

Munnharpe – Jew's Harp

The oldest Jaw Harps are around a thousand years old. Here is Svein Westad from Kongsberg in action.



CD 1 – 6 Bjørgulv Straume, Jaw Harp: *Fanitullen in Setesdal*, form from Mikkjel Kåvenes (Setesdal)

The Jew's Harp is perhaps the world's most widespread instrument, although we consider it to be very Norwegian. It most likely comes from Asia. It is often

made from a piece of bamboo. But the Jew's Harp, which came to Europe before 500AD, was made of metal. How old the Jew's Harp is in Norway, we don't exactly know, but in Setesdal an instrument was found which is around 1000 years old.

The European Jew's Harp consists of a metal hoop and a steel tongue. The steel tongue is placed with millimetres' precision between the arms of the hoop. The hoop is placed between the teeth, and the steel tongue is plucked so that it vibrates. The skull and the cavities in the head amplify the sound. The notes are created by the tongue changing the size of the mouth hole, similarly to when one whistles. It is the overtones which are most easily created.

In the 1500s, mass production of Jew's Harps began in Austria, which spread throughout the whole of Europe, including Norway. These harps were made with a big hoop and short **arms**, but the typical Norwegian form has a small hoop and long, parallel arms.

Particularly in Valdres and Setesdal, the old tradition of playing tunes on the Jew's Harp has remained the same. But there are also good players of this instrument in Hallingdal and Gudbrandsdalen.

The Jew's Harp became a fashionable instrument in the 1960s, in particular in the towns, and again it was mass-produced Austrian Jew's Harps which became popular. But this did not cause a revival in the popularity of the traditional Norwegian Jew's Harp. Nonetheless, the interest in Jew's Harp has increased and, at the end of the 1990s, Jew's Harp players organised themselves. Both players and Jew's Harp makers increased in number.