Percussion instruments of the Middle Ages and Renaissance

Their history in literature and painting

JAMES BLADES

Nakers, Luttrell Psalter, 14th century

Nakers, Luttrell Psalter, 14th century

Nakers

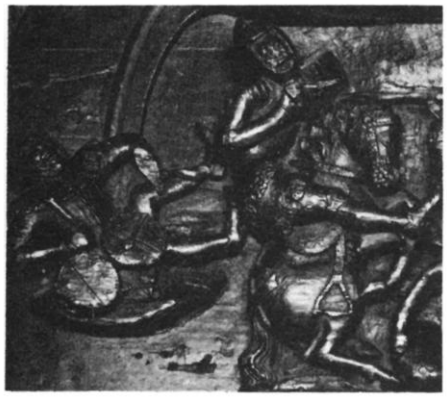
The King's 'And let the kettle to the trumpet speak' in Hamlet, along with Bottom's 'I have a reasonable good ear in music: let us have the tongs and the bones' are representative of the tintinnabulation of the Middle Ages and the more sophisticated Renaissance. The majority of percussion instruments from the 11th and 12th centuries onwards were simple; in some cases quite primitive. Many have survived and grace the orchestra of today. Our present-day timpani had their rise in the small Arabic kettledrums *naqqārā* which took the Crusader's fancy and were adopted in European military music. In a small form these instruments were known in England as nakers—presumably a corruption of the Arabic naqqārā. They were small kettle-shape drums with a single skin, with bowls of copper, wood or clay, suspended by a strap round the waist or from the shoulder, or in some cases placed on the ground. With isolated exceptions a stick was used in each hand. Nakers seemed to vary little in diameter. They may have been tensioned to produce contrasting sounds and the lower-sounding drum used as a bass, with more elaborate rhythms played on the higher-sounding drum. Played by men, the nakers were used mainly for martial purposes. In the hands of women, they appear as delicate instruments to accompany the soft-toned instruments; they were also used for dance music.

Two representations of the nakers at work are provided in the Luttrell Psalter. One shows a player with a small pair of drums at his waist, in the other the drums are placed on the ground and played with curved sticks. In *The Dance of Death* Holbein portrays a nakerer and a kettledrummer (skeletons) performing with a pair of sticks resembling thigh bones. A late 14th century carving on the choir seats of Worcester Cathedral of a tournament scene, shows a nakerer and a player on the 'clarion'. The artist has portrayed snares on the nakers, a feature observed quite frequently at this period and later, both in England and on the Continent.

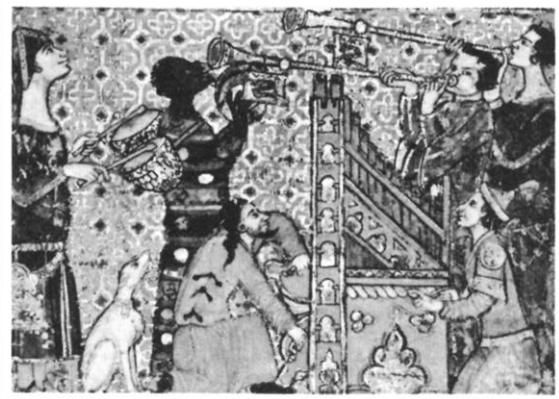
The label-mould carvings in Beverley Minster (*c.* 1290–1315, Guild of Musicians), are equally interesting for in addition to a remarkably clear

Nakerer, Beverley Minster

Musician with coconut shells (?), Beverley Minster



Nakers with snares, misericord, Worcester Cathedral



Laced kettledrum and cymbals, late 14th century, unknown Genoese artist

Angel with tabor, 15th century, Rosslyn Chapel, Scotland

Pipe and tabor, with dulcimer, Latin Psalter, second half of Henry VIII's reign

Angel with pipe and tabor, 13th century, Lincoln Cathedral

representation of a nakerer, a musician is illustrated performing with what could be a pair of coconut shells or cymbals on a slab of marble.

