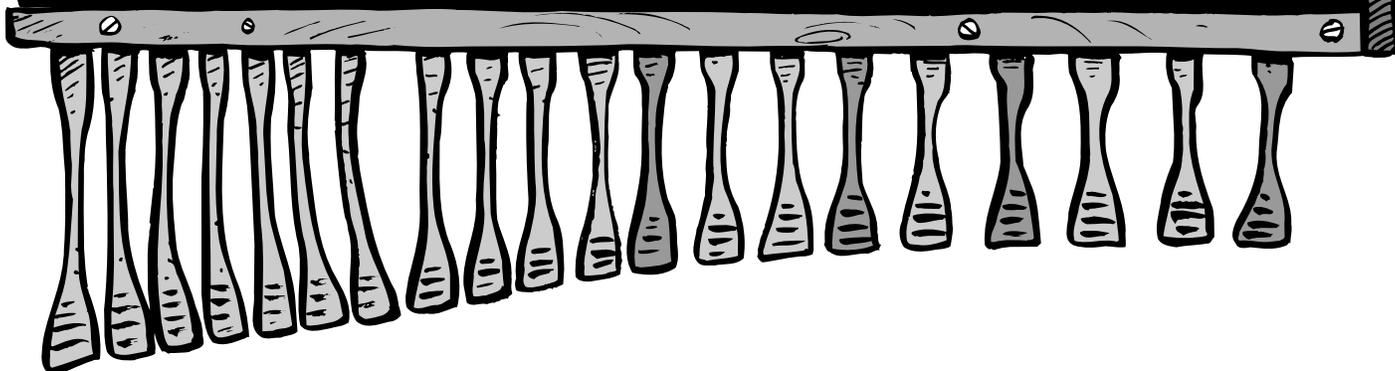


THE NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN NYCKELHARPA ASSOCIATION

NYCKELNOTES



Finding the 'Right' Tempo

by Sheila Morris

There are certain advantages to being the only nyckelharpa player in my area—I can pretty much play tunes however I want, and the dancers are stuck with it! Of course, if I didn't play them so they like them, they'd just put on a tape and adjust the speed, so there has to be some give-and-take.

This wasn't much of a problem until the first time I went to Sweden. I'd been playing the slowish bondpolskor requested by my dance group, in spite of the fact that the recordings were invariably faster. I figured most players raised the tempo for performance or recording, to make the tunes more interesting to listen to. But when I went to Sweden, I found that everyone played a lot faster than I did—maybe not quite as fast as the recordings, but close.

After I spent a week at Ekebyholm, I came back and played at a dance. Loud protests all around!! "Boy, that was fast!" So, I tried to slow the tunes down again. This was harder, because now I 'knew for a fact' that the tunes were 'supposed' to go faster. My solution was to play one tune slowly, and one tune a bit faster.

This problem has only gotten more difficult as the years go by—every time I go to Sweden, I have so much fun playing the tunes up-tempo that it's very hard to change when I get home, but the dancers here don't like the faster speed.

So, I've been doing a little research. I sat here with my metronome and went through all my CDs. Consensus—bondpolskor as played today have a tempo range from 96 to 144 beats per

minute. Weighing in at the slow end are Ceylon Wallin and Hasse Gille, at the upper end are Björn Björn and Puma. The most common tempos are 116-132.

I wrote some letters—most people who dance bondpolska in Sweden are absolutely convinced that it is impossible to dance it at the slow tempo preferred by dancers in Boulder. Apparently, the dance was taught here in the US for the first time during the 1970s, when many Swedes believed that it was more 'traditional' to play tunes slowly. This was a temporary aberration in Sweden, but many tunes and dances taught over here have retained these slower tempos. Some of the folks I talked to in Sweden feel that these dances have acquired a sort of American accent—I have even heard the extremely slow style of dancing referred to as "bond-ballet".

