

Knee-Fiddles in Poland: Multidimensional Bridging of Paradigms

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Abstract: *Knee-fiddles, i.e., bowed chordophones played in the vertical position, are an extinct group of musical instruments existing in the past in the Polish territory, known only from the few iconographic sources from the 17th and 19th century. Their peculiarity lies in the technique of shortening the strings – with the fingernails, and not with the fingertips. Modern attempts to reactivate the extinct tradition by introducing knee-fiddles to musical practice required several steps, from the reconstruction of the instruments to proposing a performance technique and repertoire.*

The process of reconstructing knee-fiddles and their respective performance practice turned out to be a multi-dimensional fusion of paradigms leading to the bridging of seemingly unconnected phenomena of different times (instrument), cultures (performance technique) or genres (repertoire):

(1) historical fiddle-making paradigms have been converted into present-day folk fiddle construction for more effective playing (in terms of ergonomics and sound),

(2) playing technique has been based on paradigms borrowed from distant cultures (in the absence of the local ones),

(3) the repertoire has been created by overlapping paradigms of folk music and popular music in order to produce a repertoire acceptable for today's listeners.

Key words: *chordophones, knee-fiddles, Polish folk music, fingernail technique.*

For more than a decade, we have been witnessing in Poland a strong activity of the “folky”¹ music scene. By this term I understand music located at the intersection of folk music (usually Polish or from neighboring countries) and various genres of popular music.

Musicians who take part in the folky music scene have been seeking the most attractive elements of folk culture such as archaic repertoires, rare performance techniques and manners, as well as forgotten musical instruments.²

Among elements which are particularly mysterious - and therefore very attractive for stage performance - is a group of chordophones of the knee-fiddle type.³ This curiosity has not survived to our time, but it is known to have still existed in the 19th century. The

¹ The actual Polish term for this genre is “folk,” which coincides with the English one for traditional peasant music; it seems useful to translate it as “folky” to avoid confusion.

² For more on the “folky” music scene in Poland see Dahlig-Turek 2011, 2012.

³ In Polish: *instrumenty kolanowe*, from *kolano* (the knee).

term itself⁴ was coined by Ewa Dahlig-Turek around 1990 to refer to traditional bowed string instruments played in a vertical position, in which the instrument rests on the performer's knee or hangs by a strap from his/her shoulder.

Only few Polish iconographic sources have preserved traces of fiddles played in an upright position. They are, in chronological order:

(1) In 1693 Jakub Haur published his book on rural economy (Haur 1693: 155) including, among others, a woodcut picturing a scene which takes place in an inn: a couple are dancing to music performed by an ensemble of three musicians (fiddler, drummer and flute player, and a bagpiper). The fiddler is playing a bowed chordophone resembling a violin, but hanging in a vertical position from his shoulder and having a pegboard instead of a scroll. In the text the fiddler is called “skrzypek.”⁵

Apparent analogies may be found in Russian woodcuts of the same time showing the *gudok* (Privalov 1904).

(2) In 1840 Polish artist Stanisław Putiatycki painted a small watercolor entitled “Włościanin ze skrzypcami z okolic Mielca” (Peasant with fiddle [or violin] from the area of Mielec).⁶ The instrument, resting on a musician's knee, has the form of a modified violin with a large and wide board attached to the neck instead of the violin's fingerboard. Although this fiddle has a usual violin scroll, the pegs are attached to the board.

(3) In 1888, at the large music exhibition in Warsaw the relatively modest section of traditional instruments included a remarkable chordophone from the Biłgoraj region (now south-eastern Poland). The instrument caused a sensation as “a violin from remote antiquity.” In the catalogue description it was labeled *suka* (a bitch), a name whose origin and range of usage has never been ascertained. In the same year, a *suka* was drawn by painter and archaeologist Tadeusz Dowgird and described by Jan Karłowicz, a researcher with many interests, including folklore and dialects. Karłowicz mentioned that in the past the *suka* was played in a vertical position, hanging on a rope from the musician's arm.

