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John Jacob Niles and His Dulcimers

“This strange looking thing...is called a dulcimer. The word is spelled d-u-l-c-i-m-e-r, a combination of two Latin terms, dolce and amor. For me I’ve never found it having anything to do with ‘sweet love’ at all. It’s usually cut fingers, glue, shellac, varnish, disappointment.”

John Jacob Niles, quoted in *A Journey With John Jacob Niles* by Jacqueline Roberts and Kerstin Warner, University of Kentucky Libraries Occasional Paper No. 13, 2001

If anyone outside the American South heard a fretted, strummed dulcimer before the “folk boom” of the 1950s and 60s, it was probably at a performance or on a recording of John Jacob Niles (1892-1980). Yet for a time after his passing the man and much of his music all but disappeared. That’s a pity, because the man and his music are both fascinating.

In fairness, many today find his performances challenging and difficult to listen to, at least at first. We who listen to traditional folk, blues, rock and other styles of music are used to rough, harsh, shrill, sometimes less-than-polished performances. But most of us aren’t used to almost operatic renderings of folk songs by a counter tenor, a male soprano who performed dressed in white tie and tails. And his dulcimer playing can seem at first to be little more than a low-pitched rumble of chords and drones.

And the dulcimers he played were far from the soft-chiming hourglass and teardrop instruments we know. Dubbed “Nilesimers” by Jean Ritchie, they were rather outlandish affairs which Niles built himself. Huge cello- or lute-shaped things, they have up to eight low-tuned strings and eccentrically placed staple frets.

All that said, Niles, a Kentucky native who lived there much of his life, was an important figure in American music and a pioneer in the folk music revival. In addition to performer, he was a composer, choral arranger, and folksong collector, as well as author, radio personality, farmer, photographer, poet, military pilot, woodworker, oil painter, and luthier. A genuine Renaissance man.

But the man *Time* magazine dubbed “the dean of American balladeers” was best known as a concert artist, a highly dramatic singer. He played venues ranging from private parties to university campuses, Carnegie Hall to The White House. In September, 1943, he was the subject of a six-page photo and text piece in *Life* magazine. He made numerous records for several notable labels, including RCA Victor’s Red Seal, Asch Records (later re-released on Folkways), The Clancy Brothers’ Tradition label, and his own Boone Tollivor Records.

Niles faded from the public eye after his death. While much of his choral music remained available, his books and most his recordings disappeared.

In recent years, Niles and his work have come back into public view from different directions. One was Bob Dylan. In Martin Scorsese's 2005 documentary *No Direction Home* there is a brief clip of Niles singing his song "Go 'Way From My Window" from a 1960 TV program and Dylan talks about him.

Dylan also mentions Niles in his 2004 memoir *Chronicles Vol. 1*. Writing about his early influences Dylan says, "I listened a lot to a John Jacob Niles record, too. Niles was nontraditional, but he sang traditional songs. A Mephistophelean character out of Carolina, he hammered away at some harplike instrument and sang in a bone chilling soprano voice. Niles was eerie and illogical, terrifically intense and gave you goosebumps. Definitely a switched-on character, almost like a sorcerer. Niles was otherworldly and his voice raged with strange incantations. I listened to 'Maid Freed from the Gallows' and 'Go Away from My Window' plenty of times."

Although Dylan has some of the facts wrong (the Carolinas instead of Kentucky and the instrument Niles played), he does catch the effect a Niles performance can have. And Dylan borrowed a line Niles himself had borrowed, "Go 'way from my window," for one of his best-known songs.

Ron Pen, on the other hand, gets the facts right. His large and fascinating biography, *I Wonder as I Wander: The Life of John Jacob Niles* was published in 2010 by The University Press of Kentucky. Twenty-five years in the making, it is a work of both tremendous scholarship and great sensitivity. A composer and musicologist, Professor Pen is Director of the John Jacob Niles Center for American Music at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Pen also contributed a chapter on Niles's dulcimers, beautifully photographed, to *Kentucky by Design: The Decorative Arts and American Culture*, edited by Andrew Kelly, also published by The University Press of Kentucky in 2015.

