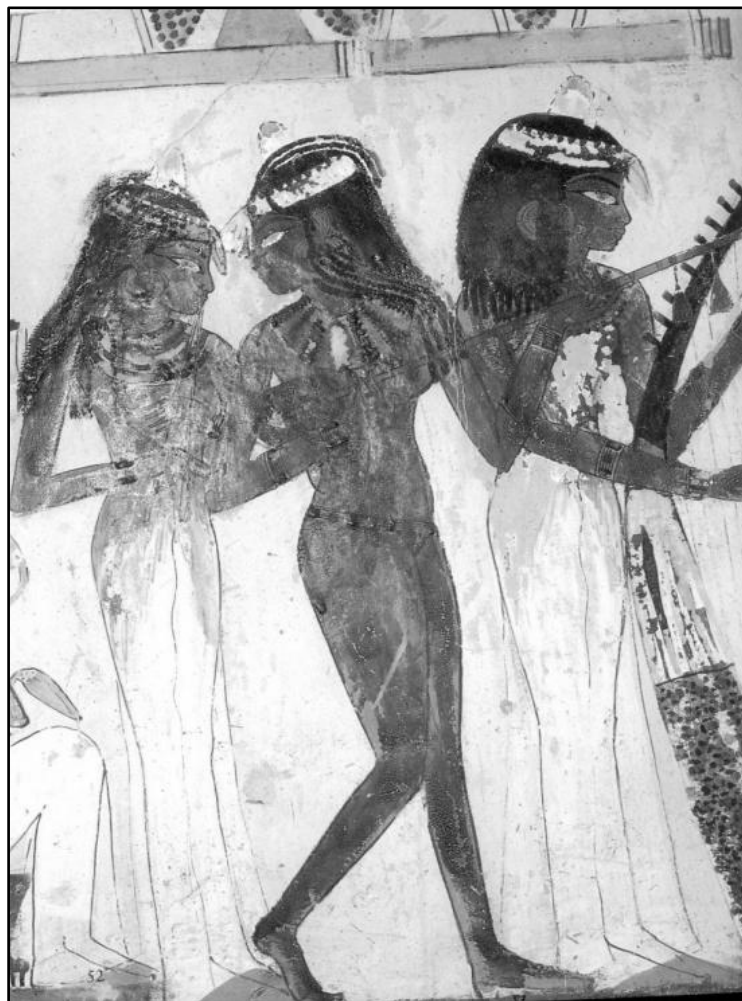


A Brief History of the Mandolin

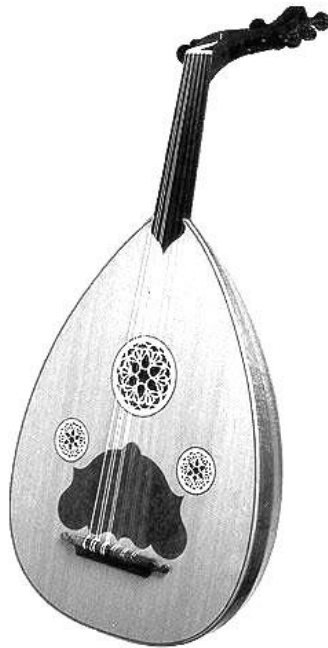
From the carvings and paintings recorded by our ancient ancestors we know that man has been creating sound through the vibrations of strings for millennia. A single string was tied to both ends of a stick to create a bow which when plucked, tapped or struck with a stick created sound. Volume could be increased by holding the bow in the mouth. The earliest stringed instruments known to archaeologists are bowl harps and tanburs. Written Records evidently show that these instruments were played by the Sumerians of Mesopotamia from about 3000 BC. The bow-harp was a bow-necked stringed instrument with a small bowl shaped body for amplification that had a soundboard of wood or animal hide. The tanbur was probably a further development as the neck was straightened out which allowed the strings to be lengthened or shortened to manipulate and control the pitch.

Wall paintings from ancient Egypt testify to the fact that harps, tanburs, flutes and percussion instruments were being played in ensemble:



Relief, The tomb of Nacht, in ancient Thebes, 15th century BC.

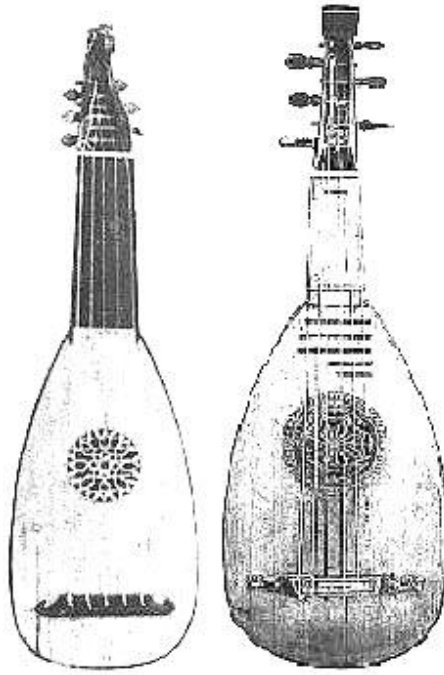
Tanburs and harps spread across the ancient world and from these early instruments came the oud, an Arabic fret-less instrument which dates back to the seventh century AD. It was a simple chordophone or lute, constructed with wood. Strings held from an angled peg head stretched across a fret-board which was attached to a wooden sound box. The oud is still popularly played by musicians today.



Arabic Oud

From the oud other instruments developed such as the pandura from Assyria, the dambura from the Arab countries and the bandura of the Ukraine. Through the Moorish invasions, the oud arrived in Europe where the strings were doubled to courses, and frets were added.

