Building a Nyckelharpa

by Lars Silen (Finland)
translation fine tuned by Matt Fichtenbaum

Since my childhood I have been interested in music. In high school in the 1960s I played violin in the school orchestra and sang Swedish ballads, accompanying myself on the guitar. Around 1970 I found the book Nyckelharpan, Jan Ling’s doctoral thesis, at a library in Helsinki. I hadn’t previously heard of the nyckelharpa, but the book piqued my interest so much that I started building a nyckelharpa of my own design based on what I read. I completed the body but never found the time to build the keybox and finish the instrument, which then lay, partially finished, collecting dust for more than twenty years.

Fifteen years ago, I decided to finish the instrument simply to be able to try it. Surprisingly the instrument sounded like a nyckelharpa but a fairly awful one. My children were small then, and when I had to cut down a willow tree that was shading our summer cottage, I decided to use a part of its trunk as the body of a child-size nyckelharpa. The result was a small harpa with one row of keys coupled to two different strings. It was playable but its body was small and thus its sound was very weak.

During a five-year stretch starting in 1999, I constructed a thirty two foot wooden sailboat, an American “Sharpie” model. This project taught me a lot about woodworking; it also left me with a fine set of woodworking tools. By the time the boat was finished, two of my children had left home. My daughter moved to Stockholm after getting her Master’s degree, and my son moved to Göteborg to study violin at the University. I thus expected to have more spare time, and started looking for a new project.

In the fall of 2005 I happened to notice a nyckelharpa for sale in Göteborg. Sebastian, my son, was studying there and I asked him to have a look at it. I thus acquired a beautiful nyckelharpa made by Tage Larsson. By chance, my wife visited Göteborg later the same week to check that all was well with Sebastian. Three days later I was able to try my first real nyckelharpa.

After playing for a few weeks and fixing some minor problems with the instrument, I felt that I really liked the instrument and I wanted to try to build a proper instrument myself. I ordered both Leif Alpsjö’s course in nyckelharpa playing and Sören Åhker’s excellent nyckelharpa construction plans. When the plans arrived it was late fall and fairly cold outside. My woodworking shed is not heated, so starting the project was out of the question. Hands don’t work...
properly at minus ten degrees Celsius!

In the spring of 2006 I read in the ESITOBO on-line forum about Peter Hedlund’s video nyckelharpa course. This inspired me to order my own copy. As it turned out, I ordered my copy from the U.S. because I could pay via PayPal. Ordering from Sweden would have required me to physically go to a bank. It feels slightly absurd to order a product from the other side of the ocean when there is a local supplier, but this is the modern world! In reading Rita Leydon’s web site I learned that Rita also had produced a DVD about building a nyckelharpa. This resulted in an additional order. The DVD *Build Nyckelharpa with Sören Åhker* is a perfect complement to Sören’s plans. The plans are well done and very detailed, but seeing Sören actually perform some of the building steps taught me a lot. I am sure that I saved a lot of time and also got a much better instrument. My mother is educated in woodworking and has worked as a woodworking teacher for a number of years; she was very impressed by the video course. We have sent a proposal to the Finnish television suggesting that they use it for a series of programs about building a nyckelharpa. Time will tell whether anything comes of it.

I finally started building the harpa in the fall of 2006 after buying top, bottom and some other parts at Österbybruk in June. The time it took, working evenings, was about two months.

**The body and the neck**

A modern nyckelharpa is essentially a wooden box made from 3 inch by 4 inch material. The material used for the neck and body isn’t critical but spruce is probably preferable because it is fairly light. The different parts are sawn into shape. A band saw is an excellent tool for this step. The nyckelharpa sides are slightly asymmetric to compensate for the offset of the strings to the left to accommodate the tangents on the top row of keys. Without this asymmetry the strings would tend to pull the bridge sideways. The difference between the left and right sides is so small that it normally is invisible. Cutting the curved sides requires a narrow band saw blade. I used a 10 mm blade but sawing would probably have been easier with a 6 mm blade. Sören’s DVD shows how the sides are slanted by cutting the inner glue surfaces at an angle in a band saw. I chose not to angle the sides for this essentially “first” nyckelharpa (“keep it simple, stupid!”). Sören recommends that extra wooden blocks be left at both ends of the sides as flat surfaces for the clamps used for gluing. I was, of course, too quick when sawing so I had to glue some temporary pieces back on for this purpose. These extra pieces were removed after the glue dried. The gluing surfaces have to be perfectly straight to ensure a good bond because the forces on the nyckelharpa are very high when the strings are on the instrument.

The neck was made from spruce with inlays of harder wood. I chose this design simply because I didn’t have good quality spruce of the required dimensions. It would probably have been a better idea to use inlays of spruce to save weight. When you have played nyckelharpa for several hours at a stretch you realize that every ounce saved is a positive improvement.

Before gluing the neck, sides and end of the nyckelharpa, I routed the slots for the tuners for the sympathetic strings. It’s best to route a deep slot like this in several small steps, otherwise the bit becomes very hot and discolors the wood (and a lot of smoke is produced!). I used a hand router for this step without any problems.