Perhaps as a result of this attention, much of Niles's recorded music is available again, as well as more of his published music. Quite a few of his recordings have made it to YouTube. There was also an hour-long WoodSongs Old-Times Radio Hour broadcast, "Celebration of John Jacob Niles" (show 604), which can be accessed from the program's archives.

Since the 1960s I have had an on-again, off-again fascination with Niles, his music, and especially his instruments. I remember as a teenager being intrigued by photographs of him posing with his dulcimers, not even knowing what he called them. Later, as I learned about dulcimers in general, I was confused and wondered how Niles's instruments fit into the scheme of things.

My interest in Niles and his instruments was rekindled by Pen's biography and I recently had the opportunity to visit the John Jacob Niles Center. There, several of Niles's own instruments are on display, along with other instruments from Niles's, the school's and Ron Pen's collections. I was graciously allowed access to the instruments for close inspection. I also was able to meet and talk with Dr. Pen. Later I had a long and enlightening telephone conversation with Jacqueline "Jackie" Roberts. She is a singer who worked with Niles as he shaped his later compositions, especially the settings he wrote for the poems of Thomas Merton. With pianists Janelle Pope and Nancie Field, she often toured with Niles in the later years of his career, sharing the program. After his passing, she began performing with a Niles-style dulcimer. Her generously shared memories and her memoir, cited above, gave me a clearer picture of Niles's dulcimer performance practices.

Bio

Born in Louisville, Kentucky on April 28, 1892, Niles grew up there and on a nearby farm. He learned piano and music theory from his mother, to sing and an appreciation for old songs from his father. He began collecting folksongs from others as a teen, writing down the words and

transcribing the melodies into notebooks. He continued to collect wherever he was for thirty years. He also began to compose his own songs, frequently using fragments or snatches of traditional material as starting points, or composing new melodies to old lyrics. A pilot in World War I, he was shot down in France and seriously injured. But as a result, he was able to study music formally while in France. He later continued his studies in Cincinnati and Chicago. In 1925 he moved to New York City. He began publishing arrangements of folk songs he had collected and his own compositions, sometimes mislabelled as folk songs. In 1929, he joined singers Cissie Loftus and Marion Kerby as their pianist. Soon Kerby and Niles left the better-known Loftus to perform their own folk music concert programs. These performances featured each as a solo singer and ended with duets. Together they toured North America and Europe. Theirs was a rocky professional relationship but lasted until mid-1933.

Before the split-up with Kerby, Niles began working between concert tours for photographer Doris Ulmann (1882-1934). He was her photographer's assistant, her driver, and her guide on trips to Appalachia. They were based in North Carolina and made brief forays into Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky. Working for the Russell Sage Foundation, her mission was to document handicrafts and other work for a book. Niles was able to continue his song-collecting during these trips. They made a total of four trips together and their relationship became intimate as well as professional. When she passed away, the wealthy Ulmann left Niles an annual stipend.

During his time with Ulmann, Niles rethought his musical and performance direction, making plans to follow a solo career. And he began to use dulcimer for accompaniment, moving away from piano.

By 1936, Niles had left New York and returned to Kentucky. He married Rena Lipetz, a young woman he had met in New York and brought her south. Ultimately they settled in Clark County, Kentucky, near Lexington, on a place they named Boot Hill Farm to live for the rest of his life. They had two sons. From there he would travel out, performing 60-70 concerts a year. At home he composed and practiced music, engaged in other arts, and made additions and improvements to their home and farm. Niles continued to perform and compose well into his eighties. His final concert was on September 14, 1978 at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina. He passed away on March 1, 1980 at age 87.

Niles and the dulcimer

Niles's life and career were complicated and his stories were often "embellished." His early involvement with dulcimer is a bit murky. Apparently he did have an instrument in his younger days. Niles told a boyhood story about how his father, while running for the office of local sheriff, bought his son a dulcimer. According to Niles, his father paid \$1.50 for the instrument, guaranteeing the seller's vote in the upcoming election. Though Niles kept journals and notebooks most of his life, there is little or no evidence dulcimer had much role in his music-making until the 1930s.

