

Common and Noteworthy Instruments from 1750s-1800s' Eastern USA

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During the 1700s and 1800s, residents of the eastern seaboard of North America enjoyed a wide variety of instruments, many of them built for “contrast and variety.”¹ Availability, on the other hand, was a different story. While few accounts of the musical scene in that time period exist for more rural settings, records of the area and the events of the period from 1750 through the 1800s paint an interesting picture of how specific social classes and needs determined an instrument’s popularity.

At the time, instruments were highly controversial, especially among specific religious groups.² The religious restrictions on music occurred in relatively isolated sub-cultures in America, whereas notable sources from Germany would spend a novel’s worth of pages praising how perfect the organ was and would carefully list the detail of instruments’ tuning, mechanisms, and origins.³ When comparing these European instrument lists or collections with confirmed colonial instruments, one finds that very few of the elaborate, most prized instruments were exported to North America. Even outside America’s religious institutions, instruments were sometimes considered profane.⁴ While some instruments and some musical styles escaped such stigma, other instruments and styles had more ominous ties or were considered inelegant; the violin and fiddle offer one illustration.⁵ The phenomenon suggests that American society’s acceptance of music may have been a sensitive or subtle affair, as the difference between the violin and fiddle is often described as the fiddle being a poorly crafted violin or, in some cases, as a different musical style performed on the violin. In other words, the

¹ Mark Steighner, “Consorting with Praetorius: Establishing an Early Music Ensemble.” *Music Educators Journal* (September 1979): 50.

² Covey Cyclone, “Did Puritanism or the Frontier Cause the Decline of Colonial Music? Debate dialogue between Mr. Quaver and Mr. Crochet.” *Journal of Research in Music Education* (1958): 68.

³ Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum II: De Ornographia, Part III - V with Index* (Zea-e books, 2014), i-148.

⁴ Arthur Michaels, "Overtones," *Music Educators Journal* (1981): 7.

⁵ Gilbert Chase, *America's Music, from the Pilgrims to the Present* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 12-263.

fiddle was not a completely different instrument from the violin, and yet the two had extremely different reputations.⁶

However, despite some instruments being looked down upon,⁷ such stigmas did not always keep an instrument from being popularly distributed. For example, citterns were more popular than lutes.⁸ This is arguably because some lutes were delicate instruments whereas citterns were shaped and constructed in such a fashion as to make them fairly hardy (National Music Museum). The durability of an instrument is important, as during this time period several of the colonies were still fairly rough places to live, as was noted in a secondary commentary carried out between characters “Quaver” and “Crochet.”⁹ Furthermore, the American colonial era was notable for the several conflicts occurring at the time.¹⁰ The fact that the fiddle remained extremely popular despite its stigma helps support this theory: the fiddle was often a key instrument for folksongs and travel songs, and was frequently described as a constant companion of slaves, who prized the instrument along with the likes of the banjo and improvised idiophones.¹¹ Slaves also fashioned makeshift mandolins out of gourds, which were hardy and possible to craft without any refined tools or formal education.⁴

As a case in point, the oboe, which is sensitive to the elements, did not appear commonly. One critic at the time quipped, “Only one Oboeist [*sic*] exists in North America, and he is said to live in Baltimore.”¹² Nonetheless, more exotic instruments, such as the glass harmonica Benjamin Franklin introduced in the mid-1700s, were hits with critics and can still be found today.¹³

However, these delicate or exotic instruments did not become very common except in cultural centers and large cities, supporting the theory that ease of assembly and durability of instruments also determined their popularity among classes at the time. For instance, the strings of the dulcimer were usually repurposed banjo strings and were sturdy.¹⁴ Another instrument that lends support to this theory is the German flute, also known as a “one-keyed flute.” It is a more complicated and advanced modification of the flute commonly found at the time. According to Janice, “Early one-keyed flutes had three sections: a more-or-less cylindrical head joint, a conical middle joint with six tone holes, and a foot joint with one tone hole covered by a key. Later, probably by about

⁶ Mary Francis Gyles, “Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned,” *The Classic Journal* 42, no. 4 (1947): 5-9.

⁷ Louis Elson, *The History of American Music* (Macmillan, 1915), 5-262.

⁸ Gilbert Chase, *America's Music, from the Pilgrims to the Present* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 12-263.