Part of the problem also seems to be a modern problem—our dance spaces are a different size than the barns and kitchens where these dances were developed (Swedish barns are smaller than you might think...), allowing for more straight-line movement, and our dancers pay a lot more attention to the details of the dances than the farmers who created them. We try to do them 'right'—the farmers just danced, with little or no consideration to styling. And wearing thick-soled shoes, to boot!

None of this 'proves' anything, of course. It's just information, which I have used to give myself permission to continue to play tunes at pretty much any tempo that works. Despite my strong feeling that bondpolska should

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Harpas in Hälsingland

By Sheila Morris

As you all may have noticed, my case of “nyckelharpa-itis” leads me to travel to Sweden whenever possible, in search of further instruction. In the summer of 2001, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend Peter ‘Puma’ Hedlund’s new two-day course for nyckelharpa (and fiddle), near his home in Hälsingland.

The course, which Peter hopes will become an annual event, took place at the Orbaden Conference Center, located a few miles north of Bollnäs. A hotel, pensionat, youth hostel, and camping-area pretty much let participants select their own price range. The Ljusnan river runs behind the center, and there are stairs leading down to a swimming beach. The sunset over the river was spectacular!

Everything ran very smoothly, especially for a first-time course. There were a few minor glitches (such as the folks at the conference center believing that a fold-out wall would suffice to separate two groups of musicians, and that harpa players need chairs with arms), but these were ironed out with quickness and dispatch. One group of musicians got moved to another building, and we had new chairs by the first coffee-break.

The course took place on a Tuesday and Wednesday, so I think Peter was a little surprised (and pleased!) to have 43 participants this first year—24 harpas and 19 fiddles. And six Americans! There were two teachers for each instrument, with Cajsa Ekstav and Henrik Eriksson doing the honors for nyckelharpa.

The first order of business was to split into two groups—“slower” and “faster”. Six players opted for “slower” and went off with Henrik, leaving the rest of us to find room for 18 students and one teacher in our room. Luckily, the room was fairly large.....those darn cases take up a lot of space!

We worked on maybe three tunes the first morning with Cajsa, had a delicious buffet lunch in the conference center’s dining hall, and returned to our room for more

tunes with Henrik. After an equally tasty dinner, people headed off to nap, jam, or practice a bit before the evening’s three concerts. The local band Draupner played first, in the pensionat’s dining room. Half an hour later, Nåra performed on the outdoor stage. These were both fine concerts, but not a nyckelharpa among them. However, Peter made up for that with the final concert of the night. He played for an intimate crowd in the Viking-

style longhouse a short walk away along the bank of the river, together with his wife Karin on fiddle and Henrik on harpa (and a special guest appearance by Peter’s nine-year-old son Johan, playing spoons.....).

The second day was a shortened version of the first day—new tunes and review with Cajsa, more new tunes and review with Henrik. Somehow, I managed to come away from this whole thing with 8 new playable tunes (which is not to say they’re presentable for an audience yet!). I’m not sure how this happened—I only held onto 5 from the whole week at Ekebyholm.

After we finished with the teaching part of the course, the

day wrapped up with the first Orbaden Stämman. Unfortunately, it rained steadily all day, so everything had to move indoors, but there was still the usual allspel (mostly Hälsingland fiddle tunes in D, unfamiliar to all the Uppland harpas), and various performances. We all played a couple of tunes we learned during the course, and then split up for ‘buskspel’ (which was actually ‘husspel’, due to the rain), singing, and general stämman activities. There was a dance after dinner, though I never heard the name of the group that was playing. They were young and a little intimidated by the thought of playing for two solid hours, but they did a great job. There were maybe twenty people dancing, though rarely all at once, several of whom came from the local dance group just for the dancing.

All in all, I had a great time at Orbaden, and I hope it does indeed become an annual event!



Sheila Morris (left) plays in Österbybruk.

Finding the Right Tempo

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be faster than it is done here, there's no point in playing for dance if the dancers don't like what you're playing! I find that some tunes, the Wallin tunes mostly, work best at slower tempos, so that's what I play for my dance group. Other tunes, Sahlström tunes, work better at the faster tempos, and I use them when I play in a concert setting. Besides, learning to play tunes at a wide variety of tempos increases my skill as a musician.

