

CADENCE

Cultural ADult Education and Nyckelharpa Cooperation in Europe

CADENCE

The Nyckelharpa – "... is no longer a disappearing relict from a small region of Sweden but a living force in the choir of music from different parts of the world, voices which together create good hope for the future of mankind." Jan Ling, 2011

Between January and October 2010, a multinational study group visited three institutes for adult education in Sweden, Germany and Italy to exchange ideas and experiences about organisation, methods and activities of musical education.

As nyckelharpa teaching was the exceptional unifying subject of the partners "Eric Sahlström Institute", "Academy BURG FÜRSTENECK" and "Scuola di Musica Popolare di Forlimpopoli", this instrument was used as the basis for the common studies.

The nyckelharpa is a bowed string instrument, part of the Medieval European heritage, but during the last 400 years has only been played in the Swedish area of Uppland. Nowadays the interest in playing the nyckelharpa has increased worldwide and in many differing musical styles.

This CADENCE co-operation was established as a "Grundtvig Learning Partnership" and supported by the European Commission in 2009 – 2011. Additional articles and sheet music that are outcomes of the CADENCE project will be published on the website

www.cadence.nyckelharpa.eu



Statue of Eric Sahlström
(by Ingvar Jörpeland)



NYCKELHARPA

NYCKELHARPA



CADENCE

CULTURAL ADULT EDUCATION AND
NYCKELHARPA COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Nyckelharpa and its History

by Per-Ulf Allmo

English translation by Matt Fichtenbaum

- Eric Sahlström Institutet
- Academie BURG FÜRSTENECK
- Scuola di Musica Popolare di Forlimpopoli



The Nyckelharpa and its History *

by Per-Ulf Allmo

English translation by Matt Fichtenbaum

Summary

The article gives an overview of the state of research on the history of the nyckelharpa. From medieval times, images have been preserved in churches in Italy, Sweden and Denmark. Hints and guesses point to German sources. During the Renaissance, the nyckelharpa is mentioned and illustrated in the music treatises of Agricola and Prætorius. Since the Baroque era, evidence of the nyckelharpa, including surviving instruments, has been found only in Sweden; in Uppland province, there is also a continuous tradition of playing.

Content

1. Introduction, definitions
2. Overview of sources before 1900
 - 2.1. Images before 1469
 - 2.2. Images after 1469
 - 2.3. Written sources
 - 2.4. Surviving instruments from before 1950
3. Commentary on the sources
 - 3.1. Images before 1469
 - 3.2. Images after 1469
 - 3.3. Written sources
 - 3.4. Surviving instruments from before 1950
4. Conclusion and overview on the period from 1900 to today
5. The author Per-Ulf Allmo

This is an offprint from the CADENCE website and e-book, 2012

All rights reserved by the author
Layout: Karsten Evers

See: www.cadence.nyckelharpa.eu

„CADENCE – Cultural ADult Education and Nyckelharpa Cooperation in Europe – Teaching music to adults with special emphasis on the nyckelharpa (key fiddle)“



1. Introduction

On the face of the Swedish 50-crown note is a picture of the opera singer Jenny Lind, called "The Swedish Nightingale". The musical motif continues on the back, which shows a string instrument of ancient appearance, somewhat resembling a vielle, an early ancestor of the violin. Few people outside Sweden know this instrument's name, or what it sounds like. Swedes recognize it as a nyckelharpa and know that it was once found only in Uppland province.

Those who research the nyckelharpa's origins discover that instruments of this type have been found elsewhere in Europe. But there too little information to know when or where. In this article I present and discuss an overview of the available sources.

Right: Sweden, Gotland, church of Källunge, Gotland, southern entrance, about 1350



Definitions:

A **nyckelharpa** is a string instrument, played with a bow. The pitches of its two to four melody strings are determined by sliding keys with tangents that stop the string, in contrast to the violin with its fingerboard. The principle is the same as that of the hurdy-gurdy.

The term **nyckelharpa** is used as a collective name for all instruments of this type, while **gammelharpa** – old 'harpa' – is used to mean the older forms found in Uppland before the introduction of the modern chromatic nyckelharpa in 1929.

In the text that follows, all geographical references refer to modern national and regional boundaries.