In his chapter on Niles's instruments for *Kentucky by Design*, Dr. Pen convincingly argues Niles's deeper relationship with the dulcimer began on August 22, 1933. On that day he and Doris Ulmann visited the Abigail and Balis Ritchie family in Viper, Kentucky. Their daughter, Jean Ritchie, remembered, "Niles...twiddled with Dad's dulcimer, looking it over, tapping it here and there, and trying to make tunes on it." This suggests that in Ritchie's memory Niles wasn't all that skilled a player. But in the following months, he began to acquire and play dulcimers. He also began to adapt the instrument to his own musical needs. The traditional three-stringed dulcimer, which would only play melody with a drone accompaniment, wasn't suited to his needs as a singer. Niles needed an instrument which would play chords along with drones, so he began to experiment.

The instruments he bought used metal staples for frets. They were under the melody string only. He began to put staple frets under the other two strings in order to play chords. Interestingly, he didn't put guitar-type frets all the way across the fingerboard, as is common now. Instead, he only placed them under the strings at the places where the notes he wanted were. First he experimented on finished dulcimers, such as one built by Will Singleton. He was soon commissioning instruments from Nathan Hicks. These were bigger and had more strings than the first instruments he used. Finally he began building his own dulcimers, bigger yet and tuned low. He was aided by Harry A. Mefford, director of buildings and grounds at the University of Kentucky. Mefford was a skilled woodworker and these instruments were often built in the University's woodshop.

The instruments

In my lifetime I have made about 30 dulcimers. Only 5 of them proved successful—that is, playable. Of these 5, 3 are still in daily use. My dulcimers are made of Kentucky walnut, curly maple, spruce, mahogany, ebony, satinwood, wild cherry, ponderosa pine, and rosewood. They are put together with French rabbit-skin glue. The strings vary in length from 16 to 42 inches, and are made of steel, steel covered with bronze, and nylon covered with bronze and silver.

John Jacob Niles, footnote in "Introduction to the Original Edition," *The Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles*, 1960, reissued by The University Press of Kentucky Press, 2000, page xx.

During my visit to Lexington and the Niles Center I examined several Niles instruments, including two of the above-mentioned three. These he used extensively in his performances and recordings. (I also looked at and fell in love with a lovely little all-mahogany Jethro Amburgey dulcimer from 1935. But that's a different story.) As one would expect of work tools from a long career, they show signs of wear, repair, additions, adjustments, and experimentation. Some glue joints have separated, and there are age- and use-related cracks. None of the instruments are in playing condition.

The instruments were built for eight strings. The first four strings have staple frets under them. Under each of the strings are a different number of frets. These four were the "chording" strings.

The other four strings are drones and played only occasionally. But they probably vibrated sympathetically with the chording strings, adding to the overall sound. The instruments use ball-end steel guitar strings. In fact, there are still Black Diamond guitar string packages in the instrument cases.

In the glass display case which houses instruments at the Niles Center, there is a card next to a huge lute-like instrument which identifies it as the original "Nilesimer." At first glance there is little to suggest that this instrument is any sort of dulcimer at all.

For one thing, it has a neck. And it is big, 42 inches long overall. The vibrating scale length is (VSL) is 28 9/16 inches. Including the peghead, the neck extends over a foot from the body and is almost three inches wide. The body is 26 inches long, 15 1/2 inches across at the widest point, and 4 inches deep.

The neck and peghead were cut and shaped from a laminated maple block with a mahogany or walnut center strip. It has a thin mahogany fretboard. The peghead is angled back very sharply, almost 45 degrees, like that of a Renaissance lute. The peghead is so long and the angle is so steep the instrument won't lie flat on a table unless the peghead hangs over the edge.

It has geared guitar tuners. They are the type which has three gears mounted on a single plate.

They were adapted in order to come up with the necessary four to a side. And they don't match: one has a white button instead of black like the other seven. These probably aren't the original tuners. Empty screwholes, exposed score lines and indentations indicate these are replacements. They are mounted on the sides of the peghead like on a classical guitar. But the pegbox wasn't cut through like on a guitar. Instead it was hollowed out, like on a violin or some dulcimers.

The fretboard extends from the neck over the body about eight inches and ends with a decorative flourish.

The body is a large, fat teardrop. It has a spruce top. There is a soundhole in the center of the top near the widest point. While early photos show a simple rosette, the soundhole now has a carved walnut or rosewood Celtic knot insert. Just below the soundhole is a dark wooden bridge, like a two-footed banjo bridge. It is held in place on the top with two wooden pins in the feet.

