HE Appalachian dulcimer, dulcimore or dulcymore, is known to folklorists as an instrument in fairly general use since 1900, and probably for some time before that, by musically nonliterate rural and small-townpeople in the mountains and foothills of southeastern United States, stretching from southern Pennsylvania to northern Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, taking in West Virginia, the western counties of Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas, and the eastern of Kentucky and Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> It is a fretted cordophone, in my experience usually a little less than a meter long, from 120 to 200 mm. at its widest and about eighty to 100 mm. in depth (Plate I).<sup>2</sup> It is made of local woods such as pine, spruce, poplar, hickory, birch, maple, and walnut by rural woodworkers with simple hand tools. Owing partly to the encouragement of rural handicrafts by urban trained social workers during the last fifty years, and partly to the nation-wide folk music revival movement in the cities since 1940, a number of makers have found a market among urban amateurs. I have, however, never known of a factory made instrument. Nor have I ever come across evidence of its use, prior to this revival movement, as a parlor or concert instrument, as was, not seldom, the true hammer dulcimer or whamadiddle throughout the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Appalachian dulcimer may be classed as a folk instrument in the strict sense of the term. Its making and its use have taken place within the currency of an oral tradition of music. To the best of my knowledge, no printed directions for its manufacture or notations of its playing have appeared.<sup>3</sup>

In Figure 1, I give rough outlines of the front views of the five shapes of which I have personally known enough specimens to be able to state that these five, at least, are traditional. A sixth is of a specimen reliably reported by Bryan. The side views are alike, except that in some cases a mere stub takes the place of a scroll at the end of the peg-stock or a handle appears at the opposite end.

The instrument is constructed in two sections. The first is represented in the outlines by cross-hatching. In many specimens this consists of a single piece of wood running the full length of the instrument, serving at once as peg-stock and scroll, finger or fretboard, tailpiece with or without the occasional handle, and, often as not, as endblocks within the second section over which the first is shaped to fit and be glued. Sometimes section one is made in two, three or more separate pieces, glued, pegged or even nailed together. Section two consists of a shallow soundbox that protrudes symmetrically on each side below section one. The front and back of the soundbox are flat and of single boards. The two sides are single boards bent or shaped in one of the several outlines shown.<sup>4</sup> On some instruments there are small buttons, usually three, on the back to hold the soundbox five to ten mm. clear of a table.

One common type of construction is especially interesting. The part of section one that serves as fretboard is hollowed out so as to form, in end cross section, an inverted square U, to each of whose edges a side of the front is glued, the part of the front

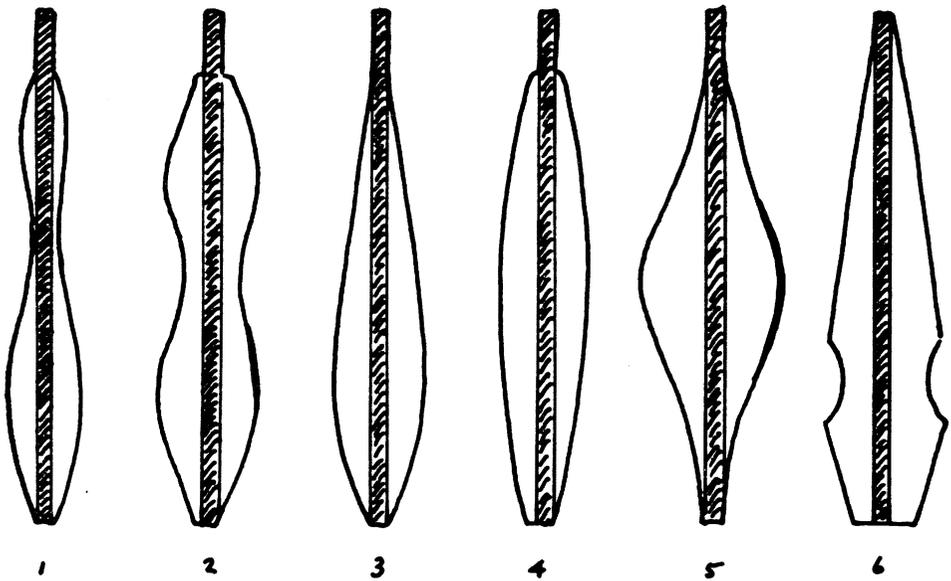


FIGURE 1

under the hollowed out part of the fretboard being cut out. The fretboard serves, thus, not only as a bridge by which the vibrations of the strings are transmitted to the soundbox, but also as an integral part of the soundbox itself. As on all the dulcimers I have seen, so on this type of construction, there is, therefore, no separate bridge. The strings pass over two nuts, an upper and a lower, consisting each of a piece of hard wood, bone or metal set into slots in the fretboard, with notches so that the strings run parallel to one another. A cross section of this type of construction is shown in Figure 2.

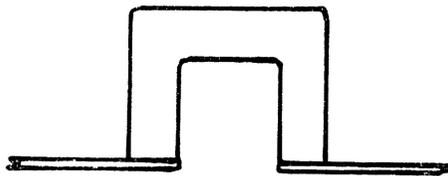


FIGURE 2

The dulcimers that I have seen have had three or four metal strings, rarely five. I have heard there are instruments with more. The strings are normally thin, .001 to .002 of an inch. Bryan recommends guitar G and E. I might add B.

The most common tuning of the three string dulcimer seems to be to set the two highest strings on the instrument's right<sup>5</sup> in unison, the third a fifth lower as in Figure 3a. Bryan gives the tuning in Figure 3b as common for the four string instrument. His experience that the A tuning is most common confirms answers given to me by informants who claim that they tune the dulcimer "to the same note as the fiddle," but meaning an octave lower and varying sometimes as much as a fourth in either direction.



FIGURE 3

The frets are placed either under the chanterelle (melody string or strings on the instrument's right) alone or across the whole fretboard. They are usually arranged diatonically: T-T-ST-T-T-ST-T for two octaves and part of a third. This might imply that the basic tuning were for a mixolydian mode. But upon historical grounds as well as in view of the type of music mostly played, the intention is obviously to set a conventional major with the tonic at the third fret.

