



# Self-Learning by the Example of Nyckelharpa

*By Jule Bauer*

The confrontation with and the understanding of self-learning is really important for Nyckelharpa players, especially outside of Sweden where there are only a few teachers for the instrument. More and more adults and older adolescents start learning to play the Nyckelharpa by themselves. This article reflects on self-learning in the field of learning culture, shows different models of self-directed learning and discusses the teaching and learning situation for Nyckelharpa players.

## Learning in the field of music

The understanding of learning and the learning opportunities for individuals have changed in our society, even in the musical field, in recent years considerably. These changes are so extensive that one can speak of the need for a new learning culture.

Through modern information and communication techniques, innovative teaching and learning opportunities have opened up. Out of that entirely new learning requirements have developed in both professional and private lives.

The concept of lifelong learning is topic of discussion in today's society and self-organized or self-learning in different areas move more and more to the forefront, and so to the student has more opportunities to put together an individual training program.

Neither a professor nor teacher decides how, where, when, what and what for is to be learnt, but the learners themselves!





Moreover, in the field of music for some particular instruments there is not the possibility of large scale continuous education, so that the learner is even “forced” to resort to forms of self-paced learning.

Learning nyckelharpa-playing is a very good example of self-learning because the nyckelharpa is an instrument “again” which is relatively new, similar to the time of Jimi Hendrix’s electric guitar, a new instrument for which there were no teachers and no teaching material. This is comparable to the current situation of the instrument nyckelharpa. After the Baroque period the instrument was almost entirely extinct worldwide. Only in a small area of Sweden, the instrument has survived until today in the local traditional folk music. This instrument will, as in the early days of pop and rock music was, mostly be learnt by adults and older adolescents, because children generally learn as their first instruments one which they have got to know through the family or at school, and for which there are at school or music school a class offered. This is not the case outside Sweden for nyckelharpa.

### Further development of the instrument nyckelharpa and its consequences

Since the mid-20th Century the re-emergence of a growing interest in the playing of the nyckelharpa have influenced the traditional design and development of the instrument by several instrument makers. Some have added to the former three-row instruments a fourth row of keys, so that the range is extended considerably because the pitches can now be played on the former drone string. In addition, experienced musicians in cooperation with instrument manufacturers have experimented with different tunings and strings.

Through these changes to the instrument in recent decades, the scope of the instrument has been extended. By changing the “traditional Swedish tuning” to viola tuning, a greater use in chamber music is possible and the further development of



the traditional bow shape allowed classical bowing styles and articulations to be played effectively. These changes dictate the need for new innovative playing techniques so as to meet the new requirements, for example being able to play complicated fingerings, or to imitate classical bowing styles on the instrument. Due to the different types of models of the instrument, as well as many types of bows, each player is forced to discover the uniqueness of his instrument and to intensively explore the boundaries of playability himself.

### The current teaching situation for nyckelharpa

The current teaching situation for nyckelharpa is as follows: throughout Europe and the U.S. various weekend workshops are held annually organized by various institutions or private individuals. Various nyckelharpa players teach privately. In addition to the short workshops, the “Eric Sahlström Institutet” in Sweden has offered a full-year course since 1998, which can be visited only once, and a two-year Instrument – Making course. There is also a block course training for 2-3 years at the “Scuola di Musica Popolare di Forlimpopoli” in Italy, which has been offered since 2005 and since 2006 following this model there is also a training course at the Academy BURG FÜRSTENECK in Germany. These three schools cooperate together. The teachers appear as guest teachers in the other schools and students are able through school exchange to gain insight into the work of other schools. At the Royal College in Stockholm, it is possible to study in the folk music department with the main instrument nyckelharpa. In addition, various music schools in Sweden they offer the instrument in their teaching program.

Comparing these learning opportunities in Germany with the great range of courses for other instruments, it is essential for nyckelharpa players to deal with self-directed learning. For comparison, there were, according to the yearbook of the Association of German music schools in 2007 in Germany 924 public music schools<sup>1</sup> as well as many statistically unidentified private music schools. For the professional musical training

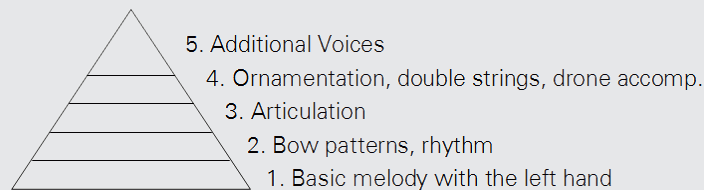
<sup>1</sup> [www.musikschulen-sh.de/download/VdM\\_2006.pdf](http://www.musikschulen-sh.de/download/VdM_2006.pdf)



there was in 2008 in Germany 32 music universities, nine conservatories and nine vocational schools for music<sup>2</sup>. In comparison there are currently one music university and three institutes worldwide which offer regular classes in nyckelharpa playing.

