



Nyckelharpa in Music Schools The Beginning

Interview with Anders Liljefors by Ditte Andersson

Anders Liljefors, violin, fiddle and nyckelharpa player born in 1928, worked his whole career as a teacher in “Kommunala musikskolan”, the local council (Kommune /Comune) music school, where most Swedish children learn to play. He was one of the two people to first bring nyckelharpa into the music school at the end of the 60’s. This is a transcription of an interview that I, Ditte Andersson, had with Anders on the 15th of September 2010.

Ditte:

This interview is really about the “nyckelharpa” in the local council music school, but I still want to ask you, because it is not perfectly clear to me, how it happened that you started to play the violin?

Anders:

It think it was because my mother, who played the piano, wanted somebody to play with.

Ditte:

But why did it come to be the violin?

Anders:

Well, I can’t say, really. It might just be because the postman, Mr. Lindkvist, he happened to play the violin. He wasn’t directly a violinist, but he played the violin.

And I got the idea to take lessons from him. He lived in town, so I cycled down to him; I think I was about 10 years the first time.

Ditte:

Was it your mother that got you a violin?





Anders:

I can't really remember how I got the first one that I played on. But the one that I played on "for real" later, and which I still have, that one I got because we got a little inheritance after uncle Ludvig.

Ditte:

How was uncle Ludvig related to you?

Anders:

He was my father's brother, and he was a quite well-to-do farmer just outside Uppsala.

Ditte:

So his full name must have been Ludvig Andersson, then?

Anders:

Yes. And when he died, me and my siblings, all the six of us, got 500 "kronor" each (about 57 Euro 2011-02-06). This must have been around the beginning of the 40's.

I remember it as one of my greatest childhood memories; the whole family went to Stockholm to entertain ourselves for the money we had inherited, and the first thing we did was to go to Erik Lindholm's violin workshop on Drottninggatan ("Queen's Street"). We stepped in and said: – How do you do; we would like to buy a violin. And among others he took out this one, which I bought. It cost as much as I had inherited, i.e. 500 "kronor". I still have it, and still play on it.

Well, I continued to get lessons from the postman, and cycled to him in rain and sunshine. I think I went to him for quite some time.

Ditte:

What sort of music did you play, was it mostly classical?

Anders:

Yes, it must have been; he himself played only from sheet music, and no folk music at all. I can't remember any particular book that we used ... I think that he had material that I borrowed.



Ditte:

How did you get in contact with folk music, then?

Anders:

Two of my elder siblings, Cajsa and Ulf, started to dance folk dances with Ungdomsringen (literally "The Youth Circle", an organization for folklore of all kinds, now called Folkdansringen, "The Folk Dance Circle").

And for some reason or other I ended up playing for them, together with other folk musicians ("spelmän") in the organization.

I liked it very much, and then I met Marianne (Anders' wife) in those circles. She was dancing and I was playing. I had great times with them.

Ditte:

But after that you joined the local "spelmans"-organization, too, didn't you?

(Spelman = folk musician on any level, professional or amateur, literally meaning a person who plays.)

Anders:

Yes, about the same time. Around 1943, -44 or so. Through the players that I met in the folk dance organization.

Ditte:

And then you came to know Ivar Tallroth and all the other players?

Anders:

Yes, and especially Olle Jansson and Curt Tallroth who were comparatively young then, around 18 or 20. We were the young ones back then. And I also met Ole Hjorth.

Ditte:

Ole was born in 1930.

Anders:

Yes. And in spite of the difference in age, and the fact that



there were so few younger people, it was very pleasant. So that's how I ended up in those circles.

Ditte:

And you played for the Zorn badge and got bronze level in 1948, didn't you?

(For information, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zorn_Badge)

Anders:

Yes. And so did Curt Tallroth and Ole Hjorth, if I remember it correctly.

Ditte:

But then, at some point, you must have decided to get an education. Well, you or somebody else.

Anders:

My mother probably had a share in that as well. Oh yes, and after the postman I studied for a real violin teacher in Uppsala, Willy Böck.