As already mentioned, the small kettledrums used by the Arabians and the Moors inspired the European use of cavalry kettledrums, which in their turn began to be put to orchestral use in the 17th century by composers such as Benevoli, Lully and Purcell. In the first instance they were tuned in fourths to the tonic and lower dominant; the interval used when they functioned with cavalry trumpets. Bach, Handel and Haydn used this interval, also the interval of a fifth, and, together with subsequent composers, particularly Beethoven, considerably extended the use of orchestral kettledrums.

The tabor and side drum

The commonest form of drum in medieval Europe was the tabor. The medieval tabor had no definite form. It differed in size and shape in various areas and at various times. In general it was a double-headed cord-tensioned drum with a single snare on the struck (batter) head. There is ample evidence of the widespread use of the tabor throughout Europe during the whole of the Middle Ages. A 12th century manuscript in St. John's College, Cambridge, associates the drum at this period with profane music. It shows a barrel-shaped drum suspended horizontally in front of the performer (a juggler disguised as a bear) who strikes it with his hands. An early 14th-century Serbian fresco *The Mocking of Christ* shows a small tabor with two snares on the upper vellum, played with a hooked stick. In many illustrations the tabor player also plays a pipe (pipe and tabor), a combination known in the folk dance world as 'whittle and dub'. Among the stone carved figures of the 13th-century Angel Choir of Lincoln Cathedral can be seen the figure of an angel playing a pipe and a small tabor. The drum is in a vertical position. The stick, which is held in the player's right hand, is especially interesting, the end being covered with material to form a bulbous head.

During the 13th century the tabor, hitherto a smallish instrument and light in sound, appeared in a larger form, adopted with other customs by the armies of western Europe from their oriental foes. Tabourers were present at the great feast at Westminster in 1306. Edward III (1327–77) included a tabor player in his household band. An entry in the Privy Purse expenses of Henry VII dated 1492, relates to '2 Sweches grete taborers'

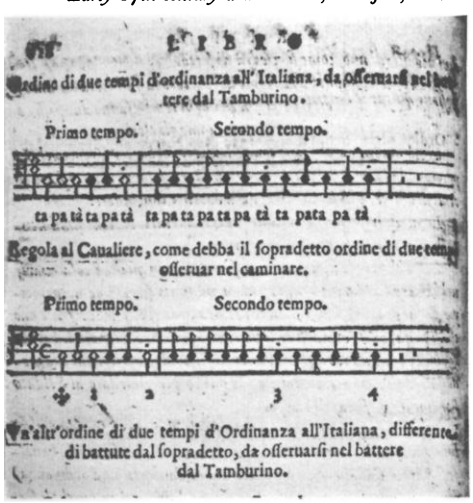
Barrel drum and chime bells (cymbals), 12th century Psalter, Abbey of St. Remigius, Reims

receiving the sum of £2. The importation of Swiss players is no surprise as the association of drum and fife is recorded in the Chronicles of the City of Basle for 1332. There is ample evidence of the lustre of this historic combination whose performers were incorporated in a guild and ranked as high officials. Continental kettledrummers were similarly exalted. In 1542 Henry VIII sent to Vienna for kettledrums that could be played on horseback, together with men who could play them skilfully. In England, as elsewhere, possession of kettledrums remained for a considerable time the prerogative of royalty and nobility, taking their place with trumpets, in a regular mounted ensemble.

The military tabor was a large instrument. In his *Orchésographie* (1588), Arbeau describes one measuring two feet in length and a foot in diameter struck, he says, with sticks or fingers. According to Arbeau twisted threads were placed on the skin extremities, whereas on the side drum there was a dual cord on one side only. The small tabor continued its function as a folk dance instrument and on the continent at least, it became an important member of the renaissance dance orchestra. The larger drum developed into the side drum; an important military instrument.