Of Course They Had to Practice!

I have on a few occasions met beginning students who seem surprised that music turns out to be harder than they expected. "But it looks so easy when all of you play!"

Well, good! It should look easy! But the way you get something to look easy is...practice! Nobody seems to be surprised that Olympic figure-skaters have to practice, or gymnasts, or football players, but a lot of people seem to be surprised that ARTISTS have to practice! Even da Vinci made practice drawings before embarking on a big work.

And you have to practice MOST when you're just starting. You need to establish good habits—hand positions, bow technique, tone production—and learn fingerings. You

need to learn exercises and tunes. Everything you learn lays a base for the next thing, so as you become more skilled, it takes less practicing to learn a new tune—you already know some of the most common figures, and can just 'plug them in'. All of this takes time—how much time depends on you. Some people learn very quickly, some less so. It doesn't matter. But a lot of those people who seem to learn more quickly are just plain putting in more hours. I try to practice an hour a day. Someone who practices six hours a day will progress at least six times faster than I will—possibly faster, since it's cumulative.

I've noticed that a lot of really good players seem to think that faster is better. This might be true in some situations, but when playing for dancing, the dancers aren't impressed by how many notes you can cram into a two-minute dance. They ARE impressed by tunes played at a danceable tempo, with the correct 'svung' for the dance. Some fiddlers are easier to dance to than others—their music helps the dancers along. This usually involves having a sense of 'lifting' the dancers out of the floor rather than driving them down into it. Most polskor have a distinct 'lift' at some point and benefit greatly from a light style of playing. Too much 'down' stress can make the music feel heavy, and the dancers really have to work to keep their svikt going.

Bondpolska

Trad. efter Mats Wesslén

The musical score for "Bondpolska" is written in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The second staff starts with a measure rest labeled '5'. The third staff starts with a measure rest labeled '9'. The fourth staff starts with a measure rest labeled '13'. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, with some notes having accents. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Playing for Dancers

by Bronwyn Bird

If you have never had the opportunity to play your nyckelharpa for dancers you really ought to give it a try. My first time playing was for the Skandinöje Dancers in Bound Brook, New Jersey, with Chris and Rita Leydon a few weeks ago and it was an experience I will never forget. Although I was nervous at first because I knew that you really have to keep a steady beat or the dancers will have a hard time dancing, I soon realized that if I relaxed, the rhythm would just come. In fact, as I began to play I found that I didn't have to listen for it, it was flowing through the air. You could hear it in the dancer's feet, in the swishing of skirts as they spun around the room. It filled the entire place with a sort of magic as the music flowed from our bows across the strings. I just closed my eyes and let it soak in, filling me with warmth.

One important thing I learned is that it is not all about playing the hardest, most complicated, and impressive tunes. Sometimes the simplest tune turns out to be the best, because to play really well you have to have confidence in what you are playing. Just relax and let the heart of the tune come out through the bow. The hardest thing for me is knowing what part of the tune is coming up next, whether it's A or B. I get so caught up in the tune and the dancers circling around that I lose track of where I am!

Everyone was so nice and encouraging, even when we didn't know the kind of tune they wanted to dance to. I left the building feeling sparked to practice more and learn new tunes. I hope I will have many more chances to play for dancers. I think it's an important part of learning to play the nyckelharpa.

Polska i C-dur

Trad. efter Mats Westlén

$\bullet = 100$

The musical score is written in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a tempo marking of a quarter note equal to 100 beats per minute. The piece consists of five staves of music. The first staff starts with a repeat sign. The second staff begins with a measure number '4'. The third staff begins with a measure number '8' and includes a repeat sign. The fourth staff begins with a measure number '12'. The fifth staff begins with a measure number '16' and ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

A Tune for Christmas Morning

by Matt Fichtenbaum

Fiddler Olle Wallman played for a music and dance workshop in Boston several years ago, and taught this tune. He also shared its story.

