Yangqin

The yangqin has a history in China that dates to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), but its origins are somewhat of a mystery! Yangqin can literally translate to "foreign zither," and it is unclear where the Chinese first encountered the instrument. Two competing theories agree that trade brought the instrument to China, but it is up for debate if the Iranian santur inspired the yangqin, or if it was the European hammered dulcimers.

Saùng-gauk

The Saùng-gauk is a traditional Burmese instrument dating to the 2nd century AD. The instrument symbolizes different aspects of Buddhist philosophy through its ornamentation, as gold symbolizes life, light, and immortality. There are also lotus flowers on the instrument, which are said to have grown out of the Buddha's footprints when he paced. The Burmese arched harp is connected both to traditional Buddhist philosophy and modern debates about national identity and belonging. Today, it is officially recognized as the national instrument of Burma, but there are 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, with many more unrecognized groups, which may or may not incorporate this instrument into their traditions.

Tayaw

The Tayaw (pictured right) is a Burmese instrument that demonstrates how local people adapted violins during the colonial period in Burma. Two-stringed bowed instruments existed in Southeast Asia prior to colonization, allowing the Burmese to adapt the Euorpean violin, into the instrument you see here.



Vietnamese electric guitar

While this electric guitar looks like a pop culture item from the United States, it was made in Vietnam in 1965. Local entrepreneurs adapted businesses to cater to foreign soldiers stationed there during the Vietnam War. An instrument like this would be appealing to any soldier with extra cash and leisure time to play it!

Lillibridge Gallery

Joseph Kekuku and lapsteel guitars

Joseph Kekuku grew up in Lā'ie on the island of Oahu in Hawaii in the 1890s. At age 11, he was already experimenting with European guitars at his school's metal shop. He eventually invented the lapsteel guitar, which was uniquely Hawaiian, and taught it to his classmates, who spread the design across the Hawaiian Islands. Many performers left the islands after the U.S. government banned their traditions, taking their music and performances to the mainland United States. Kekuku joined this diaspora and left Hawaii in 1904 for the mainland, where he performed on the lapsteel guitar across the country.

Jonah Kumalae

Jonah Kumalae was one of the first Native Hawaiian ukulele builders, as the instrument had originally come from Portuguese laborers. Native Hawaiians loved the sound and incorporated it into traditional Hawaiian music. They also experimented with its design, as Jonah Kumalae did. He brought his designs to the mainland and received the Gold Award at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco.



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Lamont Gallery

Kettle gong/Hpà-Si

Drums made entirely of metal have been crafted in Southeast Asia since prehistoric times. This drum comes from 17th century Thailand, and is decorated with bronze frogs, fish, snails, elephants, and salamanders. The drum's sound, similar to thunder, called for rain. Decorating the drum with these creatures invoked their ancient water wisdom, and the different creatures reflect the growing seasons and monsoon season in Thailand.

Mridangam

Used in Carnatic music and dance, the mridangam came directly from the gods, as Hindu mythology teaches that Brahma invented the instrument. Like Brahma himself, the drum has more than one head: one to represent the male voice and one to represent the female voice. The heads are tuned to be an octave apart and adjusted by tightening the leather straps on the instrument. Instrument parts in Indian traditions often are named after human body parts and are typically connected to deities, as Hindu philosophy emphasizes interconnectedness across time, place, and physical shape.



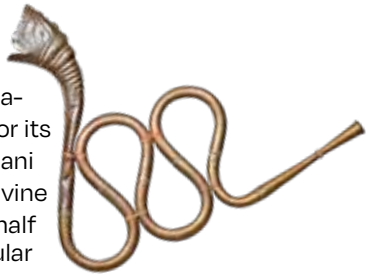
Nanaru Atingting

Nanaru a ting ting is the personal name given to this slit drum (pictured left), which comes from the Ambrym Island in Vanuatu. These drums, commonly referred to as tam tams, are commissioned by men when they accumulate enough wealth to pay for the drum and the ritual ceremony that celebrates his advancement to a higher social status. Tam tams, like other instruments, are often personified or believed to be inhabited by ancestral spirits, which is why the drum has a personal name and face carvings.

End-Blown Trumpet: Narsĩgā

Narsiga serve as both a wind and percussion instrument in Indian outdoor ceremonies. Used for Indian weddings, temple rituals, and sword dances, Narsiga are played with the bell held high above the performer's head, For rhythmic punctuation, the performer shakes the instrument, which has rattling materials inside the double rings connecting the pieces together.

End-Blown Trumpet: Nagphani



Nagphani (pictured right)are integral to the traditional musical life in the Indian states Rajasthan and Gujarat. Named for its serpent-like shape, the nagphani references the Naga, a semidivine being that is half human and half cobra. Both religious and secular gatherings use Nagphani performance, including folk theater, dances, and weddings.

Hindu Shawms: Nagaswaram and Ottu

These two instruments, the Nagaswaram and the Ottu, are played in pairs in South India, a practice dating to the 15th century. The Ottu, the instrument without fingerholes, creates a drone that forms the foundation for the other instrument, the Nagaswaram, to play the melody.

Cutler Gallery

Baining Vungvung

Although not an instrument, this Baining mask is made to be worn over the head allowing the wearer to vocalize through the bamboo tube. This particular mask is called the cobweb mask, which invokes spiders, considered evil by the Baining, and spiderwebs to symbolize the hunt. These masks are part of fire dances, which are ceremonies that celebrate important events, like hunts, harvests, births, or funerals. After the ceremony concludes, the masks are left to decay, symbolic of life cycles and the passing of time.

Music in Buddhism:

Buddhism is one of the most widely practiced religions in the world with upwards of 500 million believers. Because of its adaptability, Buddhist practice varies as it is blended with local folk culture. Music in Buddhism often assists with meditative practices. Here, we highlight instruments from two of the many places where Buddhism is widely practiced: Japan and Tibet. Buddhist music in Japan emphasizes percussion, whereas Buddhist music in Tibet emphasizes wind instruments.

Gamelan Gallery

Gamelan

The Gamelan is an ancient instrument from Indonesia, foundational to music and puppet theater. Gamelan music differs from Western music in a variety of ways, as it does not traditionally incorporate written notation or harmony. Further, the two systems use different musical scales and emphasize different beats. Gamelan music is passed between generations as an aural tradition where performers learn a core melody that they then adapt and expand.

Knudson Gallery

Sheng

The sheng is an ancient Chinese instrument that inspired many other instruments throughout Asia and Europe. Other cultures learned about the sheng through trade, and incorporated free reed technology in variants of their own. In Asia, the Chinese sheng inspired the Japanese sho and the Korean saenghwang. In Europe, the sheng inspired the accordion, harmonica, and concertina. Today, the sheng is still played in China, and has developed to have an expanded range provided by 37 tubes, compared to the 19th century sheng on display which has only 17.

Qeej

The qeej is a traditional instrument of the Hmong people, who have migrated across Asia and into the United States over hundreds of years. Although it looks like a Chinese sheng and uses similar technology, its purpose is very different. The qeej is one of the most important instruments in Hmong culture, as the ritual language it produces is used to communicate with the spiritual world.

Shakuhachi

The shakuhachi is a Japanese instrument adapted from the Chinese xiao in the 8th century. After a few centuries of development, the shakuhachi took its contemporary form in the 15th century and is now used in a diverse array of settings, including Zen Buddhist music, Japanese classical ensembles, pop music, jazz, and film music.