



The Search for a Methodology in Devising Exercises Suitable for Different Types of Nyckelharpa, of Repertoire and Modes of Execution

By Marco Ambrosini

This article is a short dissertation on the difficulties teachers can encounter in the compilation of exercises suitable for different types of nyckelharpas and tunings, especially in the educational reality of Continental Europe, where so called “Swedish” and “Continental” versions happily co-exist, and on possible solutions to such hurdles.

The nyckelharpa (seen not as a specific instrument following construction, aesthetic and sound-ideal schemes as in use at the time of Eric Sahlström, but rather as a large family of stringed instruments equipped with mechanical keyboard), for historical and cultural reasons and, indeed, for reasons strictly related to a certain type of musical repertoire, is presented today in many forms, extensions and tunings.

Such reality baffles every player coming in touch for the first time with the instrument, and represents a considerable challenge for those who are active in its teaching. This is especially true in the educational reality of continental Europe, where so-called “Swedish” and “Continental” versions happily coexist, without forgetting some imaginative experiments in recent years, whereby some instrument makers are making more or less efficient changes, both aesthetic and structural all the way to futuristic proposals for electrification and MIDI implementation into the nyckelharpa.

So here’s a brief (as simplistic) overview of the instruments which we are usually faced with, in our dealings with students:





1. Instruments with an extension of contralto (mainly from Sweden),
tuned I = A, II = C, III = G, IV = C (sixth, fourth, fifth)
with three rows of keys on the first three strings.
2. Instruments with an extension of contralto (mainly from Sweden),
tuned I = A, II = D, III = G, IV = C (fifth, fifth, fifth)
with three rows of keys on the first three strings.
3. Instruments with an extension of contralto (mainly of continental origin),
tuned I = A, II = C, III = G, IV = C (sixth, fourth, fifth)
with four rows of keys.
4. Instruments with an extension of contralto (mainly of continental origin),
tuned I = A, II = D, III = G, IV = C (fifth, fifth, fifth)
with four rows of keys.
5. Instruments with an extension of soprano
tuned I = E, II = A, III = D, IV = G (fifth, fifth, fifth)
with three rows of keys on the first three strings.
6. Instruments with an extension of soprano
tuned I = E, II = A, III = D, IV = G (fifth, fifth, fifth)
with four rows of keys.

Here follows a summary table of the 6 types of the aforementioned types of nyckelharpa:

Instrument	I (1 st string)	II (2 nd string)	III (3 th string)	IV (4 th string)	Rows of keys
Contralto with three rows of keys					
#1	A (la)	C (do)	G (sol)	C (do)	3
#2	A (la)	D (re)	G (sol)	C (do)	3
Contralto with four rows of keys					
#3	A (la)	C (do)	G (sol)	C (do)	4
#4	A (la)	D (re)	G (sol)	C (do)	4
Soprano with „violin“ tuning					
#5	E (mi)	A (la)	D (re)	G (sol)	3
#6	E (mi)	A (la)	D (re)	G (sol)	4



The problems confronting a teacher, when he has to manage several different instruments in the same school class, are evident. In fact we are talking about instruments belonging to the same family, but maybe so different from each other as a violin may be from a viola, or a viola da gamba from a modern double-bass.

The key issue is to understand in what manner this heterogeneity could be a problem or might rather be a chance for the teacher and for the student, whether he has been previously practicing another string instrument, or even if he approaches the nyckelharpa from scratch and without a great knowledge of music theory or practice.

Indeed, I think that the different features in design and tuning go deeper than we might think at first.

On one hand we have the so-called “Swedish” tuning (sixth-fourth-fifth), which is usually with instruments sounding very bright and with a certain predominance of resonance on the first string, on the other hand the so-called “Continental” tuning (fifth-fifth-fifth), which instead is mainly used on instruments of continental manufacture, favours a greater balance between all melody strings, with no preference for a particular register.

The instruments of the first type will certainly be more appropriate to perform a typical Scandinavian repertoire of “nyckelharpaesque” music, often focused on a performance accompanied by “empty” strings used as drones. An instrument with a fourth-fifth ratio in the three lower strings (so with an interval of octave between the II and IV string) will still have a strong and beautiful resonance, with a sound at the same time open and bright in the melody and warm and mellow in the lower strings. This effect is often enhanced by the use of solid metal for the first string.

By contrast, a nyckelharpa built strictly for to be tuned in fifths will normally be better suited to perform other types of repertoire, which can range from medieval music to contemporary avant-garde.