Like the tabor, the size of the drum varied considerably. Arbeau describes and illustrates a French side drum $2\frac{1}{2}'$ in diameter and depth, closed at each end with parchment skins (secured by two hoops) bound with cords in criss-cross fashion to keep them taut. Snares, a dual cord, are seen on one skin. Praetorius and Mersenne illustrate similar instruments. The drum portrayed by Rembrandt in *The Night Watch* (1642) is suspended at the angle of 45 degrees; a position maintained in military circles and with many present-day professional players. Rembrandt, not surprisingly, illustrates the correct grip of the drumsticks. Drake's drum, fortunately preserved, is similar in appearance to illustrations by Rembrandt, Praetorius, Mersenne and Arbeau. In his *Orchésographie*, the earliest clear source of information concerning 'drum beatings', Arbeau deals with the side drum as a pace-making instrument, by which a body of soldiers could march in unison, or attack or retreat without confusion or disorder. A warrant (*c.* 1632) directing the revival of an old English March, includes musical notation in context not unlike the material used by Arbeau and Pistofilo (*Il Torneo*, 1621). The latter is probably the earliest work in which military drum music was written.

Early 17th century drum music, Pistofilo, 1621



The side drum has been used as an orchestral instrument since the early part of the 18th century. It is now an important instrument in the orchestra, as are many of the percussion instruments known in the Middle Ages, particularly the triangle, tambourine and cymbals.

Basel drum, 1575, from the city armoury

Trapezoidal triangle with rings, Richard III Bible, late 14th century

The triangle

The medieval triangle is frequently illustrated with rings strung to the lower bar. The shape varies considerably, sometimes equilateral with open or closed end, or trapezoidal in form, similar to a medieval stirrup, as in numerous 15th-century illustrations. Tonally, the triangle with rings strung to the lower bar could have resembled the sound of the more ancient sistrum (a shaken instrument so closely associated with Cleopatra) in which loose bars rattle against a metal or earthenware framework. Though the triangle is so frequently illustrated with rings, the earliest mention of the instrument (in a 10th-century manuscript) refers to an instrument without rings. A triangle without rings is depicted in the late 14th-century King Wenceslaus IV Bible, and again on a mid- 15th-century window in the Beauchamp Chapel, St. Mary's, Warwick. The latter instrument with its open corner has a curiously modern appearance, except that at the top angle the steel bar is twisted into a loop through which the thumb of the performer (an angel) passes. The humble triangle, so-called, can lay claim to being one of the first purely metal percussion instruments to enter the modern orchestra which happened in the Hamburg Opera in 1710. Mozart used it in *Il Seraglio*, Haydn in his *Military* Symphony and Beethoven in his Ninth.

Tambourine, Beverley Minster

The tambourine

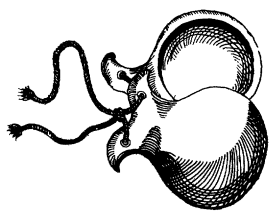
Mozart was one of the earliest composers to make orchestral use of the tambourine in his German Dances, K.571, 1787. Gluck's use of the instrument is a little earlier, in *Echo and Narcissus*, 1761. The popularity of the tambourine was sustained throughout the Middle Ages in all parts of Europe. The commonest medieval type was very close to the tambourine we know today, and even closer to the Turkish instruments of the 19th century which are to be seen in many museums. These usually have four or more sets of jingles arranged equidistantly in groups of two pairs. The jingles are larger and thicker than the modern ones and are smoothly concave rather than domed. This is the form that appears more often in paintings and carvings in churches, and in illuminated manuscripts from the 11th century and throughout the Middle Ages. Such instruments have numerous sets of jingles, as in the painting by Matteo di' Giovanni, *The Assumption of the Virgin*; and some have small pellet bells as well as, or instead of, the ordinary jingles. In the majority of cases the instrument is held aloft and struck with the fingers. In several instances it is depicted with a snare or snares running either above or below the head. A few instruments have no jingles of any description. An early instance of a tambourine equipped with jingles (three sets) is seen on a 2nd-century AD Roman relief, *The Triumph of Bacchus*. Many consider that the tambourine (*tabret*) of the Israelites may not have been equipped with a jingling contrivance.

