

## Penning the air

*Looking for the origins of 'Jew's harp'*

### Introduction

Variouly described as “*simple*”, “*primitive*”, “*unmusical*” and “*insignificant*”, the Jew’s harp or jaw harp (two names amongst numerous used in the English language) is an international musical instrument capable of great subtlety and dynamic effects. The origins of the instrument are obscure, but most musicologists believe that they originated in the Far East made of bamboo, palm wood, bone or any other local material capable of flexing. When it changed from bamboo to metal is unclear, but the principle of pressing the outer bars against the teeth and flexing the spring tongue with a finger or hand is consistent with most metal types found all over the world. The theory of its transfer from Asia to Europe appears to be that it travelled via migration routes or conquest sometime before 1200, being definitely established in Britain by the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

When and why it was given its various English names is a mystery. Almost everyone I speak to asks where the name comes from, or has a view on the matter. The names are unique to English speaking countries. Worldwide there are around 1,000 different names and it is variously called *mouth* or *child/youth* trumpet or harp, in most European countries, or has its own particular name, such as *guimbarde* in France or *Drombe* in Hungary. My interest has only been concerned with the instrument’s English name and, believe me, suggestions range from the sublime to the ridiculous. Six have been commonly used over the years, five of which can still be found in various English speaking countries or regions. *Jew’s harp* is still the most common, followed by *jaw harp*, *juice harp*, *gewgaw* and *trump*, with only ‘*Jew’s trump*’ falling into disuse.

### Early references

We know that the Jew’s harp was a recognisable musical instrument in Britain by the 14<sup>th</sup> century not only because of a verifiable find dated 1280 to 1320 recovered from a River Thames site, but because of a remarkable image on the Crozier of William of Wykeham in New College, Oxford, dated c1367. On the crook of the crozier are 19 small enamels of angels playing musical instruments, one of which is playing a Jew’s harp. Written evidence of the name can only be traced back with certainty to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Two references in a petty customs account dated 1481 clearly uses the words *Jue Harpes* and *Jue Trumpes* in reference to two consignments for a London merchant, William Codde.<sup>1</sup> To these names we can add the single ‘*trump*’ as a third common name in use prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in Scotland, where the term is still used today.

Proof that we are talking about the same instrument comes from two late 16<sup>th</sup> century sources – ‘The Nomenclator, or Rememberbrancer of Adrianus Iunius’, of 1585 and ‘News from Scotland’ of 1591. ‘The Nomenclator’ section on musical instruments, states in Latin and English that “*others think the word crembalon refers to that instrument made of steel, commonly used by boys, which, held by the lips, gives a musical sound when the bent tongue that passes through the middle, put in motion by the finger, makes a sound. A Jewes trumpe or harpe.*” The second document is a popularist pamphlet published in 1591; ‘Newes from Scotland’ is a disturbing account of a witchcraft trial attended in part by King James IV of Scotland,

soon to be James I of England and known for his interest in Demonology. At one point Agnes Sampson, one of the coven leaders, confessed that "*Geillis Duncan... did goe before them playing this reill or daunce uppon a small trompe called a Jewes trump, until they entred into the Kirk of the North Barrick... The king... sent for the saide Geillis Duncan, who upon the trump did play the saide daunce before the kinges majestie.*" These two documents link, *Jew's harp*, *Jew's trump* and *trump*.

Crane has suggested<sup>ii</sup> that '*Trump*' is the original name of the instrument, which is unfortunate because it was also an early name for a trumpet, so some filtering or judgment is necessary to distinguish between the two. When Chaucer wrote '*The House of Fame*', in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, he mentions *trumpe* eighteen times in '*Book I, Incipit liber primus.*' However, with "*Tok out his blakke trumpe of bras*", and "*...gan this trumpe for to blowe*," we can be pretty sure he's talking about a trumpet. The earliest reference found so far that Crane considers as referring to our instrument is from a burlesque poem written around 1450. Verse ii of '*The Turnament of Totenham*' has the description "*Ther hopped Hawkyn, Ther daunced Dawkyn Ther trumped Tymkyn; And all were trewe drinkers.*" Given that this describes peasants at a local fair, the theory goes that "*Ther trumped Tymkyn*" is possibly a reference to a Jew's harper. The trouble is that later in the same poem verse xvii refers to "*With flails and harnes and trumpis made of tree.*" If this is referring to the same '*trump*' I cannot see how this can be a Jew's harp. My other concern is that this is not a description of a real event but a poem written by an educated man for the entertainment of the educated. The style is reminiscent of the play performed by Bottom and co. in '*A Midsummer Night's Dream.*' We also know that tournaments were highly organised affairs and the poem constantly refers back to a recognisable format of such an event, so "*trumped*" could just as easily refer to a simple trumpet.