(4) In 1895 another Polish painter, Wojciech Gerson, known for his interest in folk culture, portrayed the same exhibit.⁷ He also painted the silhouette of a musician playing the *suka* in a vertical position.

Comparing the three sources from the 19th C., we can reconstruct knee-fiddles as bowed chordophones with a concave waist, a broad neck and frontal pegs, held vertically while playing.

⁴ The Italian equivalent - “da gamba” – seemed somehow inappropriate in connection with very crude forms of folk fiddles under question.

⁵ In Polish the term “skrzypek” refers both to a violinist and a fiddler.

⁶ The illustration has been preserved in the archives of the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw among other paintings by Putiatycki. This source remained unknown to musicologists until 2008 when it was published in the catalogue of an exhibition. The name of the instrument (*skrzypce*) mentioned in the title means both violin and fiddle (Bartuszek 2008: 60–63).

⁷ Gerson's watercolor has been preserved in the National Museum in Warsaw.

Knee-fiddles have fascinated not only Polish scholars (cf. Sobieska 1973; Sobieski 1973; Stęszewski 1975; Kamiński 1971; and Dahlig 2001), but also Czech and Slovak organologists (cf. Kunz 1979; Kurfürst 1986). My predecessors knew only of sources listed here as numbers 1, 3 and 4; Putiatycki's watercolor (2) is a more recent discovery.

(5) As for today, the list of revealed iconographic sources is no longer than above, but one should also take into account an archaeological finding - a mid-16th C. fiddle excavated in 1985 in Płock, Central Poland. This instrument, very well preserved, is the only artifact left from the past of the (hypothetically) knee-played chordophones in Poland. In this case, we have very precise information about the instrument itself, but the performance technique may be reconstructed by deduction only.

Despite many cracks, the instrument has been preserved in an almost complete form, including a bridge with feet of unequal length and some remnants of a strap, which probably served to fasten the strings. The Płock fiddle appears to be of very crude workmanship as its shape is very asymmetrical and no careful finishing was applied. The irregular form of the resonance body and "ribs"⁸ of unequal thickness reflect not only the deficiencies of the manufacturer's skill, but also the imperfect tools he used. There can be no doubt that the fiddle was a folk instrument, made by and for an amateur.

As for the performance technique, the only available clues can be found in the construction of the instrument. Although no bow was found, its use is suggested by the presence of two concave bouts (a waist), a flat body with low "ribs," and symmetrical sound-holes typical of bowed chordophones. The flat top of the bridge made it impossible to play each string separately, which means that the performer was forced to apply the bow simultaneously to all the strings, either by playing a melody against a drone background or by providing sheer drone accompaniment (e.g. to a singer).

The neck is so short and wide that considering the simplicity of folk musicians' performance technique the instrument could be played in only one position (i.e., without moving the hand along the neck) and only one string could be stopped at a time. The musical potential of this instrument was thus very limited. Whether this instrument was played in the vertical position we do not know, but its similarity to the fiddle pictured in Haur's volume is an argument for shifting the starting point of the documented history of knee-fiddles in Poland back from the late 17th century to the middle of the 16th century.

There is also another argument for counting the Płock fiddle among knee-fiddles.

(6) At the time of its presumed origin, German theorist Martin Agricola published the second edition of his treatise *Musica instrumentalis deudsch* (Agricola 1545) in which he mentioned a mysterious instrument referred to as a *Polische Geigen*, or "the Polish violin." According to this author, the instrument was played using the so-called fingernail technique, i.e., not by pressing strings to the fingerboard, which was usual for instruments like the violin, but instead by exerting lateral pressure on the strings with the fingernail, which produces tones of exceptional subtlety.

⁸ The Płock fiddle has no actual ribs (thin strips of wood glued perpendicular to the sounding board in instruments like the violin) as the body was hollowed out of a piece of wood.

Agricola was fascinated by the beautiful sound of this instrument. He specified neither the form of the “Polish violin” nor its position during playing, but he mentions wide distances between the strings. Considering the ergonomics of playing with the fingernails, the position of the hand in relation to the neck is most comfortable when the instrument is held vertically. Therefore, it can be surmised that the fingernail technique mentioned by Agricola was employed for instruments held in an upright position (as shown in the woodcut of 1693) and having strings spaced widely apart (as in the Płock fiddle). If we were then to seek a folk counterpart of “the Polish violin” mentioned by Agricola, it would seem that the two instruments mentioned above meet the requirements of the fingernail technique.

