



About Tuning

By Emilia Amper

Why I have chosen to tune in fifths

When I started playing as a 10-year old, my nyckelharpa was tuned in the traditional way for chromatic nyckelharpas: A, C, G, C (from top to bottom, "C-tuning"). After maybe 7 years I decided to change to tuning in fifths (A, D, G, C/D/A, "D-tuning") and try that for a while. I was inspired by Johan Hedin and some specific tunes I was playing at the moment, which were more suited for playing on a nyckelharpa that was tuned in fifths. It took a while to get into it and learn the new fingering of old tunes I already knew, but it went quite smoothly. And then I just never wanted to go back.

When it comes to choosing a tuning on the nyckelharpa, the needs you and your music have should decide! Speaking of Swedish traditional music for a while: To me, the reason to have the C-tuning, to have an open C-string, is if you specifically need that in the music you play. For example, if you play a lot of traditional nyckelharpa tunes from the area Uppland in Sweden, you will find a lot of tunes in C major. The style of playing includes a lot of open strings and use of drones, here the C-tuning is perfect! If you don't have the C-tuning, it just won't be the same.

If you on the other hand play a lot of tunes from all over Sweden, a lot of fiddle tunes etc, an open D-string, and therefor the D-tuning, is much more suitable and useful.

Also, without speaking specifically about Swedish traditional music, the D-tuning has more logic to it, since it has the same interval between all the melody strings. This means that the





patterns of all scales and all chords are the same, no matter where on the keyboard you start. Especially when improvising and accompanying, playing things based on scales and chords, this is good. Also, since I have an extended keyboard (meaning that I have more keys, that go higher up, on each string), the D-tuning is more logic and practical: Instead of jumping up and down with my left hand, I can play in position, and since I have the D-tuning I can apply the same fingering everywhere and on all the strings.

Why I have chosen to use the equal temperament

Intonation is all about compromise... Since the nyckelharpa has fixed keys, it can never be all perfect. So you must decide for yourself what is best to do. The majority of the traditional tunes from the Nordic countries are in D, G, A, C, F and Bb, and it might also be these keys that sound the best on the instrument (due to the possibility of open strings and the traditions for using open strings together with the melody etc). Therefore, some nyckelharpa players that I know in Sweden have chosen to use an intonation pattern that favours these keys, but where other keys suffer. But since I meet and play in so many different styles and with so many different instruments, in all kinds of modes and keys in my musical work, I have found that the equal temperament works best for me in the intonation of my leaves (the intonation done before you play). Anything else would mean a too big risk of total crash either inside of the scale that I am playing solo, or between me and my co-musicians. Working as a studio musician, meeting other musical genres and traditions or playing with for example a piano are all good examples of when I think it works best to use the equal temperament tuning.

Using the equal temperament is not perfect, but for me it seems to be the best option. It means that all notes are a little bit false, but it also means that no single tone sticks out being extremely out of tune. The important thing is that I then, with



both left hand and right hand technique, actively intonate while I play, to make the key I am in sound as good as possible. The active left and right hand technique also help evening out the differences in the sound quality in different places of the scale and on the different strings and the different keys (the ones you push to shorten the string). To me, the constant working of the left and the right hand, the constant creating and shaping of the tone, is about both intonation and sound making at the same time. Therefore it is very hard, and even irrelevant, to separate tone making from intonation and vice versa.

My biggest frustration when it comes to intonation is that I don't have any quarter notes on my instrument, which I need when I play for example Persian and Swedish music. I sometimes try to turn my leaves to intonate even more in some direction, for some specific tune, concert or project, but it is never as much as I would like or need.

As an end comment, obvious to the experienced nyckelharpa player, I just want to emphasize the importance of changing strings regularly, using a good rosin that you feel comfortable with, going over and making sure your keys are all well intonated and tuning your instrument very often and thoroughly. It really makes a big difference to your sound!



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(*1981) is a nyckelharpa player, singer and composer from Sweden, and winner of the World Championships of Nyckelharpa 2010. She has performed all over the world solo and with Swedish and Nordic folk music groups (like Absolut Trio and Blink), Persian classical musicians, jazz and pop/rock musicians (such as Jon Lord from Deep Purple) and the Norwegian

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chamber orchestra The Trondheim Soloists (with whom she won the Norwegian Grammy Spellemannsprisen 2011).

She is a popular music and dance teacher as well as dance musician in Sweden and abroad, a former student and now member of the board at the Eric Sahlström Institute in Tobo, and she has a Bachelor in Musicology with a special in composition from the University in Trondheim, a Bachelor in Swedish Folk Music/Nyckelharpa from the Royal University College of Music in Stockholm and a Nordic Master in Folk Music (with studies in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway).

Her musical passions are polskas, bowing technique, expression and dance groove, and her playing style has been described as dynamic, elegant and groovy.