

## The Hurdy-Gurdy: From Pageantry to Peasantry

Hello and welcome to my lecture, "The Hurdy-Gurdy: From Pageantry to Peasantry." Today, I **aspire** to tell you more than you ever knew – or ever wanted to know – about the wonderful, mysterious, and probably out-of-tune hurdy-gurdy! By a show of hands, who has ever heard the term “hurdy-gurdy”? [Pause] It’s a relief to see all of my colleagues raise their hands. We were introduced to the hurdy-gurdy during our junior year here at Cal Poly. Our music history professor had assigned a listening project in which a composer had used a modern-day instrument to replicate the sound of something no one in my class had ever heard of before. While writing the paper, I began to research the hurdy-gurdy and was **fascinated** by it. While I was studying abroad, I stopped into a library on the way to a bar – as any classy college student would – and saw a hurdy-gurdy **kit**. [Slide] Obviously, I had to send a photo to my history professor. Now, a year and a half later, I am standing before you, discussing this weird wooden box, the hurdy-gurdy! [Slide] Ultimately, I want to raise awareness about how the hurdy-gurdy is played, its rich history, how it was written for in its time, and how you hear it in concert music of today.

When you look at the instrument, it seems simple to play. You turn a knob, press some buttons, and **bam**, you play the hurdy-gurdy! But, how do each of

these components combine to create a hurdy-gurdy? So, let's break down the instrument into its main parts. First, is the wheel. The wheel is operated by a knob on the side of the gurdy, [Point at knob] and, when cranked with the right hand, the wheel rotates [Crank Gurdy]. [Remove cover of gurdy] The wheel of the hurdy-gurdy is rosin-covered wooden disk, and, as the wheel rotates, it rubs against all of these strings, producing a sound. This process is very similar to a violin player rubbing a bow across the strings on a violin. Yet, while turning a handle in a circle **seems** easy, the ability to do full rotations **fluidly** is extremely difficult. There is also a specific pattern to **how** you rotate the wheel, depending on what you are playing.

[Slide] As the wheel turns, four different types of strings vibrate:

sympathetic strings, drone strings, the *trompette* string, and melody strings.

[Slide] The sympathetic strings are self-explanatory: as the instrument vibrates, these strings naturally vibrate in response. These sympathetic strings are not typically found in older hurdy-gurdies, but are more common today.

[Slide] The drone strings provide the bulk of the instrument's sound. They are located on the outside of the instrument and produce a buzz-like tone. Given that timbre, it is only fitting that the drone strings are named *bourdons*, or bumblebees. Now, remember **that** word, *bourdon*; it's going to come back later. It

is unknown if there were drones strings on **medieval** gurdies, but, by the 12<sup>th</sup> century, we know that there was at least one. When there is more than one drone string, they are commonly tuned in perfect **fifths**, which is an **incredibly** warm and rich musical interval. [Slide] An interval is the distance between two pitches. Therefore, [Play a C on piano] if C is our lower string's pitch, then we ascend five notes to G, and, when both notes are played together, [Chord] you get a fifth.

Since the hurdy-gurdy has droning fifths (meaning that the sound is sustained for a long time), the gurdy is commonly confused with a bagpipe [Slide] because the bagpipe **also** utilizes the same droning interval. However, unlike the bagpipe, the hurdy-gurdy has a *trompette* string [Slide].

The *trompette* string is tricky to play but is a defining characteristic of the hurdy-gurdy. This string goes by many names; I like to call it the *trompette* string because I play the trumpet. To engage the *trompette* string, the player flicks his wrist and a string at the top of the instrument smacks against the wood and produces a sound. The sound is similar to a dog barking, which gives it another nickname: the "bark string." Unfortunately, not all gurdies have this string, which is true for mine. [Slide] In order to demonstrate this, I found a video by a professional hurdy-gurdy performer who makes video guides on how to play and

maintain the instrument; she calls herself “Patty Gurdy.” I found her video on this topic exceptionally helpful. What you will see is a clear video of her rotating the wheel and activating the *trompette* string. There will also be a graphic circle above the wheel with little dots so you can see where she flicks her wrist to activate the string. [1. Play [Patty-Gurdy 2:08-2:42](#)] [Slide] Overall, the *trompette* string has many **different** functions. Some functions include accenting the rhythm you are playing, using it to vary a repeated rhythm, beat time, or provide a counter-rhythm. In my research, I found no set rules for **when** to use the *trompette* string, commonly it is merely at the performer’s discretion.