We have thus two disjointed parts of the information: the form of the instrument and the vertical playing position (but *not* the fingering technique) have been confirmed by the sources Nos. 1-4 mentioned above, while the fingernail technique (but *not* the form or the playing position of the instrument) was described by Agricola, No. 6.

Field research in the 20th C. was rather fruitless. In 1950 explorations conducted by two well-known Polish musicologists of the post-war period, Jadwiga and Marian Sobieski, yielded testimony confirming that the fingernail technique had been used to play the *suka* in the area where the specimen of 1888 was found. Local musician Marcin Gilas⁹ recalled this instrument from his childhood and that it used to be played on the knee, with fingernails. Was this last information his remembrance or did researchers subconsciously suggest the answer? As the continuity of the tradition had by that time been disrupted, it cannot be ascertained without doubt whether this isolated account was accurate or not. The afore-mentioned remarks by Martin Agricola are an argument in favor of its accuracy, but they are nevertheless the only historical evidence for the use of the fingernail technique by musicians playing bowed chordophones in Poland. The supposed combination of these two elements – “knee” position and fingernail technique -- prompted researchers to interpret not only the *suka*, but also the Płock fiddle and the instrument from the 1693 woodcut as knee-chordophones played with fingernails.

Twenty years after his interview with the Sobieskis (1970) Gilas constructed a *suka*, giving his memories a physical form. This form, however, was disappointing at the time as it did not resemble either of the then-known sources: it looked like an ordinary violin with a wide fingerboard to which frontal pegs were attached. In 2008, however, this reconstruction turned out to be almost identical with the instrument featured in Putiatycki’s watercolor. One may therefore assume that Gilas’s instrument was not his invention, but a real reflection of the past.

Having concluded my research on knee-chordophones in 1990 with a doctoral thesis¹⁰ (without Putiatycki’s picture yet), I soon afterwards started cooperation with violin-maker Andrzej Kuczkowski to reconstruct these kinds of instruments. The first examples that we produced were intended to function as exhibits to be displayed in the

⁹ Marcin Gilas was born and living in Kocudza near Biłgoraj, a village from which the specimen displayed in 1888 in Warsaw originated. A protocol of the field research with detailed notes from the interview is stored in the Institute of Arts of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw.

¹⁰ Later published as a book (cf. Dahlig 2001).

National Museum of Ethnography in Warsaw and in the Museum of Traditional Musical Instruments in Szydłowiec.¹¹

The very idea of reconstructing knee-supported fiddles with actual performance in mind was proposed by Polish musician Maria Pomianowska in 1994. The artist, who had been trained as a cellist, but had also explored the intricacies of playing vertically-played chordophones from Asia (e.g. the Indian *sarangi*), took up the challenge of restoring the performance practice connected with these Polish fiddles, assuming that performers in the past had used the fingernail technique. Pomianowska was the only instrumentalist on the Polish music scene at the time able to meet both conditions: playing vertically and with fingernails.

However:

1. the exact reconstructions of fiddles sounded too quiet for the stage,
2. the Indian playing technique was not fully adequate for these instruments, and
3. the repertoire was totally unknown.

Therefore, in order to restore the extinct tradition, all the participants of the process had to apply multidimensional bridging of seemingly unconnected phenomena:

Stage 1. While working on the very form of the instrument, it was necessary to reconstruct historical fiddle-making paradigms and convert them into present-day folk fiddle construction for better playing possibilities (in terms of ergonomics and acoustics).

Stage 2. Working on the playing technique, Maria Pomianowska applied paradigms from distant cultures (in the absence of the local ones).

Stage 3. Working on the repertoire, we decided to overlap paradigms of folk music and popular music in order to produce a repertoire acceptable for today's young audience.