In Olle's home town in southern Dalarna province, there's a tradition of including folk music in the Christmas morning sunrise service. This tradition had gone on for many years, and "all the good tunes had been used." Olle's son Mats, also a fiddler, said "Next year I shall have a new tune," and the

following year's service featured this tune.

"I ottan" means "in the first hours of the morning," and "Julottan," the name for the sunrise service, is "Early Christmas morning."

I have transcribed this tune approximately as it sounds. Play it gently, with respect and affection. It's a fine tune.

Incidentally, I've heard it sung as a hymn, beginning with "Välkommen nu Jesu."

Julvisa från Älvdalen

Transcribed by Matt Fichtenbaum

Faster Berit

by Rita Leydon

I love my aunt very much and make an effort to visit her in the Blackeberg Nursing Home every time I come to Sweden. The Österby Stämman and a nyckelharpa course at Ekebyholm in Rimbo are the reason for this trip. My father, her big brother, died several months ago at age 85. He had lived with me his last three years and I'd watched his mind disappear into a foggy haze similar to the one that has absorbed Berit. When my Dad was in the Alzheimer wing of a nursing home the last two weeks before he died I had played for him there and seen how happy the music made not just him, but the other residents as well. I marveled how good it felt to play tunes for Dad when there wasn't much else I could do besides love him. I'd had a fleeting glimpse of the power of music to penetrate cracks where nothing else can get through.

Faster Berit has Alzheimer disease and, since the spring of 2002, is permanently signed into a facility for such cases. The insidious transition from her normal self to a woman totally out of touch with reality took a number of years, gradually becoming more and more apparent. Since I live in America and my aunt lives in Sweden, I see her only infrequently, about twice a year. With each visit, she has become progressively worse—from a slight suspicion that something was amiss to a full blown case of the Big A. The familiar Faster Berit of my youth doesn't appear to reside in her now spent body any more—or if she does, she's locked behind too many doors to ever find her way out again. She's sweet and laughs easily, but quick to scold her floor mates if her motherly feathers are ruffled or if she senses an impropriety. My two uncles, her brother Tord and husband Alf visit every other day, rain or shine. Take the subway and a bus and walk the rest. She claps with delight when

her boys come and always wonders if she can accompany them home so she can be with her mother who died maybe 30 years ago.

I decided to bring my nyckelharpa and play for Faster Berit. This decision to take along my instrument was one I wouldn't have made on previous visits because I was always too preoccupied with my lack of musical self confidence, too nervous to play for others in general, and very easily distracted. Why set myself up for failure and humiliation? I hadn't yet learned that such an audience has no interest in judging my abilities or lack thereof. Hadn't yet learned to give freely of myself and my music. Hadn't yet found the courage.

I strapped on my nyckelharpa in the open hallway by the elevators which serves as a lobby where the major social pastime is observing comings and goings. Berit radiated expectant approval, clapping her hands in anticipation, and

literally bouncing on the edge of her seat. She was all dressed up in brand new and spotless clothes, the fruits of a shopping expedition with Tord and Alf on their previous visit. She smiled and laughed, clasping her hands over her heart, head tilted to one side as she fixed an adoring gaze on me, her amazing little Rita from America. My uncles stood sentry on either side of her and shifted weight from one foot to the next, hands secured behind their backs, patiently waiting for my demonstrative foolery to be over. They're not into music.

The room's population increased dramatically as wheelchairs rolled in and slippers shuffled on by to see what all the commotion was about. I was well oiled and cranked out tune after tune feeling energized by the ruckus I was causing. Feet tapped, hands and fingers



Faster Berit, left, and Rita Leydon

twitched, heads bobbed and nodded, eyes squinted over rounded cheeks revealing ready smiles and unaccustomed giddy laughter. Two especially spirited matrons couldn't suppress an urgent need to dance—a need I understand only too well myself—each erupting in a very personal solo interpretation of my rhythms. It was easy to keep to the beat by watching the up-down, up-down, up down, of the entire room. Dancing Lady Number One pined for a partner, took my elbow and smiled suggestively, apparently not aware that I couldn't both play and dance at the same time. Dancing Lady Number Two was soon lost in a trance, totally absorbed by her dance, eyes closed, content smile gracing her life worn face. Not just the dancers, but all the assembled residents were having honest-to-god FUN! When I stopped playing, all motion stopped simultaneously, as if someone suddenly pulled the plug. The dancers were startled and annoyed by the rude awakening. No! No! Don't stop! More! More! But the lovely spell had been broken. Lunch was announced and my uncles and I needed to take our leave.