⁹ Covey Cyclone, “Did Puritanism or the Frontier cause the Decline of Colonial Music? Debate dialogue between Mr. Quaver and Mr. Crochet.” *Journal of Research in Music Education* (1958): 68.

¹⁰ Albert Stoutamire, *Music of the Old South: Colony to Confederacy* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), 32-98.

¹¹ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 41-172.

¹² Louis Elson, *The History of American Music* (Macmillan, 1904), 50.

¹³ Charles Fowler, “A History of Mechanical Instruments,” *Music Educators Journal* 54 (October 1967): 48-68. doi:10.2307/3391092

¹⁴ S.E Hastings, Jr., “Construction Techniques in an Old Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 83 (1970).

1720, makers divided the middle section into two parts.”¹⁵ While the German flute was one of the most popular wind instruments of the 18th century, one issue of the *Music Educators Journal* notes that the German flute is more easily played in the hands but has intonation problems, whereas the later-constructed Baroque recorder has opposite tendencies.¹⁶ By the mid-1800s, the German flute had all but replaced the Baroque recorder.¹⁷

Musical instruments that were popular in America are mostly noted in Boston and Virginia. As intimated above, Boston was in the midst of disputes regarding the place of instruments in religion, and both Puritans in New England and Calvinists throughout the colonies favored spare, simple rituals and places of worship with little to no indulgence in music.¹⁸ Virginia society, however, heavily embraced music. Virginia’s most noteworthy areas of interest were Richmond and Williamsburg. Richmond was observed to be a place populated with instrument repairmen.¹⁹ Williamsburg, unlike cities in the northern states, was a highly musical place. Instrument crafting shops abounded, and one visitor was annoyed that there seemed to be “a constant tuting” resounding throughout the town.²⁰ Popular instruments in Virginia are known to have included the virginal, fiddle, viol, violin, cittern, German flute, and spinet.²¹

North Carolina had its own traditional instrument that still survives to this day—the mountain dulcimer. While the exact origins of this stringed instrument are not fully clear, it is thought to be a descendant of the German hummel, which was noted to have been present in Virginia earlier than the dulcimer.²² Originally it was a simple instrument that was strummed with a turkey quill, but over time it developed until various crafting styles had branched off. Small changes, such as the development of the hollow fretboard and false bottom, continued until specific dulcimer builds allowed the performer to play in different styles.²³ For example, the Galax-style dulcimer allows for a playing style known as “droning,”²⁴ which suggests that local musicians adapted instruments to their particular needs.

Overall, considering the rough situations the colonials would manage to find themselves in, it is not surprising that most of the popular instruments were the simpler and more durable ones. While records of instruments during the time period can be

¹⁵ Janice Bouland, *Method for One-Keyed Flute* (University of California Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁶ Don Cowan, “More about Recorders,” *Music Educators Journal* 52 (September/October 1965): 121-122. doi: 10.2307/3390548

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gayle Olsen-Raymer, *The Colonists—What They Created*. (Humboldt State University, 2014), <http://users.humboldt.edu/ogayle/hist110/ColonialRegionsCompared.png> (accessed October 27, 2015)

¹⁹ Stoutamire, *Music of the Old South*, 32-98.

²⁰ James Darling and Maureen Wiggins, “A Constant Tuting: The Music of Williamsburg,” *Music Educators Journal* 61, no. 3 (1974): 58.

²¹ Chase, *America’s Music*, 12-263; Cyclone, “Did Puritanism?,” 68; Elson, *The History of American Music*, 50; Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 41 – 172; Steighner, “Consorting with Praetorius,” 12-263.

²² Hastings, “Construction Techniques,” 462-68.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Berea Digital*, “[Introduction Galax Style Dulcimer Playing] Silly Bill.” <http://digital.berea.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15131coll4/id/4978/rec/1> (accessed September 2, 2014).

difficult to come across, context paints a logical picture. Worldwide, complicated and delicate instruments abounded, but the “victors” were either very developed and/or applauded, such as the spinet and violin; had a high survival rate, like the cittern; or could be replaced or created cheaply, such as banjos and frame drums.²⁵ This is especially true as observations move farther away from urban epicenters such as Boston and into rural areas such as Virginia and North Carolina.

