

The Hammered Dulcimer in Ellis County

by S.J. Sackett

Although the dulcimer is now seldom used in wedding dances, there are still local craftsmen who have made them, including John Braun of Walker and Peter Pfeifer and Wendelin Younger of Hays. I have talked about dulcimer making with Mr. Braun and Mr. Younger; Mr. Pfeifer is unfortunately seriously ill, and I was not able to discuss the instrument with him, but I talked with his daughter, Mrs. Elmer Kuhn of Hays, and examined one of his instruments.

The dulcimer is trapezoidal in shape, usually about three feet long on the widest side, which is the bottom of the instrument, at which the player sits. Wendelin Younger's dulcimer is four feet long on the widest side. The instrument is made of some hard wood; Mr. Younger used oak. On the left side are rows of nails—Mr. Younger used pegs—to which strings are attached. Both the nails and the strings are arranged in courses of four, all the strings in each course being tuned to the same note. The Pfeifer dulcimer I saw had only three strings to a course, but Mr. Pfeifer's daughter assured me that other dulcimers her father made had four; she wanted a quiet instrument she could play in her home, and presumably her father used fewer strings for that reason. There are commonly seventeen, nineteen, or twenty-one courses of strings on each instrument, depending on its size and the number of notes it can play. The strings are usually made of piano wire. Mr. Younger told me that most makers use No. 8 or 9 wire but that he uses No. 13 so as to get more volume.

A little less than half way across the instrument from the left is what we may call the treble bridge. This is a wooden strip set perpendicular to the body of the instrument. There is a metal rod fastened to the top of the strip along its entire length, and in the wood are nine, ten, or eleven large oval openings, the number depending on the size of the instrument, which make the bridge look somewhat like the rail of a sailing ship. The treble strings pass over this bridge; the bass

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Dulcimer belonging to John Herl, Hays.

strings pass through the holes in it. Because the Pfeifer instrument I saw had been designed not to be noisy, there was a thin strip of green felt laid across the top of the bridge under the strings. Near the right side of the instrument is another bridge, which we may call the bass. It is like the other, except that the bass strings pass over it and the treble strings pass through the holes, which may be eight, nine, or ten in number, according to the number of courses of treble strings. The Pfeifer dulcimer had a strip of green felt along the top of the bass bridge as well, and in addition strips of felt along each side of the frame of the instrument.

I was told that the placement and shape of the sounding holes made little difference in the tone. The Braun dulcimer had three holes. The Pfeifer instrument, designed to play quietly, had only two sounding holes; these were inlaid with marble, and the maker had also inlaid a square of marble as an inner border around the instrument. On the other hand, Wendelin Younger had made four sounding holes in his dulcimer; this instrument was especially designed to produce plenty of volume and indeed, as its maker said, sounded like two dulcimers. Apparently three is the normal number of sounding holes, and more or less are used, depending on whether the instrument is supposed to be loud or soft.

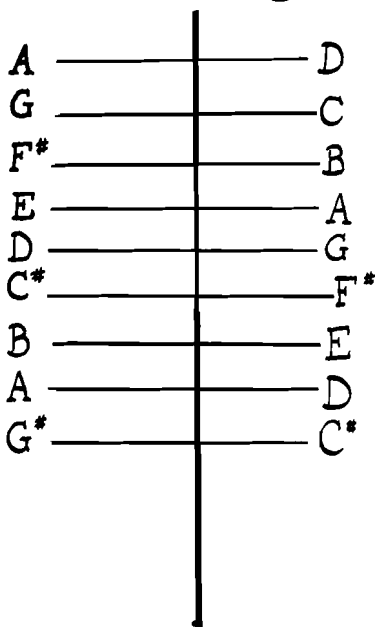
The strings are struck with mallets or hammers. Vincent Riedel of Walker calls them "paddles"; most of the other players I talked with called them "sticks." John Herl of Hays told me that in the old days these sticks used to be very flexible; I gathered that they might be willow strips curled at one end. Mr. Herl prefers his more rigid; flexible ones, he said, are hard to control. John Braun's sticks are made of maple; Wendelin Younger likes a set made from deer horn. Peter Pfeifer also has a set made from horn, but most of those his daughter showed me were made of hard wood. She said that sticks should be very rigid. The are held between the index and middle fingers of each hand, just back of the ridge. Most sticks that I have seen have two ridges, and the sticks are held between them. Mr. Herl holds his thumb on the ends of the sticks to steady them; none of the others do, preferring to let them bounce freely. (One reason for this difference may be that Mr. Herl's sticks have only one ridge.)