One of all the German musicians who came to Sweden during the 2nd world war. He taught at Uppsala Musikskola (Ditte's remark: old, private school that doesn't exist any more).

Ditte:

Ha, I went there, too. To learn to play piano.

Anders:

Who was your teacher?

Ditte:

His name was Otto Lehner.

Anders:

Otto Lehner, oh yes. Willy Böck, he worked as a musician, too. A very capable guy.

With him I played more and more classical music. And one of the folk dancers was a pianist, and we played together sometimes, little pieces for violin and piano.



Then I had another friend, Gunnar Ahlqvist, who was going away to study at "Fokliga Musikskolan" in Arvika (in the west of Sweden; has nothing to do with folk music – it is a folk high-school for classical music. /Ditte's remark). He meant to be a school teacher, and was going there to study piano playing, and one day he said to me: " – Why don't you go with me to the school?"

And since you didn't have to do tests or anything to get in there I said: "Yes, why not?" Then I spoke to my mother and father and were allowed to go.

Ditte:

What was the aim of that education, to be a teacher?

Anders:

No, just to learn you instrument better.

Ditte:

Was it one year?

Anders:

I stayed for two years, actually. You could stay as long as you wanted, as long as you registered. Some people had been there many years.

During that time I didn't play much folk music, except during the holidays.

When I came back again after my studies I started to play for the folk dancers again, since they were such nice people.

After some time I got the idea that I should apply for admission into the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, to become a qualified teacher.

I took two years, back then, to become a teacher, and I think I got my exam in 1955.

Ditte:

Who was your violin teacher at the Royal College?



Anders:

I don't remember, Rudolf something. He wasn't much of a violinist, because he had an arm injury, but he was a capable teacher. But at the same time I actually took some private lessons for Sven Karpe (well-reputed Swedish violinist and violin professor; /Ditte's remark). I also started to have a few pupils of my own, while I was still studying.

Ditte:

Did you live in Stockholm then?

Anders:

No, I commuted, by train.

Then, when my education was finished in 1955, I applied for, and got, my first steady job up in Österlövsta.

Ditte:

Did you work for Tierp's "kommun", then?

Anders:

No, Österlövsta was a separate "kommun" back then.

Ditte:

Well, what happened to your folk music playing during the college year, then?

Anders:

I continued to be a member of the "spelmans"-organization, and up in Österlövsta I met with Olle Jansson, and we played together quite much. We played some gigs together, too.

Ditte:

Your first job in Österlövsta, was that full time?

Anders:

Yes.

Ditte:

So you moved there, too?

(It is about 70 km to the north of Uppsala. /Ditte's remark)



Anders:

Oh yes, and that was some situation! Marianne and I married in august of 1955. She had applied for admission to CGI (school in Stockholm, were you study to be a physiotherapist; /Ditte's remark). I had applied for the job in Österlövsta. We had no idea how it would end. After the wedding we went to a friend down in Småland, and stayed for almost a fortnight. We went there with him, and back by hitchhiking; that was our honeymoon ...

When we came home again we learnt that she had been accepted at GCI and I had got the job in Österlövsta. So there was nothing else to do that say " - Bye, bye Marianne!", and then she went to Stockholm, and I went to Österlövsta, and then we lived like that for two years.

Ditte:

How often did you see each other?

Anders:

Well, during the weekends.

Ditte:

Home in Uppsala?

Anders:

Yes. At her or my parents.

Ditte:

I remember that you said that you went around between the schools in Österlövsta on a moped, or was it a bike?

Anders:

I used a moped my first year. I remember complaining about that to somebody once, saying "And here I am, having to go between schools on a moped!" Lasse Näsborn (friend of Anders', father of Torbjörn Näsborn), who had the job in Österlövsta before me, happened to be in the room. He said, very discreetly: "-Well, me, I had to use a bicycle."



Ditte:

Did you manage to get a car after that?