However, not all of these instruments were uniformly popular throughout general society in the United States; one would not find a glass harmonica performer casually playing the afternoon away on a road in rural Louisiana. For instance, the banjo, a favored instrument among African American slaves, was popularized outside the more poverty-stricken populations only through stage shows that had themes of Southern plantation life. These shows were popular from the 1830s until around the 1880s, and the popular songs many associate with the banjo, such as “Turkey in the Straw,” only became established during that time. The Southern-themed stage shows are often credited to Joel Sweeney, a Caucasian man from Virginia.²⁶ Until the shows popularized the banjo, it was relegated to what was considered a lower social stratum and was more a symbol of a social class than of Southern culture.

Unfortunately, many of the “original” banjo tunes played by slaves in America either have dubious origins or simply were not recorded due to the historical biases of America’s South. Because of this, as researcher Jim Carrier notes, the banjo was soon associated with Appalachian origins instead of African ones, and it was often inaccurately treated as such:

Most of the songs that we sing and play now were originally recorded by commercial companies and the Library of Congress in the Southeastern mountains between 1925 and 1935. This record was rife with the biases of the gatekeepers who were judging music for its commercial appeal amidst a period of Jim Crow segregation. The splitting of southern music into ‘race’ and ‘hillbilly’ was a mirror of Jim Crow. There was little space, apparently, for what we might call ‘black hillbillies’ playing string band music...As music became industrialized, black string bands had no commercial outlets. They couldn’t make a living. What is recorded is what is remembered. Nothing was passed to the next generation, either in the media, or at home. Charles Wolfe summed it up this way, “Today, we are left with only a pathetic handful of recordings representing this tradition in its flowering. ... As Kip Lornell told me, there had to have been ‘scores and scores (who will) forever remain unrecorded...[musicians] we’ll never know about.’”²⁷

The example of the banjo dramatically illustrates how an instrument’s reputation affected its place in society. Where many religious organizations found instruments controversial, especially in their churches, many in general society would not place much

²⁵ Dolores Kunda. “Slit Logs and Sacred Cows: The History of the Drum,” *Music Educators Journal* 66, no. 1 (1979): 56. doi: 10.2307/3395719

²⁶ Wayne Erbsen, *Southern Mountain Banjo* (Mel Bay Publications, 2010), 153.

²⁷ Jim Carrier, “The Extinction of the Black Banjo in America: Appalachian Music Fellowship Final Activity Report,” *Berea* (2009): 2-4.

cultural value on the banjo due to its reputation as an instrument of poverty, and this disfavor prevailed despite the instrument's wide distribution. Or, at least, they would not value the banjo until later, when a Caucasian male made a living off exaggerating and reviving an interest in a romanticized culture.

England's citterns and traditional music were heavily adopted by America but were viewed in a different manner. By the 18th century, the cittern had been culturally designated not as an instrument of poverty or slavery, but as an "amateur's" instrument. As early as the 1600s, the instrument had been left as an entertainment item in the lobbies of public places, namely barbershops; traditional melodies printed on sheet music were left for those who wished to play the cittern for their own amusement while they waited. One such melody is the song "Sir Whittington," by Richard Johnson²⁸:

Whittington's Bells

Traditional
Sheet Music By Emory Jacobs

The musical score is written in 6/8 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of two systems of music. The first system contains the first four measures, and the second system contains the next four measures, starting with a measure number '5' above the first note. The melody is written on a treble clef staff, and the accompaniment is on a bass clef staff. The lyrics are printed below the melody line.

Here must I tell the praise of Worthy Whittington, Known to be in his days Thrice Mayor of London

But of poor parentage Born was he, as We hear, And, in his tender-age, Bred up in Lanchaishire

There are also records of cittern music being written and used for the church in England and Germany.²⁹ Due to the spread of the Moravian church to America, cittern construction had ties with religious organizations.³⁰ The ease with which people could pick up and play the cittern contributed to its popularity. Even if an instrument was not especially sturdy or easy to transport, if many people could play it or could easily learn how to play it, people were more keen to use it.

Being easy to play helps explain the popularity of an instrument like the harpsichord, which is associated historically with a relative abundance of original

²⁸ *TraditionalMusic.co.uk*, "Popular Music of the Olden Time Vol. 2," <http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/popular-music-olden-times-2/popular-music-of-olden-times2%20-%200517.htm> (accessed November 15, 2014).