Gluing the parts for the body together didn’t cause any major problems. I didn’t check the alignment of the parts with sufficient detail though. The result was that the neck was slightly out of line with the sides. This problem was fixed by manually planing the neck and sides. Perhaps wooden dowels could be used here too to fix the parts when gluing. Better precision at this step would have saved time. It is a good idea at this stage to finish the insides and outsides of the sides to essentially final finish. When the bottom and top are glued in place, sanding becomes much more difficult. I used a belt sander to roughly form the rounded parts of the sides and also the insides of the body. Care is needed when using a belt sander not to remove too much material. It is easy to cut wood away but difficult to repair places where too much has been cut.

**Making tools**

When the body was glued I cut ribs from scrap plywood; these had the same curvature as the bent nyckelharpa top. These ribs, glued to a one-inch thick fiber plate, made a convex form for bending the top into the correct shape. At the same time I made a concave form to use as a guide for cutting the sides to fit the curved top. This concave form was also used to sand the gluing surfaces for the top to the correct shape. The ribs of the sanding form were covered by thin strips of plywood like the planking of a ship. Sören used a similar tool made from fairly thick metal. The sanding tool is a real time-saver when attaching the top. When I built my first nyckelharpa 30 years ago I planed the top into the required bent shape and formed the sides step by step using only my eyes. This is very slow, and it’s easy to make mistakes that result in bad glue joints. The time to build the necessary tools is regained many times over by the very much simplified attachment of the top! An instrument with the top properly glued in place probably sounds better, too!

The templates should be made from thin scrap plywood because the handling of the templates is easier and the templates are of course available for the next nyckelharpa. I used some templates made from paper but these will be replaced with plywood ones.

**Top and bottom**

The bottom of the nyckelharpa is made from spruce or from some other suitable (harder) wood. If a harder and stronger wood is used the bottom can be fairly thin, 6.5 mm...
mm; if spruce is used, 8 to 9 mm. My guess is that the bottom isn’t very critical: it mostly provides a sturdy base for the sound post which forces the top to vibrate in the correct modes. I believe that this also applies to the violin, whose top is selected from perfect spruce while the bottom is selected from good looking harder wood.

The top is planed and sanded to a thickness of 4 to 4.5 mm. The top I bought from Leif Alpsjö was so thin that I only sanded it. There wasn’t simply enough extra material for planing. Leif commented on the thickness of the top at Österbybruk in 2006. “Remember,” he said, “you are building a nyckelharpa and not a banjo.” My guess is that I made the top of my first nyckelharpa too thin. The top is soaked in warm water for some 45 minutes before attaching it to the bending tool. The wet top is allowed to dry in the bent, stressed form. When dry it will retain its bent shape. Don’t try to bend the top dry! There is a great risk that a dry top will crack when bending.

**Attaching the top and the bottom**

The top and the bottom are glued to the sides separately. Wooden dowels at both ends of each plate simplify alignment when gluing. The bottom was glued before the sides were cut to fit the top. This leaves plenty of space for clamps. Note that a large number of clamps are needed. When attaching the bottom I used 12 to 14 clamps. One simply uses as many clamps as fit in the available space! I bought four wooden clamps of the same type as the ones Sören uses on the DVD. These work really well, and for the next nyckelharpa I am going to get a few more.

The top was glued in place using bicycle inner tubes as heavy duty rubber bands. Additional clamps at the ends ensured an absolutely tight fit. With wooden dowels to align the plates, fitting the plate after spreading the glue was a snap, although dowels might complicate removing the plates if the nyckelharpa has to be repaired later. I used ordinary white glue; this will also make repairs difficult.

To be continued in the next issue of Nyckel Notes...

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**Scandinavian Music at NOMAD**

By Barbara Dobay (Connecticut)

November 3-5, 2006, the 19th annual Northeast Music, Art and Dance Festival (NOMAD—www.nomadfest.org) was held in New Haven, Connecticut. An all-volunteer, participatory music and dance festival which brings many of the finest dance leaders, performers, musicians and singers in eastern US together to share their heritage. It is a family festival with programs designed for different age groups.

This year the nyckelharpa made its first formal appearance in the program and Scandinavian music events took place on both Saturday and Sunday. On Saturday the Nutmeg Spelmanslag played for the Pivots and Partners (turning dances) and Hambo Review and Refine. On Sunday there was a Scandi Jam with John Chambers and Friends with dancers dancing around the musicians. Sonia Savig performed Norwegian Songs.

ANA members Barbara Dobay and Elizabeth Morrison and their respective husbands, Björn and Steve, presented an Introduction to Swedish Music workshop featuring nyckelharpa harmonies with Steve on back up guitar: Polskas, schottis, waltzes, and hambos alternating with Barbara and Björn singing traditional folk music and ballads from Bellman, Taube, and Cornelis Vreeswijk.

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At some point we are given the opportunity to share our music beyond our kitchens or living rooms. In my case, this provided incentive to refine tunes I had learned and practiced mostly for my own benefit. I was asked to play Swedish music at a St. Lucia program at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa in early December. The request came via friends who are active in the folk music community, who knew I had some Swedish repertoire, and, of course, that I had the only nyckelharpa in town.

