



## Cimbalom (Dulcimer)

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The *cimbalom* is a stringed instrument of the box zither type. Its strings are played with two hammers held in the player's hands. The sound box often has a trapezoidal shape with a varying number of resonance openings. The instrument usually has three to five strings for each course; that is, there are several strings – three to five – for each note. The strings, (most frequently steel, as in the piano), are often separated by bridges into two or three parts. The wooden hammers have, over the course of time, had a great variety of shapes. The two ends of Hungarian cimbalom (as it is called in Hungary) hammers have different sound qualities: one end is covered with felt; the other is uncovered.

The oldest known instruments of this type in Europe date back to the fifteenth century (Germany, the Alpine region, Italy, Poland, Hungary, the Czech lands, northern France and England). There is proof that, in the seventeenth century, they spread to Scandinavia and Spain. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the *cimbalom* spread from Europe to the regions ruled by Turkey – including Persia, where it was called a *santúr*. There it became one of the most important classical musical instruments.

In the nineteenth century – in contrast to the growth in popularity of the piano for sophisticated music in western Europe – the *cimbalom* became, above all, an instrument for folk music and music of the lower classes living in cities, chiefly in the Alpine region and in eastern Europe. This development applies mainly to string ensembles, (two violins and a double bass) - and sometimes wind instruments (a clarinet) and a drum, in eastern Europe. In 1874, the Budapest instrument maker J. Schunda created a large type of pedaled concert cymbalon, (length: 160 cm. – 63 inches), with a four-octave chromatic range. The body of the instrument is on a pedestal; the pedals can mute the sound. Its low register (D – B) has three-string courses; its middle (C – F) four-string courses; its upper register (F – E3), five-string courses. This instrument became the standard instrument for light music played by urban bands, (and, later on, provincial bands as well), in Hungary and the western part of Romania, where it was very often played by Roma musicians. From there it spread to Slovakia, (where it was the basis of many Roma bands [→ Jožka Kubík]), and to Moravia (where the tradition of "*cimbalom* music groups" with string instruments and sometimes clarinet is still alive), to Poland and to Ukraine. At the same time, provincial folk music bands also used an older, portable *cimbalom* that created typical harmonic accompaniment for string instruments. This instrument is still widespread in Romania where it is called "tambal mic".

The *cimbalom* reached the status of a concert instrument thanks to Franz Liszt ("*Ungarischer Sturmmarsch*", 1876) and in the orchestral version of his "*Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody*". The instrument's association with Hungarian "Gypsy music" was used by Zoltán Kodály (*Háry János*, 1926), Béla Bartók ("*Rhapsody No. 1 for violin and orchestra*", 1928) and other Hungarian composers. [→ The music of the Roma in Hungary]