An attendant caught me by the arm to express thanks and wonderment and to tell me that nimble Dancing Lady Number Two can just barely walk upright normally, even with the aid of a walker. I stopped dead in my tracks and studied the dark eyes that were penetrating mine. Really? She nodded and released her grip on my arm.

Ordinarily I think of the music that manages to escape from my nyckelharpa as being strictly of the skeletal and utilitarian variety. No virtuoso touches, no nuances, no thrills. Just simple melody lines. But, blow me away, on this particular occasion, my rudimentary assemblage of notes, once released, contained the elusive key that tickled open creaky diseased doors and dislodged old gnarled flywheels into smooth repetitive motion once again. The music I made had the amazing power to bypass obstacles and hit bull's eye, smack dab in the hearts of a couple of elderly ladies otherwise shut off from their world by Alzheimer disease. The power to lighten their load and stir them to dance. Blow me away!

Polska efter Lump-Janne

Traditional

The musical score for "Polska efter Lump-Janne" is written in 3/4 time and consists of four staves of music. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The melody is characterized by a steady eighth-note rhythm with frequent beamed eighth notes and some dotted rhythms. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The second staff starts at measure 5, the third at measure 9, and the fourth at measure 13. Each staff concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

I May Never Play My Fiddle Again

by Elizabeth Morrison

Admittedly, I was never able to make it sing like a lark, but now it sounds like an old crow in comparison to a nyckelharpa! I first heard a live nyckelharpa performance on the last day of November 2001 in Montpelier, Vermont, where Peter Hedlund was playing. I don't remember the name of his first tune but I'll never forget the effect it had on me. Nothing had ever sounded so beautiful, so enchanting, to my ears. Suddenly I was alone in that room, transfixed by the nyckelharpa and its music. Tears pricked my eyes... so THIS is where I've been headed!

Obtaining a nyckelharpa did not happen as easily as my decision to play one, but once I found my way to the ANA, I discovered a wealth of information about this amazing instrument. I also found a new family. Everyone I contacted was so friendly and generous with helpful suggestions to guide me on this path—there was light at the end of the tunnel! In just a few months, I was on Sören Åhker's waiting list and had received a loaner harpa to get started with while I waited for one of my very own!

I may not have been so completely mesmerized by this instrument if anyone other than Peter had been playing that evening in Vermont. Since he is the responsible musician, it's fitting that he should teach me to play it, but considering that I'd be traveling to Sweden for lessons, this would be a difficult proposition. Luckily for me, the solution to this dilemma came in the form of instructional DVDs starring Peter!

I'm usually fairly uncomfortable during private lessons—such close scrutiny is almost more than I can bear. In these situations, my brain tends to shut down, leaving me fumbling for notes and forgetting what I've practiced so many times. Group workshops are easier on the nerves but not ideal for learning the fine details of playing a tune in any given style. The DVDs provide a new category of teaching, combining some of the best features of private and group lessons and eliminating the worst. It's as though they were custom made for my own particular learning style.

These DVDs are works of art, skillfully filmed and produced by Rita Leydon. They are a pleasure to view both for learning purposes and pure entertainment! The presentation is in a minimalist format. Peter and his nyckelharpa are framed by a dark background; Peter dressed in dark clothing. The nyckelharpa glows. Rita and Peter have recreated, on film, the effect of my first experience with the instrument! With no distractions, it's exceptionally easy to focus on the task at hand. At first, the task at hand for me was to learn how to hold the harpa and bow, and tuning the instrument. Peter covers these skills right off and adds some exer-

cises to warm up with.