My experience has been primarily in Celtic music, playing monthly with the Old Sod Band for contra-dances—very infrequently as a soloist—so you can imagine my initial reaction. What better incentive to push my playing skills and share the sound of my new instrument! I had recently upgraded to a beautiful sounding nyckelharpa made by Mikael Grafström, as well as a bow made by Jean Claude Condi. I knew the pair would serve me well when Olov Johansson (Väsen) gave a nod of approval after trying them out at a workshop in September at West Kortright Centre in NY State.

Could I do it alone? I decided to ask some of my musical friends to help me out. I knew from previous experience that surrounding yourself with good players does wonders for confidence and the reward of a good adrenalin rush when it all comes together.

An evening of phone calls defined us as a quintet. Ann Downey (upright bass), Greg T. Brown (fiddle, button accordion), Phillip Murphy (guitar), Duncan Gillis (flute, whistle) and myself on nyckelharpa and mandola. All are consummate musicians in various idioms and help push me to be as good as they are. I prepared a CD and notes for twenty five tunes to facilitate independent practice. Despite the fractured schedules of ‘the band’ we managed about ten practices, with all members present at three of those. Busy lives!

What to play? I decided that a combination of both old and new tunes that I could play well should make up the ‘stage’ set list (we had twenty five minutes). I settled on Flickorna Svensson, Bod-Mattis Polska, Sista Polskan, Åhkerschottis, Eklundapolska #3, Polska från Småland, and Brudsmarch efter Byss-Calle with a finishing medley of I’m Not Fed up with the Pacific Ocean and a Byss-Calle Slängpolska. The remaining tunes we would play as unplugged background music during the crowd’s arrival, and at the end of the evening when they were tasting a selection of food laid out by IKEA.

The big night arrives. Sound check was wonderful. Brilliant setting in the grand hall surrounded by Haida totem poles, fantastic sound and technicians. Phillip and I position ourselves for our unplugged set near the stage. The others are upstairs near the coat check and entry queue. The crowd builds to almost 500 people, so our unplugged set barely projects. Oh well ... just following the coordinator’s direction ... then the dignitaries arrive and we retreat backstage while a choir sings festive Swedish songs. Their set ends with the procession of a (not entirely happy looking) woman with candles aflame on her head. St. Lucia. I keep looking in the shadows expecting support crew with fire extinguishers.

It’s our turn. A few butterflies, as expected, but I loosen up with a few words to the audience, then I launch into Äppelbo gånglåt. I don’t even notice the slight hesitation as the rest of the band joins in to a tune that is not on our set list, but thankfully in the same key and well practiced for our unplugged sets! The rest of the set goes well, in particular the tunes offering some improvisation for fiddle and flute, but we hadn’t nailed down the endings quite as well as we had hoped. I am sure only the musicians noticed. The performance is over before we know it, and we resume our unplugged sets while the crowd samples the food. A few interested people ask about the music and instruments, which is always gratifying, then the crowd thins out as the food is finished. Time to pack up and review the evening with family and friends.

So what now? My enthusiasm to play more has grown—made all the more fun by doing so in a group. The trick now is to build around other ‘part-time’ musicians who have the time to play for fun and not a living, and of course bring on more tunes! At times like this I wish I was retired.
Last summer Laurie Hart of Ithaca taught nyckelharpa class at Ashokan’s Northern Week—easier tunes for novices early in the week to more advanced tunes later. Swedish music and dance is an important aspect of Northern Week at Ashokan, and this year set a new record: nine nyckelharpas harping!
Occasionally an unexpected surprise pops into my in-box. Among the ANA’s most ardent supporters is Matt Fichtenbaum up in Massachusetts; he put his shoulder to the grindstone and prepared a wonderful resource for us: He transcribed all the tunes on Puma’s newest CD Resonans. My only problem was deciding which two tunes to include in this issue—after much deliberation I settled on two of my favorites. The full PDF with all the tunes can be downloaded from this page on the ANA website: www.nyckelharpa.org/sales/music_desc.php?id=RPMCD-004

—editor

As you probably realized from my recent review in Nyckel Notes, I think Peter’s latest CD is an important resource for modern harpa players who might not otherwise have much contact with the traditional music. Attached is my contribution to the project, in hopes that this might make it even more useful. Enjoy!

—Matt Fichtenbaum

Petter i Alas polska
efter Wilhelm Hedlund, Enviken

Transcriptions from Peter Hedlund: Resonans

Transcribed by Matt Fichtenbaum
Näcken och Sko-Ella
polska efter Eric Sahlström

This is an idiosyncratic tune and different people play it differently. Some play the repeats differently, e.g., two repeats only on the first part, once only through the third part. Some play the dotted figures with different rhythm, or vary the notes and ornaments. This is similar, but not identical, to the way Peter Hedlund plays it on Resonans.

