

"And hear the locust, and the grasshopper/Their melancholy hurdy-gurdies play"

When Longfellow wrote these lines in 1863, the hurdy-gurdy would have been a familiar sound in an English street, now they are as rare as hen's teeth. If you've never seen one, imagine a viola redesigned by Hieronymus Bosch and fitted with a big wheel instead of a bow. The sound of the strings is complex, full of grit and grain — if much modern violin sound is as smooth as waterskiing on a lagoon, the hurdy-gurdy is an off-road dash through a farmyard on a filthy motorcycle. Maybe the earthy sound is one reason why there seems to be a discreet revival of interest in this strange instrument.

In England, hurdy-gurdy revivalists include the fiery improviser and medieval specialist Steve Wishart, and the folk musicians Chris Stapleton and Nigel Eaton, whose recent CD *The Duellists* (Panic A/C) is a strong example of new English compositions in a French traditional dance style. Originally from Australia, Wishart and her hurdy-gurdy surface in diverse contexts, including medieval revivalists Sinfonye and the jump-cut duds improv of Machines For Making Sense. Eaton and Stapleton, by contrast, both played in the seminal folk dance group Slowabellia. For *The Duellists* they add bagpiper Chris Washaw to the two hurdy-gurdies,

thus building the folk equivalent to Phil Spector's wall of sound. Three drone instruments at once, all in the same pitch range and all grinding forth dense, high-bire music — is this the most aural fun you can have without electricity?

In central France the hurdy-gurdy refused to die, and the bagpipe-hurdy-gurdy group is fundamentally a French style. The classic recording is *Hurdy-Gurdy And Bagpipes* (Audiis Ethniques) by Vielleux Du Bourbonnais (1985) — it's only a quartet, but at high volume this is a monolithic monument of a record. Then there's the Japanese guitarist Keji Hano, whose hurdy-gurdy album, *The 21st Century Haru-y-Gude-y Mon* (RST), is an astonishing and intuitive response to the timbre of the instrument from a truly visionary musician. Hano takes Tony Conrad's violin, John Cale's viola, his own guitar and LaMonte Young's drone, and locates them all in this European medieval instrument. Thus the hurdy-gurdy is dropped right in the centre of late 20th century musical concerns: unstable Ambient texture, collapsing structures, eerie shamanistic singing. Hano explains the hurdy-gurdy's special appeal by pointing out that it's the only instrument where you have to turn a handle. Clearly Hano hasn't yet discovered the barrel organ — that's a day I look forward to.

The only European player who can match the sheer

scale of Hano's soundscapes is the improviser Dominique Reigel, whose album *Tournoies* (Vand'oeuvre) is another real eye-opener of hurdy-gurdy potential. The gaunt and hollow-cheeked Valentin Clastrier is another French player, who even manages to look medieval. A mist among mists, in some ways he's the most eccentric of the lot. He's certainly the fastest and most virtuosic player, and cattle-prods the hurdy-gurdy mercilessly into new areas through technical and electronic modifications. For the two CDs *Hérésie* and *Le Bûcher Des Silences* (recently reissued as a double set on Audiis Sixx as *Hurdy-Gurdy From The Land Of Catores*) he assembled a six piece group around the tuba of Michel Godard and the excellent drums of Gerard Siracusa. Most pieces are composed by Clastrier himself, dark-hued rhythmic showpieces for his often frantic playing. *Hérésie* has a tortured quality, like a sonic reworking of a Bosch painting. Clastrier also sings a couple of times, employing Mongolian overtone techniques alongside what he calls the hurdy-gurdy's "cris d'orages" ("stormy shrieks"). *Le Bûcher Des Silences* (*The Funeral Pyre Of Silences*) is a shade more relaxed, and the group members are able to stretch out more, as if Clastrier has slackened off the bonds on his demonic torture-wheel.

Musicians like Hano and Reigel are improvisors in love with sound itself — their hurdy-gurdy playing radiates astonishment and gleeful discovery of what they can achieve with this contraption of gut, wood and rosin. Reigel sometimes produces a tone almost indistinguishable from a



TRUE GRIT

Clive Bell tries to get a handle on new approaches to the **hurdy-gurdy**, the crankiest of medieval instruments

Steve Wishart and Sinfonye.
Right: Keji Hano



saxophone, and it's like watching a potter turn clay into a spiraling sculptural substance that seems to defy its inherent physical laws. Clastrier, on the other hand, is more concerned with positioning the hurdy-gurdy in a virtuosic world where the legacies of jazz, traditional and contemporary musics are being fused to create something new. A ferocious soloist, for Clastrier to work in an ensemble he needs players who can stand up to him, and the most recent album I've heard suggests they may have found him. *Palude* (Wergo 1995) is by a trio of Clastrier, clarinetist Michael Ressler and percussionist Carlo Rizzo, and if Clastrier's name heads

the list, this time it's for alphabetical reasons. *Palude* is Italian for swamp, but no one is getting bogged down here. The playing is highly skillful, the pace hectic, and the influence of the fevered Italian tarantella dance is often audible. On clarinet Ressler has a wonderfully clear sound, and employs circular breathing to create remarkable solos evoking Mediterranean reed instruments like launeddas or bagpipes. This is the sound of the hard northern weather to the harsh northern weather to a warmer climate. □