One big difference – certainly due to historical reasons, but also to the different tuning system of the instruments, and consequently to the allocation of the notes to the various keys – is the preference (which I observed) of the players who mainly use the first type of instrument, to relate to the keyboard in a free manner, without being constrained by classical violin-type positions. One such approach is more like a practical piano fingering, functional and not strictly related to the “classical” positions of the left hand, but rather to its practical and logistical function, related to the development of the melodic line.

Musicians who prefer a fifth tuning will usually be more inclined to consider their instrument the same way as a “semi-mechanical” viola and so try to use the left hand in a position-related modality, in fact using more or less consciously solmization parameters in search of suitable positions to perform a particular melody.

I think both methods have their advantages and their faults: in the case of nyckelharpa we are confronted with a very particular instrument that transcends the usual “forma mentis” that we normally (and, unfortunately, automatically) assume when approaching a classical musical instrument.

Let us briefly consider the pros and cons of the two different approaches:

- First method (approach to the keyboard with a piano style): the students learn their repertoire memorizing hand positions and sometimes highly complicated fingerings in relation to a particular tune. The implementation of these fingerings is absolutely perfect and beautifully functional to the performance of an already mastered repertoire, attaining very high levels of executive perfection in a relatively short time.



Perhaps the only disadvantage (of this method) is the difficulty in reading scores “a prima vista” and the performance of unusual melodic phrases, chords and arpeggios.

- Second method (approach to the keyboard with a “violin” style): the students organize the various fingering solutions according to the classical positions used on other stringed instruments. The ease of transposition resulting from the tuning in fifths, associated with the practice of position shifting, allow for a quick mastery of “prima vista” reading, and possibly even a quick and easy exchange of voices between the musicians. But beware: unfortunately, musicians who only follow this method, will be less likely to achieve a blind control of the keyboard (always seen in relation to a given melody) than students who mainly follow the “piano style”.

From these considerations came the desire to find, compile and test different types of combined exercises (involving both the left and right hand), possibly suitable to almost any type of nyckelharpa, and therefore convenient for their use in mixed classes – encouraging (and maybe even forcing) students to become accustomed using both methods in daily practice or, even better, to find their personal synthesis between the two.

Also very important, it would be good to encourage students, through these exercises, to tune their instrument in different ways, thus achieving a high flexibility, both mental and executive.

At this point, I will introduce some examples of exercises designed in exactly this perspective, written for contralto nyckelharpa using both tunings (which for simplicity will be called simply “Swedish” and “Continental”, i.e. respectively the sixth-fourth-fifth and the fifth-fifth-fifth tuning) with the aim to encourage the player to experiment and assess for themselves the possibilities offered by both fingering techniques.



First, an example of a simple exercise especially written for practicing string changes, conceived for the “Continental” tuning:

The same exercise for the “Swedish” tuning:

The differences are perhaps more substantial than might seem at first sight.

Note for example in bar 7 of the first exercise the unison interval on two strings. This is lacking in the second version, since the characteristic of the coincidence in tone between a lower fingered (4th finger) and a higher open string is typical of tuning in fifths and not for a sixth-fourth-fifth system.

A good opportunity to implement a unison interval playing on two strings comes again a couple of bars later, here again first for the “Continental” tuning:



In this case, we can easily compile the exercise for the “Swedish” tuning:

If our attention is limited to string changes, using only open strings, it is much easier to translate the exercises from one tuning system into the other.

First again the “Continental” tuning:



And then the “Swedish”:

Another issue that arises in writing exercises for different instruments of the nyckelharpa family is the musical key used in the scores. It is in this case a relatively recent debate, mostly unnoticed in the Scandinavian milieu, due to the wider dissemination on the continent of instruments with four rows of keys.

The Swedish instrument, with its tuning, the three rows of keys and the use of the fourth string as a drone, does not require writing notes below the third open string (G). For this reason the Swedish repertoire is normally written in the treble clef.

The case of four-rows-keyboard nyckelharpa is clearly different. How to write down the notes made possible by the keys on the fourth string? In this case we can find (coexisting!) a few different ways of writing.

The most frequently used keys are four:

1. treble clef (G clef)
2. treble clef octave lower (G clef)
3. bass clef (F clef)
4. Alto clef (C clef)



Let's take for example a simple melody with an extension on all four strings:

We see how in the third and fourth bar there are several notes under the staff, which are not very comfortable to read. To overcome this problem some authors prefer to insert an appropriate lower-octave treble clef, often even in the midst of a bar:

Other writers prefer to use for this purpose the inclusion of the bass clef:

A practice from some composers of contemporary music seems to be the use of the alto key in their compositions. This, because of the incorrect assumption that – having the instrument an extension similar to that of the viola – most musicians will be quite used to read in the typical key of this instrument.

This would appear to facilitate the reading of the melody, without changing key in the middle of its progress .



