

The Real Hurdy-Gurdy Man

Erik Keilholtz investigates the diverse and wonderful musical world of vielle à roué master Matthias Loibner

The hurdy-gurdy!

Where to begin?

Certainly I knew of an actual musical instrument called the hurdy-gurdy, which the Donovan song had nothing to do with, and I knew that it was played with a crank and keys. After all, as a music major I had seen pictures of medieval renderings of the instrument. However, the hurdy-gurdy was not something we studied in orchestration, we never completed harmonic analysis of any of its repertoire, and we certainly never had to write for it (or for any drone instruments, which is a shame).

My first real exposure to the hurdy-gurdy was right here in RootsWorld, and it was entirely accidental.

I had been lured into the business world during the heady dot com days and was taking an increasingly dim view of that world after the dot com startup I was involved in fell apart on the eve of presenting our product/service to the venture capitalists. I found myself missing the world of music, both academic music and the roots music I always had a fondness for. So, being infected with nostalgic melancholia, I did what was natural and immersed myself in bandoneon music, particularly the nueva tango.

Sitting at my desk, listening to Dino Saluzzi's breathtaking album *Mojotero*, trying to avoid the quotidian tasks that seemed increasingly irrelevant, I fell into that wonderful world of creative procrastination and decided to find out everything I could about the bandoneon. I ended up on RootsWorld and discovered the Free Reed Festival. Well, one thing led to another (but not to the tasks I successfully avoided, at least for that afternoon), and I happened upon a fantastic hurdy-gurdy piece. While I clearly recall the music that led me to it, and the nature of my thoughts at the time, I cannot for the life of me remember which piece it was, but it was like that free sample of heroin that the archetypal pusher hands out on the playgrounds: I was hooked.

Naturally, having a bit of the purist in me (although I have managed to beat it into submission somewhat),



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I gravitated towards creaky old Frenchmen on that creakiest of old instruments. I called an old friend and frequent collaborator up and probably sounded like I was suffering from espresso overdose (which is my usual state anyway, and this was a very good, old friend, who was probably used to this by now). We decided to build a hurdy-gurdy from scratch. As to the conclusion of that story, well, a book is probably in order.

To make this already too long story short, that afternoon of exploration led both to my discovery of Rootsworld, and the realization that I should be doing something more with music in my life. I ended up taking a job at a record label, and, through a newspaper editor friend, as a music critic. Eventually that led to my sometimes contributions to Rootsworld.

When RW editor Cliff Furnal asked me if I was interested in reviewing some CDs from a young Austrian musician named **Matthias Loibner**, I jumped on the chance. The CDs arrived, and they were all I had hoped for and more. Here was a musician dancing on the borders between my main musical loves: early music, exploratory music, and roots music, and doing it on the instrument that led me down this particular path in the first place. The problem was that I was almost too close to the topic. Whenever I sat down to work on the review, I would have something to say, but I would end up working on my own music for hurdy-gurdy, or tinkering with hurdy-gurdy designs. Finally, after an embarrassingly long period of gentle nudgings from the editor, the reviews got done. They are, I must say, inadequate. Matthias Loibner is doing work on that instrument that is worth deep, repeated listening. I still don't think I have done them justice, but here are some brief descriptions and comments on five records that are well worth the money.

If I were to recommend just one, it would probably be his solo *Vielle à roué*. But I would not recommend stopping at just that record. His collaborations with **Tunji Beier** and **Nataša Mirković – De Ro** are gorgeous, as are two baroque albums. So, without further ado, here are the reviews that represent, to me, coming full circle in the love of this instrument and my involvement with roots music. - Erik Keilholtz, Vallejo, California

Here are the reviews in this series. Some have audio or videos included.

Les maîtres de la vielle baroque: [*French Music for Hurdy-Gurdy*](#)

Les Eclairs de Musique: [Les Saisons Amusantes](#)
Matthias Loibner: [Vielle à roué](#)
Tunji Beier and Matthias Loibner: [Zykado](#)
Nataša Mirković – De Ro and Matthias Loibner:
[Ajvar & Sterz](#)

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