Though there is no direct personal interaction, the experience is very much like having an extended private lesson. Peter obligingly plays and replays the tune in slow tempo until I finally get it! He also plays it at normal speed, adding double stops, trills, and variations to demonstrate how one might expand the tune. You can even change the angle of the camera to view just his left hand for the fingering. What's more, Peter is always available whenever I need to review a tune, fingering, or bowing or if I just need someone to play with.

Peter is an excellent teacher. He presents the lessons in a thoughtful progression of tunes, each an "exercise" introducing a new skill to work with. In the text portion of the DVDs, he writes a bit about each tune—where it came from, what new skill you'll be learning, and pertinent technical hints. Also included in the text portion are the transcriptions of each tune and the English pronunciation of the titles for those of us who need them. There are preview samples of tunes in the next DVDs and surprise videos of Peter and his harpa and friends in action at the end of DVD #2.

Many thanks to Rita and Peter for producing these invaluable DVDs. I'm thoroughly enjoying this learning experience. Just one question, how soon can I get the next one?

Swedish Harpa Site Worth Visiting

Gunnar Fredelius, besides being one of the jurors and organizers of the Nyckelharpa VM (World Championships) in Sweden, is also the webmaster of the very thorough and official site, Nyckelharpanforum. One of its main draws is oodles of wonderful and drool-worthy pictures. If ANA members send him scanned jpg photos of ourselves in action "over here" he'd be thrilled and I bet he'd make a section just for us. Gunnar updates constantly.

He writes, "I don't know if it will make anyone 'over there' happy, but I've just created a few more English language pages for my website: <http://nyckelharpanforum.net/> (that is, in addition to the ones Bart translated for me back in 1996!)"

Upcoming Nyckelharpa Events

Check the ANA's web page for the most current scheduling information

EVENTS IN SWEDEN

13 - 15 June 2003:

Nyckelharpa Stämman at Österbybruk

The annual Stämman (folk festival) at Österbybruk is one of the biggest events for nyckelharpa players, with concerts, dances, courses and of course lots of jamming. For more information, see nyckelharpa.just.nu.

22 - 26 (most likely) June 2002: Ekebyholm

Residence course the week following midsommar every year, from Sunday to Thursday, at Ekebyholm castle, just north of Rimbo, Uppland. This course was started by Eric Sahlström, and is the most well-known course for learning Uppland music. Most participants are nyckelharpa players, but it's open to fiddle players as well.

The course is for nyckelharpa players at all levels, and all but beginning fiddle players. Cost for 2000 was 3300 SEK, which includes tuition, room and board, lessons and evening programs. The application period is about 20 Mar to 15 Apr 2003. Don't send any money yet, as only 75 students will be accepted.

Fiddle teachers are selected from the likes of Sonia Sahlström-Larsson, Anders Liljefors, and Tore Lindkvist. Nyckelharpa teachers include Ditte Andersson, Peter Hedlund, Cajsa Ekstav, Sven-Olof Sundell, Esbjörn Hogmark, Leif Åhlund, etc. As usual, Eva Tjörnebo will be teaching Swedish folksongs. The course leaders are Sigurd Sahlström and Lars Lindkvist.

For more information, contact:

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August 2002 - May 2003:

Year-long Nyckelharpa Course at ESI

For the fifth year in a row, the Eric Sahlström Institute (ESI) is offering a course in nyckelharpa, in Tobo, Uppland, Sweden. On this course college credit is possible. Head teachers will be selected from the likes of Olov Johansson, Ditte Andersson and Sonia Sahlström but you will meet other teachers, Niklas Roswall, Gunnar Ahlbäck, Andreas Berchtold, Hasse Gille, Johan Hedin and Esbjörn Hogmark among others.

Course content is concentrated on nyckelharpa, but will also cover music theory, transcription, arrangements, folk music history, nyckelharpa history, folk singing, folk dance, playing for dancing, instrument knowledge and maintenance, playing on stage, etc., etc.