Anders:

Yes, Marianne's parents helped us out so we could buy an old Volkswagen. So with that I went to Grönö, Valparbo, Lövsstabruk and all of those places.

And I lived in the former cantor's lodge. There was only two rooms and an old iron heater. And a big, bloody hall. I lit a fire in the heater in the morning before I went away, but that didn't last long. They just put in a zinc unit, and a bucket under it. Then I learnt that you have to carry out more water than you carry in, for some strange reason. It felt like that, anyway.

Ditte:

What instruments did you teach – was it just the violin?

Anders:

No, I taught mandolin, recorder, piano and violin.

Ditte:

Had they prepared you for the other instruments at college?

Anders:

No.

Ditte:

So you just had to sort out that by yourself?

Anders:

Yes. I actually reflected on that, that at the Royal College homework could be to analyse the chords of a Beethoven sonata or something like that ... and then, when actually working, you met little children who played the recorder.

Up in Österlövsta I also had the privilege of meeting Sture and Sven Andersson (folk musicians).

Ditte:

You brought folk music into your teaching quite soon, didn't you?



Anders:

Yes, after less than a year I had a little "spelmanslag" (folk music group) in the music school.

Ditte:

So was it your intention to work with both the genres, classical and folk?

Anders:

Yes.

Ditte:

Did you do it on purpose, or did it just happen?

Anders: Yes, I was thinking that many of them are comfortable to play and have nice melodies ... I've almost always had that thought, that even if they aren't going to be world famous violinists, they should always get the opportunity to learn at least 10 Swedish folk tunes by heart. To learn the actual trick how to learn by ear, so to say. Not to end up like many people who has drilled playing from sheet music to a point where they can't even imagine themselves playing by ear. So all violin players and "mandolists" and others, they should play tunes by heart. But at the same time they were playing from violin books to learn how to read music.

That's what was so fantastic about it, that one could, at the music school in Uppsala, begin to teach people by ear. That wasn't really accepted at the time. For example, if you wanted to play the guitar, you couldn't go to the music school just to learn how to play chords and accompaniment, it had to be melody playing.

Ditte:

But, at the beginning up in Österlövsta, if you had a pupil who really liked to play folk tunes by ear, and didn't want to do the other stuff, what did you do?

Anders:

Then I let them do that. But after only about half a year I had started a little orchestra there, and the ones that discovered



that it actually was quite pleasant to play in it, they were allowed to join, and then they had to learn how to read music, so most time it went parallelly; but if they only wanted to play by ear ... well, that was okay with me.

Ditte:

And those could play in you "spelmanslag" (= group of folk musicians).

Anders:

Yes.

Ditte:

And this must have been around 1955 to 1957.

Anders:

Yes, about two years.

Ditte:

You have had, most of your life, been playing in a string quartet with Mats Kuoppala, Lars Näsborn and Bosse Andersson. How did that happen? Bosse Andersson was a mate from your childhood, wasn't he?

Anders:

Yes, we started to play together around the age of 12.

Ditte:

Did he play the cello all the way from the start?

Anders:

Yes, he played the cello and I the violin.

Ditte:

And you kept in contact?

Anders: Yes, and Mats Kuoppala was studying at the folk high-school in Arvika too, and there we came to know each other. He was from Tierp originally, and had an interest for folk music from the beginning. So we found each other through folk music, and also started to play string quartet together when we studied in Arvika.



Ditte:

But you didn't know Mats before?

Anders:

I'd heard of him, but never met him.

Ditte:

What about Lasse Näsborn?

Anders:

Lasse also studied in Arvika at the same time. He played the double bass. And I and Mats and some other person had come so far as to have a group with two violins and one viola, so we asked Lasse "– Couldn't you play the cello with us?", and he said "–Why not?" So that's how we got together.

Then, when I got the job in Österlövsta, I, Mats and Lasse continued to play together, trios and stuff, because Mats had moved to Tegelsmora, just by the church, and had got his first job as a music teacher in Vendel, and Lasse Näsborn worked up in Hållnäs, in the music school there, so we lived in the same area.