The commonest manner of playing the Appalachian dulcimer is for the player to hold it crosswise upon his spread knees or back down upon a table or chair in front of him with the peg-stock to his left. This might be called right-handed or normal practice.<sup>6</sup> Mercer shows a photograph of a woman playing the dulcimer with the butt end in her lap, the back propped up against a table in front of her. A turkey, goose or other quill is held in either hand—in the right, to sweep back and forth or in one direction only over all the strings, a little distance above the lower nut; in the left, to press the chanterelle down upon the fretboard so as to intone a melody while the other strings sound as drones. The quill held in the right hand may be slit an inch or so from the end to make a flexible plectrum. An index finger or guitar pick will also do, while any hard, smooth, little stick, piece of bone or even a finger- or thumbnail may serve for the left hand as a “noter.” Only once have I seen the dulcimer played with a bow. The player, in Marion, Virginia in 1936, volunteered that he was “the only one” who played it so. Eaton, too, says this is rare. I have heard of players who fret several strings at once with their fingers. Bryan cites this as “the most complicated” manner of playing and says that chords may be produced and the strings plucked as on a psaltery. But I am not convinced that this is traditional in the United States, though further research may prove it to be. Certainly, it is very rare. Some urban performers play a countermelody on the instrument when they sing to its accompaniment. But I have not been able to convince myself that this is traditional, though it must be admitted the effect, when well done, is pleasing. Usually, voice and dulcimer either alternate or sound the melody in unison or at the octave. Rarely, a guitarlike strumming is used.

The timber is thin, metallic, soft, and may well be described as twanging or even buzzing. A vibrato is possible on tones of sufficient duration. Indeed, depending upon where the pressure of the noter is brought to bear—in the middle of the fret square, close to or upon the fret—upon the height of the fret, upon the breadth of the noter and upon the amount of pressure down upon the string, considerable variety of intonation is possible at any fret. The gliding of the noter over the string allows—perhaps it would be more correct to say almost compels—slurring. Though the tone

fades quickly, staccato is not characteristic of the instrument. The dulcimer is for the individual or the intimate group, not for the crowd; for the night rather than for the day, though in the hands of a skillful player, tunes lively enough for the square dance, ordinarily carried by the fiddle, can be rendered.

Obviously, the Appalachian dulcimer is not, in the accepted sense of the word, a dulcimer at all, but a fretted zither (*Griffbrettzither*), belonging to 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. This subclass is well represented in European organography, especially in the northern region, by the Icelandic *langspil*, Norwegian *langeleik*, Swedish *hummel*, Danish *humle*, Lowland *Noordsche balk*, German *Scheidholt*, and French and Belgian *bûche* or *épinette des Vosges*. It is related on the one hand to the *tromba marina* or nun's fiddle and on the other to the hurdy-gurdy or *organistrum*. Specimens can be seen in most large instrument collections in both Old and New Worlds. Praetorius,<sup>7</sup> Claas Douwes, the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, Boers, Mahillon, Thuren, Norlind, Panum, de Jong, Vanderstraeten, and others describe their tuning and manners of playing in such detail that the European provenience of the Appalachian dulcimer and of the manner of playing it is clearly marked. As I write this, there comes to hand through the kindness of Curt Sachs, an outstanding monograph, Stig Walin's *Die Schwedische Hummel*.<sup>8</sup> Besides meticulous description of forty Swedish instruments, their histories, references to them, careful acoustical measurements and report upon forty-five others from northern European countries, nearly all reproduced in fine half tone front views, Walin gives a survey of the European field as a whole, without getting entangled in the controversial background of Asiatic ancestors or the foreground of American descendants, the latter of which he did not know.

Walín distinguishes three form-groups: 1) with straight sides all around, 2) with a bulge (*Ausbauchung*) on the left side, 3) with bulges on both sides. He points out that all specimens in his third group and four of the twenty-eight in his second, are made in two sections, one of which is fitted on top of the other.

The Appalachian dulcimer obviously belongs to Walín's third form-group. On the basis of the preceding verbal description, it would seem to have no feature distinguishing it from its European prototypes. Indeed, pictured as played by Otto Malmberg not long before his death in 1921, Walín's No. G 35, although belonging to his second form-group, could easily be taken for the American instrument, excepting for the fretting with the fingers of the left hand instead of with the noter. For the lack of right bulge might not be remarked or even considered of much importance (Plate IIa).

Three questions most commonly asked about the Appalachian dulcimer, and most worth considering here, are: 1) from what part of Europe was it brought to the New World; 2) what, if any, are its distinguishing features; 3) how did it get its name?

As to question 1, Niles and Thomas claim its prototype was brought from England. Shoemaker states that Mercer discovered evidence of similar provenience (I have not been able to trace this) but goes on to say: "The French Huguenots in Berks, Lehigh and Lebanon Counties brought a unique instrument to Pennsylvania, the dulcimer, 'dulcimore' or Hackbrett, as it was variously called." Campbell and Eaton favor a German provenience, citing the trek of German speaking immigrants

to Pennsylvania southwestwards along the ridges and through the valleys of the Appalachians, a well established fact still attested to by the prevalence of Germanic family names throughout the region today. Eaton also cites the Highland copying of spinning wheels from Pennsylvania models of German provenience. In extension of these opinions it should be remarked that there was heavy Scandinavian immigration into Pennsylvania throughout the nineteenth century. The Dutch were early settlers in Delaware, New York and New Jersey in localities close to the borders of Pennsylvania. It is interesting to note that in defense of the theory of British provenience the use of the Appalachian (often called the Kentucky) dulcimer to accompany the singing of the British ballad is often adduced. The very few recordings of dulcimer playing deposited in the Archive of American Folk Song in the Library of Congress indicate that as of 1940 this was, to the contrary, very rare.<sup>9</sup> C. J. Sharp, who made his extensive field collection of survivals of British song between 1916-18 in the very heart of what has been known as "dulcimer country," states in the Introduction of his monumental work: "I came across but one singer who sang to an instrumental accompaniment, the guitar . . .," though he was informed that accompaniment by the dulcimer (which he describes briefly) was practiced in Kentucky.<sup>10</sup> Maud Karpeles, who accompanied Sharp on all three of his trips, states in her Preface to the same work: "The dulcimer . . . we saw and heard only in some of the Kentucky mountains-schools and never in the homes of the people, where it is evidently but rarely to be found." This testimony, coupled with the apparent absence of any trace of this type of instrument in the British Isles during the colonizing period, would seem to prejudice the theory of British provenience.<sup>11</sup>

