

The instrument we call the jaw harp exists in many forms, and is found on almost every major continent and has countless regional names and variants.

It is classed as a plucked *idiophone*, which is an instrument that produces sounds as a result of the rigidity and elasticity of the material it is made from, without strings or a stretched membrane.

The origins of the jaw harp remain mysterious. In Europe, jaw harps have been discovered in archaeological sites dating from Roman times and it seems to have become rather popular in Medieval Europe with many examples coming to light in England, Germany, France and Italy.

An even earlier form has been excavated in China and dated to C1,000 B.C.E. It is almost certain that other forms of the instrument were used prior to this date, but were likely to have been made from materials less able to survive the ravages of time, such as bone, bamboo and wood.



### THE MANY NAMES

Some of the many regional names for the instrument can tell us a little of the way different cultures adopted it. *Jews harp*, the other common name they are known by, is thought to derive from the French word *jouer* (to play), and there is no link between the instrument and Judaism or the Jewish peoples. *Scaccia pensieri* is Italian for 'thought dispeller', and the German name *maultrommel* translates as 'mouth drum'. Norwegians refer to them as *munharpe* or 'mouth harp' and Old English variants include *trump* and *gewgaw*. In fact the name *trump* became so popular throughout history that many modern jaw harp players and aficionados are calling for a return to this name.

The materials used to make jaw harps include iron, steel and other metals, wood, bamboo and even bone. All the forms share a common principle for making sound: a frame supporting a blade or tongue (*tang*) which has free movement so that it can vibrate.

Jaw harps can be grouped into two classes depending on the *tang*. These are *idioglottal*, where the tang is cut from the same piece of material that creates the frame (the common style in South and East Asia), and *heteroglottal* - where the tang is a separate part which is then attached to a rigid frame (the common style in Western countries).

### WIDE WORLD OF MUSIC

Considered by many to be a rather frivolous instrument, the jaw harp has been regarded with scorn by classical musicians and relegated to the level of a toy or plaything by Western culture. Despite this, a few classical pieces did start to incorporate the instrument and Austrian composer Johann George Albrechtsberger (one of Beethoven's music teachers) wrote a number of concerti entirely for the jaw harp.

In many Asian communities the jaw harp is linked with romance as it is often small and cheap enough to be made as a gift for a loved one. As many Asian-style harps are one-piece *idioglottal* style harps, made from bamboo, bone, wood or copper, they are not loud, and so can be played in the late evening without disturbing other members of the family, who all live in close proximity.

*Above:* a khomus or Mongolian shaman's jaws harp from the Altai Mountains. *Main Picture:* a Central Asian shaman carrying a drum plays the jaws harp

# BEAR'S Plaything

Jonathan Cope explains the shaman's use of the Jaw Harp



Right: A Hmong girl from South-east Asia plays a bamboo jaw harp.

The romantic link is strengthened further by their use as a courtship instrument. Small and portable, a suitor can easily produce a jaw harp and try to win favour by composing simple melodies for their love. In some regions the jaw harp is used by young lovers to communicate in a secret language. The boy will sneak close to his lover's house and play softly whilst speaking simple words of affection, which he hopes will be returned by his love - and not heard by the parents!

### GIFT FROM THE BEAR

Many cultures have their own stories of the origin of the jaw harp, but one of my favourites was told to me by a friend in France and originates from Central Asia, probably Siberia or Mongolia.

'Long ago a great hunter, in the depths of winter, was tracking a bear that he intended to kill for its meat and fur. He spent many days tracking it through bad weather and hardship when he eventually caught sight of it further up the mountainside which he was climbing. Taking care to remain upwind so the bear would not be alerted to his scent, he manoeuvred himself into a position to shoot the bear with his arrows. But as he drew closer he could see that the bear was preoccupied with a tree branch, probably searching for berries or grubs. The hunter heard the grunts of the bear but then heard something else, a wonderfully rich springy sound.

Looking over to the bear, the hunter realised that it was



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deliberately pulling at a branch that had suffered damage by wind or lightening and was shattered into several long pieces. The bear was so engrossed in this activity that it seemed to have no awareness of the hunter's presence. As the bear pawed again at the branch the hunter realised that it was causing the branch to make a wonderful springing sound as it vibrated, and this sound had captivated the bear.

The hunter was so amazed and delighted with this that he honoured the bear and let it live. He then spent many hours by the fire trying to create the same sorts of sounds himself with springy pieces of wood.'

### TALKING SOUNDS

After reading this story, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the strongest tradition of jaw harp use in a shamanic setting occurs on the Steppes of Central Asia, particularly Siberia, Yakutia, Mongolia and Tuva. These areas all have a long history of shamanism and animism and the people there feel strongly linked to their surroundings, the lands, the weather, elements, animals and spirits.