Near the end the strings attach to a two-part rosewood tailpiece. It looks to have been modified from its original design. A fan-shaped part extends over the top and holds the strings. The plan may have been for the ball end of each string to sit in a hollowed-out recess. The string would then follow an open slot to a hole near the front and pass through to the bridge. Except for the three lowest strings, that plan was abandoned. Most the strings are simply threaded through the holes and pulled snug, ignoring the original recesses.

This part of the tailpiece may have originally been suspended, like a violin tailpiece. But now, four hefty screws or stovebolts hold it firmly to the top. There are also four wooden pins which attach it to the tailpiece base. The two pieces are notched and fitted together. The base extends down the side of the body at the end, tapering to a point. It has wood pins and possibly hidden screws holding it to the body. There's a large wooden knob attached.

The sides are a light wood, possibly birch or satinwood. The flat back is a single 1/4-inch thick piece of what is probably walnut, though at first glance it looks like rosewood. The differences in finish and wood from the rest of the instrument suggest it may not be the original back.

Another interesting feature is a wooden bar running up the inside length of the body, apparently from the endblock to the neck. It is probably there to provide strength and rigidity.

The other instrument I examined closely is somewhat more "dulcimer-ish." But it also looks like a cello with no neck. In a way, it is. The sides of the instrument are the flame-maple ribs of a 3/4 size cello. The poor cello was dismantled and the ribs cut in half for dulcimer parts! Except for mismatched ebony and rosewood cello pegs, the other wooden parts appear to have been made from scratch.

The overall length of the instrument is 39 inches. The peghead is 10-1/2 inches long and the scroll is 3-1/2 inches tall. The body is 27-3/4 inches long and 2-5/8 inches deep. At the upper bout, it is 12-1/2 wide, 6-5/8 inches wide at the waist, and the lower bout is 13-15/16 inches wide. The tailblock and bridge/tailpiece are walnut and extend from the bottom edge of the ribs. At the end there is a round wooden knob. The string nut and saddle both appear to be rosewood.

For all its size, the vibrating scale length (VSL) is rather short, 25-1/2 inches. In contrast, my Warren May dulcimer, only 34-3/4 inches long, has a VSL of 26-3/8 inches, still short, but almost an inch longer than that of the Niles instrument.

Unlike a cello, the top and back are both flat. The top assembly is an interesting bit of engineering and really begins with the peghead. The peghead is laminated from several pieces of wood. It is slotted like a classical guitar. The inside corners and sides of the slot are

reinforced with maple blocks.

gribblej@gol.com Niles 6.

The the peghead, fretboard, and bridge block are all one assembly. The outside laminations of the peghead are walnut (or perhaps mahogany) boards. These run the length of the body and form the sides of the hollow fretboard and the bridge block. Another board, possibly stained maple, is glued between the side boards. There is a strum hollow about three-quarters the way up the fingerboard. In the hollow is a large round soundhole. A carved walnut disk is set into the hole. It has slots which form a cross-shaped opening. Like the Celtic knot rosette in the other instrument, it is a later addition. Early pictures show just the hole.

The strings are threaded through eight unevenly-drilled holes in the bridge block at the butt of the instrument.

The top was made from two 1/4-inch boards of spruce. They are joined to half-inch-wide strips of a different white wood, which in turn are attached to the bottom edges of the fretboard box. This odd arrangement suggests the original top may have been replaced.

In her memoir, Jackie Roberts quotes Niles talking about a damaged instrument:

“And this one once was, before they threw it off the top of a truck, this was a fine piece of Carpathian spruce...I tell you, baggage men have a way, don’t they?” (page 94)

I suspect this dulcimer is the one the baggage men damaged.

Reaching inside through the sound holes with my finger, I could feel the surface differences between the different woods, but couldn’t find any reinforcement of the joint.

The top has two S-shaped soundholes, each over eight inches long. They are slightly mismatched in size and shape. There are small diamond-shaped pieces of wood reinforcing the top and bottom curves of each “S.” These are backed with more wood on the inside. One cross brace in the lower bout is visible with a mirror through the sound holes. Tapping suggested a second cross brace in the upper bout.