After about two years I moved back to Uppsala, and Mats, who had moved to Kungsängen (just north west of Stockholm), found a cellist down there, so we picked up the string quartet (Lasse changing to viola. /Ditte's remark) again, Lasse, Mats, I and the cellist. But he was an engineer and moved to Iceland. Then we asked my old friend Bosse Andersson to join us on the cello.

Ditte:

You seem to have worked in similar ways, you and Mats Kuoppala, he in Kungsängen and you in the Uppsala area. How did it happen that you and Mats started to play nyckelharpa?

Anders:

It was the time when it started to happen things around the nyckelharpa ... and some years earlier Mats and I had started the summer courses at Wik castle.



(Ditte's remark: These summer courses were for Mats' and Anders' regular pupils in their music schools, and there they played mainly orchestral music, but also folk music.)

Ditte:

That was at the end of the 60's, wasn't it?

Anders:

Yes, I think so. We had started the courses at Wik castle, and every year they started with a concert with Viksta-Lasse and Eric Sahlström on Sunday evening, because we always started on a Sunday.

And by then the interest for building nyckelharpas had increased ... I think that the increased interest for building them and playing them sort of went hand in hand ... it is hard to see the exact connection between the building and the playing. The real "wave" came during the 70's, anyway. I, myself, bought my nyckelharpa from Eric Sahlström in 1968.

Ditte:

And was that because you had seen and heard Eric Sahlström at the Wik courses?

Anders:

Well, we had been to many "spelmansstämmor" (folk musicians gatherings), so we, for sure, had experienced the nyckelharpa, but for me it never appeared in its full radiance, so to say, until I heard Eric. Before that, well, it wasn't the same technique, or the same sound, not the same execution ... not enough to tempt your ear; he was the one that opened my ears.

Ditte:

Did Mats Kuoppala buy his at the same time?

Anders:

He bought his from a builder in Kungsängen, Härold Lundin, who started to build his own model. Maybe he even bought his a year or so before I bought mine. And Lasse Näsbo also played nyckelharpa.



Ditte:

How did he start?

Anders:

Hm ... I think that the three of us spurred each other.

Ditte:

Did you start to play nyckelharpa just for your own pleasure?

Anders:

Yes, we did. And we started to play together, and then started to bring it when we went to different gatherings with folk musicians. We also discovered that there was other nice music, apart from the fiddle repertoire.

Ditte:

You and Mats Kuoppala went to Norway to play several times, to play school concerts.

Anders:

Yes.

Ditte:

It must have been something a little extra, to bring the nyckelharpas, I mean.

Anders: Yes, ha ha, we went there with one fiddle each, and one nyckelharpa each, and "träskofiol" (a fiddle made from a clog), and "spilåpipa" (a Swedish small flute, like a recorder but in one piece) and jew's harps and all sorts of stuff, and then we had already been on tour for Rikskonserter ("Concerts Sweden") here in Sweden, one turn to Småland, one to Skåne and one up in Lappland.

I remember that everyone that was going on those tours had to go to a short course with Dorothy Irving, to learn about performing etc. And I remember, particularly, one thing that she said: "Above all, if you play the wrong note, don't show it with the slightest sign, because that is embarrassing for the audience, and it can also be the case that 80% didn't hear it."



Ditte:

Exactly!

After Österlövsta you got a job closer to Uppsala, didn't you?

Anders:

Yes, I got a new job in 1958. I was employed by Vattholma kommun as their first instrumental teacher, which was a separate council back then (incorporated with Uppsala kommun in 1971. /Ditte's remark). The first year I was employed half time, because they wanted to test the concept of having a music school.

Together with violin/fiddle, I was also teaching guitar, piano, recorder, and even some cello or other. I was alone on the job the first year, but gradually, as the school got going, they hired teachers that specialized in those other instruments, thank Heaven.

Ditte:

But then it was incorporated with Uppsala.

Anders:

Yes.