From the same period there is another lengthy poem, '*The Houlet*' or '*The Owl*' within which one verse has a list of instruments, "*The rote, and the recordour, the ribut, the rist, The trump, and the taburn, the tympane, but trayl.*" *Ribut* or *trump* could be our instrument, the former being similar to an early French name before *guimbarde*. *Trump* crops up in various forms every now and then over the next five hundred years, the most interesting references being in the 1599 '*Dictionary in Spanish and English*' of John Minsheu, with "*Trompe de Paris, a lewes harpe*", and '*The English Irish National Dictionary*' of 1732, which gives the Irish name of *Trompadh*. All the references to the use of '*trump*' alone come from Scottish or Irish records, and there have been no discoveries to my knowledge where that name is used on its own in England other than when referring to a trumpet.

Various theories have been put forward as to why it should be called *trump*. Jeremy Montagu, ex-curator of the Bate Collection of Musical Instruments, for instance, suggests that "*Trump is the most logical term for the instrument for it produces the same overtones as the natural trumpet*",<sup>iii</sup> while the '*Oxford Dictionary of Etymology*' says that, "*The notes produced by the instrument are limited, as in the natural trumpet, to the natural harmonic sequences, hence the older name "Jew's trump".*" The use of the name '*harp*' appears to be linked to the lyre shape of the frame.

### **Theories from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on**

Nothing, though, comes near the controversy over the reason for the name *Jew's*. First there was the French link. There is a proposition first made by Samuel Pegge

in 'Anonymiana or, Ten Centuries of Observations on Various Authors and Subjects' in 1778 in which Pegge suggested that, "...I conceive the present orthography to be a corruption of the French *Jeu-trump*, a trump to play with that in the Belgick, or Low-Dutch, from whence come many of our toys, a *tromp* is a rattle for children." An argument raged in the 'Notes and Queries' throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as to the earliest use of the term '*Jeu trompe*'. The main problem lay in the statement by Dr Rimbault that Roger Bacon specifically uses the name, presumably in the 'Experiments in Consort touching Sounds; and first touching the Nullity and Entity of Sounds' section of his '*Sylva Sylvarum*' published in 1628. Having checked the originals I can categorically say he uses the name *Jewes harp*, which "...hath the vantage of penning the Air in the Mouth." I thought I was on to something when I discovered a French translation of 1631, but the description had been removed from the edition I viewed. A French-English dictionary of 1593 has *Jeu – play; luif – lewe* and *Trompe – trumpet*, but no combination. The earliest mention of the connection is, therefore, Samuel Pegge. The main problem is that the phrase is considered to be bad French – a view supported by my sister-in-law, Catherine Perrier, who described the idea as "ridicules!"

The Low Countries word *Jeudgtromp*, has also been suggested, though finding early Flemish / English dictionaries has been difficult. English-Dutch dictionaries of the 17<sup>th</sup> century have "*Jeught, Youth or Adolescence; Tromp, A rattle for little children; Trompet, Trump or Trumpet*", but no reference to the instrument as such. A 1754 dictionary has '*a Jews' trump, een Speel tromp*' and in 1801 there is "*Tromp (s.f. Mondtromp) a Jewers trump or harp.*" 'Le grand Dictionnaire Francois-Flamen' of 1676 does not mention the instrument under any of the above names, *guimbard* or the earlier French name of *rebute*.

*Jaws* is the most common proposed derivation and one mistakenly often given as the true origins. The fact is, however, that it is not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the theory is first suggested. The earliest use found so far is from Thornton in the St James' Chronicle of 1763 "*We must lament, that poor Ten-toothy, who shewed such comical Execution on the Jaws-harp, has received such a Cold in the Eye-tooth...*"<sup>iv</sup>. It is Thomas Pennant in 'A Tour in Scotland' who first suggests this as an origin, with "*Probably, as an ingenious friend suggests, this should be read, the Jaws-harp*"<sup>v</sup> The main difficulty with this theory arises when you bring in '*trump*' to make *jaws trump*. Francis Galpin, in 1932, puts *Jaws* and *Trump* together, but I've not found any other written evidence of that combination.