The back is a single piece of walnut 1/4 inch thick. I couldn’t tell whether or not is is braced. The finish and the grain of the wood suggest that it, like the back of the “lute,” may be a replacement, not the original. The top and back edges are not flush to the sides but have a small overhang, or “beading.”

There are other interesting construction details and signs of repair and modification. On the sides below the heel of the peghead there is seven-inch wood strip, perhaps birch, with a single flush wooden pin near each end. On each of the sides themselves, just past the ends of the strip, are two more pins, possibly going into a block inside. There are also what look like repaired cracks in the area. And along both sides of the fretboard assembly are three uneven 3-inch gouges at the waist. They look too crude to be decorative. They may have been made to provide a gripping surface for picking the instrument up.

The “cello” and “lute” instruments became iconic, often appearing in photographs and paintings with Niles. He often used another instrument which, unfortunately, I didn’t examine. It is a large teardrop, somewhat similar to the “lute” but smaller and without the neck. I learned from Jackie Roberts that Niles called it “Little E” because it was tuned to E.

I did examine another teardrop which the Center has, but is not on display. It is in poor condition, missing its back, and one of the sides is almost completely unglued. This teardrop may have been more of an experiment and not used in performance, or at least, not as much. It shows less sign of use and the workmanship is very uneven. Although it appears to be a symmetrical design, the right, or bass/drone side of the top is a little wider than the left.

The instruments all show an odd mix of woodworking skills. Some of it is very high quality

gribblej@gol.com Niles 7.

while some of it is really crude, uneven, and very rough-hewn. When I pointed this out to Dr Pen, he suggested that the rustic appearance may have been on purpose, to help create a sense of them being “genuine” folk art. That is certainly plausible, in that Niles did cultivate a not - entirely-accurate image of a country character, “the Boone Creek boy.” Or it could reflect differences in woodworking skills between Niles and the more experienced Harry Mefford.

Tuning and frets

“Do not be surprised at my high voice. When it’s functioning it’s extravagantly high. If it’s high tonight I can sing my songs without any trouble. It’s always been this way, and praise God it remains so, because if it changes, I’d be in a awful fix. I’d have to make my dulcimers all over, because the dulcimers are all geared to the voice. The voice is not geared to anything.”

(John Jacob Niles, Roberts and Warner, pg. 95)

According to a hand-drawn “Design & Keyboard Plan,” Niles tuned his instruments in unisons, open fifths, and octaves in different keys. The drawing for the “lute” dulcimer shows the pitches to be A and E. The first two strings are A in unison, the third string the E below, and the fourth string the A below that. Strings five through eight continue the descent with two unison E notes, then an A below, and the last string an A note still an octave lower. So the open strings span a range of three octaves, the same as a guitar.

So in tuning, anyway, the Niles dulcimers are mostly an extension of traditional practice. They aren’t tuned to chords, but are similar to the common three-string DAd and DAA tunings.

The frets are a different story. As mentioned above, Niles used metal staples for frets instead of instrument fret wire. There are varying numbers of frets under the strings, and varying fret arrangements from instrument to instrument. There are only frets for the first four strings. As mentioned above, the low-tuned fifth through eighth strings are drones.

On the instruments I examined, the first strings have from nine to twelve frets. For the most part the arrangements are chromatic, except for a whole step between the nut and the first fret.

Under each of the second strings, there is only one fret, for a minor third or a fifth.

The third and fourth strings often share frets, longer staples. There are between three and five of them. On one instrument they are at the intervals of a second, minor third, major third, fourth and fifth from the nut.

Apparently placing frets was not an exact science. There are unfilled holes which show where the original frets were pulled out and moved slightly, sometimes more than once.

There are also “mystery frets” under two of the third strings. They are not anywhere which would give a useful note and I have no idea of their purpose.

The fingerboards have fingernail gouges at the places Niles most often fretted the strings. As would be expected, the frets which would yield I, IV, and V chord notes show the most wear.