In the literature of the new culture of learning, there are many approaches that are useful to apply to the learning and teaching of the nyckelharpa because they help to organize and promote self-directed learning. It is therefore very important for the nyckelharpa student or teacher with both independent learning and the requirements as a possible learning assistant to be aware of them.

For example, Ditte Andersson, a nyckelharpa teacher at the "Eric Sahlström Institutet" in Sweden, has developed a teaching model which is based on the Maslow pyramid of needs.



The justification for this model is that in nyckelharpa courses there are usually very large differences in the playing skills of the students because there are not so many players and courses are limited. Care must be made as a teacher that each student is picked up at his level of ability and gives them the opportunity to further develop their skills.

## Self-learning

Before I get to the idea of self-paced learning models, I would like to define the term "self-teaching" and give some historical evidence of it.

<sup>2</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste\\_der\\_Musikhochschulen\\_und\\_Konservatorien\\_in\\_Deutschland](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_der_Musikhochschulen_und_Konservatorien_in_Deutschland)



## Definition of "self-teaching"

"A self-taught (*autodidact* from Greek "αυτός" = *self* and "διδάσκω" = *teach*) person is someone who taught himself appropriated (ie, self-study) an education at a high level. Unlike the dilettante, who can be also self-taught though usually less knowledgeable standard, the self-taught person usually seeks a professional application of his knowledge and sometimes also its social recognition."<sup>3</sup>

For "self-learning" exists, according to Ulrich Mueller of the workshop for new learning culture "no single universally accepted term use, but it prevailed a great variety of terminology, such as self-organized, [...] independent learning or self-directed learning."<sup>4</sup> All terms are for learning methods that give the learner a greater degree of self-determination.



Abb. 10.6: Titelblatt der Schrift »Musicus autodidactos«, Erfurt 1738

## Historical evidence of self-teaching

Historically, there have been many famous musicians and composers who have instruments and compositional techniques acquired through self-study. For example, Georg Friedrich Telemann taught himself to play the harpsichord, Anton Bruckner and Modest Mussorgsky to compose, Arnold Schoenberg violin and composition, Jimi Hendrix to play the guitar, etc.

As early as 1738 in Erfurt an anonymous pamphlet appeared called "Musicus autodidactos oder der sich selbst informirende Musicus"<sup>5</sup>. It was a practical guide for independent learning of musical notation and to play a variety of instruments. The pamphlet

does not require any special knowledge. Unfortunately, today is not known how widespread or popular this pamphlet was.

<sup>3</sup> <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autodidakt>

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Müller, 2001

<sup>5</sup> Heiner Gembris, 1998



## Models of self-paced learning

Pedagogy has only recently begun to occupy itself with this type of learning style. By the course of the 20th Century emergence of increased interest in popular music, which is now also taught in colleges and universities scientific, led to the necessity of studies that dealt with the learning of these types of music.

In the field of jazz, rock and folk music, the self-directed learning has a high priority. The tradition of oral transmission is very important to the learner so that the student becomes familiar with the right "groove". An experienced jazz musician says: "In jazz, learning ,by ear' is still a crucial part, which goes back to the African roots of jazz. And a lot is also learned from the radio and recordings: copying is the ideal way of learning".<sup>6</sup> In Swedish traditional nyckelharpa music it is the same. To obtain the right "Polska Groove" it is best to internalize the music through listening.

I would like to present here three models of self-paced learning, which were developed in recent years.