The most important part of any tonal instrument is its ability to play different pitches. [Slide] The melody strings are the only set of strings that continually change pitch without having to stop and retune the entire instrument. The two or three strings are tuned to the same pitch and change in tandem, which allows the performer to create melodies. [Slide] The melody strings run into the keybox, which protects them and houses the mechanism to change their pitch. The keybox also provides a place for the player to rest his or her hand, while performing. However, most importantly, “the keybox is the structure that holds the tangents that change the pitches of the melody strings.” Let’s unpack that: the Keybox is comprised of two main parts, the door and the tangents. The

door is hinged to the instrument and closes to protect the melody strings, or opens to view them. [Slide] The *tangents* are the buttons that, when pushed, **shorten** the melody strings and raise the pitch. It's fitting that *tangent* is French for jumper because the pitch jumps from one note to another. The *tangents* move by pressing the button up and gravity brings them back down – a simple, yet **effective**, device. [Play “Mary Had a Little Lamb”]

[Slide] As a conglomerate of simple parts, it is unsurprising that the hurdy-gurdy has been around for nearly a thousand years. In fact, it has been **so** long that we no longer know its exact origins. It is difficult to find two historical sources that use the same identifying label and description. Even the origin of the term “hurdy-gurdy” is a mystery to historians. Before the designation “hurdy-gurdy” became common, the instrument went by many names. [Slide] *Vielle à roue* was common, translating to “violin with wheel.” Often, the name would be truncated to just *Vielle*, which caused confusion when trying to distinguish the hurdy-gurdy from the violin. Another frequent name was *Musette* [Slide]. Since the hurdy-gurdy and the [Slide] **bagpipe** produce many sounds, *Musette* is a term associated with **both** instruments. Therefore, it is often unclear for which instrument the composer was writing.

[Slide] Researching the history of the hurdy-gurdy proved to be more difficult than I initially thought. [Slide] Since there are 10<sup>th</sup>-century manuscripts by Odo of Cluny that discuss the mathematical effects of pitches when shortening a string, it is believed that **Odo** may have invented at least a **precursor** to the hurdy-gurdy. However, there is no indisputable evidence for the hurdy-gurdy's **existence** until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. On top of that, most of what historians know before the **16<sup>th</sup> century** comes from studying pictures and artifacts, which scholars call [Slide] **iconography**. For example, we can look at statues from the 12<sup>th</sup> century that depict musicians playing the larger *organistrum* version. [Slide] Through sculptures, we can not only **date** the instrument to an era, but also we can also see **how** it was played.

[Slide] The instrument was very large and operated by two players. [Slide] One player is operating just the wheel, while the other player is working the *tangents*. An important aspect of this statue was how the performer moved the *tangents*. [Slide] He **pulled** them up from **above**, instead of pushing them up from below. It is suspected that smaller versions of this instrument (that could be played by one person) were being constructed towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century [Slide].

Concurrently, the church began to **dominate** Europe's musical culture and the hurdy-gurdy proved useful in learning plainchant. The scholar Honey Meconi notes that **some** people believe the hurdy-gurdy originated in a monastery. Since the hurdy-gurdy provides droning pitches and was played with the hands, rather than using one's mouth as is the case in wind instruments, a hurdy-gurdy could be played by a choir director, who was still able to sing, while playing. Additionally, since he could change the pitch of the melody strings, he could play an introductory phrase to set the pace of the work before beginning the chant. Fortunately, there **are** surviving **manuscripts** from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, such as those written by [Slide] the medieval nun Hildegard von Bingen. In a modern performance of a piece by Hildegard, the hurdy-gurdy is used as a drone under the choir as well as to add music between sections of the chant, which would sound like this. [2. [Play 1:20-1:55](#)] [[Remove Gurdy](#)]

[Slide] Despite the hurdy-gurdy's medieval religious usage, around the 14<sup>th</sup> century the instrument began to leave the church for secular music. During this time, people began to specialize in particular crafts; you had blacksmiths, tanners, and pottery makers: well, why **not** professional musicians? As people became talented in their field of work, they would form guilds with other professionals. Of all the guilds created, [Slide] the *Meistersingers*, meaning mastersingers, are the

earliest-known **German** organization, which formed in 1311. At **this** point, minstrels and “professional musicians” were employing the hurdy-gurdy, which was **extremely** attractive for the same reasons it appealed to the church – it was played by the hands, which freed the mouth to sing or tell stories.