²⁹ *IMSLP*, "Music used at the Magdalen Chapel (Various)," http://imslp.org/wiki/Music_used_at_the_Magdalen_Chapel_%28Various%29 (accessed November 10, 2014).

³⁰ Nola Knouse, *The Music of the Moravian Church in America* (University Rochester Press, 2008), 288-298.

compositions, both due to its more “high-brow” reputation and because it was a familiar instrument many people could at least pluck a basic tune with by simply pressing a key. John Christopher Muller, despite having been born in Germany, is considered one of America’s early composers. He was a harpsichordist and contributed to the instrument’s repertoire with pieces like “Rondo in III in G major.”³¹ Other composers, such as William Selby³² and Benjamin Carr,³³ were European immigrants to America. In fact, research seems to suggest that most original harpsichord pieces were written by composers who began their careers elsewhere and later moved to America, a development that mirrors the distribution of instruments, like the cittern and banjo, that debuted in America through migration.

Due to the culture of early American music, many instrumental portions of fiddle songs are simply borrowed from the immigrants’ cultures of origin: they are given new titles and lyrics, but the melody and harmonies remain relatively unchanged. One such example is “Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms,” which was also published under the title “My Lodging It Is on the Cold Ground”³⁴; its melody was also used as Harvard University’s alma mater.³⁵ The reuse of existing songs makes, of course, for ease of play, but that is not all to the story of America’s compositions and instruments. It is not difficult to create simple alterations in a musical piece already well-known to the performer, but the performer must also have an instrument that can play the tune in question. As noted above, the violin, banjo, harpsichord, and flute were the most widely distributed, and each of these instruments has a range of at least an octave (setting aside, for the moment, custom versions of the instruments made out of improvised pieces, which may or may not have been as versatile as conventional versions).

However, there are several examples of fiddle and violin music that have unknown origins but cannot be attributed to migration from other cultures. The specifically syncopated styles in songs such as “Forked Deer” are heavily correlated with the South, hinting that such styles and music originated from the likes of Virginia or North Carolina.³⁶ If this is the case, the fiddle was one of the first instruments to shift or blend styles into something completely unique to America. The development of original American fiddle music reveals a slow-starting evolution of musical culture that later allowed for the adaptations of popular instruments, or instruments that pick up in popularity.

In fact, many of the songs of America’s common instruments were not published until the late 1700s: many original American compositions required a generation or so to gain popularity, and most of what is now considered America’s

³¹ John Ogasapian, *Music of the Colonial and Revolutionary Era* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 153.

³² Nicholas Temperley. *Bound for America: Three British Composers—Music in American Life*, “Two—William Selby” (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

³³ Eve Meyer, *Selected Secular and Sacred Songs*, Vol. 15 (A-R Editions, 1986).

³⁴ YouTube. “Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms – Samuel Gardner, violin,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJjNQv2R-ZQ>

³⁵ YouTube. “Fair Harvard,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApRmiBjnwyA>

³⁶ Library of Congress, “Forked Deer,” <http://www.loc.gov/item/afcreed.13035b05> (accessed November 2, 2014).

“traditional Southern music” only started to appear around 1780 to 1800. Many of the country’s notable composers—or the known composers of recorded songs—were born near 1750.³⁷ The publication of identifiably American songs in the late 1700s marks the rapid shift toward new blended styles that had diverged from overtly British culture. Through the influence of European immigration and African musical roots, a distinct style that was uniquely American had begun to emerge.

As of the 1750s, Americans were still using the traditional tunes and instruments from their various homelands, albeit in modified forms. The slave had the banjo, the aristocrat continued on harpsichords, the common lady could strum a cittern, the mountain residents built dulcimers, and the common man and child played the flute. The uneven distribution of each instrument among the social strata suggests that there were different “classes” of instruments in the eastern United States, and that there were specific qualities an instrument had to possess in order to reach significant distribution within a given class. For the higher social strata, an instrument had to be either interesting or well-praised and embraced by critics. Musicians on the other end of the social scale favored an instrument that was durable, easily fabricated, and able to play songs passed down through tradition. Aiding in the appeal to people at both ends of the spectrum was the instrument’s reputation and the ease with which it could be played in the first place. In this manner, instruments that are now icons, for example, of the South or of sophistication started off as much smaller symbols of class.

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³⁷ Nicholas Temperley. *Bound for America: Three British Composers - Music in American Life*, “Two—William Selby” (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

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