During the fourteenth century a miniature lute or *mandore* appeared which was plucked with the fingertips. From the mandore, the Italians developed a smaller version which was called the mandolino. This gut strung mandolin was played with a quill, wooden plectrum or finger-style and was developed in several places in Italy. The mandolino was the instrument of Vivaldi's mandolin concerto 1725.



Mandore and Mandolino 1760c

From bow-harps, tamburs, ouds and their countless progressions came our modern mandolins. They originated in Naples, Italy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They had four courses of double strings and were played with a plectrum.

Neapolitan mandolins from the Vinaccia family of luthiers in Naples, 1710-1796 which survive today are the first evidence of steel strung mandolins. Mandolins were now beginning to standardize. They had a bowled backed sound-box constructed from a number of strips of wood with a sound board, canted just behind the bridge to allow it to support a greater string tension from the increased pressure of the new metal strings. They had a hardwood moveable bridge and fingerboard with metal frets spaced along the neck in semi-tones. The fret board came flush with the soundboard. The strings were made from brass or steel except for the lowest string course which were wire wound gut. They had four double courses of strings, tunes like a violin GG DD AA EE.



Neapolitan Mandolin, Carlo Loveri & Figlio 1890c

Other luthiers of the time were Rafaele Calace, Luigi Embergher and the Ferrari family. The Neapolitan style of mandolin construction was adopted and developed by others, notably in Rome, further dividing the mandolin into two distinct but similar types- Neapolitan and Roman.

The mandolin became very common in the nineteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth, it travelled across Europe to the US with Italian immigrants where its popularity as a parlor instrument soared. The mandolin was among the first instruments to be recorded on Edison cylinders. By the turn of the century, mandolin ensembles were touring the vaudeville circuit, and mandolin orchestras (groups usually arranged like the string section of a modern symphony orchestra, with first mandolins, second mandolins, mandolas, mandocellos, mando-basses) were forming in schools, colleges and communities.

Mandolins continued to be made in Italy and throughout the rest of Europe by many famous violin-making families. In the United States as luthiers began experimenting, one big development was the change from the old bowl-backs (disparagingly referred to as 'taterbugs') to new flat backed models. These new designs were mass produced by companies such as Lyon & Healy, the Larson Brothers, Martin and the Gibson Company

The Gibson Company made two styles of mandolins which had violin style, carved-tops and backs with either round or oval sound holes. These louder and more fashionable instruments were the preference of the time. **Lloyd Loar**, a mandolin virtuoso and luthier joined the Gibson Company in 1919. He created the F-5 mandolin. This mandolin also had a carved front and back similar to the violin and were braced with two tone bars. They had a raised fingerboard as in the violin design, allowing the top to vibrate more freely. This instrument had a new rich and powerful tone. Today, the Gibson F-5 is still replicated by modern luthiers and has become the standard for bluegrass players.



F5 Mandolin, Joe foley

The mandolin reached its heyday through the 1900s until the 1920s after which, along with the explosion of jazz in America, the banjo became more popular and the mandolin began to decline.

Two decades later in America, resurgence came when William Smith Monroe (Bill Monroe) blasted out his Loar F-5 with blistering speed and virtuosity to play a new music which he called Bluegrass. In Europe, the folk and Celtic revivals provided the same resurgence along with the formation of mandolin orchestras in the style of those of the early twentieth century. Over the last few decades the mandolin has found its place in various genres of music such as pop, jazz, blues and rock etc.

Today the mandolin has travelled worldwide. Along with the US at the turn of century, the mandolin quickly spread through Australia, New-Zealand and the Americas. It has become a mainstay in the folk and traditional repertoires of Ireland and the United Kingdom, their rich repertoire of Fiddle tunes being readily accessible to the mandolin player, because of the similar fingering and range of both instruments.

The bandolim (Portuguese for *mandolin*) was a favorite instrument within the Portuguese bourgeoisie of the 19th century. It is particularly popular in the Madeira Island. The mandolin came into Brazil by way of Portugal where it has a long and rich tradition in Brazilian folk music, especially in the style called choro. Like Brazil, the Mandolin has played an important role in the Music of Venezuela. It has enjoyed a privileged position as the main melodic instrument in several different regions of the country sharing a great mandolin Waltz tradition which has evolved over the last century.

An increased interest in western music, especially in Central European countries such as the Czech and Slovak Republic, has inspired many new mandolin players often mixing traditional folk elements with classical and modern styles. In Greece the mandolin has had a long tradition in the Ionian Islands and Crete. It appeared on Crete around the time of the Venetian rule of the island and has long been played in the Aegean islands where it survived outside of the control of the Ottoman Empire.

The mandolin has been both adopted and adapted for the playing of Indian Carnatic music. Mandolin is also used in Bhangra, dance music popular in Punjabi culture. The Neapolitan style mandolins in particular are popular in Japan with many of their modern composers writing for mandolin orchestras.

More recently, both the Baroque and Classical mandolin repertoire and styles of playing have benefited from the raised awareness in early music along with the present interest in 'unplugged' music which continues to showcase the mandolin. The mandolin orchestras never disappeared and ensembles continue to grow in popularity.



Large Scale 5 course Mandolin, Stefan Sobell

Our modern mandolins come in many shapes- and sizes as they continue to develop through the experimentation of today's luthiers. There are guitar shaped mandolins, banjo mandolins (mandolin with banjo resonators), mandolins with various courses of strings and tunings. Some have also been electrified. They are constructed not only from wood but can be found with metal bodies, fibre-glass, graphite and other modern composites. Today the future popularity of the mandolin is in the safe hands of a new emerging virtuoso Chris Thile, a Californian who is taking the mandolin to dizzying heights and to a new global audience.



Banjo-Mandolin, Georges Caucassonne, 1920c