As people encountered the instrument, the hurdy-gurdy continued to climb **up** the ladder of social ranking. [Slide] By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it was used not **only** in the church, as we can see in surviving [Slide] manuscripts and religious artwork, but **also** in the Court of Burgundy. The hiring of professional hurdy-gurdy players in the Court continued to promote the popularity of the instrument and shift the application of the hurdy-gurdy from a liturgical role to the aristocratic lifestyle.

[Slide] Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the hurdy-gurdy remained a social phenomenon. Wives would play it in their homes for the family, and blind peasants and farmers would **beg** with the hurdy-gurdy, usually in the winter, when it was too cold to farm. [Slide] Despite the hurdy-gurdy’s occasional use for panhandling, professional musicians used the hurdy-gurdy, bagpipes, and so forth at dances. Because the hurdy-gurdy was played by such a **wide** array of social classes in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, an influx of terms are associated with the instrument, [Slide] such as *instrument de truand*, or “ugly instrument” in French. The oldest hurdy-gurdies that have survived to this day also date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.



[Slide] Remember that *trompette* string we talked about earlier? One thing that becomes more common in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is **that** string. The *trompette* string was the device that produced that sharp buzzing sound with the flicking of the wrist. The *trompette* string became increasingly important in the [Slide] 17<sup>th</sup> century for two main reasons. One reason was its ability to beat clear and simple time for dancers. The other benefit was a **higher** caliber of performance by **professional** musicians who could now accent the melodies with simple counter-rhythms. [Slide] Two virtuosic hurdy-gurdy players in the 17th century, who most likely mastered the use of the *trompette* string, **were** 'Janot' and 'La Roze'. They were popular during the reign of Louis the XIV, and not only did they **perform** in court, but there were records of aristocrats receiving lessons from them.

Also in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, something both **terrible**, yet kind of wonderful, happened. [Slide] Throughout France, the growth of the Protestant Church created conflicts with the established Catholic religion. For **many** years, blood was shed between the Catholics and the Protestants, resulting in Louis XIV's outlawing of Protestantism in France. What followed was a mass exodus of French Huguenots. While this is a **terrible** chapter in France's history, it led to the dissemination of the hurdy-gurdy and additional cultural features to other parts of the world, such as England, Africa, and America, as the Protestants fled.

[Slide] As a result, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we have what Susann Palmer calls the [Slide] “Golden Age” of the hurdy-gurdy. At this point, the hurdy-gurdy had reached the peak of its popularity. As aristocrats had **again** taken a liking to the instrument, with performances in the courts of Versailles and Munich, the hurdy-gurdy was an **international** symbol of status [Slide]. And, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, method books on how to play the hurdy-gurdy began to emerge [Picture], such as Jean-Baptiste Dupuit’s **six** principles for playing the hurdy-gurdy with six sonatas. Dupuits’ book contains several pages that explain how to hold the instrument, how to crank the wheel, and various other techniques.

During the “Golden Age,” people began modifying the shape of the instrument as well. [Slide] The father and son duo of Henri and Charles Bâton revolutionized the shape of the instrument. The Bâtons began by using old guitar bodies to create gurdies. In 1716, [Slide] the pair switched to using a lute body that became the predominant form of the instrument. Overall, the lute shape gave the hurdy-gurdy a more sonorous tone that made it suitable for playing in concerts and with other instruments.

However, all good things must end, and [Slide] by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the hurdy-gurdy began its descent through the social **ranks**. Peasants and farmers still used the hurdy-gurdy to beg for money, and the instrument devolved back into a

**folk** instrument versus its previous status as a symbol of power and prestige.

Seeing lower-class citizens playing the instrument **was already** off-putting to the upper class. Moreover, the instrument is also **extremely** difficult to play and these country-dwellers were most likely playing it **poorly**. Consequently, the low-quality performances by farmers ultimately tarnished the name and **sound** of the once-respected instrument. Thus, as the industrial revolution took the world by storm, the hurdy-gurdy rapidly **declined** in popularity.

