

# Swedish Nyckelharpa

If you visited OXFORD 2013, you will have no doubt been aware of the presence of a slightly more exotic bowed string instrument, the virtues of which were being extolled by delegate Sue Ferrers. In an unusual turn of events, I had just asked an old school friend, Vicki Swan, to write about this very Swedish rarity. Imagine my surprise when it turned out that Sue and Vicki were good friends! Here is what Vicki has to tell...

**I**n the far distant north, up in Sweden, they've kept a secret. It is the voice of angels, although if some of the old stories are to be believed this angelic voice could be the work of the devil. The earliest images date back to the 1350s, but no-one is quite sure of its origins. The oldest statue appears to be on an island in Sweden, in Källunge Church on the island of Gotland, there is a church fresco dating from 1408 from as far south as Siena in Italy and numerous other images in countries in between.

The instrument itself looks like a cross between a Viking long ship, an egg slicer and a typewriter. In reality it is quite like a hurdy-gurdy played with a bow rather than a wheel but through time has become far less drone based and more violin like. Back in the

Middle Ages the instrument was fairly simple with only one diatonic melody string and one drone string played with a loose-ish bow tightened manually with the thumb. It is hard to know where the instrument was actually invented or what route it took, but we do know that it ended up in Sweden, stayed there and thrived. Gradually over time, in true operating system upgrade style more and more strings were added. A string was added on the other side of the drone and another tangent placed on each key. The sympathetic resonating strings were probably added in the 1700s, probably as a result of the East India trade route to Europe. There are a several surviving instruments from the 18th century Music and Theatre Museum in Stockholm. These instruments were all made in the



Depictions of the nyckelharpor across Europe:  
 left – Two angels playing nyckelharpor from ceiling fresco, church of Tolfta, Sweden, late 15th century; above – Angel with viola a chiavi, Cappellina di Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy. Fresco by Taddeo di Bartolo, 1408

old fashioned way of hollowing out the body and sides from the same piece of spruce.

By the early 1900s the instrument was falling out of favour and by the 1920s only around 20 players remained. In the 1930s a Swedish gentleman called August Bohlin made one of the first changes to help save the instrument from extinction. He made the nyckelharpa fully chromatic with three rows of keys. Then along came Eric Sahlström who almost single handedly made the instrument into the success story that it is today. He developed a new way of manufacturing the instrument by making the sides and back separately in a compression moulding technique. Along with some other alterations that made the instrument much easier to play Eric won competitions and wrote many fine tunes. During the folk revival in the 1970s and 1980s however, there was a lack of good instruments so government funded evening classes were started up so that people could go and make under the guidance of Eric, their own instrument. From this point, the popularity of the nyckelharpa has steadily increased and there are now thousands and thousands of players in Sweden.

The word nyckelharpa comes from the Swedish name and translates as keyed-fiddle. Most of the

countries in Europe have their own translation of the name, but generally it is known by its Swedish name as a nod of acknowledgement to the work and dedication of Eric Sahlström and his predecessors. The modern instrument has four bowed strings and twelve sympathetic resonating strings. The traditional Swedish tuning of the strings is (from bottom to top): C G C A. The sympathetic resonating strings are tuned chromatically so there is a sympathetic for all twelve notes of the scale. These strings add a resonance; a built in reverb and they also act as amplification. A freshly tuned nyckelharpa packs an incredible punch with the zingy resonating strings.

The repertoire for the nyckelharpa has in the past been very much focussed on Swedish traditional folk music, especially the music of the Upland region, north of Stockholm. A lot of Swedish folk music is polska based, various dances in varying three beat rhythms. There are many good clips on youtube, including possibly the most famous proponents of the nyckelharpa Väsen, in this clip seen performing a tune written by Byss Calle, (1783-1847): <http://youtu.be/bq8yDVRK3Cs>

We are lucky enough to have television broadcasts of Eric Sahlström himself performing one of his best know works: <http://youtu.be/GNwSj7FW9I4>

Learning an instrument like this is no easy matter anywhere other than in Sweden, but over the last 10 years, several projects have been started to help increase knowledge and numbers playing the

Photo: two angels courtesy of Karsten Evers

## SUE FERRERS TALKS ABOUT THE NYCKELHARPA AT OXFORD 2013



Sue Ferrers

Early this year I investigated where and what was on the agenda for the ESTA International Conference 2013.