In reality, the advantages afforded us by the use of this key are not obvious (as I believe, they have never been evident, if not for historical reasons, even in its use for the viola da braccio). Most contemporary musicians prefer to read music in the treble or in the bass key – see how the same melody would look, when written entirely in lower-octave treble clef:



The small difference of a line or a space between a key and the other does not justify in my opinion the use of the alto key, except in the case when the usual instrument of the performer is the viola.

Another peculiarity of the nyckelharpa is certainly the use of the short bow typical for of this instrument.

Its length, much shorter than bows made for other string instruments, both traditional and classic, requires a differential use of this tool. While this would seem to pose problems, for example in playing long notes or legato, on the other hand it will offer a higher manoeuvrability, because of its tension, weight and nervation.

This type of bow can be used almost like a percussion instrument, allowing the performer to play easily very sharp, defined accents and rhythmic patterns – in a way which is almost unknown or at least very difficult to attain on other string instruments.

Exercises should absolutely take account of this fact as well, offering the student help in overcoming difficulties but at the same time also highlighting the particularity of our nyckelharpa bow.

An exercise written especially for the right hand should not therefore include big difficulties for the left hand, so we can



focus all our attention on the bow. In my opinion, however, the use of a little melodic phrase is in this case more effective than practicing the same exercise on open strings.

From this consideration comes the idea to combine different articulations with a small, easy melodic line. In this exercise, from bar 1 to 9, every “cycle” of 3 bars has its own articulation.

Starting from bar 10 we find a different articulation for every bar, and from bar 16 the first legato strokes.

Proceeding in this exercise we'll discover the same melodic line, but this time accompanied by various alternating articulations and legato combinations, aimed at improving flexibility and mastery of each previously learned bow technique.



The exercise continues with the addition of accent-independent bow changes, sometimes downward, sometimes upward. Starting from bar 44 there are also different accents within the same bow stroke.

Another example follows, that uses the same simple melodic line but in this case transposed down a fifth. Now the frequent changes of articulation and the accents at each bow change are joined at bar 12 by three-tones-legato phrases (asynchronous, relative to the binary rhythm of the melody and so a short anticipation of more poly-rhythmic exercises):

If we have the possibility to involve more performers, we can combine articulations with dynamics and play the tune as a 2- or 3- voices canon, using again the same melodic line:



Concerning the use of the bow as a rhythmic instrument, we have the uncomplicated possibility to "import" several good exercises originally construed for percussion instruments, even in this case using the same (or another) easy melody:



The task of the teacher is, in my opinion, to motivate a beginner and clarify from his first approach that, in the case of nyckelharpa, we are confronted with an instrument which only partially can be compared with traditional and classical bowed string instruments, and not necessarily for the single reason that it is fitted with a mechanical keyboard.

Our instrument has many very different features, not only due to the different tunings and to its special structural properties, but also because of the particular position of the instrument during the performance, the presence of sympathetic strings and the characteristics of the bow.

It is therefore a matter of helping the student to approach the nyckelharpa with an open mind, by encouraging the practice of reading in various keys, in of experimenting with different positions, tunings and techniques of both hands, applying – especially in the case of the left hand – both the traditional Swedish and the classical method.

In this way we will have soon a generation of performers open to any musical experience and repertoire, be it traditional or belonging to the field of early music or avant-garde.

Certainly a desirable goal, for an instrument that has managed to survive, largely thanks to countless (and often unnamed) Swedish musicians and instrument makers, from the late Middle Ages to the present day.

An exciting musical adventure, and surely worthy of note, which I hope will continue for at least as many centuries in the future.

(English revision by Gerard Vespignani)



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Marco Ambrosini studied violin and composition at the Musical Institute “G.B.Pergolesi” in Ancona and at the Conservatory “G. Rossini” in Pesaro, Italy. His eminent tutor was Adrio Casagrande.

Ambrosini discovered the nyckelharpa in the 80’s, and immediately fell in love with its beautiful form and its marvellous sound. He started using this instrument in concerts in the 90’s and very quickly shifted his attention from the violin to the nyckelharpa. He performs as soloist and in several orchestras and ensembles for early and contemporary music, at various venues, from Vancouver to Moscow.

He is also active as a composer and often writes for nyckelharpa, especially for nyckelharpa ensembles.

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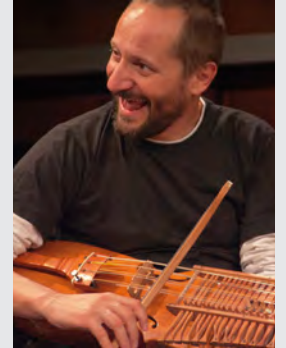


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