Ditte:

But you continued with the same concept, i.e. that all pupils should learn at least 10 Swedish tunes by heart, and also tuning into what they were interested in.

Anders:

Yes, I kept it as a rule, that everybody should at least have the feeling of what it means to play by ear, and maybe become a little interested in that way of playing ... not many classical pieces are constructed in a way so that a beginner can learn them by ear. Folk music, on the other hand, is made for that.

Ditte:

Yes, also the fact that it is created to play solo makes it ideal to play when you are on your own.



Anders:

Yes.

Ditte:

Mats (Kuoppala), he was working in Kungsängen at the same time, and Lasse Näsbom was still working in the north of Uppland; did you ever, consciously, discuss this approach to teaching, or did you just happen to work in similar ways?

Anders:

I can't remember us talking about it. But we said to each other, when we planned our first summer course, I think it was at Biskops Arnö, that "Now we'll have the first course where you don't have a bloody written note." The whole week we played by ear only. The pupils were regular pupils from him (Mats Kuoppala) and from me.

Ditte:

And this was before the Wik courses?

Anders:

That was before, yes.

Ditte:

And you and Mats decided that?

Anders:

Yes.

Ditte:

When did you start with letting the pupils play nyckelharpa, and how did it happen?

Anders:

Well, for my part, here in Storvreta and around, I think it was parents and pupils that who asked for it.

I mean, since there weren't a bunch of nyckelharpas lying around, I couldn't say "Here is a nyckelharpa, play it!"; it had to come from the parents. Quite a number of the parents and others had built nyckelharpas, so you could borrow instruments



for the pupils. So I'm quite sure that the interest came from outside the school – it wasn't anything that I could direct.

Ditte:

Do you think that the situation was about the same for Mats down in Kungsängen?

Anders:

Yes, I'm sure.

Ditte:

Did the headmaster of the school have a problem with this, or interfered in any way?

Anders:

No.

Ditte:

Who was the headmaster at that time?

Anders:

I think it was Rolf Ek.

Ditte:

This must have been quite soon after the time you got your own nyckelharpa.

Anders:

Let's say that I had played a year or so. And, as I said, quite a number of people were building instruments, and realized afterwards that it would be nice to be able to play on them, too. I also brought Eric Sahlström a couple of times, to play at Lions-bazaars and such, which made people turn on even more.

And then some of my pupils started to play nyckelharpa, for example Sverker Åkered, who had started with violin and then fiddle. Folk music was quite natural for him, because his father came from Boda (in Dalarna). The same thing happened with Peder Källman, when he discovered the nyckelharpa he became interested in it. Toivo Wiskari too, and all the rest of them who played in Harpan Min ("My harp"; Anders' and



Mats Kuoppala's youth group. /Ditte's remark). That's how it started here around Storvreta, and it was the same way when I started to work in town (Uppsala) – parents phoned me on behalf of their children, because they knew I taught nyckelharpa.

Ditte:

And this could have been around 1969, -70?

Anders:

Something like that, yes.

Ditte:

How did it happen that Mats Kuoppala and you decided to form the group Harpan Min, with pupils from your two, different schools?

Anders:

I think it was a result of the fact that we brought nyckelharpa into the summer courses at Wik

There we saw that if we put his and my nyckelharpa pupils together we would have a pretty good group. It was also good for them to meet other players.

Ditte:

So at that time you had both violins/fiddles and nyckelharpas at the courses?

Anders:

Yes.

Ditte:

For how long did these courses take place?

Anders:

It feels like almost 10 years.

Ditte:

Then you started the summer courses at Säbyholm, courses for anybody that wanted to play nyckelharpa. That was three years, 1973, -74 and -75.



Anders:

That's right.

Ditte:

I was there in 1974.

Those courses were initiated by you and Mats too, weren't they?

Anders:

Yes. And by then we had a quite decent bunch of nyckelharpa players.

