

A Brief History of the Bowed Psaltery

The bowed psaltery is based on several medieval instruments that disappeared over a thousand years ago, about the same time as the ancestor of the violin appeared. Though not a medieval instrument, the bowed psaltery does have its precursors in the Welsh *crwth*, bowed *rote*, or *rota*. Most historians agree that around the 1890s, a schoolteacher in Germany invented the instrument. Then as now, its isosceles shape with naturals along one side and accidentals makes it easy to play.

Psalteries are found, in one form or another, in every major folk culture in the world dating back thousands of years. They came in all shapes and sizes, some were plucked, some were struck. It is still questionable if any were bowed. An instrument similar to the bowed psaltery probably dates back around 300 years ago in Ireland can be documented. It is important to realize that the modern psaltery differs from its ancient relatives. Psalteries were originally played by plucking, either with the fingers or a plectrum according to medieval paintings and sculptures. This does not necessarily mean that in medieval or Elizabethan times the psaltery was never played with a bow. The exact origins of the bowed psaltery are shrouded in the mists of time. Although, many historians believe the bow psaltery is completely unhistorical. However, as a folk instrument, the bow psaltery could have gone unrecorded.

It is important to realize, though its historical origins are at best questionable, the bowed psaltery is a wonderful instrument to play. The bow on wire gives a sound that can easily be mistaken for an ancient sound. Because of this, the bowed psaltery fits in well with a medieval ensemble.