Transcribed by Matt Fichtenbaum
Modern Sweden is a homogeneous country. Everyone speaks modern Swedish, they read the national newspapers, see the same television and movies, and communicate on the internet. Meet a Swede from anywhere in his country, and he will have much in common with all the other Swedes you have met. But in the folk culture, Sweden is a strongly provincial country. Traditional customs, foods, clothing, music, and dance are connected to provinces, regions, and even towns. Before modern communication, there were many people whose dialect of the Swedish language could not be understood by outsiders. The polska is the traditional dance of choice in Sweden, but subtle variations of styling and steps unique to a place are found all over. The fiddle is the dominant traditional instrument everywhere, but the styling, rhythms, and type of tune are still very regional.

We play the nyckelharpa, which was at one time found in many places in Sweden, but which gradually became a purely Uppland instrument through most of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is only since about 1970 that the nyckelharpa has begun to find its place as a Swedish national instrument, rather than just from Uppland. People from every region in Sweden are now playing the nyckelharpa. The Uppland repertoire is still the basis for playing, but we now hear tunes from Småland to Jämtland, from Värmland to Hälsingland, being played by musicians who specialize in their local music.

How can one know the difference? How can one learn the appropriate musical dialect for a given tune when bombarded with tunes from every direction?

Swedes have an advantage in that they know the geography of their own country. Most tunes are identified according to the tradition they come from, more than just a title. A “Polska efter Ceylon Wallin” evokes the style of one of the 20th century’s most prominent nyckelharpa players. “Polska från Föllinge” gives one an idea of the special syncopated triplet tunes from Jämtland in the far north. “Polska från Orust” is from the maritime province of Bohuslän, influenced by Norwegian, Danish, and even non-Scandinavian musicians.

If you would like to keep your Swedish repertoire in order, I recommend getting a good map of Sweden, and getting to know it. First, see where the provinces are, and what part of Sweden they belong to.

The more southern provinces belong to the ancient kingdom of Götaland. It was here that the Danes ruled for many years, and where the bulk of commerce took place in the past. It is the most densely populated region, and with the best transportation connections. Canals and railroads crisscrossed Götaland long before the automobile age.

The band across central Sweden extending west from Stockholm is called Svealand. Here we have less cultural influence from abroad, and very rich musical traditions. Värmland, Uppland, and Dalarna are all considered part of Svealand.

Farther north is Norrland, including the provinces of Hälsingland, Härjedalen, and Jämtland. This is the less populated region in Sweden.

These place names come up in the learning of tunes, continued on next page...
and knowing something of the places helps you play the tune with the right feeling. If you can play fifteen tunes from Skåne, then you will have an idea of how to play the next one you learn from there.

I cannot pretend to give a geography lesson in this short space, but I can stress the importance of learning the Swedish geography a little more. Learn that Rättvik, Leksand, Ore, Orsa, and Boda are all in the Lake Siljan area of Dalarna. Arbrå, Alfta, and Bollnäs are in southern Hälsingland, and the music has a different style from the Hälsingland music of the north—Delsbo and Bergsjö. Tierp, Österbybruk, Lövstabruk, Örbyhus, Gimo, and Harg are all in the most traditional nyckelharpa region of Uppland.

If you cannot get a good map, then use the internet. When you learn a tune, go to a search engine and see if you can find the place name. You may be surprised at how much more you will enjoy playing a tune when you know more about the place it came from.

I know that many of the ANA members are familiar with the folk tours I conduct in Sweden in the summer—www.folksweden.com. I do these not just trying to make money, but because I want to share the understanding of the folk culture out of which this music came. This year’s tour is not in the traditionally nyckelharpa region of Sweden, but even so, nyckelharpa players will be encountered. It can be a revelation to see how fiddle tunes in the far south translate to nyckelharpa.

If you can, go to Sweden and see street signs! Learn the names of the rivers, lakes, and main cities! Learn to connect fiddlers’ names with their home areas: Lapp-Nils and Gås-Anders were NOT neighbors, but Per Persson Menlös DID meet Byss-Kalle.

I am in hopes that the ANA may help in the sorting out of information like this, but in the meantime you must do it on your own. Feel free to ask any knowledgeable musician about the place a tune came from, and if there are any more similar tunes from that tradition you might know or be able to learn. Get the regional connection! Not only does the music become more interesting, but you will find your skill in playing tunes from various traditions will improve.
A visit to beautiful Bucks County Pennsylvania in the spring with your nyckelharpa? Priceless!

East Coast
Nyckelharpa Stämma
April 20-22, 2007
www.nyckelharpa.org

Advent Lutheran Church
45 Worthington Mill Rd.
Richboro, PA 18954-0840
(215) 355-2529
www.adventrichboro.org

The instructors
Edward Anderzon will teach the nyckelharpa classes for both nyckelharpa and violin students. Born in 1972 in Katrineholm, in 2003 he became a Riksspelman for the tunes of Södermanland, and received the “silver” at the Zormärkes competition in Västerås. Edward teaches fiddle and nyckelharpa at the music high school in Malmö, and has taught classes for many institutions and groups.

Elin Skoglund was born in 1980 in Väsby, Uppland. She built her own nyckelharpa in 1996, and in 2004 became a Riksspelman for the tunes of Uppland. She has conducted many classes with Edward, and they recently recorded “Låtar från öst”, a well-received CD of traditional music from Eastern Sweden.

