

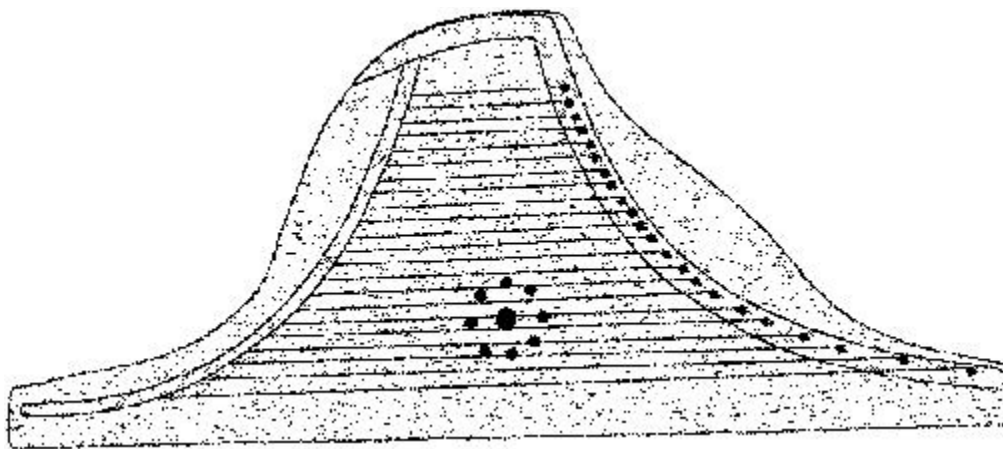
# Gusli

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(from early Slavonic *gosl*: ‘string’). The term has had a variety of meanings, primarily designating three different kinds of psaltery found in Russia, namely: (1) the *gusli shlemovidniye* (‘helmet-shaped’ *gusli*); (2) the *gusli krilovidniye* (‘wing-shaped’ *gusli*) and (3) the *gusli pryamougol’niye* (‘straight-sided’ *gusli*).

The *gusli* may have come from Byzantium to Russia by AD 1000. It was the principal instrument of the *skomorokhi*, professional travelling minstrels until the 16th century, and was a motif in their ‘heroic narrative’ poetry (*bilini*). The earliest iconographical evidence is a 13th-century silver bracelet showing an instrument similar to the ‘wing-shaped’ *gusli* and the [Kantele](#). 14th-century miniatures from Novgorod depict sacred figures playing the ‘helmet-shaped’ *gusli*. In the same region archaeologists have found fragments of instruments dating from the 11th to the 15th centuries. Several of these instruments resemble the ‘wing-shaped’ *gusli*. The excavations uncovered at least one fragment thought to be from a ‘helmet-shaped’ *gusli* as well as fragments of a Russian *gudok*, a three-string fiddle also associated with the *skomorokhi*.

The ‘helmet-shaped’ *gusli* ([fig.1](#)) was made by combining thin strips of wood to form a half-oval frame with concave flanks, attached to a straight base. The existing museum specimens range from 70 to 100 cm long, 30 to 55 cm wide and 7 to 12 cm deep, with sides which slope inwards so that the soundboard is wider than the back. The strings, originally made of gut, were parallel and attached at one end to a curved wooden string-holder and at the other end to wooden rear tuning pegs. The number of strings varied from 11 to 36, with 20 to 25 being most common. The higher-pitched strings were tuned diatonically and the lower-pitched strings in 4ths and 5ths, giving these instruments a typical range of one and a half to three octaves.