Map with important source localities



2. Overview of sources before 1900

2.1. Images before 1469

- 1350, stone carving in Källunge, Gotland, Sweden
- 1408, painting in Siena, Italy
- After 1450, Flemish and German church altar pieces in Sweden

2.2. Images after 1469

- 1469-1525, paintings in Danish and Swedish churches
- Encyclopedia of music by Agricola, Magdeburg, Germany (see also 2.3)
- 1565, painting in Rynkeby Church in Fyn, Denmark
- 1590, carved wooden relief in Hildesheim, Germany
- 1620, encyclopedia of music by Prætorius, Wolfenbüttel, Germany (see also 2.3)

2.3. Written sources

- 1529, encyclopedia of music by Agricola, in German
- 1619, encyclopedia of music by Prætorius, in German
- Danish written works
- Swedish written works

2.4. Surviving instruments from before 1950

- Two nyckelharpas, probably German, in the Carolino Augusteum Museum, Salzburg, Austria
- Several hundred gammelharpa instruments from Uppland, Sweden



3. Commentary on the sources

3.1. Images before 1469

The only sources we have from before 1469 are depictions of instruments. In these we see that medieval instruments of vielle type sometimes had keys and tangents in small numbers. These paintings and sculptures are in typical Gothic style, showing musicians with light, wavy hair and long, flowing robes.

Similar instruments, but without keys, appear in the medieval song book collection Codex Manesse (1300, Zurich, Switzerland), in Germany's first Gothic cathedral in Magdeburg, and in Flemish and German altar pieces.

Left, top: Italy, Siena, Cappellina di Palazzo Pubblico, Angel with nyckelharpa, fresco by Taddeo di Bartolo, about 1408

Bottom, left: Sweden, Uppland, Church of Skutunge, triptych, 1490. One of 13 angels surrounding the Virgin Mary.

Bottom, right: Germany, Heidelberg, Codex Manesse, most extensive manuscript of songs of the Middle Ages, Tafel 312r: "Herr Reinmar der Fiedler", about 1300 to 1340, left a vielle without tangents.

Right: Sweden, Gotland, church of Källunge, southern entrance, about 1350, detail.
(see also page 3 of this article)



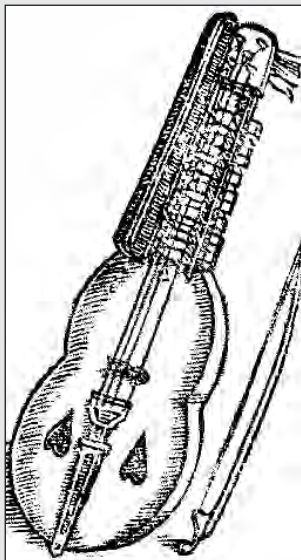


3.2. Images after 1469

Besides the wooden relief in Hildesheim, we find in Germany only the depictions in Agricola's and Prætorius' encyclopedias, discussed below under written sources.

Both of these authors came from and lived their lives in the border region between eastern Germany and Poland. Specific to this area is a tradition of instruments with similarities to

Uppland's gammelharpa. This suggests that the gammelharpa may have been inspired by these instruments, similar in construction and playing although different in detail.



Left:
Germany, Michael
Prætorius, Syn-
tagma Musicum II
De Organographia,
text 1619, images
1620



Martin Agricola 1529,
Musica Instrumentalis Deusch



Germany, Hildesheim,
Knochenhaueramtshaus, 1529



The carved relief in Hildesheim, a putto – a cherubic child – playing a nyckelharpa found on the facade of the butcher's house, doesn't give much insight into the instrument. The house, furthermore, was not original: it was completely destroyed in a bombing in March of 1945 and reconstructed from photographs 1987 to 1989.

We know of medieval vielles equipped with keys. Danish and Swedish church paintings show other contemporary instruments in vielle, lute, or guitar form, with keys. There is, however, no evidence of any standard form of such keyed instruments, and no instrument resembling Uppland's gammelharpa.



Sweden, Uppland, church of Älvkarleby, about 1500



Sweden, Uppland, church of Lagga, about 1500



Sweden, Skåne, church of Emmislöv, about 1450-1475



Denmark, Rynkeby, about 1560



Art historians believe that such church paintings were the work of German painters, sometimes with local artisans as helpers. Essentially all these paintings have undergone restoration, often heavy-handed, which makes their authenticity doubtful. In the regions where these paintings are found, we find no account of the nyckelharpa's being played; this suggests that the inspiration for these paintings came from the painters' German background rather than locally.

The first depiction of a true gammelharpa is a water-color from around 1790, by Pehr Nordqvist of Stockholm.



Sweden, Per Nordqvist, about 1790



3.3. Written sources

Music chroniclers Martin Agricola (1529, 1545) and Michael Prætorius (1619) are the only writers who make mention of the nyckelharpa, but only in passing and without further detail. Both of these upper-class gentlemen use the term “Schlüssselfidel”, but one can ask whether that is a term of their own invention. Researchers often coin their own terms in the belief that they better describe the object in question; such new terms are sometimes adopted into general use.