Students live in the Institute's modern annex, adjacent to the lecture hall. The cost is 3400 SEK/month for a double room, 4000 SEK/month for a single room. That includes the monthly rent, breakfast, lunch, dinner and coffee (of course - it's Sweden) on weekdays. You buy your own food for the weekends. Teaching is free for Swedish citizens, and maybe for non-citizens too, but you must pay for your own paper, pens and you might have to buy a few books, and other incidentals such as small trips.

The first semester starts the last Monday in August and ends the third Friday in December. The next semester starts second Monday of January and ends the last Friday of May. There are some weeks of holidays (one in November, one in February and one in April).

For more information, contact

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ANA Joins Swedish Council

The American Nyckelharpa Association, has joined the Swedish Council of America (SCA), the umbrella organization for Swedish and Scandinavian groups interested in the promotion and preservation of the Swedish heritage.

The mission of the Swedish Council of America is to bring into a cooperative relationship all groups and individuals whose purpose is to promote knowledge and understanding of the Swedish heritage in American life, and to strengthen the cultural and professional ties between Sweden and America. Benefits include:

- **Nordic Reach** — A significant subscription discount to SCA's beautiful magazine including the Sweden & America section highlighting activities of the Swedish Council of America. The regular subscription rate is \$14.00 USD per year. Our members receive the magazine for \$5.00 per year (\$8.00 USD/Canada, \$15.00 USD/Sweden). The magazine focuses on cultural events, business, travel, food, architecture, etc.
- Send a personal check payable to SAC to Swedish Council of America, 2600 Park Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55407 and state that you are an ANA member if you wish to receive this publication.
Phone: 612-871-0593 • Fax: 612-871-0687
E-mail: elise@swedishcouncil.org
- SCA's "Update" newsletter — these monthly newsletters keeps you abreast of the national network of organizations, SCA activities, and highlights our member benefits.
- **National educational conferences** — SCA organizes conferences allowing members the opportunity to network with other interested participants. The next conference is being planned for the summer of 2004. More information will be forthcoming.
- **Your special events advertised** through our website (<http://www.swedishcouncil.org>). This site provides information about Council members, a calendar of events, Swedish groups that want to connect with groups in the United States and vice versa, links to many interesting sites, as well as news about happenings in the Swedish community.
- **Swedish Council of America grants program** — Between \$35,000 to \$50,000 us distributed each year to its member organizations. The scope of projects receiving funding has been diverse from research projects to festival promotion. Projects must be endorsed by an affiliated organization of the Swedish Council of America or by a Director of the Board of the Council.

New CD available from the ANA

DITTE ANDERSSON

Twenty-four newly-recorded traditional and original songs and tunes from Uppland's Ditte Andersson.



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—each, \$75 plus \$5 ship/hand



VHS VIDEO
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—\$25 plus \$5 ship/hand

CD
Peter Puma Hedlund
"Vägen," long awaited new recording by legendary two-time world champion.
—\$16 plus \$3 ship/hand

Materials produced for true nyckelharpa aficionados!

PO BOX 127, LAHASKA, PA 18931

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Ask a nyckelharpa player why he or she has taken up this unwieldy, obscure instrument that was once near-extinct and you're likely to get the same answer.

"It's the sound," said Johan Hedin, who has won the prestigious Zam medal, given to players who best uphold the traditional styles of playing, as well as playing in a number of contemporary bands, such as Bazar B&B and Triptyk, that have updated traditional music.

"It sounds like nothing else," said Rita Leydon of the American Nyckelharpa Association. "It's so huge, so exquisite. You're completely bewitched."

The nyckelharpa (which means "keyed instrument" in Swedish) looks like a large Frankenstein-fiddle, with a boat-shaped body and a thick neck with keys jutting out from one side. These keys push up movable frets that press the strings just as a fiddler's fingers do. Running parallel underneath the melody strings are a set of resonating strings that vibrate in sympathetic vibration, giving the nyckelharpa its distinct sound.