The three stages mentioned above were based on bridging phenomena of, respectively, different times, cultures or genres. The process of reconstructing knee-fiddles and hypothetical performance practice turned out to be a multi-dimensional fusion of paradigms in which all the constitutive components of the phenomenon under restoration have met: the instrument, the performance technique and the repertoire.¹²

¹¹ They were built in the early 1990s; Putiatycki's painting did not become the basis for another reconstruction until 2009.

¹² For more extended information about knee-fiddles, their history and the process of reconstruction see Dahlig-Turek and Pomianowska 2014: 174.

Bridge 1: Historical

Subject: Instrument

Method: Reconstructing and converting historical paradigms into a present-day folk fiddle

Reconstruction of atypical instruments with no direct analogies in preserved specimens or living culture has been a big challenge to both a researcher and a violin-maker because even when a real artefact is available (like excavated instruments) there is always some degree of uncertainty about details. In the case of iconographic sources the margin of interpretation is even wider. Anyway, we attempted to reconstruct the instruments as accurately as possible, but, even if we managed to approach the “historical truth,” this was not enough to revive the instruments.

The reconstruction required a luthier to retrace the building process that took place in the past and to convert it into modern practice as the tools, the technology of production and to some extent the materials have changed over the centuries. As already mentioned, exact reconstructions did not sound good - what was good for a museum was not satisfactory for a stage performance. While building fiddles for display only, it was crucial to remain faithful to the original construction. Accuracy in reconstructing the original shape, however, was not conducive to obtaining the desired quality of sound. Therefore, the instruments built for performance had to resemble their authentic predecessors to the greatest possible extent, but on the other hand they required modifications to achieve optimal sound and ergonomics of playing. Most importantly, they had to be executed with a level of diligence and precision seldom found in a rural luthier's workshop.

At this stage of reconstruction, the violin-maker had to focus his efforts on obtaining a compromise between fidelity to the original sources and the ergonomic, technical and aesthetic considerations involved in producing a concert instrument. Each of his decisions had been preceded by detailed discussions and experiments conducted together with Maria Pomianowska.

As to the Płock fiddle, the changes were the following:

- the instrument was adjusted to the longer mensur;
- the bridge, originally flat, was now slightly arched to allow playing on each string separately;
- a leather loop fastening the strings was replaced by a wooden tailpiece;
- The belly was strengthened from the inside with a wooden slat to balance the pressure of the strings.

In the case of the *suka*, the main change concerned an extended mensur and a form of the bridge. The one depicted in the illustration (with two long legs) did not transmit vibrations between the belly and the corpus. The instrument was too quiet, so the violin-maker applied the same form as in the Płock fiddle (one leg long, one short).

At the same time, in the 1990s, Zbigniew Butryn, a local musician from the region where the last specimen of a *suka* was found, made attempts to build his own reconstructions of a *suka*. Having no access to sources and research publications, he used a rough picture of the instrument from a postage stamp and experimented with the

construction and sound, as every folk fiddle-maker does. His instruments are in fact created, not reconstructed.¹³

Bridge 2: Intercultural

Subject: Playing technique

Method: Applying paradigms from distant cultures

Knee-fiddles and the fingernail technique link Polish folk instruments with other cultures. Considering the fact that the discussed instruments were held vertically during a performance, their closest counterpart in other countries was the Russian *gudok*, an instrument whose existence is confirmed for the period from the 17th century until the 19th century when it disappeared. The woodcuts in which the *gudok* is depicted are strikingly similar to the picture from Haur's work. The resonating body of the *gudok* assumed a variety of shapes ranging from elliptical to violin-like. Regardless of its shape, the *gudok* was always played in an upright position, but the exact fingering technique (whether fingertips or fingernails) cannot be determined. Geographically more remote equivalents can be found in the Balkans, where numerous types of pear-shaped bowed chordophones exist and are referred to with an umbrella term “the Balkan bowed lyre.” This family of instruments includes, among others, the Bulgarian *gadulka*, the Greek *lyra* and the Dalmatian/Croatian *lijerica*. During a performance, they are held vertically and the strings are stopped laterally with the fingernails.

