

The Dissemination of the *Nyckelharpa*

The Ethnic and the non-Ethnic Ways

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THE ETHNIC AND THE NON-ETHNIC

Many traditional instruments are strongly linked to ethnic concepts. These connotations are often well known to musicians and listeners both inside and outside ethnic communities, although they are valued and interpreted differently. Some instruments are regarded as typical of certain cultures; you could even call them emblematic. This is evident when it comes to national cultures. The Finnish *kantele* and the Norwegian *hardanger fiddle* are typical examples of this (cf. Torp 1998). Other instruments have ethnic connotations without being symbols for specific cultures. The *djembe* drum, for instance, is mostly considered as simply “African” in the Western world.

These and many similar instruments are more or less accessible to everyone today. The same goes for music and playing styles. Record stores, festivals, workshops and the Internet can easily provide everyone interested with inspiring products.

A musician who wants to pick up a traditional musical instrument from a different culture than his or her own has to choose. He or she may try to learn the original music and playing style associated with the instrument; the so-called “tradition.” We will call this the *ethnic way* of approaching the instrument. The beginner wants to learn the instrument and its music in the same way as if he or she were living in the original community of the instrument. In this way many musicians in Sweden and other similar countries have learned how to play *highland-pipes* or *bouzouki*—and have become Scots or Greeks in their musicianship.

The *non-ethnic way* refers to a musician’s use a certain instrument with obvious ethnic connotations without caring about its traditional repertoire or playing style, or its original cultural contexts. These musicians regard their instruments just as musical instruments with some specific qualities, i.e., in terms of sound. They probably do not lack knowledge about the cultural and historical significance of the instrument, but this knowledge is not relevant.

In this discussion “ethnic” relates to well-known associations and values, which are attached to many traditional instruments. In another sense, all instruments and all instrumental music can be seen in ethnic perspectives. Here we will limit the term to a conscious custom of playing on widespread ethnic connotations.

In this article we will focus on the *nyckelharpa* (pl. *nyckelharpor*, Eng. keyed fiddle, Germ. Schlüssel-fiddel), a Swedish folk music instrument. Our purpose is to sketch and discuss the ongoing processes of the dissemination of the *nyckelharpa* outside Sweden.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE *Nyckelharpa*¹

There are different types of *nyckelharpor* that together form an instrument family. The instruments are chordophones played by a bow, and the strings are stopped by means of a key mechanism. This special mechanism consists of rows of keys at right angles to the strings, and the keys hold small tangents, which stop the strings when the key is pressed in, thus determining the pitch (cf. Ling 1967:221, Ahlbäck & Fredelius 1991:71).

The latest model for classification of the different type-groups of *nyckelharpor* takes into account the occurrence of sympathetic strings, the number of melody strings, the occurrence of drone strings, and the way in which the rows of keys serve the strings (Ahlbäck & Fredelius 1991).²

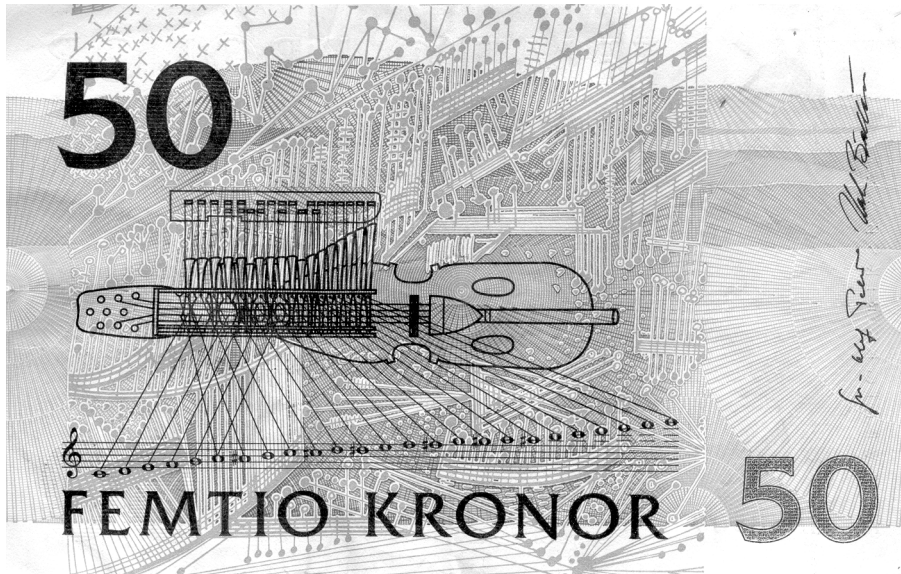
The origin of the *nyckelharpa* is lost in the mists of history. There are of course definite parallels in the key mechanisms of the hurdy-gurdy and the *nyckelharpa*, which might suggest a non-Scandinavian, probably German origin, according to Jan Ling (1967, 1991). From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, *nyckelharpor* seem to have been fairly well-known instruments in Northern Europe. *Nyckelharpor* are found in church paintings from Denmark and Sweden, as well as in some books on musical instruments, i.e., Praetorius's *Theatrum Instrumentorum*, from early 17th century. But from that time and onwards, the *nyckelharpa* has been found almost solely in Sweden, especially in the east part, in the region of Uppland.³

