

KANTELE IN THE UPPER MIDWEST

What is a *kantele*?

Kantele is a type of stringed instrument native to ethnic Finns. It consists of a wooden soundboard strung with up to 36 strings. The musician plays the kantele by making chords with one hand and plucking or strumming the strings with the other. Another Finnish folk instrument called a *jouhikko* is very similar to the kantele, but it is played with a bow rather than with the fingers.

Simple stringed instruments like kantele are found throughout the world and in almost every culture and time period. The kantele, however, has a specific tradition among Finns which has been handed down for generations. Kantele experienced a revival in the 1980s during a period of increased interest in folk music. Gerry Luoma Henkel claims that kantele wasn't so much a part of Finnish-American culture, but has become so over the past few decades as both native Finns and Finnish-Americans have revived folk music traditions in the Upper Midwest.



Gerry Luoma Henkel: Finnish-American Kantele Maker

Gerry grew up in Finlayson, Minnesota, raised by a Finnish mother and attending a Finnish-American church, but without much conscious connection to his ethnic heritage. As an adult, however, Gerry said he became a “born-again Finn” after a Finnish-American friend invited him to attend the 1985 Finn Fest. At the festival, Gerry said he found himself particularly drawn to the music exhibits and started discovering folk crossover music from Finland, in particular groups blending traditional styles with contemporary jazz. “Music was the way for me to find out about my heritage,” Gerry said. “And making kanteles made it solid, made it very material.”

Having previously worked as a carpenter and cabinetmaker, Gerry's established skills drew him to learn more about kantele construction. In previous times back in Finland, Gerry said, it was often carpenters who made folk instruments, and so his own



Gerry with an assortment of his kanteles.



Finnish musician Merja Soria teaches schoolchildren in Duluth, Minnesota, to play kantele.

Color in the kantele player!



progression from woodworker to kantele-maker made sense. However, there was much about making kanteles that differed from what Gerry had known through working in carpentry and construction. Gerry said that making a kantele is more than just putting pieces of wood and metal together in a particular shape. Rather, the kantele-maker must take the various qualities of the wood into account in order to make an instrument that will both look and sound beautiful. Gerry was mentored by master instrument-maker Rauno Nieminen in Finland, and said that the most important thing he learned from Rauno was to slow down when making kanteles. For example, Gerry said that paying careful attention to what key the soundboard wood is in is an important part of ensuring the instrument sounds good and is in tune.

Gerry currently lives in Two Harbors, Minnesota, and has made many kanteles over the years. His kanteles have gone to customers in the US and Finland, as well as to folk music enthusiasts in Russia, Japan, and Australia, just to name a few. Some of Gerry's instruments are traditional-looking, while others incorporate non-traditional elements. For example, Gerry has created solid-body electric kanteles, kanteles with unique shapes and wood-burned or painted designs, and also some kanteles incorporating hockey sticks, seen below, which were made for members of the University of Minnesota-Duluth women's hockey team!