Nevertheless, you can **still** find the hurdy-gurdy being played **today**. Mostly in Europe, it can be heard at weddings, festivals, village ceremonies, and concerts. France is still the main center for the hurdy-gurdy, where it performs mainly its traditional repertory, **but** I did find an **alarming** amount of hurdy-gurdy rock groups, [Slide] such as Irdorath, a metal fantasy folk band – yes, a metal fantasy folk band— let’s watch, shall we? [3. [Metal Gurdy 0:00-1:04?](#)] Unfortunately, the band has not announced another concert since their last performance in Austria in January, but be patient!

[Slide] So what **did** these instruments play? And I’m sorry to **disappoint** you, but it’s not all **metal**. What I have done is gathered a variety of works by several different composers and stared at them for many hours trying to unlock the mysteries of the instrument’s capabilities. Ultimately, I found two main types

of surviving compositions: [Slide] those written for the **actual** instruments, or similar instruments, [Slide] and those written for **other** instruments asking them to **mimic** that rich hurdy-gurdy sound.

You'll remember that [Slide] Charles Bâton participated in revolutionizing the physical design of the hurdy-gurdy, and was a player and composer.

Combining both his passion for the hurdy-gurdy and composition, Bâton wrote six sonatas for the hurdy-gurdy. [Slide] Notice the term used in the title is *Vielle*.

Bâton also notes that some of these sonatas **can** be played on the [Slide] Musette, or bagpipe. Since he made a distinction between them, we can assume the primary instrument he was composing for was the hurdy-gurdy.

When we look at Bâton's work, we see an example of music written for a **virtuosic** hurdy-gurdy player. [Slide] This is the fourth sonata of his six-sonata set. You will notice two lines of music that run in parallel. The top line is played by a hurdy-gurdy, while the bottom line is played by the accompaniment – in this case, a harpsichord.

Throughout the course of Sonata IV's three movements, we are exposed to a brief history of the hurdy-gurdy. The first movement is calming, referring to the instrument's simple origins, and asking the performer to play [Slide] graciously. The second movement [Slide] is a much more rapid and virtuosic piece, which

resembles the **climb** of the hurdy-gurdy to aristocracy. Lastly, the third movement, Bâton wrote a *Gigue* or jig – a traditional and lively peasant dance.

Let's take a listen to this [\[Slide\]](#) second movement of Bâton's work. This movement is rather impressive to hear and is an **excellent** demonstration of virtuosic hurdy-gurdy playing. Notice how the *trompette* string is sprinkled throughout the work, being employed on long notes and repeated phrases. [\[4.](#)

[Play Moderement 3:00-4:10\]](#) Astonishing and incredibly difficult, this piece is one of **my** favorites.

I would like to point out one more sound from that recording. You obviously heard the hurdy-gurdy, that percussive *trompette* string, and the harpsichord, but did **anyone** hear any **other** unusual sounds? Perhaps a kind of clacking, **especially** when the notes were moving quickly? Listen again closely. [\[5.](#)

[Play 3:35-3:45\]](#) That clacking sound is **another** characteristic of the hurdy-gurdy that is a natural consequence of a wooden instrument. It is the *tangents* banging on the keybox as the performer rapidly presses them. [\[Jostle keys on gurdy\]](#)

Bâton's six sonatas included two duets for a pair of hurdy-gurdies, alerting us to the fact that the hurdy-gurdy was not used strictly as a **solo** instrument, but that there was an interest in **two** hurdy-gurdies playing together. [\[Slide\]](#) In the second duet, the sixth sonata of the set, you will hear one hurdy-gurdy begin a

complex rhythm that is passed back and forth from player to player. Moreover, while the instruments are the **same**, you can still distinguish one from the other.

Often, when the two hurdy-gurdies play the same rhythm, the instruments will play in thirds. A third is an interval, similar to the fifth I discussed earlier, but, instead of a distance that is **five** notes apart, a third has a separation of **three** notes. [Piano] To remind you, this is what a fifth sounded like [fifth] versus the sound of a third [third]. Frequently, the top voice will continue to play a melody and fill in the harmony provided by the second player. Simply put, the top line, or first player, plays **more** notes.