Attempts to recreate the performance practice on the extinct Polish knee-fiddles started with a fundamental question: should this be a process of reconstruction or maybe a freer approach – as a matter of fact, a CONSTRUCTION. As no detailed information has survived about the performance techniques and the repertoire performed on traditional knee-fiddles in Poland, Maria Pomianowska decided for this second option.

In order to advance a technique of performance for the reconstructed instruments, she borrowed from the paradigms found in other cultures. The key feature in the selection of chordophones to be used for comparison was their vertical position on the musician's knee during a performance. The wide range of chordophones referred to by Maria Pomianowska included both instruments played either by pressing the strings with the fingertips (*kamancze*, *er-hu*) or with the fingernails, from the side of the string (*sarangi*, *gadulka*, *morin hur*).

However, direct application of techniques learned in such distant cultures could not bring good results due to the very different aesthetic expectations of Polish listeners. Instead, it was necessary to adapt the “exotic” techniques to a different repertoire and audience, which resulted in the creation of new types of experimental fingernail technique. This technique was in fact a combination of *sarangi* playing with certain elements typical of e.g., cello or violin playing (the latter being the most typical and important instrument

¹³ Zbigniew Butryn deserves credit not only for reintroducing the instrument to the local instrumentarium of traditional music, but also for the activities of the Suka of Biłgoraj School, which he has managed since 2007 along with his son Krzysztof.

of Polish folk culture). These experiments gave birth to the new way of thinking about playing Polish knee-chordophones.

The proposed fusion of various Asian techniques and the Polish tradition of performing folk music, applied to historical knee-fiddles once played in Poland, has produced a completely new effect. The result neither imitates Asian sounds nor reconstructs a Polish technique from the past. It is a new artistic proposal whose purpose was not to imitate performance techniques that may have existed once, but to fully explore the sound qualities of the reconstructed instruments, with clear allusions to the performance styles typical of instrumental folk music.

Thus, the performance techniques of producing sound and creating melody, characteristic of those instruments, helped to create a paradigm of performance that goes beyond the typical framework of traditional music and constitutes a viable artistic alternative in its own right.

At the same time, Zbigniew Butryn and his son Krzysztof learned to play the *suka* intuitively. Since fingernail technique is quite difficult to master, their performance possibilities cannot reach the level of Pomianowska's virtuoso playing, but they are fully appropriate to the traditional local repertoire they perform. In fact, they are probably closer to the "real" sounding of the *suka* in the past, while Pomianowska's goal was to make the most of the instruments, to show their rich tone and full music potential.

Bridge 3: Inter-genre

Subject: Repertoire

Method: Overlapping paradigms of folk music and popular or classical music

Zbigniew Butryn, his son Krzysztof and their pupils keep practicing as if the tradition had never been broken. They play simple tunes, often as accompaniment to singing. The range of their influence is mostly local.

Contrariwise, the use of knee-chordophones by the *folky* music scene is very spectacular. Traveling in Poland and abroad, they reach new audiences, like the Warsaw Village Band, which gained an international reputation. Especially Maria Pomianowska may be called a pioneer and ambassador of Polish knee-fiddles. She has been performing worldwide, including even at the Imperial Court in Tokyo and playing with Yo Yo Ma.

This popularity of knee-fiddle music could not have been possible without the bridging of musical genres.

In her repertoire for knee-fiddles Maria Pomianowska reaches for folk tunes in 19th C. collections, contemporary recordings of folk music, and scores from 16th-17th C. Polish music sources (organ and lute tablatures). She also makes free use of Chopin's music translated into ethno-style of different ethnicities, not only Polish. It is complemented by the artist's own works.

Contemporary development of this newly-created tradition thus goes in two ways, neither of which is better than the other ones. Despite their different characters, both have

been created with no continuity of the tradition which remains unknown. Dissimilarities result from different access to materials, educational background and musical skills of both performers, but also from different attitudes. Maria Pomianowska aims for music production which is attractive thanks to unusual instruments. Zbigniew Butryn, aware of his capabilities, has rather been playing the role of the “authentic” *suka*-player, i.e., the one continuing tradition. In this case, all the supposed “imperfections,” like creaking sounds and simple technique, are an asset. In fact, both artists have created new musical realities that reflect their ideas about the tradition, and not the traditions as such since reconstruction was not possible due to the lack of sources.

