



The Biniou

A Breton bagpipe

The biniou is the most evocative name of the Celtic world in France; it also suggests many sorts of instruments... But *it is a bagpipe* and the sharpest one of the family!

The *biniou bras* or “big bagpipe” in Breton language is in fact the Highland bagpipe imported in Brittany at the end of the 19th century and played within the bagad (*).

But the bagpipe we're talking about is the *biniou kozh* (old biniou), sometimes called *biniou bihan* (small biniou): it is the most typical and traditional Breton instrument, with the bombard.



*Biniou tuned in B flat
(made by G. Bothua)*

The “old biniou” is not so old: the *veuze* is probably the oldest bagpipe in Brittany while the biniou was created at the end of the eighteenth century or even in the nineteenth century.

Very high pitched, this bagpipe is rarely a solo instrument but fits very well to the bombard. Within this duo, biniou players will put forward the rhythmic character of their instruments to support the steps of the Breton dances and the melodies led by the bombard.

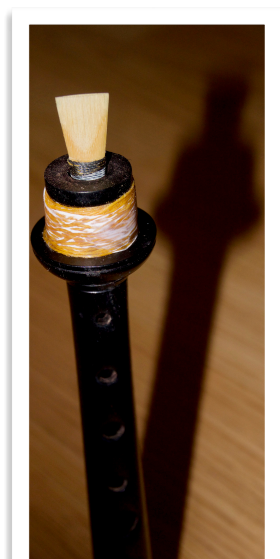
The Breton biniou is made of :

- a leather bag,
- three stocks mounted in the bag for the *sutell* (*blowpipe*) used to inflate the bag, the *levriad* (*chanter*) with a *double cane reed* playing the melody, the *tenor drone* or “*bourdon*” with a single reed producing a continuous note, one octave below the chanter (at the bombard height),
- the three pipes (sutell, levriad and bourdon) are made of *ebony* or *boxwood* most of the time.

The biniou has a small bag and the pipe where we play the melody (levriad in Breton, chanter in English) is shorter than the *veuze* one, enabling it to play an octave above. The biniou is probably the smallest bagpipe in the world but certainly not the less powerful!

The powerful reed is a little smaller than the one we use for the bombard and the sizes may vary due to the chanter pitch. It is put in the bag instead of between the musician lips: the air put under pressure make vibrate the reed strips and the sound is then amplified by the conical chanter.

Biniou B flat (Bothua) & chanter reed



(*) band from Brittany (20th Century) with bagpipes, bombard, drums, quite similar to a pipe-band.



The Biniou

The Biniou today

There are biniou in many keys ranging from F to C, according to the repertoire.

The low pitched biniou, *like the one in G shown in this page*, goes well with the tunes from South-East Brittany (Vannes County).

On the other hand, a chanter in B flat, shorter and higher, is a good choice for the tunes from French Cornwall.

Emblematic of Breton music, this bagpipe has nearly disappeared in the twentieth century, but it managed to regain its deserved place in the Celtic universe, due to musicians and bagpipe makers.



Biniou tuned in G (Hervieux & Glet)