I want to isolate just a little segment of the second movement of this duet to talk about **style**. [Slide] In music, we have something called embellishments or ornamentation. Embellishments are particularly prominent in Baroque music as a way for virtuosic players to demonstrate their musical prowess. [Walk to piano] The most common embellishment we will hear is a trill, which will turn a phrase like this [Play C-D-E-D-C] into something like this [Play C-D-Trill-D-C].

In this Sonata [Slide], the composer has used a plus sign to indicate where these flourishes should occur. Let's listen to the first few seconds of Bâton's sonata; pay attention to any oscillations between longer notes that are very quick and rapid. [7. Play Grac. 0:00-0:31]

This concept of ornamentation is even more **apparent** when listening to [Air Quotes] “Vivaldi’s” *Il Pastor Fido* – The Faithful Shepherd. [Slide] Who has heard of Vivaldi? [Pause and Raise Hand] Vivaldi was a famous Baroque composer and violin player who made a **significant** impact on religious music and operas. [Slide] When looking at the title page of *Il pastor fido*, you will notice it was written for five instruments and *basso continuo*. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a composer would list several instruments that could be used to perform the work, and the order in which the instruments were listed was from [Slowly] most optimal to least optimal. The score listed the Musette, or bagpipe, Viole (that would be the hurdy-gurdy), the flute, Hautbois (the Oboe), and lastly the violin. Therefore, the **best** instrument to use is the bagpipe. Ready for this to get complicated? Vivaldi did not actually **compose** *Il Pastor Fido*, Nicolas Chédeville did [Slide], but Chédeville **published** it under Vivaldi’s name. So why would Chédeville do this?

If you’ll think back, [pause] the 18<sup>th</sup> century marked the **peak** of the hurdy-gurdy before its popularity rapidly decayed; it was the same for the bagpipe. At the time, [Slide] Chédeville was a bagpipe player **and** maker, so a **decline** in the popularity of the instrument was not good. [Slide] In an attempt to save the instrument, **he** [Slide] composed *Il Pastor Fido* and pirated the very **marketable**

name of Vivaldi to convince the public that the bagpipe and hurdy-gurdy were still relevant. Fortunately, for hurdy-gurdy players, this piece was written within the playing limits of the hurdy-gurdy, as promised on the cover page. Let's listen to the beginning of this work, [\[8. Play Moderato 0:00-0:25\]](#) In contrast to the first two movements, the **third** movement exploits the soft and luscious side of the instrument with an aria. This movement is slow, and sultry, but utilizes the **same** concept of ornamentation [\[9. Play Aria 5:45-6:17\]](#). Similar to Bâton's work, the final movement is a *Gigue* as well – that lively peasant dance.

Next, we find the hurdy-gurdy entering the artistic realm of programmatic music in an 18th-century score by [\[Slide\]](#) Leopold Mozart, an **extraordinary** violin player and composer, and father of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. [\[Slide\]](#)

“Programmatic” is a fancy term for instrumental music that conveys a story without words, and that is **precisely** what Leopold does in [\[Slide\]](#) *Die Bauernhochzeit* or, in English, “The Country Wedding.” Leopold wrote this piece as a musical portrayal of this [\[Slide\]](#) **1567** painting titled “Peasant Wedding.”

Leopold's lively opening imitates the march of the wedding. After the ceremony, Leopold crafted two dances and concluded with an **exciting** finale to celebrate. Leopold's piece is useful in isolating the contrasting timbre of the bagpipe from the hurdy-gurdy. Here is an excerpt that features the wonderful



bagpipe sound. [10. [Trio, mvt. 3, 11:05-11:26](#)]. [Slide] Now that your ear is attuned to the sound of the bagpipe, let's examine the first movement of Leopold's "The Country Wedding."

Leopold calls for two horns, oboes, violins, one viola, bassoon and a cello. But, since it is a **peasant's** wedding, it is only fitting that there be a hurdy-gurdy— Leopold uses the German term "Leyer" [Slide]— and also a bagpipe, called a "Dudelsack" in this piece. [Slide] One difference I noticed in Leopold's treatment of these two instruments was in the number of notes each instrument played. In general, the bagpipe plays fewer and longer notes, while the hurdy-gurdy plays more and shorter notes over the same period of time.