1. 'Helmet-shaped' gusli

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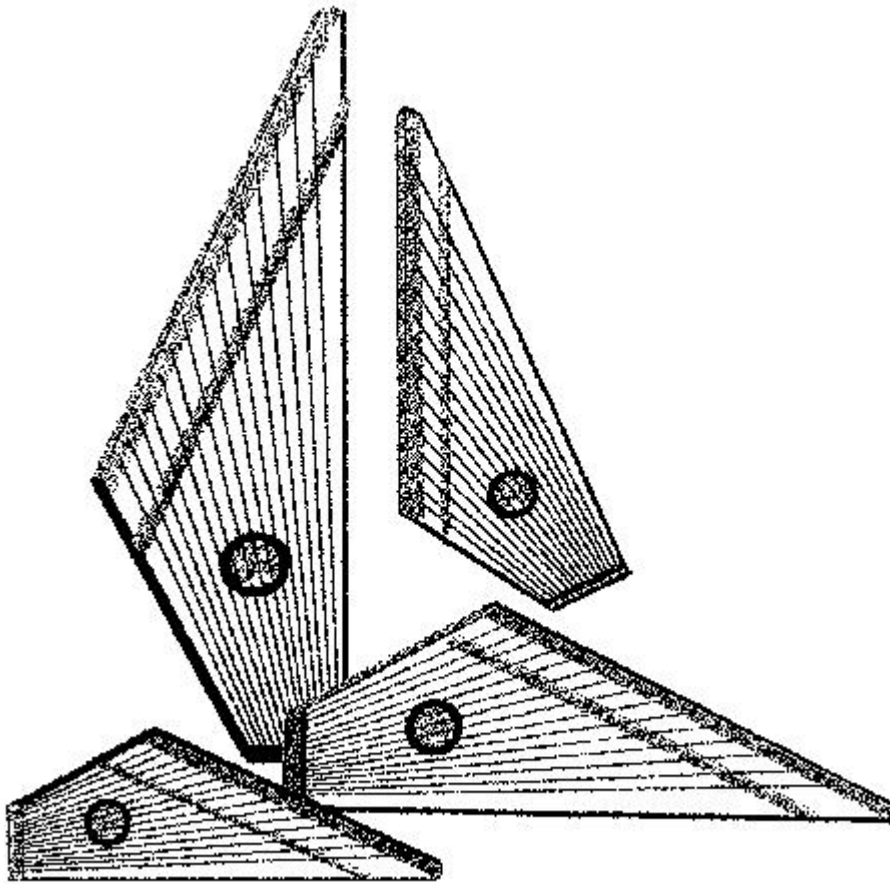
The 'helmet-shaped' *gusli* was usually played in a sitting position, with the straight side across the lap and the curved side resting against the chest. Using a sling, it could also be played while standing or walking. One hand played melodies on the upper strings while the other hand played accompaniment and bass on the lower strings. Though little evidence of the early repertory survives, folklore and iconographical evidence suggests it was used by the *skomorokhi* to play a variety of music, most significantly accompanying *bilini* and other songs. Late 19th-century repertory included folksongs and dances. The 'helmet-shaped' *gusli* was one of the few instruments tolerated by the Orthodox Church since it was portrayed as a holy instrument, analogous to the psaltery of David; it was also called *gusli-psaltir* ('psaltery-shaped' *gusli*).

The *skomorokhi* may have spread the 'helmet-shaped' *gusli* to various ethnic groups throughout greater Russia, where it is still played among the Tatars (*késlja*), the Mari (*küsle*, *kärš*), the Votyaks (*krés*, *krödž*), the Chuvash (*kesle*) and the Mordvin (*kájda*). In the 1930s G.P. Lyubimov developed a chromatic 'helmet-shaped' *gusli* based on the Chuvash version; others tried attaching tuning mechanisms, though these innovations never became generally accepted. Various modern forms of the 'helmet-shaped' *gusli* are played among ethnic groups in Russia, particularly those of the Finno-Ugric peoples from the Volga basin.

The 'wing-shaped' *gusli*, also called *gusli zvonchatije* ('bright-sounding' *gusli*), was found in north-western Russia in areas adjacent to where the Baltic psalteries were found. Existing museum specimens are similar in size and structure to other Baltic psalteries (see [Kantele](#)). The instrument was played with the long side on the lap and the short side propped against the body. Players used the 'covering technique': the fingers of the left hand damped the strings not needed for a chord while the right hand strummed a dance rhythm.

An advanced form of the 'wing-shaped' *gusli* was developed around 1900 in St Petersburg. Influenced by V.V. Andreyev, Osip Smolensky and Nikolay Privalov made 'wing-shaped' *guslis* in three sizes with 13 strings each. The bodies were

built of separate pieces of wood, then varnished, and bridges were added to increase volume. The strings were attached to individual hitch-pins set into the narrow end of the instrument and to metal tuning-pins at the wide end. Smolensky founded the first 'wing-shaped' *gusli* 'choirs' which performed throughout the eastern Baltic region. The current 'wing-shaped' *gusli* ([fig.2](#)) is built in four sizes, piccolo, prima, alto and bass, each with 12 to 15 strings tuned to a diatonic scale. Playing involves the same technique as that used to play folk versions, except that the player uses a pick and may play melodies on individual strings using tremolo. The 'wing-shaped' *gusli* is regularly played in Russian traditional music ensembles, though not in the large professional orchestras of traditional instruments.