Playing and performance

...the fact is he was a singer and an actor and these few chords...You could be playing the dulcimer and it is so...it feels almost like it doesn’t need to be there, you know, it’s just a background thing and it just goes, and you keep it going and the singing just twirls around all

of that. The dulcimer is incidental. It doesn't mean that much. You have the chords and you
gribblej@gol.com Niles 8.

play music...you know, when I'm playing, I don't know that I'm playing. A good country music star does the same thing. The guitar is there and you don't even think about it, do you. You think about the words of the song and the performance. And that's the way it was, it was Johnnie's singing voice and his performance and the dulcimer was just sort of "there." It was incidental, never a featured thing. You never had a solo on the dulcimer. Never, never.

Jackie Roberts, interview

Niles often posed in photographs holding his instrument up like a guitar or in his lap like a traditional dulcimer. But when he performed Niles nearly always set the instruments face up on a table and sat to play and sing. He used card tables because he liked the height. In a concert he would have several instruments tuned to different pitches on tables to the side. He also used a loose-leaf notebook, which I suspect contained the evening's songs in performance order.

With his left hand fingertips and the side of the thumb he fretted the chording strings. The chords were simple voicings, but often the harmonies combined with drones were distinctively modern.

With his right hand he brushed the strings rather lightly with either the flesh of a finger or the side of his thumb, strumming in double time. At times he would play all the strums in one direction for a phrase and then reverse the direction in the next phrase. So the tone was rather dark. He would play the notes of a chord followed by the drones in a slow descending arpeggio before beginning to sing and/or as an ending. He never played melody or anything other than the strums. However if you listen closely you'll hear chords more sophisticated than the simple triads of most folksong accompaniment. His playing was quite simple but very flexible and was adapted to the needs of the song and the performance.

On stage Niles was as much an actor as a singer and he used the dulcimer to either add intensity or provide a dramatic pause. They are also striking artifacts, providing visual interest, and he would often use them as much as props as music instruments. Sometimes he would use one as a character in a ballad or love song, singing to it, cradling it in his arms. Performing the traditional ballad "Maid Freed from the Gallows" he would at times hold his cello-shaped dulcimer out at arm's length, dangling the instrument by the peghead, as if it were a young woman swinging from the end of a rope.

Conclusion

So what are we to think of Niles, his instruments, and his dulcimer-playing? While he has been dismissed as an oddity from an earlier age, his music has shown real staying power. I think his critics judge him by the wrong criteria.

First, in regards to his dulcimer playing, he is not an instrumentalist. He is a singer and a singer of a certain sort. Despite his folksy manner, country dress in publicity photos, rustic instruments, and RCA's billing him as a "mountaineer tenor," he is not a folksinger. He is an art singer. He developed a style and body of work by combining the folk materials he had collected over a thirty-year period with the technique and sophistication which came from training and firsthand exposure to the world's concert music. He welded the two into a distinctive and distinctively American performance.

As a folksong collector, he wrote down the words and transcribed the melodies from people who, for the most part, sang unaccompanied. One of Niles's goals was to present, along with the songs, something of the singers from whom he had learned them. Those original performances no doubt were rhythmically free, possibly improvised, and something difficult to accurately score for a piano accompaniment. Yet to perform completely unaccompanied in a salon or concert setting would have probably been too radical a departure from the norm to

have been saleable. His adapted dulcimers both provided a light, appropriate support for his voice

gribblej@gol.com Niles 9.

and the songs, and helped meet audience expectations of a “real” musical performance.

It is important to note that as a collector, Niles was not an academic or strict preservationist. He collected songs to sing them and to build his own repertoire.

One of his goals both as a composer and as a performer was to champion the idea that American folk music was worthy of attention as serious art. When he arranged traditional material and his own compositions for publication, he often provided sophisticated settings appropriate for formal performance.

But for his own performances he built instruments which would play chords often different from the conventional I-IV-V progressions of most folk song accompaniments. Both the open fifth drones of early music and the harmonically ambiguous chords of the French Impressionists were available to him. His light brushing of the strings provided a rhythmically free accompaniment. The low-tuned strings contrasted with his soaring tenor voice, providing a foundation and expanding the sound.

Finally, I think Niles should also be more widely recognized as a precursor to the dulcimer boom of the 1960s and '70s. Even though his performance style and practices aren't widely copied, many of his changes to the instrument itself (increased size, added frets) and playing techniques (chording rather than the use of a noter) have become “mainstream” in the dulcimer world.

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