[Slide] For instance, in the first ten measures, the hurdy-gurdy plays fifty-six notes, while the **bagpipe** plays only thirty-four. What I like about this example is the hurdy-gurdy is using the bark string to project a simplified version of the rhythm. [Slide] Therefore, you hear the shrill sound of the bagpipe with a stark **timbral** difference from the hurdy-gurdy that emphasizes the rhythm. [11. [Play](#) [Beg. 0:00-0:20](#)]

So, earlier, I said that there are two kinds of compositions: works written for an **actual** hurdy-gurdy and those that **mimic** the hurdy-gurdy on some other instrument. [Slide] Carlo Farina was a composer active in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century,

just over a hundred years before Leopold Mozart, and wrote one of the oldest “mimicking” compositions I was able to find in his work *Capriccio Stravagante*, [Slide] or a “Whimsical Journey.” Throughout this work, Farina clearly **evokes** the sound of the hurdy-gurdy through one violin, two violas, a cello, bass, and harpsichord. In fact, Farina not only mimics the hurdy-gurdy, but **other** instruments as well, such as the horn and the fife. [Score] Fortunately, each section is labeled according to the instrument being imitated. In this section, Farina uses the Italian term *La Lira* [Slide], and begins with rich droning fifths in the lower strings, the same interval produced by the drone strings on the hurdy-gurdy. Farina even specifies that the performers should **not** use vibrato [Slide], in order to replicate the static sound of the hurdy-gurdy more closely.

[Slide] Vibrato is a technique used by musicians to give their tone a warmer and more interesting sound. Basically, it makes a steady pitch [Sing note w/o vibrato] [Slide] wave up and down slightly [Sing note w/ vibrato]. Brass players, move the chin a little to create a “wah” sound, and string players will use their hands to rock the string gently back and forth. However, since the hurdy-gurdy has *tangents* to change pitch and **not** direct finger-to-string contact, the instrument does not have vibrato naturally. [Slide] Therefore, Farina devises **another** method of evoking the sound of the hurdy-gurdy with conventional

orchestral instruments. Let's listen to Farina's interpretation of the hurdy-gurdy.

[13. [Play Farina](#) 1:49-2:35]

[Slide] Through techniques that resemble those of Farina, Franz Schubert uses a **piano** to imitate a hurdy-gurdy in his work "Der Leiermann" nearly a century and a half later. [Slide] "Der Leiermann" or, the Hurdy-Gurdy Man, is one of twenty-four songs that tell a sad story about a doomed young man's winter's journey. [Slide] Schubert titles this 1828 set *Winterreise*. [Slide] Richard Wigmore translates Wilhelm Müller's poem, "Der Leiermann," as follows:

There, beyond the village/stands a hurdy-gurdy player/with numb  
fingers/he plays as best he can  
barefoot on the ice/he totters to and fro/and his little plate/remains  
forever empty/no one wants to listen/no one looks at him

Very clearly, the work is discussing a poor man playing for spare change. Grinding the best he can and with his little plate forever empty, the man is most likely playing the hurdy-gurdy very poorly. In addition, since it **is** the middle of winter, it is unlikely he will survive **much** longer. Since the man is using the hurdy-gurdy to beg for money during winter, Müller's poem reflects his **keen**

understanding of the history of the instrument. Schubert, too, understood the instrument, since he uses the piano to replicate the beggar playing his hurdy-gurdy. Before I show you the score, I **want** to play just the first couple of seconds to see if **you** can figure out how Schubert imitates the hurdy-gurdy. [14. [Play Schubert 0:07-0:20](#)] [Slide] Immediately, you hear the piano play fifths, which resemble the tuning of the hurdy-gurdy. In addition, you can see these fifths in the bottom hand of the piano played throughout the entire piece. Let's listen to a longer excerpt from Schubert's "Der Leiermann." [15. [Play Schubert 0:07-0:52](#)]

[Slide] So how do all of these pieces tie together? What about them makes **each** one so special? One morning I was mindlessly flipping through one of the scores I had collected when I noticed a **pattern** of notes repeated throughout **several** movements. I would turn a couple of pages and there it was again. After that, I began to search frantically through all of the other sources I had collected. It was **then** that I found this motif again and again! [Slide] These are all excerpts from music we have heard today. Each of these pieces contains the same figure, one note that oscillates to a new pitch and returns to the **original** note. I believe **this** is the figure that makes the distinction between instruments that are simply playing in perfect fifths and the instruments that are deliberately meant to imitate the hurdy-gurdy.