For many people in these regions the jaw harp is an instrument of meditation and introspection, and is often played in solitude by shepherds and woodcutters etc. These people are surrounded by - and in tune with - nature and use the jaw harp both to mimic the sounds which they hear around them, and as a way to commune directly with these powers of nature.

Jaw harps can also be used for a form of secret communication between people, where the player speaks whilst playing and it takes great concentration to understand what is being said. The well known Tuvan throat singer Kongar-ool Ondar has a story which illustrates how the jaw harp can be used for secret communication.

'Since Tuvans love horses more than almost anything on earth, it stands to reason that they can't help secretly admiring a good horse thief!

It happened that one man crossed the mountains and made off with a fine stallion. The owner of the horse could hear the thief in the distance and so he set out to chase him. Eventually, the owner rode over the mountain and came to a yurt where he went in. The yurt was the home of the horse thief and his wife, and as custom dictated they gave their new guest some tea to drink. While he was drinking it, the host sat and began to play his *khomus* (jaw harp), as he was able to communicate through his music without using words. And as he played, he spoke in his harp music to his wife. "This is the man whose horse I stole, you'd better go and move it to a better hiding place, further from the yurt."

But as she went to get up to do as her husband asked, the guest spoke to the host. "What a fine instrument you have!" He said. "May I try playing it?"

The host handed over his instrument, and the guest began to

Below: A bamboo GengGong jaw harp from Laos



play, and he too had the ability to talk through his music without using words; and this is what he said to the horse-thief's wife. "It's too late to move the horse. I already know that you have him and now I'm going to take him back!"

### HARPS AND HEALING

Although played socially by many of the people within a community, the jaw harp is considered a sacred instrument by shamans, and is often used in their rituals. The use varies little across different geographic regions.

In Mongolia the jaw harp is known as the *Amaan khuur*, which means 'mouth instrument'. The shaman Dondogiin Byambadorj, who was in Western Mongolia born in 1947, and learned shamanism from his uncle Vanchindorj. When the spirits of his shamanic lineage started calling him he suffered much illness until his uncle empowered a jews harp and gave it to him to use for shamanising.

In Tuva, people believe in *aza-spirits*, who can kill people and cause diseases, and it is the shaman's job to try to communicate with the spirits, gain help from them and try to fight any evil spirits to regain control of a sick man's soul. Spirit-helpers are known as *ak-ereem* and *kyrgyz ereen* and are called upon to assist the healing or cleansing process.

In Mongolia there are two types, the *khulsan khuur*, which is a bamboo jaw harp (but can also be made of bone, horn or wood), and the *tömör khuur*, which is made of metal, often iron.

The Darkhad shamans of Northern Mongolia have three methods of playing the *tömör khuur* harp in their shamanic work. Firstly there is the *shuud tsokhilt* or 'direct stroke', which is a regular rhythm with no change in pitch symbolising the journey of the shaman along a road.

Secondly the *Khelnii tsokhilt* or 'tongue stroke' which is made by moving the tongue backwards and forwards to alter the shape of the mouth and so create different overtones and pitches. This type is used to imitate the cries of animals and to communicate with the animal spirits.

The last type of playing is the *ongodiin tsokhilt* or 'spirit stroke' which imitates the trotting of an animal, and is used at the end of a ceremony when the shaman's spirit helper has left the shaman's body and is returning to its home in the other worlds.

The other type of jaw harp, the *khulsan khuur*, is largely played by women and girls and is said to attract men. It is played by pulling sharply on a cord attached to one end, which causes the *tang* to vibrate.

