

An Introduction to Traditional Folk Music



by
Simple Gifts

Simple Gifts plays twelve different instruments!

Fiddle



What's the difference between a fiddle and violin? Nothing! They are the same instrument. Usually if it's classical music, you'd call it a violin, and if it's folk, traditional, or country music, you'd call it a fiddle. The fiddle has four strings that are normally tuned, from low to high, GDAE. In the Appalachian Mountains, fiddlers often use different tunings. Linda will play a piece from West Virginia where the fiddle is tuned DDAD.

Guitar



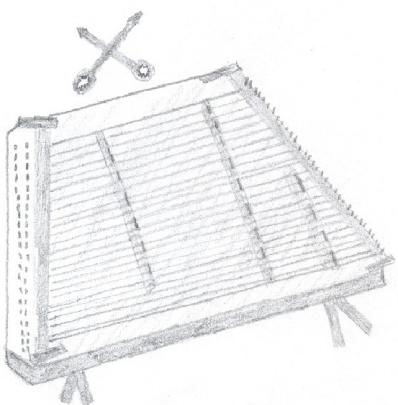
The guitar originated in Spain. It is a fretted instrument with 6 strings, and is normally tuned from low to high, EADGBE. Karen sometimes tunes her guitar to CGCGCD, and this gives it a very open, ringing sound. A guitar can be used to play chords or melody. Karen usually plays with a small plastic pick. Sometimes she plays with just her fingers, and this is called fingerpicking.

Mandolin

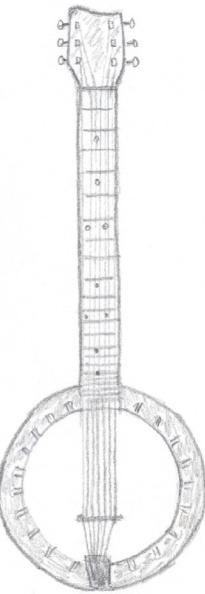
The mandolin is related to similar instruments played in medieval Europe. It is used in bluegrass, country, classical, and folk music. The mandolin has 4 strings that come in pairs, making a total of 8 strings. It is tuned the same as a fiddle, GDAE.



Hammered Dulcimer

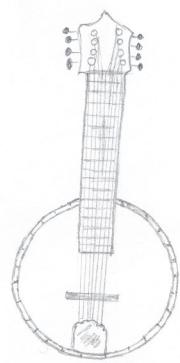


The hammered dulcimer originated in Persia about 2,000 years ago! This instrument is shaped like a trapezoid. It usually sits on a stand. It is played by striking metal strings with wooden hammers.



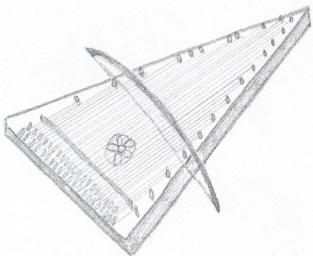
Banjo guitar

This is an instrument that has four names! You could call it a guitar-banjo, banjo-guitar, guitjo, or bantar. It has 6 strings tuned like a guitar and the neck is the same as the guitar. It sounds like a banjo though, because it has the round drumhead of a banjo.



Banjolin

The banjolin is a cross between a banjo and mandolin. It has the neck of a mandolin and the drumhead of a banjo. Like a mandolin, it has 4 strings that come in pairs, for a total of 8 strings. It is tuned the same as a mandolin, GDAE.



Bowed Psaltery

This stringed instrument is shaped like an isosceles triangle. It was designed in Europe in the early twentieth century, but early styles of psalteries go back to biblical times. It is played by moving a bow back and forth across metal strings. It is usually used to play melody.



Recorder

Like a whistle or flute, this instrument is played by blowing air through a mouthpiece while covering and uncovering the finger holes to obtain notes. There are seven holes on the front and a thumbhole on the back. Recorders are usually made of wood, bamboo, or plastic, and they come in different sizes. Simple Gifts usually brings soprano, alto, and tenor recorders. Many of the earliest settlers to America from Germany and England brought recorders with them.