When I saw there was a presentation on Medieval and Renaissance instruments, I contacted Cathy Elliott and asked if there would be interest for me to present my instrument, the nyckelharpa, at the conference.

Unfortunately, programming was already complete, but she invited me to come along anyway with my instrument and exhibit it as part of Rhiannon Evans' "Try a viol" workshop, allowing people also to try the nyckelharpa. I was only too happy to come.

I have only been playing nyckelharpa for three years, but being a trained violinist, it was not so difficult to pick up. At Burg Fürsteneck, near Fulda in Germany, where I live, courses are offered on the instrument. Here I gained the foundations of playing, as well as an introduction to Swedish and other suitable music for the nyckelharpa.

nyckelharpa. Academy Burg Fürsteneck in Germany has run its 'International Days of Nyckelharpa since 2004. The Scuola di Musica Popolare di Forlimpopoli in Italy has run its European Nyckelharpa Training in 2005. In 2010, these two institutes grouped together with The Eric Salhström Institute in Tobo in Sweden in a project called CADENCE where they shared best practise music and experiences. In 2013, a second project called ENCORE brought together a

Being a violinist, I chose to get a nyckelharpa with four rows of keys, different from the Swedish three-row harpas, and I also decided to tune it in fifths like a viola, rather than the Swedish tuning of C-G-C-A. Even though the body of my instrument was crafted in Sweden, the keyboard was built by German-maker, Annette Osann, who lives and works in Dole, France. The keyholes on my instrument are also padded with felt, thus minimizing the key sound while playing, different from the Swedish traditional instruments.

When the workshop took place, a few curious delegates came to experience this strange never-seen-before instrument. Through the instrument's 12 resonating strings, people's first reaction is always one of awe at the huge sound and reverberation, a sound that we have to work on as violinists. This sound was particularly interesting for Rachel Stott, composer and presenter at the conference, who bravely tried it first. Other delegates chose to admire the nyckelharpa from a distance and listen to the unique sound together with the viol as Rhiannon and I played a few pieces together.

On another day I organised a room to allow another session of "Try a nyckelharpa" for the delegates who missed the first opportunity. This time a few Swedish delegates came along, all who had already heard of the nyckelharpa, and even some who play it regularly. For them it was particularly interesting to see my instrument, a modern continental European instrument. Previously they had never seen a nyckelharpa outside of Sweden, and especially not one like this. To play on this nyckelharpa was a new experience for them, which they really enjoyed. One delegate even asked if she could buy my instrument!

For a small, niche audience, the nyckelharpa was well received in Oxford 2013. For some a completely new instrument to discover, for others a new modern take on an old tradition. All in all we left the conference enriched and endowed with new inspirations and stimulations.

nyckelharpa orchestra consisting of 22 players from 10 different European countries. This project shows just how far the nyckelharpa has come in Europe, to find out more about the nyckelharpa in mainland Europe visit: [www.nyckelharpa.eu](http://www.nyckelharpa.eu) Clips can be found of the orchestra online: <http://youtu.be/1vkoX8M7dqE>

In the UK, the nyckelharpa is rapidly catching up with Europe. It began to become more popular in the early 2000s, with a sudden spike in interest in the

Trying out the  
Nyckelharpa at  
OXFORD 2013



last couple of years. Over 67% of players currently state a first preference for performing Swedish tunes and 61% are standard Swedish tuned. 66% had their main instrument as the violin, but surprisingly only a third of these tuned their instrument in fifths. As more data is gathered from players these figures may change and it is expected that this demographic will change over time.

In 2012, the UK Nyckelharpa Society was formed to help players get advice and discuss all things nyckelharpa, instruments can be bought and sold, strings can be sourced or advice on making your own instrument found. <http://www.nyckelharpasociety.org.uk>

In 2012, Halsway Manor played host to the first teaching weekend in the UK with the second weekend in November 2013. The date has been set for 2014, and it's hoped that numbers will double by 2015 with numbers hopefully doubling and collaborating with central European tutors. The weekend is split into beginners and non-beginners and four instruments are available for complete beginners to use. These weekends are run by Vicki Swan. [www.nyckelharpa.me.uk/halsway.html](http://www.nyckelharpa.me.uk/halsway.html) ■■

*For more information about the nyckelharpa visit:*

*<http://www.nyckelharpasociety.org.uk>*

*and also see the work by Vicki Swan at:*

*<http://www.swan-dyer.co.uk>*



Vicki Swan