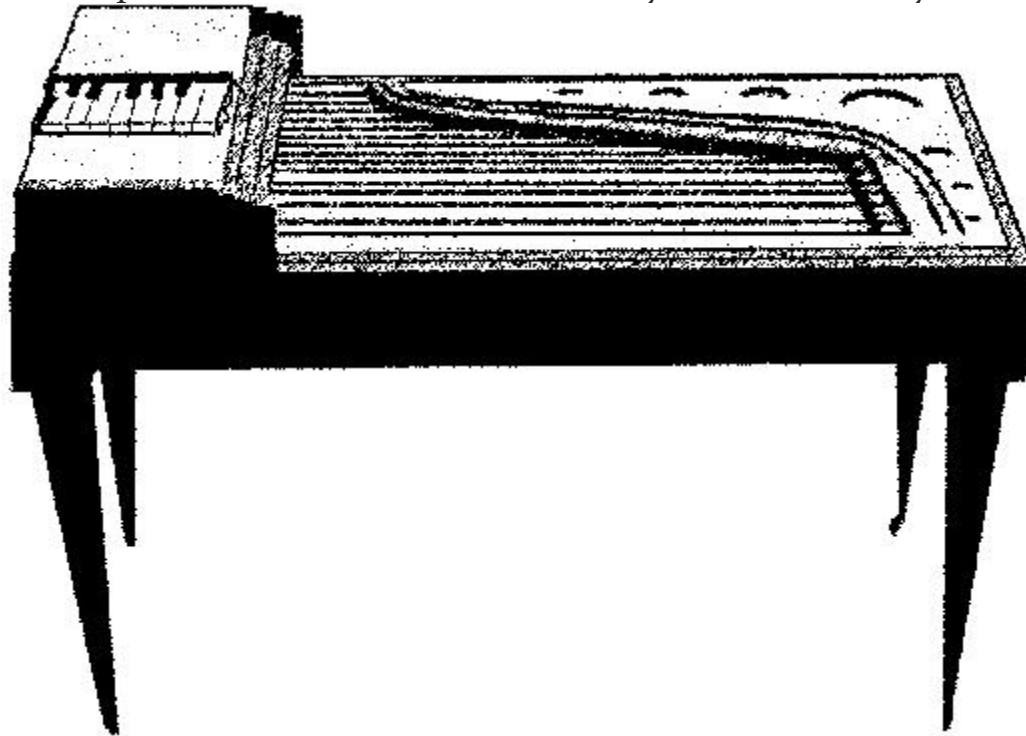


## 2. Modern 'wing-shaped' gusli family

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The 'straight-sided' *gusli* ([fig.3](#)) appeared in Russia at the beginning of the 17th century among the nobility and upper classes. In the 18th and 19th centuries 'straight-sided' *guslis* were made by builders who also made instruments such as the clavichord, spinet and piano. The 'straight-sided' *gusli* was rectangular in shape, averaging 150 cm long, 50 cm wide and 20 cm deep. Most examples stood on legs or rested on a table; a variant name for this instrument

was *stolovīmi* or *nastol'nīmi* meaning 'on the table'. The instrument had between 55 and 66 parallel strings of graded lengths attached to hitch-pins at one end and to metal tuning-pins at the other. Earlier models had brass strings, later ones used steel; the lowest-sounding strings were wound. They were originally tuned diatonically, but some later models added chromatic strings set slightly lower. In 1914 N.P. Fomin developed a 'straight-sided' *gusli* with a mechanism for the production of chords controlled by a one-octave keyboard.



3. 'Straight-sided' gusli

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The 'straight-sided' *gusli* was played with the longest strings closest to the player. The strings were plucked with the fingers of both hands. Repertory included arrangements of folksongs, dances and popular art music of the day. The *gusli* with the keyboard mechanism was played with a hard leather plectrum. Both the finger-plucked and keyboard *guslis* were used in the Andreyev Orchestra, in which Nikolay Privalov played the instrument, and in other professional orchestras of traditional instruments.

No genetic relationship has been proven to exist between the three varieties of *gusli*. In 1890 A.S. Famintsin proposed that the simple 'wing-shaped' *gusli* was an ancestor of the 'helmet-shaped' *gusli*, but A.O. Väisänen (1928) and subsequent scholars have disputed this theory. Archaeological and iconographical evidence suggests that the three varieties of *gusli* co-existed.

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## See also

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[Glinka, Mikhail Ivanovich, §2: 1835-42](#)

[Trutovsky, Vasily Fyodorovich](#)