On Saturday evening, Edward and Elin will present a community concert.

Weekend Schedule
- There will be a pre-stämma dinner at a local restaurant followed by a jam on Friday evening beginning at 7:00 P.M.
- Continental breakfasts and lunches will be served at the church on Saturday and Sunday.
- The stämma will begin at 9:00 AM Saturday.
- Saturday’s dinner will be at the church, followed by a community concert by Edward and Elin.
- The Sunday workshop concludes mid-afternoon and will be followed by the opportunity for private lessons for any interested participants.

Fees
The event fee is $180. If you are unable to attend the Sunday sessions, the fee will be $120. Breakfasts, lunches and Saturday’s dinner are included in the fee.

Private lessons
Private lessons with either Edward or Elin are $60 for a 45 minute session.

Bucks County Area
Richboro is located about 45 minutes north of Philadelphia Airport, 30 minutes west of Trenton, and 90 minutes west of Newark Airport. The church is at the intersection of Second Street Pike and Worthington Mill Rd. in Richboro PA (Northampton Township).

It is in the heart of beautiful Bucks County with many sight-seeing, shopping and recreational opportunities in the immediate area. Near-by points-of-interest include Peddler’s Village, New Hope and historic Washington Crossing.

For more information about this event or to register:
Visit www.nyckelharpa.org or contact: Doug Oines – (267) 688-6072 doines72@yahoo.com
Our First Nyckelharpa Stämma

by Björn Ljungström (Connecticut)

It was a sunny day in early June in Österlen where our summer paradise fishing village on the Baltic shore is located. We were on our way across the new ten mile bridge from Malmö to Copenhagen airport to pick up our first American visitors. We found Elizabeth and Steve Morrison on the ANA membership roster last fall when my wife Barbara was searching for nyckelharpa playmates. After several meetings we planned a joint trip to the upcoming nyckelharpa stämma and world championship competition in the middle of June. We drove our friends back across the giant bridge and back to our fishing village through the ultra bright yellow rape seed fields now in full bloom. The first four days we introduced our guests to the pastoral beauty of Österlen, it’s gently rolling landscape and its quaint idyllic villages.

When it was time for the stämma we loaded up our van and hit the road north. We reached Stockholm after a nine hour drive, stopped there for a day to see my family and a brief visit to the Old Town and Skansen (an outdoor museum with displays of many different buildings and farms from every part of Sweden). Our friends stayed overnight at my sister’s place and got a chance to connect with a typical family with four children in suburban Stockholm after which we drove three more hours further north to Österbybruk—a very typical ironworks town and fine example of the cradle of Sweden’s industrialization starting in the 1600s. It is a tradition and evolution that spawned inventors such as John Ericsson, creator of the Merrimac which helped the North win the Civil War in the US.

What you first see as you arrive in Österbybruk is the huge castle-like mansion in a large surrounding park big enough to easily host a Woodstock size crowd. What we find, however, is the opposite of a mega event with a crowd of less than 1000 souls. You are struck by intimate atmosphere with small groups of players scattered around the park or in the caravan parking area in the grass.

The main attraction, of course, is the World Championship competition for best player in two different classes of nyckelharpas and a competition for builders of nyckelharpas.

The opening day featured a concert with young nyckelharpa players. The quality of their playing is a very hopeful sign that the nyckelharpa will survive even if it will always play second fiddle to the fiddle which reigns supreme. That was particularly obvious during the folk music wave of the 70s when the big Bingsjö fiddle stämma would attract 60,000 visitors.

On the second day a concert in the church featured folk superstar Sofia Karlsson. Her magical voice was accompanied beautifully by a bass, a fiddle, and nyckelharpa master Johan Hedin. Johan is working on new developments of the nyckelharpa with an extended range. I was moved to tears by Sofia’s voice and her interpretation of Dan Andersson’s highly romantic melancholy songs.

Neither this enthusiast, nor our friends, can survive three days on music alone and what saved us from starvation was a little cafe restaurant called Karin’s Stable Café which provided down to earth home style baking and cooking with an intimate atmosphere.

Between concerts and competitions there is lots of time for mingling and jamming. Buskspel (bush playing) is the quintessential core of any stämma, it is where fiddlers share new tunes with each other and learn new ways of playing in different dialects.

We bumped into Rita Leydon, the godmother of American nyckelharpa players, and Anna McFarlane, a Swede living in New Brunswick, Canada, who joined Barbara and Elizabeth for a rousing good set on the grass with Steve strumming along on mandola. Among the many characters we met while mingling was a curious builder of equally curious unorthodox harpas playing away in front of his vintage Swedish caravan from 1950.

We really enjoyed the competition for nyckelharpa builders. It was a treat not only to see some thirty-five great looking harpas on display but also to meet some of the best builders and try some of the harpas. Barb was happy to meet Sören Åhker and Olle Plahn—both nearly sober. Olle Plahn offered to take her harpa for repairs and adjustment.

