

The épinette des Vosges



The épinette is a delightful French regional instrument of the zither family that takes its name from the Vosgés mountain range. The Epinette shares common features (like the diatonic fretboard, and methods of playing) that are found in other European instruments like the Scheitholt, Langeleik, Hummel, and consequently in America, the Appalachian Dulcimer.

Traditionally there are two distinct types of Epinette which take their name from the Vosges districts associated with them.

Val d' Ajol

The épinette began here as a 4 string instrument that was made into the 5 string instrument in the 18th century. This is considered the standard and traditional model, and most museum examples are of this type.

In the 18th century the Val d' Ajol was a popular spa town and visitors would frequent the inns to hear the instrument played and sung to, and the instrument became very popular among the high society of the day.

This created an ideal environment for professional Instrument makers who made many beautiful épinettes.

Originally the instrument was very small, around 40-50 cm and would have had only 14 frets, but was increased during the 19th century to 60 cm long and 17 frets.

The best and most famous maker was Amé Lambert (1843-1908) who at his peak was reputed to have made 500 épinettes each winter. Unsurpassed tonally and in beauty too, and often embellished with marquetry. Some of the innovations he introduced were the introduction of mandolin machine pegs in 1888 and the replacement with steel instead of the brass strings.

After Lambert had died and the Great War the instrument nearly became obsolete, but was thankfully revived after the 2nd World War.

Jules Vançon began making Val d' Ajol type épinette after Lambert during the 1950's, a little larger at 64 cm and now with 6 string instead of 5. Later instruments were often made 7/5ths bigger.

Gérardmer

The first written records of the épinette in this area are in 1723 when a local clergyman purchased some for teaching music to children. Unlike the Val d' Ajol épinette they were never the product of professional makers and always made by the mountain people themselves, and as such, had a wider variety of style and size.

Gérardmer épinettes are between 70- 80 cm and 10- 12 cm wide and 5 cm high.

The stringing likewise differed with anything as little a 3 strings to 8 in number.

épinette Developments

Generally the instrument is made larger now than in the past with more strings.

Christophe Toussaint of the village of Sapois is perhaps the most respected modern Musician - Luthier who has added his own innovations to the instruments development. He makes all types of épinette, but seems to play a larger version of the Val D' Ajol with a long guitar shaped body underneath the sound/fret box. As well as making recordings and writing music he has produced a leaflet how to make a simple version of the instrument, he also has other books on the subject.

Making Your Own

The plans I have drawn up reflect my desire to make a traditional Lambert sized instrument of my own design, with the simplicity of guitar/ mandolin pegs or zither pins found on later instruments. This is an ongoing project for me since 1992/3 that began after seeing an example in a museum.



I had known about the instrument for many years from my stepmother, Beatrice King, (Pictured) who was born near Gérardmer and had known an épinette player during the 60's revival of the instrument. It was her passion for the Vosges mountains that made me look into this.

Sizes (approx.)

Amé Lambert : 60 cm long, 6.5 cm tail end, 4.8 cm nut, 2.5/3.0 cm thick,

9.87 cm long head

Jules Vançon : 64 cm long, 8.5 cm tail end, 6 cm nut ,3.2 cm thick, 15 cm long head

Christophe Toussaint : 84 cm +, 7-11 cm tail end, 5-7 cm nut, 3-5 cm thick, 14-24 cm long head

Update 7/10/04 There are now drawings available now from the Paris conservatoire of music!

My drawing is only a sketch, but it has all the main points. If you use this design remember to buy your machine pegs first (or zither pins)

Please feel free to [e-mail me](mailto:christophe.toussaint@paris.conservatoire.de) if you have a question (or any suggestions)

For More Info and Links

[Christophe Toussaint](http://www.epinette.free.fr/) (Best épinette site on the web in French, in my opinion!)

[Http://epinette.free.fr/](http://epinette.free.fr/)

For sound samples/CD's try

[Http://www.cdrom-musique.com/francais/instrument.idc?instrument=17](http://www.cdrom-musique.com/francais/instrument.idc?instrument=17)

[Http://users.skynet.be/jil/index.html](http://users.skynet.be/jil/index.html)

Books :

Dulcimer People by Jean Ritchie

The Dulcimer Book By Jean Ritchie

L'Épinette Des Vosges complete method by Jean-Loup Baly and Jean Francois Dutertre

To obtain the making épinette leaflet (in French) or for obtaining instruments recordings books, try

Christophe Toussaint

Artisan Luthier

"la Pierre des Blancs Poux"

Menaurnpt

Sapois

88120 Vagney

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Christophe Toussaint's [E-mail](#)

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Players

(to be completed)

[Michel Hindenoch](#)