Picture 1. The traditional way of holding and playing the *nyckelharpa*. (from Leffler 1899)



From the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1960s, a diminishing number of people played and built *nyckelharpor*. But a couple of people modernized the *nyckelharpa* into a fully chromatic instrument, instead of, as earlier, a diatonic drone instrument. When the folk culture revival movement started in Sweden in the 1970s, literally thousands of people started to build and play *nyckelharpor* (cf. Ahlbäck 1980, Kjellström et al 1985). Today, the *nyckelharpa* is in every Swede's pocket, as it is depicted at the back of the Swedish 50 kronor bill (cf. emblematic national musical instruments above). (See picture 2.)

Picture 2. The *nyckelharpa* has in recent years become a highly visible instrument. On the 50 kronor bank note one can see an old type of *nyckelharpa* and its tonal register.



It was in the 1970s that the *nyckelharpa*'s geographic and social dissemination began. This dissemination continues today. It began with the whole of Sweden, followed by the Scandinavian countries and the USA. Nowadays *nyckelharpa* players and builders can be found in most West European countries, across the USA, and beyond.

THE TWO APPROACHES IN PRACTICE

We would like to illustrate the two dynamic approaches, the ethnic and the non-ethnic, towards the *nyckelharpa* through the presentation of two musicians: a woman from the USA, and a man from Belgium. They will be presented as typifications of musicians following two different approaches to the *nyckelharpa*. It is not *who* they are that is crucial in this article, but *how* they are related to the instrument and *how* they look upon the *nyckelharpa*. Therefore these musicians will remain anonymous.

THE ETHNIC WAY

The American woman is well-educated, like many of her fellow countrymen that are interested in the *nyckelharpa*. She is of Swedish descent, and it was during a visit to Sweden that she came in close contact with the *nyckelharpa* for the first time. While in Sweden, she bought the instrument and started taking lessons. She plays the chromatic *nyckelharpa* with three rows of keys, which today is the most common type of *nyckelharpa* in Sweden. But she also wishes she could afford to buy a 19th century type of diatonic *nyckelharpa*, in order to be able to play the old *nyckelharpa*-tunes on an instrument with another sound (more drones) and a type of key mechanism that is more idiomatic for the old tunes.

Her interest in Scandinavian folk music is broad, and she not only plays, but also teaches, *nyckelharpa*, Norwegian *hardanger* fiddle, and Swedish folk fiddling. She is very interested in genuine folk culture, and wants "the real thing": the traditional tunes and ways of playing, knowledge of the context in which the *nyckelharpa* was used and is used in Sweden, and knowledge about the people who played and play the instrument in a traditional style. The

woman is enthusiastic about learning and does not hesitate to travel two days by car to get to a weekend course for a Swedish *nyckelharpa* teacher in the US. Furthermore, she travels to Sweden as often as she can, which is about every third year. She is an active member of the Scandinavian-American folk music association in her hometown, as well as the *American Nyckelharpa Association*⁴ on a national level.

THE NON-ETHNIC WAY

The Belgian man who plays the *nyckelharpa* is a professional musician in the European world music scene, and the *nyckelharpa* is one of the instruments that he uses for his work. The reasons why he decided to begin playing the *nyckelharpa* were the instrument's exotic look and spellbinding sound. But most importantly, he could see a direct use for the *instrument* in his music making, where the *nyckelharpa* is mostly used for slow Irish airs and Bulgarian tunes.

He was not interested in learning a new musical *tradition*, but in learning a new musical *instrument*. In this case, it took him about three weeks, and then he made a record using the *nyckelharpa*. By use of his knowledge of fiddle and guitar playing, he developed his own way of holding and playing the instrument. He has never been to Sweden, nor has he any intention or interest in going there to learn or improve his skills on the *nyckelharpa*.