After three full days of nyckelharpas we headed back down south to our fishing village, very content and satisfied and ready for the next major event—the midsummer celebration which always takes place one week after the stämma. Midsummer is a major holiday in Sweden and Barbara and Elizabeth enjoyed dressing up in folk-costumes and playing for the dancing around the midsummer pole.
Nyckelharpa in Germany

by Paul Allman (California)

Interest in the nyckelharpa has been steadily growing, as evidenced by the increase in the membership of ANA over the years. This is probably due to the fact that the nyckelharpa is an exotic looking instrument and once someone sets their eyes on one they can easily succumb to its charm and character. This is especially true if that individual already has an interest in playing music. While the nyckelharpa is an instrument most often associated with Swedish folk music, a wide range of music can be played on it and the notes and melodies are limited only by the imagination of the player.

It is with this in mind that I recently attended the 3rd International Nyckelharpa Days at Burg Fuersteneck in Germany. I enjoy playing the typical Swedish/Scandinavian polkas, schottises, and waltzes, but I also enjoy an occasional Irish tune from time to time. Friends listening to me play frequently request a tune “we can recognize,” and every once in awhile, while practicing my nyckelharpa, I hear my wife Sharon in the background muttering, “Not another polka!”

I thought that maybe Germany would offer a different perspective. I was planning to be in Europe and arranged my schedule to include a four day stop at the International Nyckelharpa Days.

Burg Fuersteneck is located pretty much in the middle of Germany. The setting is smaller and more compact than Ekebyholm (for those of you who have been there), and even more quaint. The “Burg” (meaning castle of residence) has a long history dating back to 845 A.D. Much like Ekebyholm, once you are at the event, there is really no need (and certainly little time) to wander off anywhere else.

I was a little worried how my German was going to hold up as it had been a long time since I had used it, but that turned out not to be an issue. Similar to Sweden (where everyone is more than willing to “practice” their English with you), the Germans were very willing to speak English. However, my German, once dusted off, came back quickly, and when I needed a specific clarification, there was always someone willing and able to assist me with a translation.

The International Nyckelharpa Days truly was an international event. Classes were taught primarily in English, as well as in German, with the instructors coming from Germany, Belgium, France, and Sweden. Thirty-four participants and four instructors took part in the program. Ditte Andersson, who may be familiar to you from her teaching at Ekebyholm was there from Sweden, as was Marco Ambrosini (an Italian living in Germany), Didier Francois (from Belgium), and Annette Osann (a German living in France). Annette was also the resident nyckelharpa repair/builder person.

The program began on Thursday afternoon and ended on Sunday afternoon. On the first evening, we all met in the large lecture room, formed a circle and introduced ourselves. It immediately became clear what impact Sweden has had on those present. Almost everyone explained that they attended a folk festival in Sweden, or had seen or heard someone from Sweden playing the nyckelharpa, making it clear that the roots of the modern day nyckelharpa are securely grounded in Sweden. Many of the participants were professional musicians—either part of a group that currently performs, or music teachers. These combined talents added a great deal to the sessions and allowed for some interesting improvisation.

What I hoped to get from this experience was a broader look at the nyckelharpa. At the beginning of each day, a list of classes was posted, along with the instructor and topic. Participants could choose the classes they wanted to attend and were able to rotate between instructors, providing an opportunity to experience each instructor, their teaching style and specific lesson. For example, in Ditte’s class, which she called, “Overcoming the fear of playing at the top end,” the focus was on perfecting double stops and specific exercises for playing all the way up to the highest G. She also demonstrated when to add accent notes to enhance the melody. Marco introduced better techniques for bowing and provided several baroque tunes to experiment with. Didier explored the world of improvisation, an area I had not yet ventured into. He had class members learn a basic bass melody and we took turns improvising melodies. To be able to do this with some degree of structure, Didier reviewed some of the basics of notes in chords that became the starting point for our improvisations. In one of the sessions, he walked the group through the arrangement of Crystal Bells by Chet Baker, originally played on the trumpet. It sounded great on the nyckelharpa.

These were just a few of the sessions that I personally attended. There were many more throughout the several days we were together. During the evenings, there were performances and presentations. One evening, we were treated to a rendition of Bartok on nyckelharpas. Another evening, Ditte and Michael Naslund (Director of the Eric Sahlinström Institute) gave a presentation about ESI and the nyckelharpa in Sweden. Michael was also there to discuss the newly proposed “Certificate of Nyckelharpa,” a certificate of accomplishment given to participants who successfully complete the program. The certificate would be recognized in several countries (initially Italy, Germany, and Sweden) and provide a forum to standardize the increasing international status of the nyckelharpa as an instrument.

I had hoped there would be several different types of nyckelharpas at the event, and I was not disappointed. About 40% of the participants played the typical Swedish nyckelharpa—three rows of keys with strings tuned C–G–C–A. Others had variations of the four-row instrument typi-

continued on next page...
cally tuned G–D–A–E. Three of the four instructors had the four-row instrument and one, Annette, was a builder of this type of nyckelharpa.