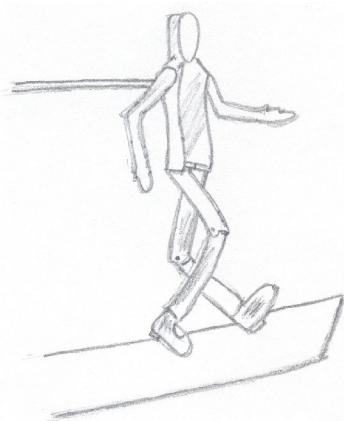
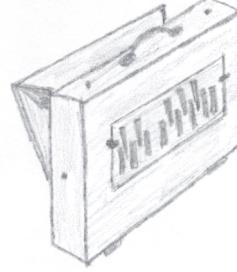


Doumbek

The doumbek is a drum from the country of Turkey. It is shaped like the djembe, an African drum. The name is onomatopoetic (on-o-mat-o-po-et'-ic), which means the instrument was named for the sound made by the drum. The "doum" is a low tone made by striking the center, and the "bek" is a higher-pitched tone made by striking the edge.

Shruti Box

The shruti box is probably the most unusual instrument that Simple Gifts plays. It comes from India and is used to play a drone. A drone is one note, or sometimes two or three, that is played throughout the tune.



Limberjack

The limberjack is a wooden toy that comes from Appalachian folk traditions. It is sometimes called a "clogging doll," "dancing Dan," or "stomper doll" because it is played by getting the legs to tap rhythmically like a clog dancer.

The limberjack consists of a carved person, or sometimes an animal, attached to the end of a stick. To make the figure dance, sit on a wooden stick, or paddle, so that the paddle sticks out over the edge of the chair like a diving board. Hold the figure so the feet touch the paddle. With your free hand, tap the paddle so that it bounces up and hits the legs of the figure. Repeat! Repeat! It takes practice to get a steady beat.

Simple Gifts plays music from many different cultures!

Klezmer music is Jewish music that comes from Eastern Europe. The music uses unusual scales that give it an exotic feel. Besides being a religion, Judaism is a culture that has its own food (bagels), holidays (Hanukkah), languages (Hebrew and Yiddish), dancing (the hora), and music (Klezmer). In that way, being Jewish is similar to being Chinese, African, or Irish. Klezmer originated in the fifteenth century during the Middle Ages. It found its way to America with Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century. Today the largest collection of Klezmer musicians is in the United States.

Celtic music comes from the musical traditions of the Celtic people of Northern Europe. The most common Celtic styles are Irish and Scottish. Simple Gifts also plays Celtic music from Cape Breton Island. This is an area of Nova Scotia in Canada that was settled by Scots. The music from Cape Breton is a style of Scottish music.

Appalachian music is the traditional music played in the Appalachian Mountains. Music of immigrants from Ireland and Scotland blended with music of African slaves to create Appalachian music. The most popular Appalachian instruments are fiddle and banjo. Appalachian music can also be called old-time or mountain music.

Balkan music comes from an area of Southeastern Europe called the Balkans. This music is very different from other European music. The most unusual thing about Balkan music is the unusual rhythms. Instead of having rhythms of two, three or four beats as you would hear in most western music, Balkan music is generally grouped in complex patterns of five or seven beats, and it is sometimes as complicated as 15, 21, or more beats per measure!

Simple Gifts arranges all of their own music.

Simple Gifts makes up all of their own musical arrangements. They usually learn the melody from a CD or sheet music. Then they decide which instruments to use, and they make up all of the harmony parts, decide how fast or slow to play, and how loud or quiet. Sometimes they write additional parts, and sometimes they drop parts. Simple Gifts memorizes all of the music. They need to practice for a long time so they don't forget!