Presently, he plays the chromatic *nyckelharpa* with three rows of keys, but he has ordered a new four-row *nyckelharpa* from a Belgian instrument maker who builds hurdy-gurdys and *nyckelharpor*. The chromatic *nyckelharpa* with four rows of keys has a chromatic register on all four playing strings, which the *nyckelharpa* with three rows of keys does not have. This kind of *nyckelharpa* is not very popular in Sweden, probably due to its lack of connection to old traditions.

He tunes the *nyckelharpa* like a fiddle, with the exception of the lowest string, which is tuned down one tone to increase the instruments register. Furthermore, he has developed some changes to the instrument together with the Belgian *nyckelharpa* builder. (The latter had never seen a *nyckelharpa* in reality when he started to build one, just pictures and plans.) The builder incorporated microphones to facilitate electric amplification, and has changed the placement of the sympathetic strings on the bridge. Moreover, they have adopted a development by a French *nyckelharpa*-builder,⁵ who has invented a new way of quickly changing the tuning of the *nyckelharpa*, in a way that resembles the function of a capodastro on the guitar. By drilling a hole in the top part of the key, it is possible to "lock" the key in position by means of a hook on the top of the key-box.

He has some contact with the few other Belgian *nyckelharpa* players, and he sometimes borrows one of the other's four-row instrument for concerts and recordings, but not on any formal basis. In fact, they seldom meet and play together. One reason for that is that they do not share the same repertoire.

Picture 3. One of the new ways of holding and playing the *nyckelharpa*, derived from violin playing technique. (Photo: Mathias Boström)



DISCUSSION

The dissemination of the *nyckelharpa* is based upon two different approaches towards the instrument: an ethnic and a non-ethnic. These approaches give, of course, different results in terms of sounding music, but they also affect each other.

The ethnic way does not lead to any modifications of the *nyckelharpa*. On the contrary, the ethnic musicians want to handle their instruments in the “right way” as they strive to be as close to the “tradition” as possible. Within this process, the musician learns the boundaries of the “tradition” in question and at the same time practices the ability to articulate them.

This historicizing attitude is often manifested in a growing interest in playing old types of *nyckelharpor*, as we have seen. Old instruments seem to show a deep familiarity with the tradition.

A non-ethnic *nyckelharpa*-player feels more or less free to adapt the instrument in his/her own fashion. Mark Slobin speaks about *domestication*, when he describes how internationally available music genres are transplanted into a certain cultural setting (Slobin 1993:90f). His term catches a common phenomenon in today’s music life: the transformation of music from an intercultural or sometimes global level to a local one. In the case of the *nyckelharpa*, the instrument is domesticated both conceptually and physically with instrument-making tools. As we have seen, the domestication of the *nyckelharpa* is done with the four-row type, which is unusual, not to say “unacceptable” in Sweden (cf. Hogmark 1983a; 1983b). Also, the domestication results in several changes to this instrument type. In the hands of these non-ethnic musicians, the *nyckelharpa* is gradually developed. Soon we will see a new, Belgian branch of the *nyckelharpa*-family.

Another way to look upon the process of domestication is as a *creative misunderstanding*. Musicians outside the core of the tradition, like the Belgian *nyckelharpa*-player, modify their instruments without knowing anything about traditional Swedish musicians' views on changes. The musicians with the non-ethnic approach solve problems, where those with the ethnic approach do not even recognize that there could be any problem. In fact, many important innovations in music have this background. Without knowledge of traditional concepts musicians have created new sounds, new playing styles, and new ways of combining instruments.

Musicians with the ethnic approach learn traditional tunes of the instrument and traditional playing techniques. They want to study with well-established traditional musicians in Sweden; at least their Swedish colleagues serve as models for these diasporic *nyckelharpa*-enthusiasts. They can even oppose changes that will be accepted in the heartland of the tradition. Consequently, diasporic players can use tunes and playing techniques abandoned in Sweden. From the vocabulary of art history we can borrow the term retardment of style (cf. Boström 1999:24f).

The non-ethnic approach results in a quite different music. As we have seen, today's *nyckelharpa*-music can sound Bulgarian as well as Irish (but is in no way limited to ethnic musical categories). The non-ethnic musicians develop both repertoire and playing style on their own. They have no use for a ready-made package of tradition with all its rules.

