Music of the Mountains
An Exploration of Appalachia Guided by the Dulcimer

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Appalachian Culture

European traditions: The region was settled in the late 1700’s by Scott-Irish, English, German, and Dutch immigrants. Each group of settlers brought their own traditions and cultural identities.

Isolation: Far from their homelands and from established settlements on the coast, Appalachian settlers made do with what they had. Many aspects of life, from religion to farming techniques and cabin-building became a combination of what worked best from different cultures, including Native American traditions.

Terrain: The physical nature of the Appalachian area shaped how life there was lived. The mountains and rough terrain was not easily farmed or traveled. The area’s natural inhabitants, including black bears and snakes, presented an added challenge.

Appalachian Music

European contributions: English and Scottish settlers brought ballads, dances, and play-songs, while Germans brought hymn tunes and other music. The insulated nature of the Appalachian area has made it ideal for preserving European folk traditions. While European musical culture moved forward, Appalachian musical culture remained relatively untouched for centuries.

Modality: A distinctive aspect of Appalachian folk music is its use of modes. The term mode generally refers to a set of seven notes and the octave repeat of the starting note, arranged in a certain pattern of half-steps and whole-steps. Today, most music is written in either the Ionian or Aeolian modes, now called “major” and “minor,” respectively. Many folk tunes are written in either Mixolydian or Dorian modes, sounding somewhat foreign to our ears.

The Appalachian Dulcimer

German origins: The dulcimer is an American adaptation of an old German stringed instrument called the “scheitholt.” Examples of this instrument have been discovered in Appalachia, dating back to 1781. The instrument is a rectangular wooden soundbox with frets applied directly to the top, strung with anywhere from two to nine strings which are tuned and arranged in different patterns. The sound holes are heart-shaped, circular, in patterns, or e-shaped.

English and Scott-Irish adaptations: While the design of the instrument was brought to the Americas by German settlers, it seems that it developed into today’s recognizable dulcimer in the hands of the English and Scott-Irish settlers. The main physical difference between scheitholts and dulcimers is the addition of the separate fretboard - a dulcimer is essentially a scheitholt with a top of a larger soundbox. This adaptation allows for a louder sound and the ability to play for a large audience or in an ensemble. The arrangement of the strings does not easily allow for intricate music, but is meant to play a melody and a simple accompaniment; often the melody string is doubled and another string is left open as a drone.

Folk revival alterations: America’s folk revival in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s brought a new popularity to the Appalachian dulcimer, along with some structural changes. Post-revival dulcimers tend to have heart-shaped sound holes. Changes have been made to the fretboard: modern fretting techniques are used rather than old staple frets, the fret patterns are more accurate, and new dulcimers often have a "6 1/2" fret, an extra fret added between the sixth and seventh traditional fret positions.

Diatonic fretting: The frets on a dulcimer are arranged in a pattern of half-steps and whole-steps, allowing it to only play in one mode at a time. The tuning of the strings determines which mode the instrument can play in. This is different from a chromatically fretted instrument, such as a guitar, which can play in any mode or key at any time.

Design: The design of the dulcimer is simple and fitting for folk music. It is not loud enough to be played for a large audience or in an ensemble. The arrangement of the strings does not easily allow for intricate music, but is meant to play a melody and a simple accompaniment; often the melody string is doubled and another string is left open as a drone.

The Appalachian dulcimer is a symbol of Appalachian life and culture: it is multi-cultural in origin, uniquely suited to its purpose, and thoroughly American in its identity.