With respect to the claim of French Huguenot introduction of the instrument into Pennsylvania, I do not know upon what data Shoemaker based his statement or whether it is relevant. For presumably he refers to the true hammer dulcimer. European evidence seems to point the other way. All of the French *bûches* or *épinettes* that I have seen were small, rectangular and of Walin's first form-group, i.e., without bulge. To the writer in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, the instrument was so "très-peu connu" that he describes its German counterpart, the *Scheidholz*. Mahillon describes a single specimen in the great Brussels collection. Choquet reports but two in the collection of the Paris Conservatoire. Walin details five of French origin. Four belong to his first form-group; the fifth is not classified. Interestingly enough, a surprising number of the specimens now in museums were made by one Fleurot in Valdaïol, a fact that certainly points away from a well distributed folk tradition in France. C. Marcel-Dubois, of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires (Paris), who possesses an *épinette* by Fleurot much like one in the National Museum in Washington, D. C., also made by him, assures me that this type of instrument is, in her experience, known only in the extreme east of France.<sup>12</sup>

The most cogent support to the theory of German provenience is borne by the collection of Pennsylvania *zitters* made, documented, and reported upon by Henry C. Mercer and now housed in the Museum of the Bucks County Historical Society in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. It consists of seven plucked and five bowed instruments (Plates III and IV) in good or fairly good states of preservation. To be sure, like the French variant of the family, they are examples of Walin's straight-sided first form-group. But unlike that almost miniature variant, they are full sized and about the same length as the average Appalachian dulcimer. Unfortunately, most were bought

from second-hand dealers and are consequently without pedigree whatever; others were gifts. But the information about them was sketchy and did not antedate the middle of the nineteenth century. Similar specimens have been found in the attics of old houses and some have been acquired by municipal, county and other museums, and by private individuals. Eventually, we may hope, some will turn up with more detailed documentation. Mercer, a brilliant amateur student of local history, knew of their European provenience and was in touch with such collectors as F. Scheurleer and J. W. Enschede in Holland. He diligently sought local informants and interviewed them in detail. Several bore witness that both plucked and bowed *zitters* were played by members of the Mennonite sect,<sup>13</sup> to accompany hymn singing, not in the church, but in the home, as is still the *psalmodikon*, a Swedish variant "invented" by one J. Dillner in the early nineteenth century, by Scandinavian-Americans in some north central states. Mercer gives excellent descriptions of the playing of the instruments and assumes that the Kentucky dulcimer is related to them.

Obviously, it is a far cry from the almost primitive Pennsylvania *zitters* with their straight sides, fretboard and soundbox all in one, to the more elaborate Appalachian dulcimer with its often hollowed-out fretboard and symmetrically built out soundbox. If we are to hypothesize a connection between them, might we not reasonably expect to have some evidence of the existence of transitional or intermediate forms? Perhaps the shelves of local historical societies and museums may still reveal such. Mercer, who evidently combed the antique shops of southeastern Pennsylvania quite thoroughly during the early part of the century seems to have found none. John Cummings, Curator of the Bucks County Historical Society and himself an expert woodworker, has offered the ingenious suggestion that given a verbal order, but no model, to make a stringed instrument of the *zitter* type, a Kentucky fiddlemaker, for example, might readily have adapted his customary procedures to the occasion and produced a mutation such as the Thomas type, or an ancestor of it, which, when seen by others, might have given initial impetus to the distinctive design of the Appalachian dulcimer. It might even have been purposely designed to meet the needs of music loving people who would prize it not only for its resemblance to the beloved fiddle but also for the greater ease with which its playing could be mastered. However this may be is, of course, pure speculation. The Pennsylvania *zitter* remains, at this writing, probably entirely out of use and as only one possible ancestor of the Appalachian dulcimer.

On the other hand, attention was called as long ago as 1917 by Josephine McGill, to another possible ancestor of our instrument. And Maud Karpeles published a reminder of its almost forgotten existence fifteen years later. "The history of its [the dulcimer's] introduction into the mountains," she continues in the text already quoted, "is obscure, but it may be noted that a similar instrument, catalogued as a German zither of the eighteenth century, is exhibited in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, No. 988) and if this classification is correct it is possible that the instrument was introduced by the early German settlers, who drifted into the Mountains from Pennsylvania."<sup>14</sup>

This CBC 988 (briefly reported on by Walin as VG No. 33) is no transitional or intermediate form but a full-fledged specimen of what I have been designating the Appalachian dulcimer. This can be seen in Plate V, where it is pictured by the side of one of three dulcimers made before 1938 by Nathan Hicks of Rominger, North

Carolina, and that is now in my possession. The resemblance to the Thomas instrument pictured in Plate I is striking enough. The Hicks instrument, which is representative of shape 2 in the outlines given in Figure 1 and is among the most common to be found in current use, could almost be a copy of CBC 988.<sup>15</sup>

If CBC 988 is German, then the Appalachian dulcimer is a direct importation and there is nothing more American about it than there is about the guitar or the hammer dulcimer. The variations of its shape as pictured in Figure 1 could not be considered significant acculturative phenomena, as must be, for examples, the five-string banjo and the Trinidadian steel pan.

But is CBC 988 German? Unfortunately, Emanuel Winternitz, Director of Musical Activities of the Museum, tells me, neither the agent of the Crosby Brown family who acquired the instrument for the Collection nor the editor of the catalogue whose description I quote in full above, left more documentation than that published, except that it was acquired before 1889. We have, thus, no record of where it was bought or made. The description "German, 18th century" may be reasonably correct if it was acquired in Germany. But it might as well have been bought elsewhere in Europe or even in the United States. Here, at least, almost any seller would readily swear that his "granpappy's pappy" brought it over from Germany "more'n a hunder years gone." Yet if it came from Germany, why are not specimens of like pattern reported—and commonly reported—from European museums? According to Eaton, James Edward Thomas, maker of the instrument shown in Plate I, was born in Letcher County, Kentucky, in 1850, began making dulcimers in 1871, and died in 1933 after turning out about 1500 of them. And he was by no means the only maker.<sup>16</sup> True, for every dulcimer one might have run across in the last twenty-five years in the Highlands, one might have found a dozen fiddles, a dozen banjos and two dozen guitars. But in contrast to its neglect in Europe, cultivation of the *Griffbrettzither* in the United States seems to be comparatively vigorous.