One point of particular interest on the four-row instrument was that the keys would ‘pop’ through the topside of the key box. Didier (one of the instructors) demonstrated for me how this could allow the player to create different tones for a drone string by simply using a ‘capo’ he had created. The capo was made from a piece of metal and looked quite similar to a small Allen wrench. It cleverly stopped the key when it ‘popped’ through and held the note.

The four-row instrument, as you might suspect, is quite a bit heavier than the typical three-row instrument. Didier had also come up with a clever way to hold the instrument and alleviate back and neck strain. He runs the shoulder strap under the right arm (bow arm), and places the right arm behind and under the instrument, basically taking the elbow off of the tail piece and letting the arm be free under the instrument. This certainly distributed the weight more comfortably and allowed the arm free movement. For violin players it allows the shoulder to be more involved in the playing. He attached a typical violin chin rest to the back of his nyckelharpa to prevent the instrument from slipping. His theory is that lifting the instrument away from the body allows the instrument to resonate better and therefore increase the richness of the sound. He also created a different bowing technique to accommodate the different angles. While this way of holding the nyckelharpa takes some getting used to (as does the four-row instrument in general), it illustrates another dimension of the nyckelharpa as an instrument, as individuals explore beyond the traditional.

Several participants used this way of holding the nyckelharpa during the sessions. If you want more information about this style of holding the nyckelharpa contact Didier at d@didierfrancois.be. While on his web site take a moment to listen to some of his different nyckelharpa music. The version of Crystal Bells by Chet Baker is listed there as well.

My experience at the 3rd Annual Nyckelharpa Days in Germany did what I hoped it would. It opened my eyes to new ideas, unique music, and different things I could do with my instrument—like retuning the C melody string to a D. I brought back with me simple things, different tunings altogether, different ways of holding the instrument, and different types of early and contemporary music. If you are enjoying playing the nyckelharpa but want to discover different ways to play the instrument, as well as different types of instruments, this event might be worth your time. Still however, there is nothing quite like getting together with other nyckelharpa players and just playing those great traditional Swedish tunes.
Väsen in Oneonta

by Peter Blue (New York)

This fall, as part of their US tour, Väsen gave a concert at the West Kortright Center in East Meredith, NY. The following day, workshops and master classes in nyckelharpa, guitar and fiddle were offered at nearby Hartwick College’s Pine Lake Campus.

The Concert

The West Kortright Center is an incredibly wonderful performance venue—a former church at a rural crossroads where the neighbor’s cows, with cowbells, can be heard from the yard. In 1975, the valley’s residents vowed to save the building, with its beautiful stained glass windows, kerosene chandeliers, and rich woodwork. There are no bad seats, the acoustics are excellent, the space intimate, and the location (in rural Delaware County) divine. There are only two houses visible from the center—it’s mostly farm meadows, pastures and wooded hillsides. People come from all over. It’s always a treat to see that remote building fill up with neighbors and musicians.

We arrived incredibly early (especially for us) and, though we were far from the first arrivals, we managed to get seats in the front row. Väsen would be performing acoustically. Before long, the room was packed. For many people this would be their first exposure to nyckelharpa and Swedish traditional music.

A couple of hours and encores later, concert goers were invited to an after-hours party at one of the neighbors, where many of the next day’s workshop participants were staying. Some fiddle students decided to have a “jam in their jammies” and were surprised when three very tall Swedes appeared in the bedroom door. “We love that tune,” said one of the girls, “Do you guys know it?”—Came the reply, “Yes, we enjoy it very much; we wrote it.”

The Workshops

Next day we met at Pine Lake Hartwick College’s 920-acre natural classroom of woodlands, wetlands, lake and buildings located near Davenport Center, just eight miles from the college’s main campus. Breakfast was at Peter and Debbie Blue’s little house at Pine Lake. Olov, Mikael and Roger (Väsen) were staying across the yard in the Strawbale House. Master classes in the morning, lunch, another round of classes in the afternoon, then a group session.

The nyckelharpa class at Pine Lake 2006; top row Lydia Ievins, Lenora Kandiner, Joanne Sturgeon, Tim Cresson, Marie Lutins, Olov Johansson, Emily Schaad; kneeling: Debbie Blue, Hannah Mason, Laurie Hart, Tim Cutts.
Nyckelharpa students met with Olov. Guitar students went with Roger to tune their instruments to Roger’s ADADAD tuning; fiddle students met with Mikael. Classes were focused on each instrument, and making everyone feel comfortable, yet teaching challenging material to all. A long lunch hour gave ample time to schmooze, try each others’ instruments, or go outside to enjoy the day and the lake.

Mikael, Olov and Roger taught each group *Polonäs från Småland* and in the afternoon, everyone gathered to play together. This tune has become one of the favorites of our local Swedish tune session. Laurie Hart of Ithaca, NY made a transcription of the tune to help everyone out. Guitarists opened the set, playing in an unfamiliar tuning, with soggy loose low strings; eleven harpas joined in, then fiddles. Väsen played a piece of theirs that incorporated the tune, and after some lingering and exchanging of addresses and phone numbers, all went on their ways.