Twenty five years ago Polish knee-fiddles were known to a few ethnomusicologists in Poland and a few abroad, and two Polish museums of musical instruments exhibited misinterpreted copies of instruments from iconographic sources.

In the mid-1990s correct versions were built first for museums, then for an artist who recreated playing technique and created repertoire.

Today the public presence of these instruments is evident and confirmed by:

- the Butryn’s Folk School of *suka*-playing in the region of the instrument;
- class of knee-fiddles at the Music Academy in Krakow led by Maria Pomianowska, which is the first case of introducing a traditional folk instrument into the curriculum of academic education in Poland;
- numerous knee-fiddles playing in authentic folk ensembles and *folky* bands;
- recorded music on CD releases and on YouTube.

After more than twenty years since the first reconstructions of knee-fiddles, their growing popularity in Poland proves what a potential these remarkable chordophones have. It is still too early to predict the impact they may have on Polish “folky” music as this phenomenon is relatively new. It may be just a fad, or – hopefully – it will become a permanent part of the contemporary music scene.

Video excerpts

Maria Pomianowska – Suka: <https://youtu.be/mrIazTpq8no>

Maria Pomianowska - Plock fiddle: https://youtu.be/u_9WuZy9AaM

Illustrations

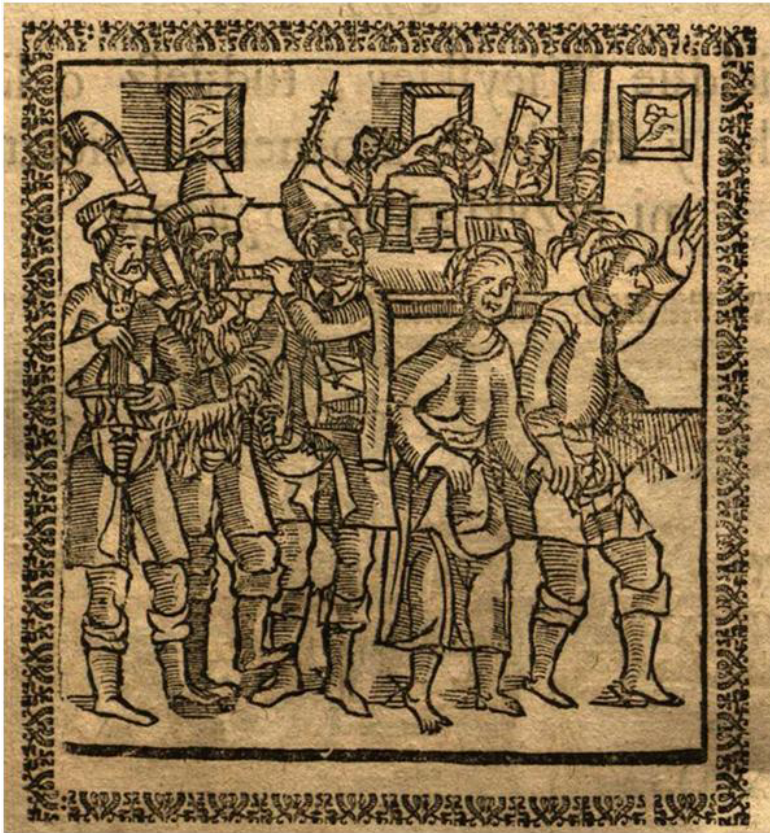


Figure 1: Woodcut.

From: Jakub Haur, *Skład abo skarbiec znakomitych sekretow oeconomii ziemiańskiej*
[A repository of the glorious secrets of landowning economy]. Krakow 1693, p. 155



Figure 2: Stanisław Putiatycki, *Włościanin ze skrzypcami z okolic Mielca* [Peasant with fiddle from the area of Mielec], 1840. Państwowe Muzeum Etnograficzne w Warszawie.