It is worth noting that of the fourteen other exhibits listed by Walin as of *deutschsprachigen Gebiet* (his Nos. VG 23-26, 28-32, 34-38), none belong to his third form-group with *Ausbauchung* on both sides. But all Appalachian dulcimers seen or reported upon (to my knowledge) do. Only one of the German zithers, and that belonging to his first form-group, shows heart shaped sound holes. Yet, for example, of his five Danish specimens (VG 6-10), two belong to his second and three—the only ones in his non-Swedish section—to his third form-group. (Perhaps we should explore the possibility of Scandinavian provenience.) And of his five Norwegian instruments, three show heart shaped sound holes on the front, as do three of the French specimens pictured.

If the wood of CBC 988 can be identified as German, our only doubt of the provenience of the Appalachian dulcimer might be that it had been fashioned in Pennsylvania from a piece of imported furniture, reworked along some such lines as those suggested by Cummings. Painting of a formalized wood grain upon natural wood was common in Pennsylvania in early days. There remains, of course, the chance that even if this wood were identified as American, No. 988 might still have been fashioned in the likeness of a German original, now unknown. The trouble is that the geographic origin of poplar wood, I am reliably informed, is very difficult to determine. Discovery in Germany of only one such instrument, or, upon opening up No. 988, of internal evidence of German manufacture, would dispel the above doubts.

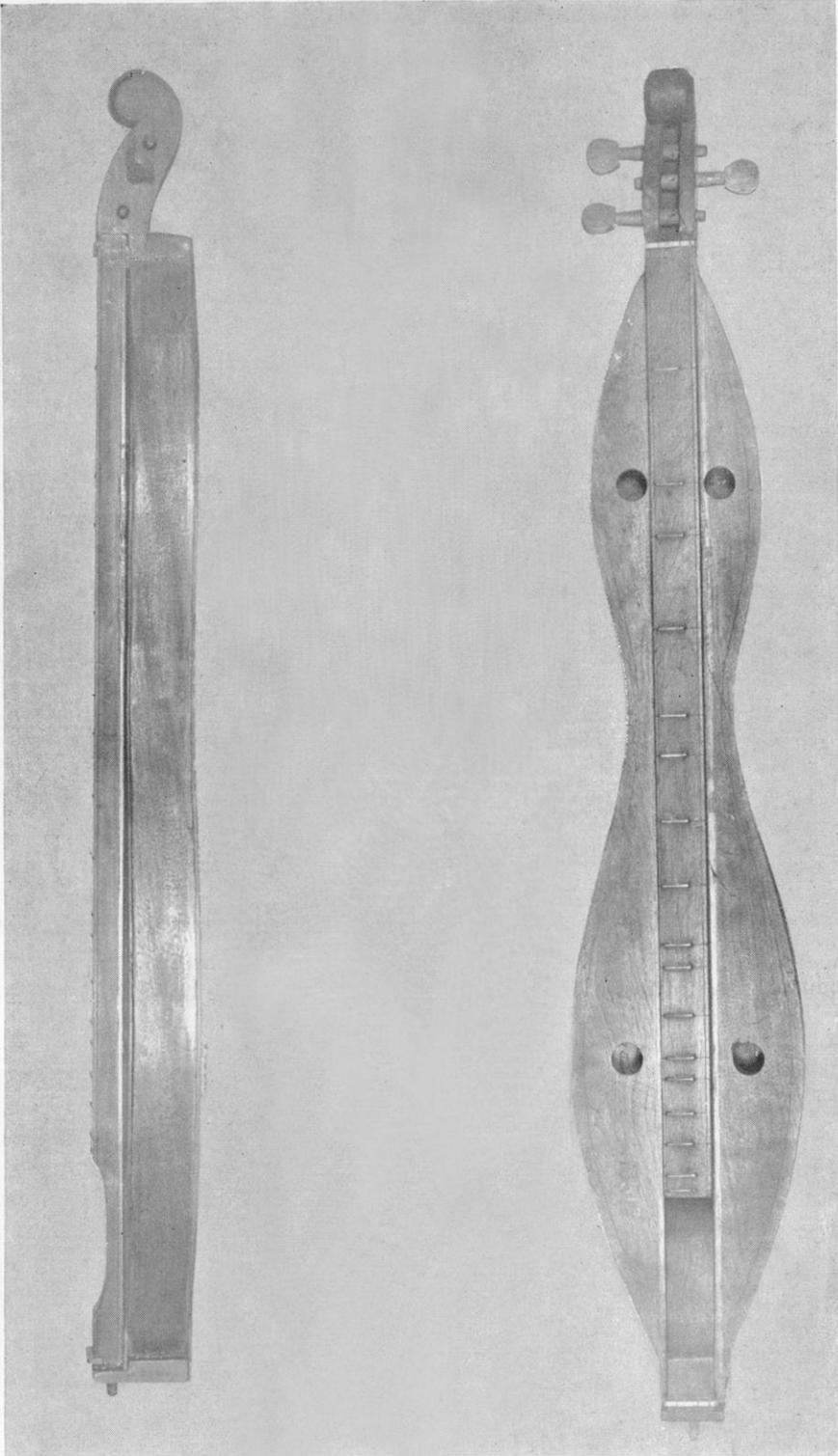
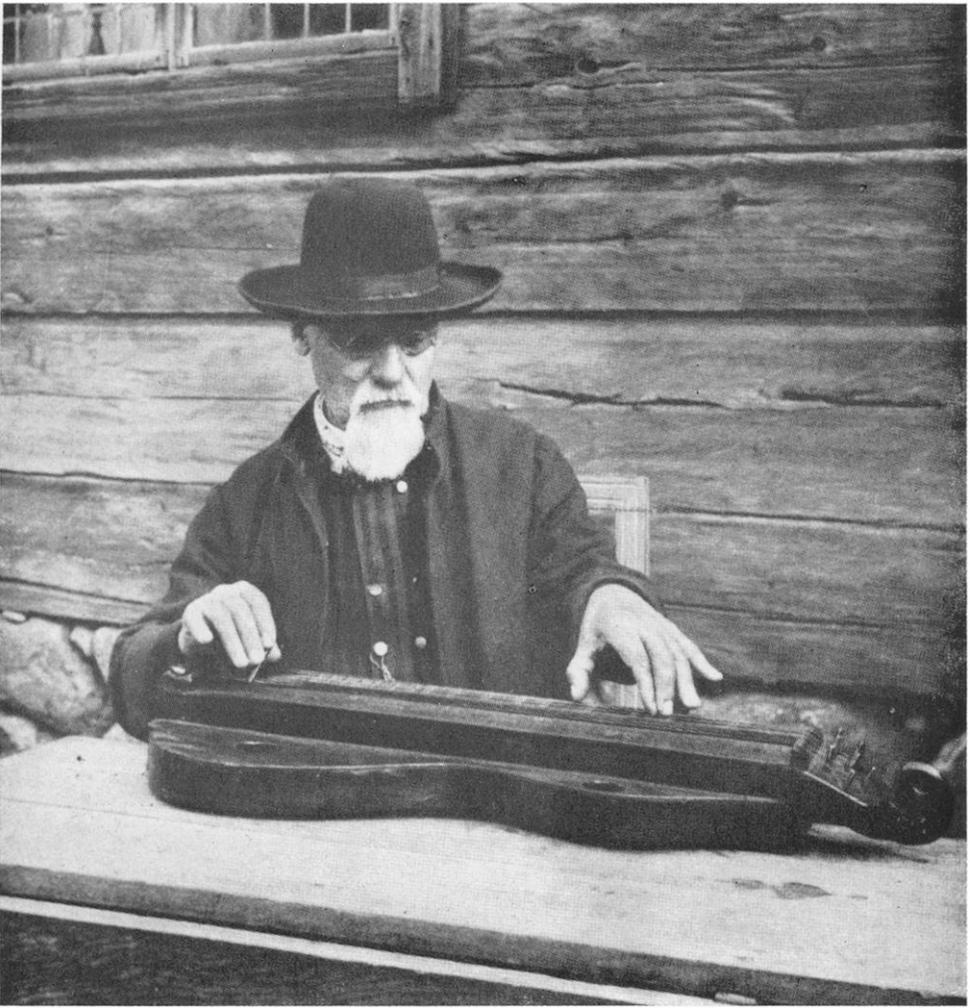