[Slide] This rhythm is found in Charles Bâton's sonatas [16. [Play Moderate 0:00-0:12](#)] [Slide] Leopold Mozart used this rhythm in *Die Bauernhochzeit* accompanied by the Violin [17. [Play Leopold 0:05-0:10](#)] Perhaps the clearest example of the implications of this rhythm is by Farina. [Slide] Farina wrote the piece in which he deliberately evoked the sound of old instruments with a small ensemble. Notice that in the section titled *La Lira*, measures thirteen through twenty, Farina oscillates to one note and back to an 'A'. [18. [Play Farina 2:23-2:38](#)]

To prove my point **further**, I want to introduce another composer. [Slide] François Couperin was active in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was an esteemed harpsichord player who wrote a six-movement set titled [Slide] *Les Fastes de la Grande et Ancienne Ménéstrandise*, or, in English, *The Splendor of the Great and Ancient Minstrels*. Couperin's work satirizes the entertainments put on by the minstrels who would play music, juggle, and perform acrobatics, **very** similar to today's traveling circus.

[Slide] Couperin's second movement is titled "*Les Viéleux et les Gueux*," which translates to "The Old Ones and the Beggars." This is a suitable title because movement two imitates the hurdy-gurdy, and of course, the term hurdy-gurdy goes hand-in-hand with the word beggar. Now, remember in the beginning

I told you to remember the word *bourdon*? Well, it has **finally** come back! [Slide]

Notice the top line is titled *Air de Viéle* and the lower line is the *bourdon*. Looking at the *bourdon* line, you see a string of long droning notes on fifths that extend throughout the entire work. Moreover, since the top line is labeled *Viéle*,

Couperin clearly uses the harpsichord to imitate the hurdy-gurdy. [Slide] Couperin also gives us this fancy rhythm. [Slide] For **eighteen** measures straight, Couperin oscillates from one note, to a G, to a different pitch, and back to G. [19. Play

Couperin 2:54-3:35]

Although I felt like I had unlocked some big mystery of the hurdy-gurdy, the more music I analyzed, the more I realized that most composers **already** knew this! Take [Slide] Maurice Ravel, for example. Ravel is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century composer writing music **three hundred** years after Couperin. In an attempt to **revive** and modernize this old style, Ravel applied characteristics of past composers in his work [Slide] *Le tombeau de Couperin*. As some of you know, we studied this piece in a music history class. We learned that, Ravel wrote this work as a memorial or a lament for Couperin. Since Ravel was **recreating** the French Baroque style, it was no surprise that we encountered a segment of [Slide] long droning fifths in the cellos. **Immediately**, a red flag was raised. Now, without the composer's explanation, it's **impossible** to tell if this was meant to be the sweet sound of a

droning hurdy-gurdy, or its counterpart the bagpipe. However, I want to draw your attention to one little thing. [Slide] Look at the bass line at the bottom of the score. We get that same oscillation from one note, to a pedal, and back, making us wonder: is this the calling card of the hurdy-gurdy? [20. Play Ravel 2:00-2:18]

The author of my textbook speculates that this section mimics a bagpipe, but you can guess that I believe Ravel was referencing the esteemed hurdy-gurdy.

[Slide] As you can see, the history of the hurdy-gurdy is **extensive**. The roots of the instrument can be traced back hundreds of years, and it most likely existed hundreds of years before that. From pageantry to peasantry, we can see the hurdy-gurdy climb through the social ranks before falling to the margins of society as a **beggar's** instrument. Regardless of the social status of the hurdy-gurdy, many composers continued to write for it, while others honored the hurdy-gurdy by imitating its sound with other instruments. Despite not being wildly popular today – apart from that metal folk-fantasy band – the hurdy-gurdy still lives on in music, hidden in the **fabric** of droning fifths and oscillating rhythms.

Thank you.