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**Polonäs från Småland**

*Trad. efter Magnus Gustafsson, taught by Väsen in Oneonta workshops 2006*

Transcription Laurie Hart 2006
String Bazar

The ANA is pleased to offer nyckelharpa strings for sale! We have playing strings and three versions of understring sets.

Order Form

Prices listed are for ANA members/non-members. Price includes shipping to a US address.

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e-mail for inquiries: strings@nyckelharpa.org

Send this form along with a check payable to American Nyckelharpa Association to:
Tim Newcomb
P.O. Box 51, Montpelier, VT 05602

After many years of waiting, the harpa string flood gates seem to have opened at Prim and I have received a full selection of nyckelharpa melody strings. The elusive Prim brown strings have shown up for the C (2) and G (3) strings. They are labeled “orchestra” and are the hardest of the three flavors of Prim strings, in theory giving a nyckelharpa with timid central melody string sound more get-up and go. I have six C (2) strings and four G (3) strings, which is all Prim had. On the other side of the string aisle are the Prim blue strings, which are labeled “soft tone.” These help tone down harpas with A (1) strings that have a penchant for belting it out like the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s Magic Flute. The blues are available for the A (1), G (3) and C (4) strings. Lastly, the good old Prim greens are well-stocked in all gauges. Paying online using PayPal is most helpful. I’ve had a couple checks get lost in the mail recently, which electronic payment avoids. If you’ve been concerned with your nyckelharpa’s evenness of sound, now is a great time to experiment with the blue and brown strings while the supplies last!

—Tim Newcomb

Playing Strings

The playing strings are the four largest strings, the ones that you actually touch with the bow. PRIM brand strings are made by an old Swedish string manufacturing company. Their fiddle strings are popular among folk musicians, and are available widely in the US. Their nyckelharpa strings are basically the same as their cello strings, except that they are the correct length for nyckelharpas instead of about a foot too long. All four strings are wound. The A-string is .020” (0.50 mm) in diameter.

Sympathetic Strings

We offer three versions of understrings, described more fully in the January 1998 edition of Nyckel Notes. Basically, the three sets can be called 6+6, 4+4+4, and 12-step. There’s actually some logic here:

6+6 is
- 6 wound strings .021” (0.53 mm) in diameter
- 6 plain strings .014” (0.36 mm) in diameter

4+4+4 is
- 4 wound strings 0.24” (0.61 mm) in diameter
- 4 wound strings .021” (0.53 mm) in diameter
- 4 plain strings .014” (0.36 mm) in diameter

12-step is
- 12 strings, varying from .025” (0.64 mm) to .014” (0.36 mm), by steps of .001”. The lower 6 are wound, the higher 6 are plain.
The American Nyckelharpa Association
The ANA is a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering the nyckelharpa and its music in North America. We sponsor and produce music workshops across the country featuring the traditions of the nyckelharpa.

ANA Membership dues are $10 per year, which includes a digital subscription to this newsletter. Send to the address below, and please indicate if you play the nyckelharpa and if we can publish your name in our roster.

www.nyckelharpa.org
Source of information about the nyckelharpa, nyckelharpa players, a history of the instrument, nyckelharpa events and more!

Nyckel Notes
Published quarterly. Send submissions to Nyckel Notes at the address below, or to: nyckelnotes@nyckelharpa.org

The American Nyckelharpa Association
c/o John Wendell, 1486 Ulupuni Street
Kailua, Hawaii 96734

Rita’s Notes
We have all had the chance to participate in the election process once again ... our ANA election to fill three empty seats on the Board of Directors. As of this writing the outcome is still unknown, but when all is said and done I will have removed the mantle of President of the organization and instead put on the cloak of Journal Editor. I requested that my name be removed from the nominations list because I only wanted to wear one hat at a time.

I believe strongly that our journal, Nyckel Notes, is vitally important to the health of our organization. When I asked my husband to help me with the proofreading of this issue, he shared the observation that the issue reflects a really positive trend among the membership, a trend toward sharing our enthusiasm and love of the nyckelharpa with each other and wanting to learn as much as we can together. I think he’s right.

On a personal note, I’ve had to hustle to get this issue together and out the door because all of a sudden I’m facing an unplanned three week trip to Sweden. My uncle passed away and I’m flying over for the funeral and to help with cleaning out his house so it can be sold. It’s going to be a very nice funeral—Magnus Holmström, the reigning Nyckelharpa World Champ has agreed to provide the music ... my uncle would have loved that! He was a big supporter of my nyckelharpa addiction and came to all my Ekebyholm “graduation” concerts at Rimbo church. He was old. It was time.

—Rita Leydon, Editor

Hear Ye! Hear Ye!
Concert in NYC
Saturday, March 10 at 7:30 PM

Bruce Sagan, nyckelharpa
& Elaine Comparone, harpsichord
play traditional Swedish music
and sonatas by Loisellet & Telemann.

First Moravian Church
Lexington Ave. & 30th St. (SW corner)
New York City

Tickets: $25; $15 for Seniors, Students & Musicians.
Program Information & Reservations:
212-280-1086 or 212-684-4174.
Fundraiser to benefit restoration of First Moravian Church’s rare mid-19th century organ.