Both Agricola and Prætorius write of the “Schlüssselfidel” as exclusively an instrument of society’s lower classes. Prætorius goes so far as to assert that it shouldn’t be considered “music,” and is, hence, hardly worthy of mention at all.

Two scholars in Denmark make mention of instruments with tangents. Hans Mikkelsen Ravn, who in 1646 called a lira – a hurdy-gurdy – a Nøglefeile, which is a direct translation of the German term, and Peder Syv, who in a 1663 book wrote that some poets are no more authors than bagpipers or nøglefedlere – players of nyckelharpa and hurdy-gurdy – are real musicians.

In Sweden the gammelharpa first appears in 1603, most often in court records and other written works. The first comprehensive description of the instrument first appears in 1899; isolated details turn up, however, in scholarly theses from 1684, 1686, 1698, 1702, and 1717.

In the oldest writings we see the term nyckelgiga – keyed gigue – used by scholars. That term eventually gives way to the folk term nyckelharpa or just harpa. A more recent source from 1939 tells of a German-born tobacco maker in Karlskrona, Sweden, Stefanus Cyrillus Rettig (1750-1828). Rettig described how, as a youth in Pomerania, Germany, he’d seen nyckelharpa-like instruments stored away in closets, but that they were so old-fashioned that nobody around knew anything about them.



Das dritte Capitel. Ein vnterweisung vom absetzen.

Wenn du des nu alles hast ein vorstant
So nym zum ersten für dich den Discant:
Vnd yhn (Wie folget) mit Noten formit.
Auff fünf odder sechs linien notyr.
Doch also/das allzeit ein gangter schlag
Vom andern abgefondert/ stehen mag.
Auff das deßte leichter dich Kommet an
Vnd subtil geschagt wird von yderman.
Darnach setz den Tenor aus den Noten
Ynn buchstaben/das sey dir geboten.
Also/das des Tenors schleg ynn allen
Gleich vnter des Discants Tact gefallen.
Zum letzten den Bass. auch ynn buchstaben
Vnd hör/ wie du dich mit yhm solt haben.
Setze yhn mit seinem Tact/ wie ich zege
Vnter des Tenors vnd Discants schlege.
Wie ich dirs ynn der Figur wil weisen
Wirstu mercken/so wird man dich preisen.
Ein solch absetzen/ sag ich dir behend
Magstu brauchen auff alle Instrument.
Sie sind Clauirt odder vngelauirt
Auff welchem man mehr denn eine stym fürt.
Wodoch hat die laut ein ander gestalt
Welchs ym sechsten Capitel wirt vorzalt.
Folget ein Figur/ Wie die Noten vnd
Pausen gemacht werden **

Germany, Martin Agricola 1529,
Musica Instrumentalis Deusch, facsimile

DE ORGANOGRAPHIA.

79

Was aber sonst noch allerley anderer Art Instrumenta in der Scigraphia,
(als das Hackbrett/ Col. XVIII. Sawrenhyra/ Schlüssselfidel/ Strohsfidel/ Cym-
belen/ Glöcklein/ Eingefügt/ Vntambour de Biscaye, Col. XXII. Heer- o-
der Kesselpauken/ Soldaten-Drumme/ Ambosi/ Colum. X. XIII. Auch an-
dere Muscomitische Türkische/ seltsame frembde Instrumenta, Col. 29. 30. 31.) ab-
contrahirt gefunden/ vnd etliche darunter kühlich/ wie Sebastian V�hrung nennet
Dreische/ oder aber kumpen Instrumenta k ndem genennet werden: weil dieselbe
ein jeden betant/ vnd pur Music nicht eigentlich geh ren/ ist vnndertig/ darvon etwas
zuschreiben/ oder zu erinnern: Allein diß/ das das Ambosi darumb auch mit in die
Scigraphian gesetzt worden/ diweil Pythagoras aus desselben Klang vnd Vnter-
scheid der H mmer examiniret vnd erfunden hat/ worinn/ vnd in welchen propor-
tionibus der Vnterscheid drey Consonantien, so damals Consonantie Musice
genennet worden/ als nemlich der Octa, Quint vnd Quart beruhet. Darvon
abertu Boethio lib. 1. Musices, cap. 10. & 11. Sowol in 2. Exercitatione Sethi
Calviji ein mehrer vnd ausf hrlicher Bericht zu finden.