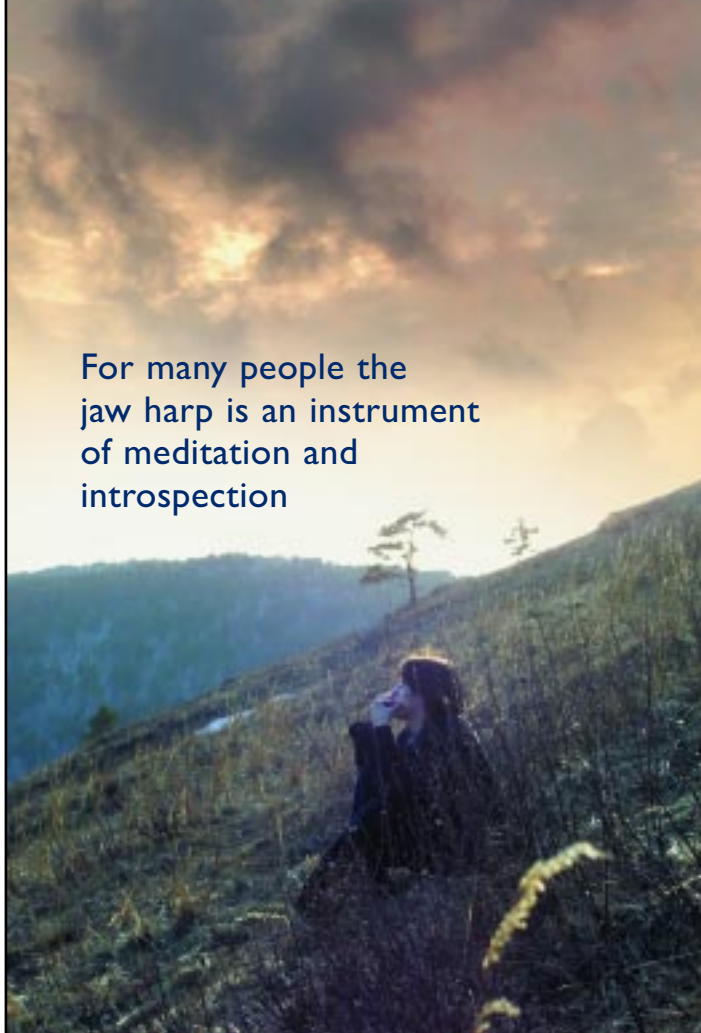
### SOUND FOR THE SPIRITS

Shamans in Central Asia use different techniques to 'journey' to meet the spirits who live in the three worlds of the shaman's cosmos, the Upper, Middle and Lower Worlds, and these techniques include the playing of the drum and the jaw harp.

A drum may be thought of as a *yang* instrument, and is suitable for use in group ceremonies, but the jaw harp is considered a *yin* instrument and is used by the shaman to directly enter a changed state of perception, and is therefore more for the player and less for the listeners.

By using the jaw harp in this way, the shaman can access these other worlds to seek guidance from spirit helpers. A shaman's strength is said to derive from the strength and number of spirits they can call upon for help. The spirits are of varying strengths and it is their strength that determines the shaman's rank. The spirits help the shaman treat people, foretell and influence the future, and the shaman needs the spirits as much as they need him.

For many people the jaw harp is an instrument of meditation and introspection



Many jaw harps have special cases made for them to keep them safe. Left: a jaw harp from Nepal, with its brass case

Right: two jaws harps with wooden cases, a Tuvan one in boot-shaped case and a harp from Kazakhstan in guitar shaped case.

Considered by many classical musicians to be a rather frivolous instrument and an object of scorn, the jaw harp is still appreciated by a number of musicians the world over



It is said that spirits must be in touch with our physical world to stay charged with energy. When a shaman for some reason severs his ties with them, it may have dire consequences, for according to Siberian traditions, many spirits are quite aggressive and they can take away the shaman's life energy. If they do this enough, the shaman will die. Another danger for the shaman is that the spirit helper may supercede their own human soul. If this is the case it may mean insanity for the shaman.

ancestors, by ritual prayers and words being spoken, and by invocations made to the five directions (North, South, East, West and Sky), along with offerings of milk, vodka or tobacco.

Although many shamanic rituals and practices were suppressed in the past by the Russian authorities they are starting to find favour again, and much of the old knowledge is returning. Consequently there has been a renaissance in the use of jaw harps, and this has led to the older makers training new apprentices in traditional methods of production.

### FORGING THE SHAMAN'S HARP

For use in shamanistic ritual, jaw harps are made in traditional ways and can take many days to craft. Fire and water are used to forge and shape the metal frame and also to temper the flexible *tang*. Many makers have secret processes that use unusual ingredients such as salt, chips of bone and hair, and these will be cast into the fire to aid the tempering.

Also makers often work ritually at auspicious times such as dawn or during certain phases of the moon. Help may also be sought from the



Top: highly decorated brass Morsing jaw harp from India

Top left: The author playing a jaw harp in a concert

Centre: Ivan Alexejev (front) and Spiridon Schischigin. Spiridon is a well known Siberian Yakut khomus player and exponent of the culture and folklore of his people

Above: decorated Kubing jaw harp from the Phillipines

Left: brass harp from the Hmong tribe of Vietnam

Jonathan Cope is a multi-instrumentalist, musician, artist, teacher and qualified sound therapist. He is the author of 'How to Play the Didjeridoo, (available in book, CD and now DVD formats), walking the path of Urban Shaman, often without knowing it. He leads workshops and tuition for those interested in using sound as a self-developmental and healing tool.

See his website: [www.soundforhealth.com](http://www.soundforhealth.com) for information about Jaw harp lessons and workshops as well as Instruments for sale.