Tambourine, Roman, 2nd century AD

The tambourine is frequently illustrated in the hands of angels, but in many respects it was a rustic instrument, associated with wandering minstrels, showmen and jugglers. In the late Middle Ages it was given a part in concerted music. Henry VIII, for instance, included four tambourines in his musical ensemble of 79 musicians. It remained an integral ingredient of rhythmic music of many descriptions. Like certain other percussion instruments it has been given a variety of names. In England, the old English *tymbre*, later timbrel, was replaced by tambourine

Cymbals from The Assumption of the Virgin, *Matteo di Giovanni, late 15th century Turkish musicians, Agostina Tossi*

Timbrel with snare, early 16th century, English MS



Castagnettes, Mersenne

in the 18th century. On the continent we find *Tamburin* and *Schellentrommel* (Ger.), *tambourin de Basque*, *tamburino* or *tamburello* (It.), *panderete* (Sp.). Closely resembling the tambourine without the skin head was the jingle-ring, consisting of a shallow wooden hoop or metal ring with jingles inserted in it.

Cymbals

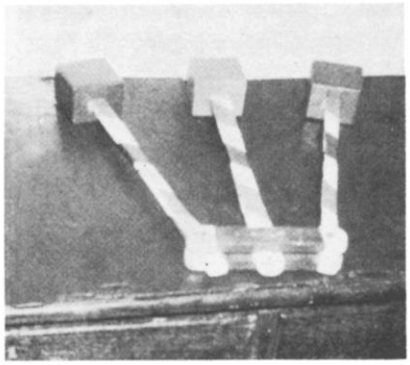
Cymbals remained unchanged throughout the Middle Ages. They resembled closely the instruments used by the Greeks and Romans, and in many respects were 'loud, high-sounding and tinkling'. From pictorial representations the majority appear to be quite thick, and about six to ten inches in diameter. Instruments of this nature are frequently represented as played by women and angels, generally in the manner of ancient cymbals (in pairs) in that they are held with one resting above the lower hand and the other hanging below the upper hand so that they were horizontal and the hands came together vertically. In Britain, cymbals both flat and hemispherical appear in 13th-century manuscripts, and in earlier literature are mentioned in connection with William the Conqueror.

There is some evidence for larger and thinner cymbals in many parts of Europe. They seem to have been about 12 inches in diameter and would sound rather like the light cymbals used for dance music today. They were played in the modern style, vertically. Large cymbals were used more often for pagan than Christian rites. Small cymbals were more often associated with angels. They were used by dancers and certainly to some extent in ensemble music for their rhythmic properties. Cymbals were introduced into the orchestra in 1680 by Strungk in his opera *Esther*. Berlioz said that there had never been a finer effect of cymbals than that produced by Gluck in the chorus of Scythians in *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779). Cymbals became an important component of the Janissary orchestra, en route as it were, to their permanent position in the music of the romantics and moderns.

Clappers

Strictly speaking, cymbals are metal clappers, though one associates clappers more often with such instruments as castanets, or flat pieces of wood or bone. The popularity of the latter in the Middle Ages is confirmed by Bottom's request for the bones, and by Mersenne who, in his *Harmonie Universelle* (1636), speaks of 'all the little bones and wooden sticks which one can manipulate in such a fast and agile way . . .' Castanets as we know them today rarely appear in medieval art, possibly because their use seems to be mostly confined to Spain. Mersenne points to the importance of castanets as musical instruments, particularly in Spain. They should, he says, be of resonant wood such as plum or beech tree. The word castañuelas (Sp.) however suggests the greater use of the fruit of the chestnut tree. In the *Cantigos de Santa Maria* by Alphonse X 'The Wise' (1252–84), reference is made to the use of castanets in Spanish songs and as an accompaniment in church music.

Various other forms of clappers were also used. The staves of the Morris men could be a relic of the concussion sticks of ancient Egypt, and the similar 'dancing sticks' of Western Asia and Australia (claves in the music of today). Clappers consisting of small cymbals on the ends of flexible shafts joined together at the handle are illustrated in the 9th century Bible



Triccaballacca, Neapolitan

Crecelle, rattle, French, 15–16th century

Rommelpot (Dutch), Frans Hals

of Charles the Bald. A psalter dated 1015 in the Cambridge University Library shows an identical instrument. Another form of clapper derives from the Greek and Roman custom of either building rattles into a thick sole of a shoe or making a double sole with the bottom part loose, so that the parts clapped together at each step.