Though the instrument is over 600 years old, it has gone through several transformations over time. By the mid-20th century, however, the instrument had all but disappeared.

Although he did not invent it, Eric Sahlström (1912-1986) is considered the father of the modern nyckelharpa. An instrument maker and musician, he refined the modern design and acted as its ambassador, teaching others to build and play it. Still, it seemed like a losing battle until the 1970s "Green Wave" movement reignited the Swedes' interest in folk music and their own indigenous nyckelharpa.

Today, there are estimated to be about 25,000 nyckelharpas and the instrument has a firm place in the growing contemporary folk music world in Sweden. The modern chromatic nyckelharpa has 37 wooden keys in three rows, three melody strings, one drone string, and 12 resonant strings. Being such an old instrument, there is a fair bit of superstition and folklore around it. In the past, players always stored

the instrument bottom up so the "o-shaped" sound holes, or "eyes" were on top. Old players often named their instruments and many put a small cloth bag of lucky charms in it. There's even a World Nyckelharpa Championship held every two years and though no American player has won, a boy from Colorado did well in last year's youth competition.

Leydon of the ANA said her group's membership is over 200, with a "hard-core group" of 30 to 40 serious players. Since the group's members are spread across America, they don't go for big conventions, but have smaller gatherings, often at a member's house. Perhaps a dozen or so players will come together and bring their sleeping bags and play along with an "imported Swedish super-player," Leydon said.

The ANA began about 10 years ago when Bart Brashers, the current president, spoke with his Swedish teacher, who gave him a list of nyckelharpa players in the U.S. Most of the members, Leydon said, are not Swedish, but have gotten exposed to the traditional music—often through the folk dance scene—and fell in love with the instrument.

The association helps wannabes in the States overcome the obstacles to taking up the instrument: the difficulty in obtaining one, and the near-impossibility of finding a teacher or even a fellow student.

The nyckelharpa cult should continue to grow, though, as word of the instrument spreads. Leydon herself co-produced two instructional DVDs and translated a Swedish how-to book on building nyckelharpas.

Leydon has also begun a series of films on the old master nyckelharpa players. "There's an urgency, I feel, to catch these people before the tradition is lost," she said.

The fundamental nyckelharpa experience, she said, would be listening to the instrument without accompaniment, and played by an experienced old master.

A slight twist on tradition is the Nyckelharpa Orchestra, which formed at the suggestion of Drone Records producer Oile Paulson, who wanted to see a group record a CD of Eric Sahlström's songs. While it is not unusual for nyckel-

harpa players to perform in groups, said Orchestra member Olov Johansson, "It is unusual to have a group with six nyckelharpa players that don't play any other instruments."

The group reconvened to record the music of the renowned 19th century nyckelharpa composer and player Byst-Calle. Now, Johansson said, the group plans to compose original compositions for its next album.

While Leydon said she respects what the new generation of players is doing to traditional music, she is frustrated that listeners hearing the updated music "think they're done, but they haven't gotten to first base."

She said that she'd like to see newcomers "take this ray of sunlight and travel further with it."

For more information on the nyckelharpa go to: www.nyckelharpa.org

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Vikingapolskan

Curt Tallroth



The American Nyckelharpa Association

The ANA is a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering the nyckelharpa, its music and its dance in North America. We sponsor and produce music and dance workshops across the country featuring the traditions of the nyckelharpa.

Membership dues in the ANA are \$10/year, which includes a 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.

ANA Web Page

Source of information about the nyckelharpa, nyckelharpa players, a history of the instrument, nyckelharpa events and more! The URL is: <http://www.nyckelharpa.org>

Nyckel Notes

Published quarterly, edited by Bill Layher. Send submissions to *Nyckel Notes* at the address below, or to: nyckelnotes@nyckelharpa.org

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P.O. Box 661, Lahaska, PA 18931-0661

Build Your Own...?

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Chromatic Nyckelharpa, a construction manual written and illustrated by Sören Åhker, has finally been translated into English and is now available for purchase from the ANA. The price is \$65 delivered to your door (US address).

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