

Psaltery

A **psaltery** (Greek: ψαλτήρι) (or **sawtry** [archaic]) is a stringed instrument of the zither family.

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Psaltery 1700 – Venitian school

Etymology

The psaltery of Ancient Greece (*epigonion*) was a harp-like winged instrument. The word *psaltery* derives from the Ancient Greek ψαλτήριον (*psaltérion*), "stringed instrument, psaltery, harp"^[1] and that from the verb ψάλλω (*psállō*), "to touch sharply, to pluck, pull, twitch" and in the case of the strings of musical instruments, "to play a stringed instrument with the fingers, and not with the plectrum."^[2] The psaltery was originally made from wood, and relied on natural acoustics for sound production.

In the King James Bible "psaltery", and its plural, "psalteries", are used to translate several words from the Hebrew Bible whose meaning is now unknown.^[3]



A woman playing a triangular harp, which was called by Greeks a *psalterion*. Ancient Greek red-figured pelike from Anzi, Apulia, circa 320–310 BCE.

Characteristics

The strings of the medieval instrument were usually made of metal, unlike the finger plucked harp made with gut strings. There are many illustrations that show the instrument being played with a plectrum. While the harp had single strips, a psaltery could have multiple strings for one tone. It had a soundboard under the strings. The psaltery has been compared to the harpsichord^[4] and dulcimer, though the latter is not plucked but struck with hammers.^[5]

Medieval and Renaissance psalteries

From the 12th through the 15th centuries, psalteries are widely seen in manuscripts, paintings and sculpture throughout Europe [1] (<http://musiconis.huma-num.fr/fiche/451/Roi+David+jouant+du+psalt%C3%A9rion>). They vary widely in shape and the number of strings (which are often, like lutes, in courses of two or more strings).



■ Psalter player from the Gorleston Psalter, c. 1310–1326.

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- [Kantele](#)
- [Nevel \(instrument\)](#)
- [Psalterium \(instrument\)](#)
- [Salterio](#)
- [Santur](#)
- [Magadis](#)

Modern psaltery

While psalteries had largely died out in Europe by the 19th century, the [salterio](#) remained common in Mexico well into the twentieth century and is still played in some regional styles.

The [hammered dulcimer](#) and related instruments such as the [santur](#), [cimbalom](#), [yangqin](#), and [khim](#), appear very similar to psalteries and it is often hard to tell which one historical images represent. They differ in that the player strikes the strings with small hammers rather than plucking them. As a result, they have much higher string tension and heavier frames.

In the 19th century, several related zithers came into use, notably the [guitar zither](#) and the [autoharp](#). In the 20th century, the [bowed psaltery](#) came into wide use. It is set up in a [triangular](#) format so that the end portion of each string can be [bowed](#).



Picture of an unusual type of psaltery, found in Central Europe (Kingdom of Bohemia, 14th century)

See also

- [Gusli](#)
- [Kankles](#)
- [Qanun \(instrument\)](#)
- [Kokles](#)

Notes

1. [ψαλτήριον](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%23115319) (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%23115319>), Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, on Perseus
2. [ψάλλω](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%23115311) (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%23115311>), Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, on Perseus
3. These words are the Hebrew *keli* (כלי) in [Psalm](#) 71:22 and [I Chronicles](#) 16:5; *nevel* (נבל) in [I Samuel](#) 10:5; [2 Samuel](#) 6:5; [I Kings](#) 10:12; [I Chronicles](#) 13:8; 15:16, 20, 28; 25:1, 6; [II Chronicles](#) 5:12; 9:11; 20:28; 29:25; [Nehemiah](#) 12:27; [Psalms](#) 33:2; 57:6; 81:2; 92:3; 108:2; 144:9; and 150:3; and the [Aramaic](#) *pesanterin* (פסנתרין) in [Daniel](#) 3:5, 7, 10, and 15.

4. Bucur, Voichita. *Handbook of Materials for String Musical Instruments* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=TyvrDAAAQBAJ>). Springer. p. 51. ISBN 3319320807. Retrieved 10 August 2019.
5. Jackson, Ronald (2013). *Performance Practice: A Dictionary-Guide for Musicians* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=Qeq1AQAAQBAJ&pg=PA322>). Routledge. p. 322. ISBN 113676769X. Retrieved 10 August 2019.

References

- Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). "Psaltery" (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Psaltery). *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

External links

- Psaltery (<http://www.music.iastate.edu/antiqua/psaltery.htm>)
- Discussion of psalteries, with image (<http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/arts/opus/opus213e.shtml#Opus4>) from the exhibition Making Musical Instruments: The making of musical instruments in Canada (<http://www.civilization.ca/arts/opus/opus201e.html>) by the Canadian Museum of Civilisation (<http://www.civilization.ca/>)

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