PLATE I. APPALACHIAN ("KENTUCKY") DULCIMER

MS label on back of lower right sound hole reads: "Manufactured by J. E. Thomas Jan, 25 1918 Bath Ky." Presented by Loraine Wyman to the Bucks County Historical Society, in whose Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, it bears the number 18514. Photograph by Maddox Photo Studio. Courtesy of the Bucks County Historical Society.



OTTO MALMBERG PLAYING THE HUMMEL

Reproduced with permission of the author from Stig Walin, *Die Schwedische Hummel* (Fig. 84). Courtesy of Nordiska Museet.



JETHRO AMBURGEY PLAYING  
DULCIMER OF HIS OWN  
MANUFACTURE



JEAN RITCHE PLAYING DULCIMER  
MADE BY GEORGE PICKOW  
Photograph by Barratt

PLATE II



PLATE III. PENNSYLVANIA PLUCKED *ZITTERS*

Photograph by Maddox Photo Studio. Courtesy of Bucks County Historical Society.



PLATE IV. PENNSYLVANIA BOWED ZITTERS

Photograph by Maddox Photo Studio. Courtesy of Bucks County Historical Society.

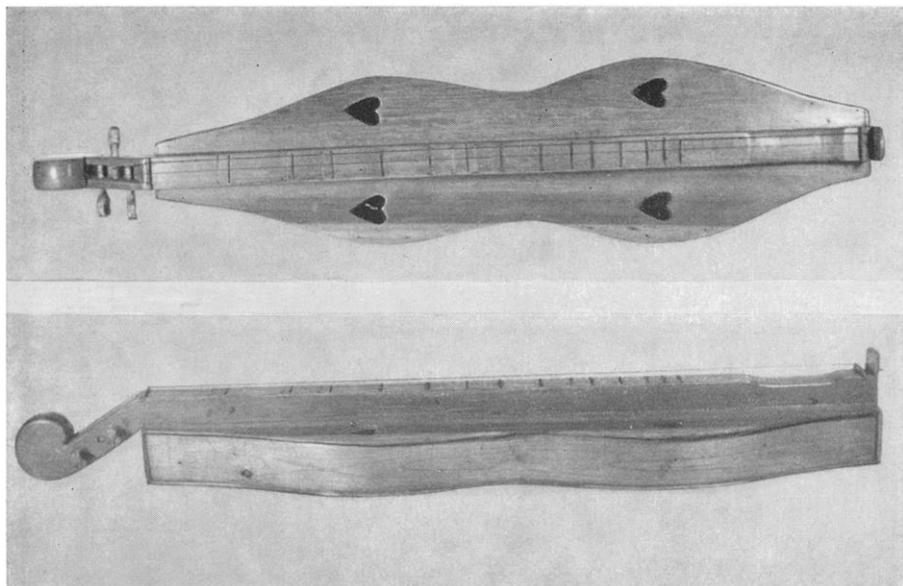
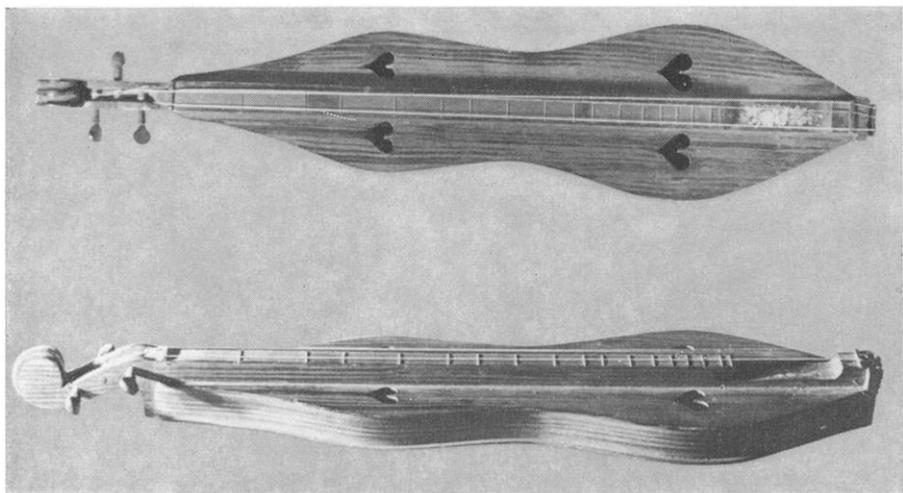


