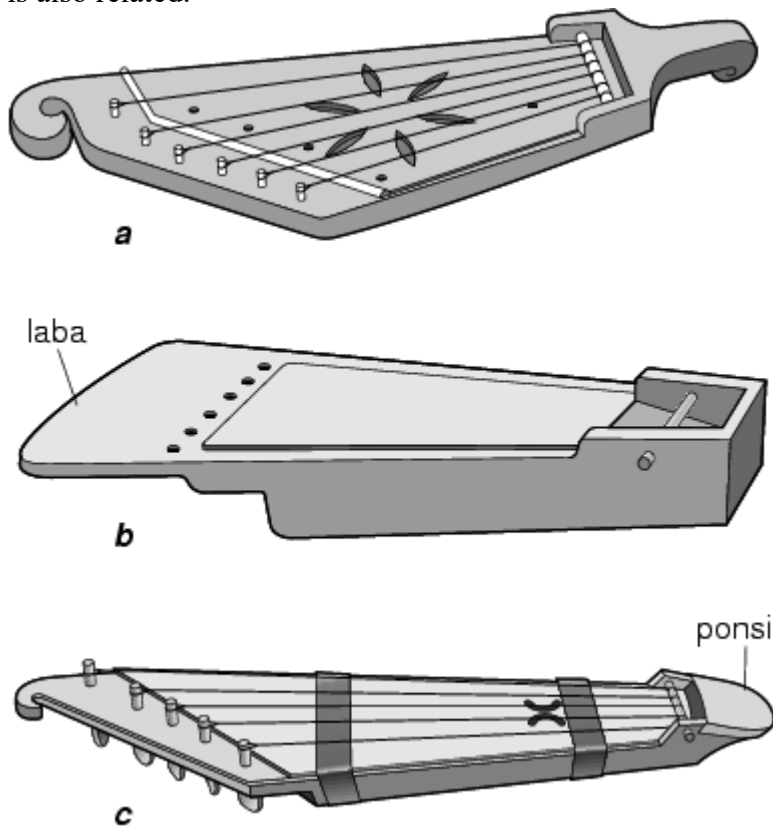


Kantele

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The Finnish version of a psaltery played throughout the eastern Baltic Sea region, collectively known as ‘Baltic psalteries’. The various names of the instruments are etymologically related. In Finnish they are called *kantele* or *kannel*, in Estonian *kannel*, in Karelian *kandele*, in Latvian *kokle* or *kuokle* and in Lithuanian *kankles* (see [illustration](#)). Similar names are also known among Livonians, Vepsians and Setus. The ‘wing-shaped’ [Gusli](#) of north-western Russia is also related.



‘Baltic psalteries’: (a) Latvian kokle; (b) Estonian kannel; (c) Finnish kantele

[View large](#)

The oldest forms of Baltic psalteries were carved from a single piece of wood, usually alder, spruce or birch, to form an irregular triangle- or trapezoid-shaped body with the narrow end cut off. The body might be carved from the top, side or bottom. If carved from the top, separate soundboards were added; if carved from the bottom or side, they were usually left open. Soundboards may feature one or more soundholes in a variety of shapes, the most common being

a round hole, cross or flower. Examples in Finnish museums range from 45 to 100 cm long, 10 to 32 cm wide and 3 to 11 cm thick.

The carved Baltic psalteries had between five and 15 strings, typically made of copper or steel. The strings were attached to a single rod, which was most frequently held in place between the sides of a wide notch carved in the top of the narrow end. The strings were usually not parallel, fanning out from the rod to the tuning pegs at the wide end. The tuning peg side usually formed an oblique angle with the rod, thus giving the strings graduated lengths. The Finnish five-string *kantele* was tuned in a major, minor or neutral pentachord. Those with greater numbers of strings were generally tuned diatonically, although the lowest strings could be tuned lower to produce a drone.

The top was extended on the wide end in order to allow space to insert the tuning pegs from below. On some instruments this extension was quite large, and was called *laba* (Estonian: 'blade' or 'paddle'). Virtually none of the Finnish carved *kanteles* had this extension, rather they had a downward curving extension at the narrow end called *ponsi*. The variations in structure between those instruments featuring a *laba* or a *ponsi* are believed to derive from different playing positions. The instrument could be played horizontally, laid across the player's lap or on a table, or vertically with the long side of the instrument on the lap and the short side propped against the body. In both cases, the shortest string was closest to the player. According to Finnish folklore the *ponsi* was placed on the knee, so it may have served the function of securing the instrument in the horizontal playing position. The *laba* was believed to function as a place to rest the left arm in the vertical position.

There were two basic playing techniques. The Finnish carved *kantele* was played by plucking the strings with the fingers of both hands. Strings were always plucked by the same fingers with interlocking finger patterns which Väisänen and subsequent Finnish scholars call the 'together position'. The playing style could be fast since it alternated between hands. In the second technique the fingers of the left hand covered or depressed the strings not needed to produce a chord, while the right hand strummed a rhythm with a finger or plectrum. This 'covering technique' made it particularly suitable for dance music. Some players combined both techniques. The earliest repertory described by Väisänen and others included improvisations, rune melodies, songs and dances.

During the 19th century Baltic psalteries began to be built in larger versions with bodies constructed of individual pieces of wood that formed enclosed boxes (thus the Finnish versions have been called 'box *kanteles*'). The strings were strung parallel and were attached between hitch pins and tuning pins. The number of strings on these diatonic instruments increased to 36 or more with a five-octave range, though the majority of museum specimens have 24–32 strings. They were played using the 'apart position', where one hand played a melody and harmony in 3rds, while the other hand played a chordal accompaniment and bass. The repertory included the same styles of folk music, songs, marches and dances as played on other Western folk instruments.

Modern varieties of Baltic psalteries have been developed with tuning mechanisms or chromatic strings in various arrangements that make the instrument more suited for Western art music. Contemporary composers, especially in Finland, have written pieces that exploit the instrument's wide range of sound qualities. Conservatories throughout the eastern Baltic Sea region teach the more advanced forms of the instrument. However, there has been a strong revival in playing the older style instruments throughout the region, and among North American immigrants.

Due to its prominent position in folklore, the Baltic psaltery has become a national symbol in every country in which it is played. According to the Finno-Karelian rune songs which formed the basis of the *Kalevala* epic, the first *kantele* was fashioned by the eternal sage Väinämöinen from the jawbone of a pike and the hair of a maiden. Like Orpheus, Väinämöinen's *kantele* playing enchanted all those who listened. In addition to mythology, folk runes also gave accurate descriptions of the carved *kantele* and playing styles. Similar folklore survives throughout the region.

In spite of more than a century of research, the early history, diffusion and etymology of the names of the Baltic psalteries remain obscure. The debate centres around whether the instrument originated among the Finns, Balts or Slavs, and the direction of its dissemination. Some scholars attribute great antiquity to the Baltic psaltery, believing it to be the same age as its folklore.

Recent scholarship has postulated connections with other ancient string instruments. The earliest artefacts have been reconstructed with fragments dating from the 11th century to the 15th found in archaeological excavations in Novgorod, Pskov, Opole and Gdańsk. These instruments all have the same basic shape as the oldest Baltic psalteries, but some feature a large opening in the body that suggests they were a kind of lyre. During the 1990s there were three international conferences devoted to Baltic psaltery research.

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See also

[Estonia, §II, 5: Traditional music: Instruments](#)

[Finland, §II, 3: Traditional: Instrumental music](#)

[Latvia, §II, 3: Traditional music: Instrumental music and instruments](#)

[Lithuania, §II, 7: Traditional music: Research](#)