And even if nyckelharpa wasn't so easy to tune back then – nobody used tuning machines, and there were keys and pegs and all sorts of stuff – you noticed that it was much easier to get a group of players sound decently together playing nyckelharpa (than fiddle) ... 'cause everybody was, at least, if you had tuned properly, playing in tune. For some reason – I've thought about that afterwards – it is easier to have a group of nyckelharpa players sound acceptable quite soon. With violins/fiddles there's always somebody that doesn't have a good enough ear.

Ditte:

Many of the ones that played in Harpan Min have become musicians and teacher. Toivo, for example, is he a teacher?

Anders:

Yes, he actually works with music therapy.

Ditte:

And Sverker is a music teacher.

Anders:

Yes, he is.

Ditte:

Instrumental or in class?

Anders:

In music school. He teaches violin/fiddle, nyckelharpa, double bass and this and that.



Ditte:

Peter Hedlund ("Puma") and Åsa Jinder, from Mats gang, has continued as musicians, too.

And then Peder, he came from you, and works mostly with violin and nyckelharpa building.

Anders:

That's right; he started as a Suzuki pupil, and he was quite good on violin. But one day his dad said to me: "Could you take over Peder, he has completely grown tired of violin playing". So we played a couple of times, folk music, and his interested started to come back, but then he saw the nyckelharpa and was really turned on, and after that he got his interest for music back, and became a gifted guitar and nyckelharpa player, and found joy in the fiddle as well. I've noticed that about Suzuki pupils; they are often totally worn out at the age of 15, having completely lost the drive to play.

Ditte:

For how long did you work at the music school?

Anders:

Until I retired.

Ditte:

1993, then. But you had some private pupils after that, didn't you?

Anders:

Yes, a few who came home to me.

Ditte:

And you continued with violin/fiddle and nyckelharpa parallelly, and classical and folk music? And the idea that everybody should be able to play some tunes by heart?!

Anders:

Yes, because, as I said, I think it is a pleasant way to make music, not putting a music stand up every time.



It's an easy way to get together and play, and be able to take interest in something else than just the sheet music. You have more time to listen instead.

Ditte:

Yes, and the problem is greatest with the ones that are mediocre in music reading. If you are a good reader you look at the sheet music now and then, not all the time, and it doesn't take all your focus.

Anders:

Exactly.

Ditte:

But most pupils and students are mediocre readers.

Anders:

Yes, and then the focus ends up on the wrong body organ, so to say.

Ditte:

Now I've brought up all the questions I had planned. Do you want to add something?

Anders:

Not that I can think of. Maybe, once again, the way it all started with the nyckelharpa, how parents built them, and their children started to play on them, in spite of the fact that they were big and heavy. I have never had such parent support as from the parents of the nyckelharpa pupils, I have to say. They have always been there and listened, been interested and helpful.

Ditte:

Isn't that because when the nyckelharpa became well-known because of the "folk music wave", it was more accessible from a psychological point of view? The fiddle has always been depicted as so bloody unreachable; you have to start playing it preferably before you were born, and other myths surrounding it, while it has been less myth around nyckelhar-



pa, and moor sort of "OK" to try to play it when you are an adult.

Anders:

Yes, and also the fact that if you just press the right button it sounds more or less acceptable.

So many people who had been, for example, interested in folk dance, started to build nyckelharpas. And this "building wave", in spite of it resulting in a large number of bad instruments hanging around in peoples' homes, it still gave people instruments to play on, and gradually their demands on the instruments increased and they got other ones, or learnt to build in a different way.

Ditte:

Shall we turn it off?

Anders:

Let's turn it off!

Ditte Andersson (Sweden)



Photo: Ditte Andersson

Ditte Andersson is a musician with one foot in Swedish folk music and the other in a mix of genres, like Scots traditional music, rock and blues. She is an accomplished nyckelharpa player, fiddler, singer, composer and story teller. Her aim, as an artist and composer, is to create music in the borderland between folk and popular music, in an acoustic, small-sized format. Ditte is also an experienced teacher on a free-lance basis (Master of Education in Music, main subject

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