PLATE V

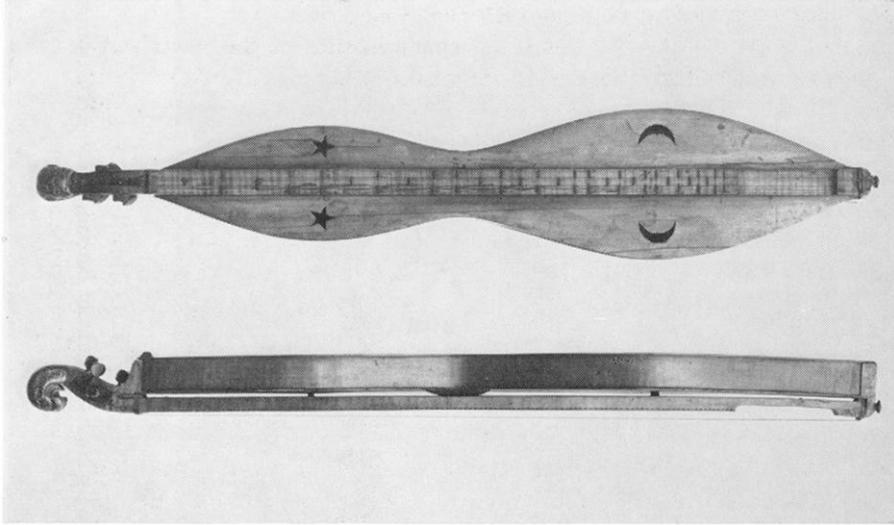
DULCIMER

Made by Nathan Hicks of Rominger, North Carolina,  
in possession of the author.



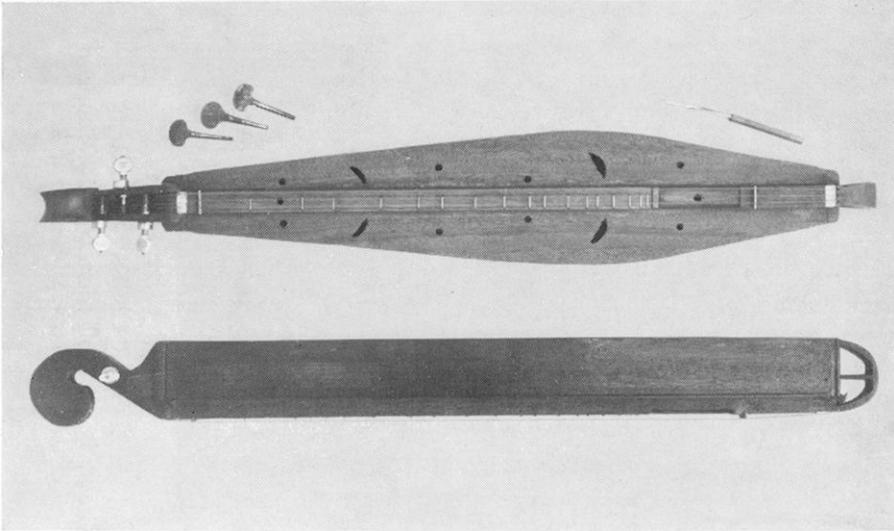
ZITHER OR DULCIMER

Crosby Brown Collection, No. 988, Courtesy  
of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



THE GAMBLE DULCIMER

Presented by its maker to Wm. C. Gamble when Secretary of Berea College, Kentucky, 1901-11. The fretboard is solid and rests upon three bridges. There are three series of frets—one for each string.



THE CAMPBELL DULCIMER

(See footnote 11)  
Three original hand wrought pegs have been replaced by geared banjo keys. The fretboard is hollowed out at least in part.

PLATE VI

As things stand at present, then, the European provenience of our instrument is clearly established in all but minor detail. I consider the claim of German eighteenth century origin of CBC 988 open to question, but the claim to German provenience for the whole American variant, if such it is, the strongest of the several advanced. Collections of local history and popular antiquities in Pennsylvania<sup>17</sup> remain to be explored as do also travel books and memories of living makers and players and libraries and institutional records of Highland settlement schools.

The question of what are the distinguishing characteristics of the Appalachian dulcimer can best be answered by comparing the plates presented herewith and the excellent reproductions at the end of Walin's monograph. I would say they could be expressed as "slender symmetry." None of Walin's instruments—excepting, of course, his reproduction of CBC 988—exhibit this particular variant of the basic functional conception of the *Griffbrettzither*. Further search in European Museums may uncover a tradition of such a variant. For the present, the American design, especially the one with the hollowed-out fretboard, would seem to stand as a well defined folk tradition still current among the people who carry the older and more archaic folk traditions generally. There is no telling, of course, what effect the present mild popularity of the instrument in the cities will have upon its overall currency among the people at large.

How the dulcimer got its name is perhaps the most baffling, though certainly not the most important, question that can be asked about it. Obviously, the word "*Scheitholt*" or "*Scheidholz*" cannot, with propriety, be used by, or even in close proximity to, an English speaking community. With even less propriety can it be formally Anglicized. The word *zitter* might have passed into American-English as "zither." The fact that it did not is no challenge to the claim of German provenience. For the word "zither" probably did not exist in the limited and archaic vocabulary of eighteenth and nineteenth century Highland speech. The fact that a rechristening took place is perhaps some support for Cummings' suggestion. And what more attractive name could have been found for the delicate instrument by a hard-bitten, bible-reading lot of pioneers who found in music almost the sole recreation of their secluded life? Is it not sanctified by Holy Writ (Daniel iii: 10)?

Not least among the difficulties of tracing the history of the dulcimer in the United States is the employment of the same name for two distinct members of the string family, the fretted zither and the hammered dulcimer. The earliest reference that has come to my notice (this, through the kindness of Sidney Robertson Cowell) is in Samuel Sewall's Diary, in which the entry for 23 May 1717 mentions the dulcimer.<sup>18</sup> In estimating such references it is only too often impossible to know from internal evidence which type of instrument is meant. For rarely do general authors give any detailed information of the object or the manner of playing it. Apparently, there is no ground for belief that the Appalachian dulcimer was known north of Pennsylvania, though of course, an individual specimen could have wandered up there.<sup>19</sup> The hammer dulcimer, to the contrary, has long been widely known in the Northeast, North Central and Lake States. It is known in the Southeast, though not as well-known as the Appalachian dulcimer. I have seen a pretty parlor model that stood upon four delicate legs, the whole painted in fine, aged, ivory enamel with colored festoons of flowers, probably of eighteenth century workmanship, and said to have been long held in Vermont. At least one craftsman, Thomas Mann, of

Ortonville, Iowa, was still making them to order in the late 1930's.<sup>20</sup> The probability is that this is the sort of instrument mentioned by Sewall.