Das XLVII. Capitel. Von Orgeln. (Col. II. & XXXV. XXXVI.)

Der Person ist zwar in Tomi Primi Membro Primo aus etlichen Au-
toribus eins vnd anders referiret vnd angebeutet worden: Allde-
mahl aber die Notdurfft erfordert/ das die Orgeln etwas sch rffer be-
schriben/ vnd weitl ufigiger davon mu  geredet/ vnd also in diesem andern
Theil nicht kan begriffen werden/ So solim folgenden dritten vnd
vierden Theil dieses 11. Tomi notl rftiger Bericht folgen vnd angezeigt werden.
Die Abcontrahierung eines Postiffts ist Col. IV. zu finden.

Das XLVIII. Capitel. Von dem Postifft (Col. XXXVII.) so zu einerley Pfeffen drey absonderliche Register hat.

Xithier

Germany, Michael Pr torius,
Syntagma Musicum II De Organographia,
text 1619, images 1620, facsimile



3.4. Surviving instruments from before 1950

In general, folk instruments have not been seen as valuable – objects to be used rather than preserved – so we find few surviving examples.

In Salzburg two primitive string instruments with tangents were found. Their form resembles that of the Bohemian lyra, but beyond that it we can't draw conclusions about their origins or how they were used.



Austria, Salzburg, two instruments with tangents

The Moraharpa was most likely made in the 1680's, inspired by the depiction in Prætorius' work.

Two nyckelharpas, one found in Vefsen in Norway and the other in Esse in Finland, can be seen as attempts to replicate the gammelharpa. Neither of these instruments can be connected to local musical traditions.

Finally, we find large numbers of surviving gammelharpa instruments from the mid-1600's and later.



Right, top: Gammelharpa, Blekinge Museum, Karlskrona. Origin from near Gävle, north Uppland

Bottom, left: Gammelharpa, privately owned. Origin from the parish of Harg, north-east Uppland

Bottom, right: 3-rows chromatic nyckelharpa, built by Olle Plahn

Left: Playing a 3-rows chromatic nyckelharpa





4. Conclusion and overview of the period after 1900

Scholars and other refined folk have seldom considered the nyckelharpa to be a worthy instrument, so there is a general lack of source material available for further examination.

In Europe outside Scandinavia, before and during the Renaissance, there were clearly many experiments that added tangent mechanisms to contemporary string instruments of rebec, guitar, and lute form. But there is no record of these instruments' music and playing style, suggesting that the results were unsatisfactory and the instruments died out.

Only in Uppland province in Sweden do we find remaining evidence, consisting of a large number of surviving instruments and copious written records of the music. Both tales of legendary proportions and accounts more anchored in reality tell of particular players and their lives as musicians; some later records even provide wisdom about their musical repertoires.

Today we have the gammelharpa in continuous tradition from its first appearance, but it is the modern chromatic nyckelharpa, introduced in 1929 by musician and instrument-maker August Bohlin (1877-1949), that reigns supreme. And while Bohlin gave us this modern nyckelharpa, it is Eric Sahlström (1912-1986), composer and stunningly skillful player, who deserves the credit for the instrument's present popularity: had Sahlström not taken an interest in the instrument, it's likely nobody today would know what a nyckelharpa is, let alone be able to play one.

Today the modern Uppland nyckelharpa is played throughout the world, and applied to far more than strictly folk music: classical music, early music, world music, experimental music, and more.

Research into the history of the instrument and its use continues. Observations and comments are welcome: contact me at per-ulf@allmo.se.



August Bohlin, 1877 – 1949



Eric Sahlström, 1912 – 1986



Per-Ulf Allmo (Sweden)

Photographer, author of numerous articles, books and other publications about folk music and the nyckelharpa. Publisher in his own publishing company "Tongång".

After he first met Eric Sahlström in the 1960s, he was interested in the nyckelharpa and began to take photographs of instruments, collect texts and cultivate contacts with musicians. Since the 90's, he has intensified his efforts to collect information on the rich history of the nyckelharpa players and their instruments. More than 700 instruments have been personally examined. Upon request from Stockholm University, he works today primarily focusing on the nyckelharpa's earliest history. This article is a brief summary of the knowledge so far.

Comments and contributions are received gratefully at:
per-ulf@allmo.se

In addition to the above, he has always been a great practitioner of folk dances and has built two and a half nyckelharpas. He participates with great interest in the European nyckelharpa cooperative effort and contributes with his well-founded knowledge.

All photographs: Per-Ulf Allmo



Photo: Esbjörn Hogmark