From: Joanna Bartuszek, *Akwarele Stanisława Putiatyckiego* [Stanisław Putiatycki's watercolours] in: *Zwykłe – niezwykle. Fascynujące kolekcje w zbiorach Państwowego Muzeum Etnograficznego w Warszawie* [Usual – Unusual. Fascinating Collections in the Resources of the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw], Adam Czyżewski, editor, Warszawa 2008, p. 60.



Figure 3: *Suka* by Tadeusz Dowgird.

From: Jan Karłowicz, *Narzędzia ludowe na wystawie muzycznej w Warszawie, na wiosnę 1888*, p. 434.



Figure 4 Suka by Wojciech Gerson, 1895. National Museum in Warsaw.

From: Ewa Dahlig-Turek, *Polskie instrumentarium ludowe za czasów Fryderyka Chopina* [in:] *Chopin in Love: masovian inspirations*, ed. Adam Czyżewski, Warszawa 2009, p. 12.

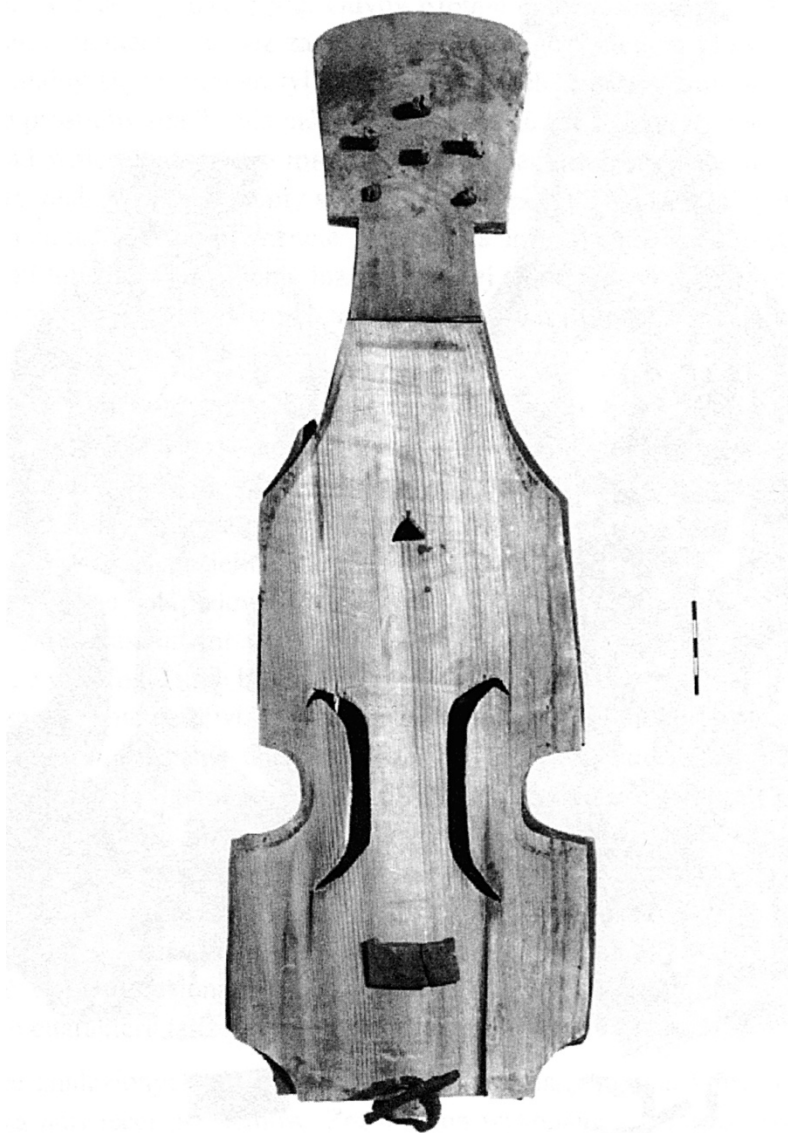


Figure 5 Fiddle from Plock. Photo by Michał Dąbski.

From: Ewa Dahlig, *Ludowe instrumenty skrzypcowe w Polsce* [Folk forms of fiddles in Poland] 2001, p. 29.

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