**SUGGESTED READING:**

Frederick Crane: *A History of the Trump in Pictures - Europe and America.* (Mount Pleasant Publishers, Iowa. 2003).  
 Sibyl Marcuse: 'Musical Instruments, A Comprehensive Dictionary.' ISBN: 978-0393007589 (W W Norton & Co Inc. 1975)  
 'Musical Instruments of The World'. ISBN: 978-0806998473 (Sterling Books. 1997).  
 Phons Bakx: 'The 1000 Names of the Jew's Harp'. (Foundation Antropodium. 1998)

**WEBSITES:**

[www.fotuva.org](http://www.fotuva.org) - a source of recordings and instruments from Tuva and Mongolia.  
[www.jewsharpguild.org](http://www.jewsharpguild.org) - lots of information about the instrument.

**RECORDINGS:**

Various Artists: 'Tuva, Among The Spirits - Sound, Music And Nature In Sakha And Tuva' (Smithsonian Folkways) (available from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)).  
 Spiridon Shishigin: 'Soul of Yakutia'. (Wergo) (available from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)).  
 Tran Quang Hai - 'Les Guimbardes du Monde'. (PlayaSound) (currently out of production).

# PLAYING THE JAW HARP



For those seeking to use the same techniques as shamans, it is first necessary to search out a jaw harp of high quality and integrity, ideally made using the old techniques wherever possible. I have included some resources at the end of this article to guide those interested in seeking further information.

Jaw harps are held by firmly grasping the frame with the first two fingers of the left hand and held up to the mouth. The last couple of centimetres of the arms of the harp are in direct contact with the front teeth, with the jaw slightly parted. The first two fingers of the right hand are then used to pluck the trigger at the end of the *tang*, usually plucking toward the face rather than away from it. The *tang* will then oscillate rapidly to and fro, and pass in and out between the gap in the teeth, so care must be taken to get the gap right or it will hit your teeth.

The resulting vibration of the moving *tang* passes from the harp into the teeth, jaw and mouth cavity which acts as a resonant chamber, and makes the playing seem more immediate and intimate than many other musical instruments.

Some larger metal jaw harps will need a good deal of care to keep them in contact with the teeth while they vibrate.

The shape of the mouth will amplify the natural pitch of the instrument to produce a springy sounding, rhythmic drone-like note. Thereafter the skill in using a jaw harp for shamanic work comes with controlling the resulting sound by use of the tongue, lips, jaw, glottis, voice, lungs and diaphragm. It is, in short a very physical instrument and leads to the feeling that, although the jaw harp is providing the initial vibration, it is the player's body which becomes the instrument.

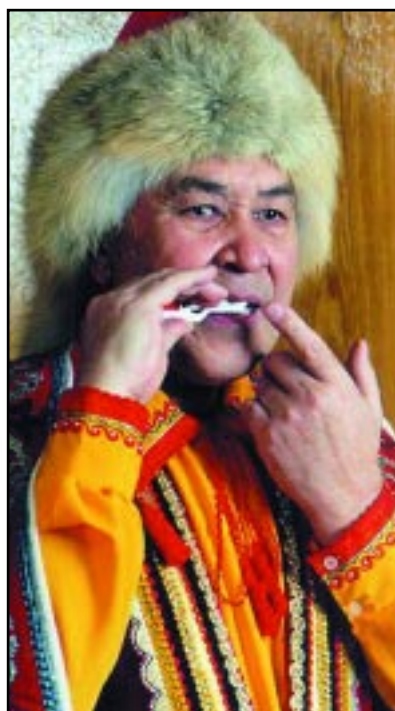
As mentioned, the rhythmic nature of the jaw harp and the frequencies produced can induce a trance-like state and by altering the shape the tongue and mouth cavity, a vast array of harmonics can be accessed, making it possible to mimic animal cries and natural sounds like dripping water and also to produce beautiful melodies and rhythmic lines.

Scientific studies have shown that certain frequencies induce 'frequency followed effects' where the brainwaves slow down and allow deep relaxation. These effects allow access to altered states of consciousness.



*Inset above:* a modern Russian *khomus* in the shape of a guitar

*Above:* a Siberian shaman's jaw harp and its case



**A SOFTER ALTERNATIVE**

The vibration that passes into the teeth from a typical shaman's or Western style metal jaw harp can be quite strong and so may be too uncomfortable for some players; those who do find them too much might like to try another style of jaw harp.

Some of the best, for ease of playing and excellent sound quality, are those from Vietnam known as *rab ncas*. These harps are formed from a single sheet of copper which has been skillfully bent and cut to form a very delicate jaw harp. These are held close to an open mouth and played by gentle flicking of the thumb. They produce very clear harmonics and the larger ones generate quite a long natural sustained sound. Harps from Cambodia, Bali and Laos are of similar style and can also be played in this way. Many of these are made from bamboo rather than copper, but the principle is the same.