The Neapolitan *triccaballacca* consisting of three or more percussive clappers, falls into the clapper class. Similarly the Spanish *tric-trac* and the click-clack and rattle-plate used in the Low Countries. Here, a pivoted hammer or hammers oscillate on a wooden base. Instruments of this type were used as bird scarers and noise-makers during Holy Week. In Holland, the click-clack was used as an alarm by night watchmen. (The author has found the triccaballacca and the click-clack to be admirable instruments for children with physical handicaps).

Rattles

Rattles in various forms were connected with the religious and secular life of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The cog rattle (ratchet) which is twirled, or the cog wheel revolved against the one or more stout tongues of wood, was used (and still is) as an alarm signal and a bird scarer. It remains connected with certain religious ceremonies, particularly on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday when (as is said) the bells are gone to Rome to be blessed by the Pope.

The friction drum

A peasant instrument (not strictly percussive perhaps) particularly associated with the Netherlands was the *rommelpot*: a stick friction drum, the body consisting of a clay or wooden receptacle with a parchment head in which is affixed a short stick standing erect. A clear illustration of this instrument is given by the Dutch artist Frans Hals (1580–1666). In Germany, the friction drum was known as *Brummtopf* (now *Reibtrommel*). It is connected with festive occasions as is the Italian *puttiputi* and the Spanish *zambomba*.

A further type of friction drum known over a long period of time is the German *Waldteufel*, in which the central stick is replaced by a rosined cord. This instrument is twirled. Alternatively, as in the Old English 'jackdaw', friction is applied to the cord, as in the modern orchestral *tambour à corde* (lion's roar).

The dulcimer

The tuned percussion of the Middle Ages included chime bells, the xylophone and the dulcimer. The medieval dulcimer was clearly portrayed on a relief in Santiago de Compostela Cathedral (1184), and on a mid-12th-century ivory book cover of Byzantine workmanship in the British Museum. The 15th-century dulcimer seen on a carving in the roof of the nave of Manchester Cathedral, shows the performer, an angel, striking the fifteen strings with slender beaters with curled ends. This style of beater and those with spoon-shaped ends apply to the majority of representations elsewhere; though in certain cases the strings are plucked. Virdung gives an instrument with six strings played with spoon-shaped beaters; this is a form of string drum like the *tambourin de Béarn*: an instrument consisting of six gut strings stretched over a wooden sound-box and tuned to the keynote and fifth of the pipe. A two-string drum is among the numerous instruments depicted in the Angers Tapestry (1380).

Béarnais string drum, beater and three hole pipe

Dulcimer and quadrangular psaltery, mid-12th century, Byzantine

Xylophone, Holbeins' Dance of Death

Chime bells, early 12th century, Luttrell Psalter

The xylophone

The xylophone (*stroh-fiedel*, Ger.) is first mentioned in 1511 by the organist Arnold Schlick as *hultze glechter* (wooden percussion). Martin Agricola (1528) illustrates a series of twenty-five wooden bars as stroh-fiedel, and a century later Praetorius illustrates a series of fifteen bars from fifteen to twenty-one inches in length, arranged (as is Agricola's) diatonically in a single row pyramid fashion. Holbein gives excellent examples of the xylophone of the 16th century in his cycle of woodcuts in *The Dance of Death*, where he depicts a skeleton performing a death knell on a small xylophone. Mersenne seems to have considered the xylophone no mean instrument, having said that it gave as much pleasure as any other instrument when played to its full effect. In general however, the xylophone of the Middle Ages was a simple instrument, the wooden slabs loosely slung together, or resting on ropes of straw, giving rise to the name 'straw fiddle'. It was very much an instrument of the wandering musician.