'*Juice*' is an American idea, although I recently got an email from Australia with the same description. In 'The Porcupine, Alias the Hedge Hog', 1784, William Billings of Boston adds a note: '*Our very boys and negroes pretend to understand the original; and they all agree that this word is wrongly translated; for they say it should be rendered thus, juice harp; because, if they play it any considerable time, it makes their mouth water.*'<sup>vi</sup>

'*Gewgaw* is one of the most interesting theories. This is an old word, having been traced back to the medieval period as a name for a small unspecified musical instrument, though its normal use, even earlier, was to describe a bauble or cheap trinket. Its use for a name specifically of our instrument yet again can be traced to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In 'The Rural Economy of Yorkshire, of 1788, by Mr

Marshall, the local name is given as 'Gewgaw'. This is thought to have come from the Swedish for a Jew's harp, 'Munnigiga', with the suggestion of the evolution from *Gewgaw* to *Jew's harp*. A cunning thought, but tenuous and without evidence. There is a variant *Gewe-Gawe* from the Low Countries, but that does not explain why the term is only known in the Northeast.

We now come to a few theories of association. First, we need to establish that there is no history of the instrument as part of Jewish musical culture. *Punch Magazine* makes use of the image as a symbol of Jewish-ness, particularly during the period of Baron Rothschild and the Parliamentary Oaths Bill. Then there is the connection with the Bible. Bonnell Thornton (alias Fustian Sackbut) in 'An ode on Saint Cæcilia's day, Adapted to the Ancient British musick: the Saltbox, the Jew's Harp, the Marrow Bones and Cleavers, the Hum Strum of Hurdy-Gurdy', while obviously satirising attitudes of the time, writes in 1749, "*The Judaic, or (as commonly called) Jews Harp, speaks its origin in its appellation; and I cannot help thinking that this was the harp which David used, as the sound of the Hebrew language seems particularly adapted to this instrument...*"

A relatively recent theory is that it got its name from the sellers of the instrument. C B Mount appears to be the first to come up with the idea in 1897, "*Suppose now that the "trump" had been known in England and Scotland, that it had fallen into oblivion, and was suddenly brought back into vogue by the enterprise of some Jew pedlar selling it around the country – what more likely, in such a case, than that it should be called the Jew's trump or harp?*" The Oxford English Dictionary expands the theory, "*More or less satisfactory reasons may be conjectured: e.g. that the instrument was actually made, sold, or sent to England by Jews, or supposed to be so, or that it was attributed to them, as a good commercial name, suggesting the trumps and harps mentioned in the Bible.*" This, of course, assumes that it made good commercial sense to have such a connection.

Two final derivations come from the Broadsheet of 'Roger Giles, Surgin, Parish Clark & skulemaster, groser & Hundertaker', circa 1790, who offers '*Joesharpes, penny wissels, brass kanelsticks, frying pans, and other moozikal hinstrumints hat grately redooced figers.*', and, from a fourteen year old in the United States in 1999, '*The name Jew's Harp probably comes from chew harp because it is bitten upon*'. Nice try.

## Conclusion

The first name of the instrument found so far is in the 1481 Customs account and is *Jue harpes* and *Jue trumpes*. This is a hand-written account intended for auditing implying that the name must have been in common usage or no one would have known what they were dealing with. They must also have been imported in sufficient numbers to justify inclusion in the customs' book of rates or merchandizes from 1545 to 1765, or 200 years, where the official name in various spelling was *Jew's trump*.<sup>vii</sup>

The overall history of the name appears to be divided into two periods. The first during the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, where *Trump*, *Jew's trump* and *Jew's harp* are commonly used, with no attempt to explain why. The second begins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and goes on to the present day, when there is an effort to try to make sense of how the name came about, hence, *jaw harp*, *juice harp*, *Jeu-trompe*, *Jeugdtromp*,

the King David connection and the peddler theories. 'Gewgaw' sits in the latter group, but further research might move it into the former.

This is the evidence uncovered so far, and there is no clear-cut result. Whether by corruption or association, *Jew's harp* is the earliest English language name at the moment, while *jaw harp* is a preferred contemporary name, though there is a move in the USA in particular to use *trump*, and good luck to them that tries. What is clear is that the name, a bit like the instrument itself, has a history shrouded in mystery.

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<sup>i</sup> Wright, Michael, Jue harpes, Jue trumpes 1481, Journal of the International Jew's Harp Society, 2005

<sup>ii</sup> Crane, Frederick, Jew's (Jaws? Jeu? Jeugd? Gewgaw? Juice?) Harp – VIM 1, 1982

<sup>iii</sup> Montagu, Jeremy, notes given to author

<sup>iv</sup> VIM 2

<sup>v</sup> VIM 1

<sup>vi</sup> VIM 1

<sup>vii</sup> Wright, Michael, Rates of Customs-Merchandizes, 1545 to 1765, Journal of the International Jew's Harp Society, 2005