

# The Musical Angels of Rosslyn Chapel

Music was an important part of medieval life, both religious and secular. Bands of musicians would play for special feast days such as Christmas or Easter, and for special events such as trade fairs. The nobility encouraged their children to learn a musical instrument, and it was common for noble girls and boys to learn to play a drum or simple wind instrument.

In churches and monasteries, the voice was the principal instrument of music, starting in the early middle ages with plainsong such as Gregorian Chant, developing into polyphonous music by the start of the Renaissance. As music became more complex, musical notation was developed. There are some fine examples of medieval sheet music preserved in the special collections department of the University of Edinburgh Library.

Rosslyn Chapel, founded in 1446, features many intriguing details carved in stone. In the Lady Chapel, carved at the tops of pillars, there are a number of angels playing musical instruments. These angels represent the Heavenly Hosts, praising God and rejoicing over the birth of Christ. It has long been public knowledge that one of the angels is playing the bagpipes, and that this is one of the earliest depictions of bagpipes in Scotland. However, the identities of many of the other instruments in the chapel are less well known. Young Research Group volunteers Rory Hardie and Hannah Mooney consulted with experts in medieval music, and have identified them as the following:

## Psaltery



The psaltery, or a harp on a box, is an ancient instrument that was played by plucking the strings while the instrument lay in the player's lap. The style shown in this carving was sometimes called a 'pig nosed' or 'boar's head' psaltery as it was meant to look like two pig heads back-to-back, but the psaltery came in various other styles as well.

Originating in the Middle East, the psaltery came to Europe in the 12th century, and remained popular until the 16th century. The instrument was not compatible with the new Renaissance style and it is believed that the psaltery evolved into either the harpsichord or the zither, both of which were important Renaissance instruments.

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## Bagpipes

The bagpipe has origins in ancient Sumaria, and is even mentioned in the Bible. Sound is made on a bagpipe through the squeezing bag, and the melody is played on a pipe that has finger holes. It is likely that the bagpipe had rustic origins, as the pieces necessary to make a bagpipe, a goat or sheep skin and a reed, were readily available. It was a popular instrument for use in folk dances as well as in monophonic music. Today, the bagpipe remains a popular symbol of Scotland. The bagpipe depicted in the Chapel appears to have two pipes, a style that was popularised from the 1400s.



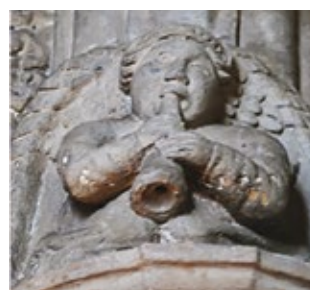
## Rebec



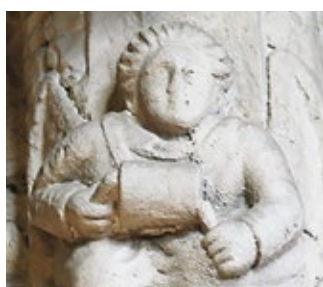
The rebec was a stringed medieval instrument with a vaulted back that was played with a bow. It has existed in Europe since the 10th century, but peaked in popularity during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period. Made of a hollow, pear-shaped body, the rebec came in a variety of sizes depending on its tuning, but was typically played in the soprano range. The rebec was popular for use in dance music, and was often played at parties and feasts held by the nobility and during procession, both sacred and secular. The rebec is the medieval ancestor of the violin.

## Shawm

Another medieval instrument of Middle Eastern origins, the shawm, is a double-reed wind instrument. During the Moorish and Arab occupation of Spain in the 13th century, the shawm was introduced to Europe. The shawm was popular for use in dance and ceremonial music through the 17th century. Medieval shawm players were central to court music as well as to town music, and most medieval ensembles contained two shawms. The shawm is known today as the ancestor of the oboe.



## Tabor or Drum



The tabor is a small drum usually with a snare, and was popular during the medieval period. This drum was used in medieval times to accompany folk music, and its principal function was to maintain rhythm.

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## Gittern

The gittern was a stringed instrument made of a single piece of wood, played by plucking or strumming. Like a number of other medieval instruments, the gittern came to Europe from Arab countries during the 13th century. It remained popular in Europe until giving way to the lute during the Renaissance period. The identity of the gittern is confusing as it is often mistaken as the citole.

While it is possible that these angels hold citoles, which were also stringed instruments played by plucking and strumming, the gittern was a more popular instrument during the time that the Chapel was built. The gittern is the medieval ancestor of the guitar.



## Pipe, Tabor and Wrist Bells



The pipe and tabor were a common pairing in medieval music. The pipe is a simple instrument, typically possessing three melody holes. A ridge along the bottom of the pipe facilitates holding the pipe with just one hand, so the other hand is free to strike the tabor, or drum. Drums are thought to be some of the earliest instruments, and the tabor was a popular drum during the medieval period. The angel in the Chapel is also wearing a set of wrist bells, very common at this time.

The pipe and tabor were popular instruments for dance music in medieval times, and can be considered the original one man band.

## Portative or Bible Regal

The most unusual instrument carved in the chapel is believed to be a portative, or specifically a Bible regal. It is also known as an organetto. A portative is a small, portable medieval organ carried over the player's shoulder. This instrument was held in the player's lap with one hand playing the keys while the other hand worked the bellows. As you can see in the carving in the Chapel, the keys of the portative look like typewriter keys.

Some sources describe this carving as a 'Bible regal.' A Bible regal is a portable organ that gets its name from its ability to be folded into the shape of a book when not in use. It is possible that this instrument is specifically a Bible regal, but it is certain that it is generally a portative.