Tuning the dulcimer is difficult, because each string that crosses the treble bridge must be tuned to two different notes, and all four strings in each course must be tuned absolutely identically. Tuning keys of various shapes are used. I attempted without success to find out how dulcimers are usually strung; apparently everyone tunes his dulcimer differently. Mr. Herl, whose treble bridge contains eight strings, told me that the right treble strings were one octave, from F to F. Wendelin Younger told me that the lowest note of his right treble

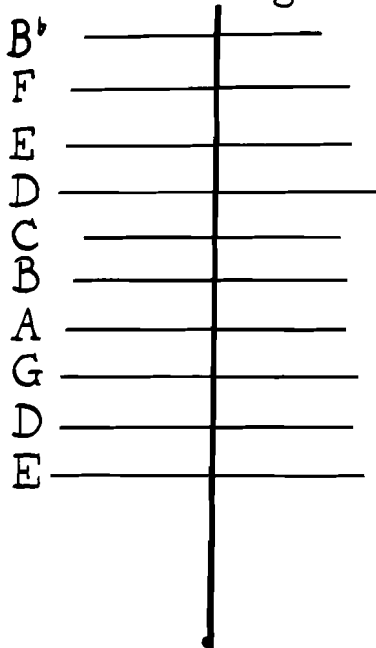
strings was A but that he had raised it to B-flat and tuned all the other strings higher accordingly. John Braun told me that on the lowest string of his instrument, the left treble was A and the right treble D. All agreed that dulcimers had no sharps or flats and that thus it was impossible to play some music on them. Peter Pfeifer's daughter gave me a scheme of the way her father strung his dulcimers, which, as will be observed, does include some sharps and flats (Fig. 1).

The basic possibilities of the dulcimer comprise only those chords and melodies that do not contain sharps and flats,¹ although the presence of B-flat and C-sharp in the system indicated the possibility of a desire on the part of the player to extend his harmonic and melodic vocabulary. The left treble is a fifth higher than the right treble, which gives an additional sharp, and this also extends the possibilities of the instrument. The Pfeifer tuning is diatonic in nature and conforms generally to the mixolydian species, in the sense of the medieval church modes, with the left treble transposed. Because there is some overlapping of notes, the range of the Pfeifer dulcimer comprises two

Treble Bridge



Bass Bridge



¹For the statements in this paragraph I am indebted to Leland Bartholomew of the music faculty of Fort Hays, Kansas State College.

octaves and a perfect fourth. It is strange that the three lowest notes on the bass bridge are E, D, and G instead of E, F, and G; this may have been an error in the information given me, or it may be a peculiarity in tuning. A similar peculiarity exists in Wendelin Younger's dulcimer. The strings on his treble bridge ascend the scale for eight notes and then descend it for two.

Dulcimer making is a dying art. John Braun is seventy-five and made his last dulcimer fifty years ago; Wendelin Younger, at forty, is the only dulcimer maker in Ellis County who has not passed beyond middle age. Dulcimer playing is a dying art as well. I discussed dulcimer-playing with the two men just mentioned and also with John Herl of Hays, who is seventy-one, and Vincent Riedel of Walker, who is also in his seventies. The only example I found of a really continuing tradition of family dulcimer-playing is in the family of Peter Pfeifer; he made dulcimers for all his children, who have learned the instrument from him and from each other.

While I have heard dulcimer-players perform such selections as "Redwing," "Listen to the Mockingbird," "Sioux City Sue," and even "Lili Marlene," most commonly played on the instrument are the traditional dance tunes. Players divide these into waltzes, polkas, schottisches, and hochzeits. The hochzeit as a dance, as distinct from the celebration itself, is in fast 2/4 time and is, in fact, indistinguishable from a polka. The difference is the dance step; it is like a waltz step but speeded up to get into two beats. Mr. Herl tells me that the polka step is comparatively modern innovation among the German-Russians.

HOCHZEIT 1: NO TITLE

Collected from John Braun, Walker, Kansas

Transcribed by John Chambers

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "HOCHZEIT 1: NO TITLE". The score is written on four staves of music, all in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The first three staves contain a single melodic line, while the fourth staff contains a rhythmic accompaniment consisting of eighth-note chords. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The image shows a musical score for two staves in G major. The top staff contains a melodic line with a '1st ending' bracket. The bottom staff contains a bass line with a '2nd ending' bracket.

1st ending

2nd ending