European Countries



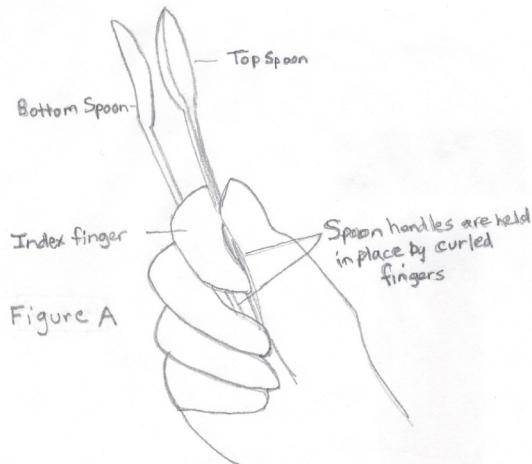
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Simple Gifts plays music from these countries in Europe: Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Scotland, England, France, Denmark, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, and Greece.

They also play music from other countries, including Israel, Canada (Cape Breton and Quebec), and the United States (Appalachia.)

How to Play the Spoons

Like the limberjack, spoons are an unusual, but fun, percussive instrument sometimes heard in Appalachian music. Spoons are also used in Cajun music from the French-speaking part of Louisiana. Some Appalachian settlers carved spoons from wood, but most musicians just borrowed the spoons from the kitchen.

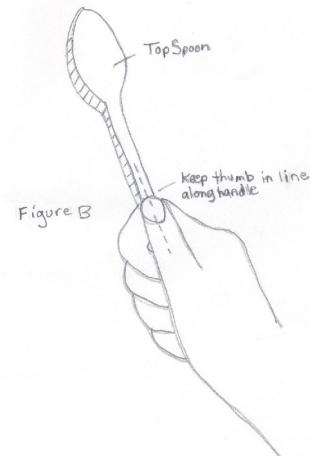


Place the spoons back to back and insert your index finger in between the handles about halfway down the handles.

Close your hand around the handles, curling your fingers in to hold the handles against the palm of your hand.

Your thumb should be lined up along the shaft of the top spoon. This prevents them from wiggling sideways.

While seated, gently tap your knee with the bottom spoon. You should hear a click. Place your other hand above the top spoon. As the bottom spoon comes back up from your knee, allow the top spoon to hit the palm of your hand, thus getting two clicks. Repeat, hitting your knee, then hitting your palm.



There are additional spoons moves and combinations. Simple Gifts can teach these to groups of up to 50 students at a time. Spoons are appropriate for third or fourth grade through adult.

About the Artists

Linda Littleton and Karen Hirshon have played music together since 1995. They often play with a third member, Rachel Hall, who plays piano, concertina (a small squeeze-box), accordion, and drums. They chose the name "Simple Gifts" for their band. The name is based on the traditional song, "Simple Gifts." ('Tis the gift to be simple, 'Tis the gift to be free....")

The members of Simple Gifts live in the hills of central Pennsylvania. They play for schools and adult audiences in a nine-state area. They also plan two musicians' camps each year, Huntingdon Folk College and Greenwood Furnace Folk Gathering, where they help musicians of all ages learn to play traditional instruments and music, and offer concerts, jam sessions, dances, and other fun things. Simple Gifts has recorded and released six CDs. Their most recent recording, *Crossing Borders: Music of Many Lands*, won a national award from the Indie Acoustic Project.

About the Program

The program is educational, multicultural, interactive, and fun! Students will learn about instruments, music, and cultures of many different traditions.

Simple Gifts will perform on 8-12 different instruments, depending on the length of the program. The program will include a wide range of ethnic music, such as Romanian, Bulgarian, Klezmer, Irish, American, Greek, and Finnish. Assembly programs are structured so that each piece introduces either a new instrument or a new style. Simple Gifts is very interactive with the students in explaining the styles and instruments they play, and they often invite students on-stage to participate.

Simple Gifts offers both assembly programs and smaller group workshops. In their most popular workshop, they teach children to play spoons and then have them perform during an assembly. For small groups, they offer hands-on workshops on ukulele or psaltery playing, and Simple Gifts will provide the instruments. For older students, there are several participatory workshops where students in orchestra, band, or chorus learn to play "exotic" music.

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