No transcriptions of dulcimer playing have come to my notice. Below, I give two skeleton notations of field recordings of simple playing of the instrument. Transcription of the more elaborate playing must await recording with sound-camera, so fleeting or submerged in the overall twanging and buzzing are the sounds of the individual strokes of the plectrum and of the gliding from one fret to another.

*Notations of Dulcimer Playing.* Transcribed from tape dubbings of aluminum discs in the Archives of American Folk Song in the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., which were themselves dubbings of original field recordings on aluminum. No checks are known to have been made either of the electrical currents used or of the accuracy of the recording equipment used. Keys and tempos indicated are therefore only approximate. ↓ indicates probable down stroke of plectrum—away from player; ↑ indicates probable up stroke of plectrum—towards the player. Barring and metrical signature is a problem in this idiom. It could be determined in any one of three ways: by down strokes of the plectrum; by foot beat; by metrical pattern. Using the note values in the two examples, the first would double the number of bars and require a signature of 1/4; the second, which is followed here, marks the foot beat at the beginning of each measure and a signature of 1/2; the third would use one-quarter as many bars and a signature of 4/2. On the whole, the idiom is characterized by a general adherence to *ritmo di una battuta*. The third way is, therefore, improper. I would use the first if the players' foot beats marked the quarters—a technique often met with, in which the foot taps lightly or even pounds quite strongly as often as 200 or more times a minute. In the present examples, the down strokes are of equal strength throughout. Occurrence of the foot beat with every other one recommends the barring and meters used.

GROUND HOG

Played and sung by Curtis Dartey. Recorded by Walter Garwick and Jean Thomas, Ashland, Kentucky, 1934, LC No. 302A1. The drones sound continuously but it is not possible to perceive the strokes of the plectrum upon them.

Dulcimer Solo ♩ = ca. 23

SOURWOOD MOUNTAIN

Played by Theodore Blevins. Recorded by Alan and Elizabeth Lomax, Smithsboro, Kentucky, 1937, LC No. 154B2. The drones are usually weak, sometimes inaudible, but occasionally so strong as to give an effect of syncopation.

Dulcimer Solo ♩ = ca. 176-184



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> References are meager. No investigation with even a pretense of musicological character has, to present knowledge, been made. The best account I have found is: Charles F. Bryan, "American Folk Instruments, I—The Appalachian Dulcimer," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, XVIII, 1 (March 1952), 1-5; 3 (September 1952), plate opposite p. 66. Other references are: Allen W. Eaton, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (New York, 1937), p. 199 ff.; John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (New York, 1921), pp. 143-4; John Fetterman, "Tennessee Hill Country Dulcimer Builder," *Nashville Tennessean Magazine* (30 May 1954), pp. 8-9; Josephine McGill, "The Kentucky Dulcimer," *The Musician*, XXII (January 1917), 21; Henry C. Mercer, "The Zither of the Pennsylvania Germans," *A Collection of Papers Read Before the Bucks County Historical Society*, V (1926), 482-97; John J. Niles, "Deft Hands Carve the Dulcimer," *Louisville Courier-Journal Magazine* (20 January 1952), p. 26; Jean Ritchie, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands* (New York, 1954), p. 276; Jean Thomas, *The Singin' Gatherin'* (New York, 1939); Dorothy Scarborough, *A Song Catcher in the Southern Mountains* (New York, 1937), pp. 70-2; Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians* (London, 1953), pp. xviii-xix, xxvii; Henry W. Shoemaker, *The Music and Musical Instruments of the Pennsylvania Mountaineers* (Altoona, 1923); *Mountain Life and Work*, I, 21; XII, 19.

<sup>2</sup> I have seen about forty specimens, some half of them in the Appalachian area during the summer of 1936, in the hands of men and boys who played them in an apparently traditional manner.

<sup>3</sup> This is a report, not upon completed investigations in American organography, but upon some preliminary observations occasioned by neglect of two bits of evidence that might have engaged the closer attention of students at any time during the last fifty years, and that should be taken into account in the field work with sound camera, which alone can report adequately upon the music rendered by the skilled player of the instrument concerned. See *Ethno-musicology—Newsletter*, No. 5 (September 1955), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Thomas describes a type of construction in which a piece of sassafras wood 38" long and 3" wide is (split? and) bent to make the sides of a soundbox 30½" long and a neck 7¼" long.

<sup>5</sup> In the anthropomorphic presentation, the instrument is regarded as facing the viewer and having its own right and left, front and back, top and bottom. See Curt Sachs, *Handbuch der Musikinstrumentenkunde* (Leipzig, 1920), p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> I have not seen a left-handed player. A double dulcimer, for two right-handed players sitting opposite each other was exhibited at a National Folk Festival in Washington, D. C. around 1940. It was said to have been owned in Iowa.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Praetorius, *Syntagmatis Musici*, II, *De Organographia* (Wolfenbüttel, 1619), 57; *Theatrum Instrumentorum* (1620), Plate XXI, No. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Stig Walin, *Die Schwedische Hummel* (Stockholm, 1953).

<sup>9</sup> The following items are rendered by the more reliable informants and listed in the *Check-List of Recorded Songs in the English Language in the Archive of American Folk Song to July 1940* (Washington, 1942). Sung and played with dulcimer accompaniment: 291 A, "Run, Nigger, Run"; 302 A1, "Ground Hog"; 302 A2, "Turnip Greens"; 302 B, "Barbara Allen"; 1342 B2, "Little Brown Jug"; 1540 A2, "Henry of Knoxville"; 1540 B, "Barbara Allen"; 1541 A, "The Knoxville Girl"; 2854 A1, "George Collins"; 2855 A1, "Ground Hog"; 3161 A1, "Over the River, Charlie"; 3161 A3, "Sally Brown." Played on the dulcimer, without singing: 1340 B1, "Liza Jane"; 1342 A3, "Sourwood Mountain"; 1342 B1, "Turkey in the Straw"; 1343 A5, "Water Bound"; 1343 B2, "Arkansas Traveller"; 1343 B3, "Brown Eyes"; 1343 B4, "Liza Jane"; 1347 A1, "Turkey Buzzard"; 1347 A2, "Going Down the Road Feeling Bad"; 1541 B2, "Sourwood Mountain"; 1541 B3, "Old Granny Hare"; 1553 A1, "Buck Creek Girls"; 1553 B1, "Redwing"; 1553 B3, "The

Wreck of the Old 97"; 3160 B1-3, "Water Bound"; 3160 B4, "Turkey in the Straw"; 3160 B5, "Bonaparte's Retreat."