Another difference between the results of the two approaches is the way in which the *nyckelharpa*-players organize themselves. The ethnic way includes the interest in tradition, context and people around the instrument. Hence, there is a need to meet other *nyckelharpa*-players, to have contact, and exchange tunes, information, records etc. Not surprisingly, you can find associations among ethnic way *nyckelharpa*-enthusiasts, i.e., the American Nyckelharpa Association. On the other hand, with a non-ethnic approach, there are few reasons to meet, as the Belgian example shows.

But how do these approaches affect each other? And do they affect the use of the *nyckelharpa* in Sweden?

Both attitudes can be regarded as constructions within the minds of the musicians. And as such they are under constant change. Musicians playing in the ethnic way can hypothetically modify their musicianships in two directions.

They can either look upon the non-ethnic attitude as a threat towards established values; in other words, modernity as the enemy of tradition. They increase their struggle to maintain the instrument (as it is) as well as its music. But modernity and tradition are interdependent. Without the struggle for modernization and innovation, there will be no striving for maintaining traditions. And vice versa: visible traditions are the ground for modernization. Paradoxically, both approaches—the conscious traditionalistic/ethnic attitude as well as non-traditionalistic/non-ethnic—have modernity as their presumption.

Or, on the other hand, it is possible that modernists can inspire traditionalists. New tunes, even innovations on the instrument will then, gradually, be accepted as "tradition."

You can even find struggles in the opposite direction. Musicians outside the core of *nyckelharpa*-tradition can profile themselves as modernist in opposition to the tradition-bearers or pick certain elements from them. Let us conclude that the dynamics of the dissemination of the *nyckelharpa* outside Sweden depend on these two approaches.

In fact, you find both types of players within today's Sweden. Most *nyckelharpa*-players in Sweden could be labeled ethnic musicians, as they use traditional playing techniques and pick their tunes from the instrument's homeland. Many of them do not know any other way of treating the instrument. But there are also some modernists or musicians with a non-ethnic approach, who try to liberate the instrument and its music from all kinds of old connota-

tions. For them, the given tradition is almost an obstacle. Like their fellow-musicians outside Sweden, they are interested purely in making good music. For acceptance in the land of the *nyckelharpa* they must first demonstrate their knowledge of traditional tunes and playing techniques, which is not the case for non-Swedish modernists. Without that kind of legitimacy Swedish modernists⁶ will not gain confidence among *nyckelharpa*-connoisseurs.

The struggle between these approaches has indeed resulted in a growing interest in the *nyckelharpa* in Sweden. Today it is a very well known and well-respected instrument, when it before was considered a peculiar old machine. Partly the popularity of the instrument can be explained by this movement toward modernism and maintenance of tradition—and the inspiration these musicians of very different sorts give each other. You could also say that both types of approaches contribute to give the *nyckelharpa* more interesting music and at the same time a greater visibility, the latter being of not the least importance today (cf. Slobin 1993).

FINALLY...

During the Medieval period, the *nyckelharpa* was played in a vast area, not only in today's Sweden. It, however, lost both land and popularity. For unknown reasons, the instrument made its heartland in northern Uppland, a small province not far from Stockholm.

Today, the *nyckelharpa* seems to recapture its old area, although with other types of *nyckelharpor*, with different music, and with support from different types of musicians than before. It has even been disseminated outside northern Europe, which was once its home centuries ago. We have pointed out that the instrument is used outside Sweden with two different approaches: one that we called *ethnic* and another called *non-ethnic*. Furthermore, we have emphasized that these approaches create a dynamic, which not only promotes a continued dissemination of the *nyckelharpa*, but also paves the way for the development of the instrument and its music. As these approaches can be found within Sweden as well, they also affect the use of the *nyckelharpa* among Swedes.

The dissemination of the *nyckelharpa* outside Sweden continues. The instrument evidently has qualities that attract musicians. In a near future it will be included in the instrumentarium of world music. Whether its traditional tunes and playing techniques will accompany that dance or not will depend on the musicians' attitudes towards the *nyckelharpa*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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NOTES

- 1 <http://www.nyckelharpa.org>
- 2 <http://home4.swipnet.se/~w-45963/typo.htm>
- 3 <http://www.algonet.se/~jwinter/katalog/bildcd36.html>
<http://www.algonet.se/~jwinter/ratongang/osterby.ram>
- 4 <http://www.nyckelharpa.org/info/board.html>
- 5 <http://www.nyckelharpa.org/pics/french.html>
- 6 http://user.tninet.se/~rbu642q/hedin/angel_archipelago_int.html
http://user.tninet.se/~rbu642q/hedin_media/angel_media/kusten.mp3
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