Chime bells

Much of the dance music of the Middle Ages was permeated by the rhythmic susurration of small bells or jingles. The most highly regarded percussion instruments however were the true bells—chime bells or bell chime. Chime bells appear frequently in continental and English illustrations from the 10th to the 15th century. King David is almost invariably shown with them. Chime bells are usually seen in small numbers, from four to five, or eight to nine in a single set. They are struck with a single hammer or with two hammers, one in each hand. The bells which are usually clapperless, are quite small, about the size and shape of modern handbells, or like hemispherical gongs, and are arranged in order suspended in a frame over the performer's hand, or placed on a stand in front of him.

One of the most interesting representations of chime bells is in a 12th-century Psalter in the Glasgow University Library showing King David and two musicians representative of the period. At a row of fifteen bells,

Chime bells, hand bells and dulcimer,
***King David,** 12th century*

each of the performers has a hammer in each hand. Inscribed on the supporting beam are the names of the notes according to the Guido d'Arezzo system: ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si, signifying two scales in the reverse direction. The Luttrell Psalter, and other manuscripts, show handbells with clappers being rung in the normal manner. A woodcut from Franchinus Gaforus's *Practica Musicae* (1492), shows a series of six bells and six musical glasses being used to demonstrate harmonic intervals. Writers of the 13th and 14th centuries speak of chyme bells, cymballs or little bells, and chymes; also organs and chymbes are placed together.

Authentic music for these instruments is hard to find. Possibly they were employed to distinguish the intervals in teaching music, mark the beginnings of phrases or provide a descant or melody where practicable.

The instruments described above are typical of the percussion of the period insofar as the literature and representations allow. Their manipulation at that time and in present day performances will be discussed in the next article. This will take the form of a dialogue between James Blades and Jeremy Montagu, a 20th century version of the celebrated dialogue in Arbeau's Orchésographie.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AGRICOLA, Martin: *Musica Instrumentalis Deutsch* (Wittenburg, 1528, reprint Leipzig, 1896)

ARBEAU, Thoinot: *Orchésographie* (Lengres, 1588) reprint (Paris, 1888) English translations by C. W. Beaumont (London, 1925) and Mary Stewart Evans (New York, 1948)

BAINES, Anthony: *European and American Musical Instruments* (London, 1966)

BLADES, James: *Percussion Instruments and Their History* (London, 1970)

GALPIN, F. W.: *Old English Instruments of Music* (London, 1910)

GALPIN, F. W.: *Text book of European Musical Instruments* (London, 1937)

MERSENNE, Marin: *Harmonie Universelle* (Paris, 1636)

PRAETORIUS, Michael: *Syntagma Musicum* (Wolfenbüttel, 1619) reprint (Kassel, 1929)

REESE, Gustave: *Music in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1940)

VIRDUNG, Sebastian: *Musica Getutscht* (Basel, 1511) reprint (Kassel, 1931)

DE HEN, F. J.: 'Folk Instruments of Belgium: Part I', *Galpin Society Journal*, XXV (1972) 87–132

Sale room records

An ivory concert flute by Thomas Stanesby, junior (1692–1754) in very good condition, made what was at the time a record saleroom price on Thursday 16 November 1972, at Phillips in London. It fetched £4,000. The mounts on the joints and the key were of high-quality gold, minutely engraved. A female head with halo and musical instruments was on the key, and on the mounts, musical instruments and scrolls. Thomas Stanesby, junior, took over from his father in 1734, and the date of the instrument is believed to be *c.* 1740.

This record was surpassed only a month later when an ebony flute, owned and presumably played by Frederick the Great fetched £5,800 at Sotheby's on 21 December 1972. The flute dated from about 1750 and had the double keys that Quantz introduced in 1726. Details of this improvement were not published until 1752.

In the same sale the top price of £6,000 was paid for a two-manual harpsichord by Jacob Kirkman, dated London, 1767. This came from the William Barrow collection. From the same collection came a notable fortepiano by Longman and Broderip of London, dating from about 1785, which fetched £3,000. The total amount realized by the William Barrow collection, which comprised the first 32 lots, was £21,359.