<sup>10</sup> Accompaniment by guitar has become almost the rule in recent years.

<sup>11</sup> The British rebec and crwth adduced by Niles, and the cruit or cruet (in nineteenth century Pennsylvania) by Shoemaker would seem to be too far removed in kinship to have bearing upon the present enquiry. It is worth noting that Walin reports no specimens of the fretted zither from the British Isles. Thurston Dart (Cambridge, England) has told me that he knew of no such instrument in the organography of England. Perhaps I should report that in January 1957, Ed Cray (Los Angeles, California) acquired from the estate of Stella Campbell, deceased, of Pasadena, a handsome dulcimer of the Appalachian type, with tapered noter and quill (Plate VI). The label has not yet been deciphered. A handwritten slip of paper accompanying it designates it as Scotch and of the kind "made by the Clan Campbell for five generations." Enquiry addressed to John Lorne Campbell brings the reply: "I know nothing about the kind of dulcimer you illustrate being made in Scotland," though he does remember a hammer dulcimer being played on MacBrayne's Loch Fyne boats to entertain tourists. Reference of the enquiry to Francis Collinson, of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, elicits the reply: "I have never heard of the 'Scotch Dulcimer' myself . . . it is perhaps not without significance that the name Campbell is not unknown in Scandinavian countries, notably Sweden." Passed on to Robert Stevenson of the National Museum of Antiquities, the enquiry brings further reply from Lyndesay G. Langwill, C.A., Honorary Treasurer of the Galpin Society: "I feel sure that Miss Campbell's 'Scotch Dulcimer' has no connection with Scotland. The fretted zither is not known here. . . ." For the present, therefore, I am inclined to discount the claim of Scotch provenience.

<sup>12</sup> Without more detailed study of the French *épinette*, it might be difficult, in some cases, to distinguish an instrument fashioned in accordance with a tradition known as such by its maker and one that is a mere sport or phantasy of an individual experimenter entirely ignorant of that tradition or a counterpart. For in many collections there are to be seen miscellaneous rectangular boxes, large, and small, with strings stretched over them.

<sup>13</sup> The first Mennonites came to Pennsylvania in 1720.

<sup>14</sup> The description of CBC 988 given in the section "Europe" of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Handbook No. 13—Catalogue of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments of all Nations*, I (New York, 1902), 51, runs as follows: "Zither. Shallow body. Sound-board with long pointed ends and incurved sides, and having four heart-shaped sound holes. The peg-box with 3 wooden pegs inserted at the side and terminating in a moulded scroll. Three metal strings, 2 in unison sounding D, passing over 17 brass frets, the other string sounding a fifth below, G. Germany, 18th century. Length 2 feet 1 inch. Width 7½ inches." Perhaps I should add: (1) the length is 35¼, not 25, inches; (2) it is painted, in black, in what seems to be imitation of pine grain, concealing the natural wood, which may be poplar; (3) the tuning is indicated in black painted capital letters D DG on the fretboard just below the lower nut; (4) fret squares are numbered in black painted figures from the top down: 6,7,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,1 in the order of the conventional major scale with the tonics at the third, tenth and seventeenth frets; (5) the fret squares of the tonics show a faded black paint; (6) the fretboard is hollowed out at least in part; (7) a cluster of flowers in faded painted colors can be seen in the plucking well—an indentation on the fretboard under the place where the plectrum in the right hand plucks or sweeps the strings. Incidentally, the Crosby Brown Collection comprises a number of fine specimens of the *Scheitholt*, *hummel*, *épinette* family. One, No. 2475, has a scroll turned sideways like the Pennsylvania *zitters* pictured in Plate III, but stubby, rather than elongated.

<sup>15</sup> The description of CBC 988 fits closely the Hicks instrument, except (1) the wood (poplar) was left unfinished by the maker, (2) no tuning is indicated, (3) there are only fourteen frets, (4) they are not numbered, and (5) the length is 35½ inches and the greatest width, 7 9/16 inches. Probably, comparative study of the cents values of the interval ratios produced by the string lengths at the various frets will yield results of the greatest interest of any measurements of the instrument. However, individual instruments vary so astonishingly that only statistical averages can render conclusions of musicological significance. For example, on CBC 988, the cents value of the interval produced by frets 12-13, a half step in the scale, is 168 instead of 100 (my measurements). The two succeeding intervals, frets 13-14 and 14-15, whole steps in the scale, are 149 and 163 instead of 200 each.

<sup>16</sup> Niles lists as "truly great" dulcimer makers: Bristol Taylor, Berea, Kentucky; W. C. Singleton, Viper, Kentucky; Nathan Hicks, Rominger, North Carolina; (S. F.) Russel, Marion, Virginia. Theodore Blevins, of Marion, Virginia, made very good pear-shaped instruments in the 1930's. Jethro Amburgey (Plate II) learned his craft from J. E. Thomas. Eaton names Lewis Hinkle of Volga, Upshur County, West Virginia. Homer Ledford has been making dulcimers at Berea College, Berea, Kentucky. J. J. Niles and Jean Ritchie (Pickow) (Plate II) are largely responsible for the present urban interest in the dulcimer. Niles has made some fine instruments elaborated according to his own fertile imagination. Jean Ritchie's husband, George Pickow, a pupil of Amburgey, has made a number of fine traditional dulcimers.

<sup>17</sup> A list of museums can be found in Earl F. Robacker, *Pennsylvania Dutch Stuff* (Philadelphia, 1944), p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> "23.5. To Salem, Meadford, Lodge at Cousin Porter's: See and Hear the Dulcimer." In "Diary of Samuel Sewall, Vol. 3," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, VII, Fifth Series (Boston, 1882), 131. The Editors offer the following footnote to the quotation: "A musical instrument played by striking the brass wires with sticks—Eds."

<sup>19</sup> Wesley B. Reed, of North Woodstock, Connecticut, who has the largest local collection of musical instruments I know of in New England, states that he has never run across a Kentucky or Appalachian dulcimer though he has never gone very far afield yet. He has three hammer dulcimers in his collection, two of about 1875, one probably before 1850.

<sup>20</sup> The Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., has made available to the public some recordings of Mann's playing (Record No. AAFS 41).

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