In the 1970s Malcolm Knowles first used the term "self-directed learning". He understands a learning process where the learning individuals:

- "take the initiative themselves
- diagnose their own learning needs
- formulate their learning goals
- organize resources
- choose appropriate learning strategies
- evaluate their learning process itself"<sup>7</sup>

A similar definition was given by F. E. Weinert in 1982, when he said, self-directed learning is a form of learning where the learner makes the key decisions on whether, what, when, how, whereupon he learns, which can affect serious and consequential results."<sup>8</sup>

6 Günter Kleinen, 2006

7 Malcolm Knowles, 1975

8 F.E. Weinert, 1982



Ulrich Müller in 2001 came to the conclusion that:

"Self-education learning makes great demands on the learner:

- awareness of their own (life and) objectives
- Self-awareness as a successful learner
- Openness to learning
- Initiative and independence
- conscious acceptance of personal responsibility
- creativity and problem solving skills
- to develop and maintain skills, motivation, concentration and discipline
- strategies in information retrieval, recording and processing"<sup>9</sup>

## New learning culture in the musical field

### Self-learning in the new learning culture

Educational psychologists arrange the self-taught learning in the learning environment of a new culture of learning and especially in the realm of adult education. A new understanding of learning as an intrinsically active, constructive process is fundamental. The students and teachers must redefine their roles, so that the learner definitely takes more responsibility. The teacher is no longer the "all-determining authority", as in the classical music education was often the case, but instead helps the students to be aware of his learning, his goals and desires and to assist the learner with his own skills. These are new requirements that are imposed on the teacher. The old image of the "infallible" teacher, who gives detailed instructions that must be executed without deviation 100%, no longer exists in this case. It is rather a guidance towards self-help and above all a truly individual approach to each student.

For the student this means a tailor-made tutelage, in which he is actively involved.

9 Ulrich Müller, 2001



Self-education, self-directed learning is a complex approach that can be also seen as a diverse range of methods and procedures which are associated with learning. The student is the self-paced learning but not on his own. He gets the authority which would help him, not from outside “imposed” but he selects himself by looking at videos of famous instrumentalists, listening to solos on a CD of his model or hero, or imitate a singing voice, because it reflects his personal ideal. These days there are also much information on the Internet about all instruments. One can direct oneself through the “new media” guide, visit Internet forums, order DVD or video courses participate in weekend workshops, ...

Thus, the learner is in the control of his learning with outside assistance, which need not necessarily originate from a teacher. And even if he has lessons once a week, the learner is able for the rest of the week to self-direct his practice sessions, which in principle makes self-organised learning very important.

The former understanding that an instrument not learned in childhood would not be learnt in adulthood is outdated. Adult education has become a large field in Music education. The “lifelong learning” is a term that is used these days more often. Because of the change in lifestyle over the past 50 years and decrease in the birth rate allowing more time for hobbies, there are many people who dream of learning an instrument or a second instrument as adults, without the desire to pursue a career as a professional musician.

The self-taught learning is at the beginning of the development of an individual musical self-concept that characterizes every musical person. The musical self-concept includes all the music-related attitudes, practices, aesthetic opinions, likes and dislikes, temperament and personality traits of a person.



## Tasks of the learner

In relation to integrative teaching in youth and adult education it makes sense to combine self and other organized forms of learning with mutually supportive forms so as to find an individual learning style each.

A guide that was developed by Ulrich Mueller in 2001 can help the learner to find an optimal form that suits him for learning by himself.

“Short Guide to the planning of self-organized learning projects:

### 1. Objectives

- Formulate your objective. What do you want – in general – to achieve? What tasks do you want to undertake, which situations do you want to handle more competently?
- Specify your objectives. What skills, knowledge, what position do you want to conquer?
- What sub-goals you want to achieve, and which first?

### 2. Motivation

- Get clear about your motivation: Why do you want to achieve this goal?
- What moves you?
- What is your objective in conjunction with other areas of your life? Are there any similarities / conflicts?
- Can you combine your learning with other areas of responsibility and commitment?

### 3. Time required

- How much time can and will you spend on your learning project?
- How can you create the necessary free space?
- At what fixed times can you learn?
- Make a clear timetable.



#### 4. Knowledge / previous experience

- What existing knowledge and experience do you bring with you?
- Where can you build on?

#### 5. Methods / learning strategies

- What methods / learning strategies, you know, what can you use?
- Do you master these techniques?
- Could you optimize them further?
- For which learning goals / tasks are still looking for suitable methods?
- What media forms are there for your learning project? Which media do you want to work with?

#### 6. Learning Partners

- Could you learn together with someone?
- Who could support you as a mentor / guide, advising on learning difficulties?
- Who can give you access to resources, give advice on further sources of learning?

#### 7. Controls

- How do you check whether you have achieved your goals?

This questionnaire can help you consolidate your experience up to now with and your ability to execute self-organized learning.

1. What have you learned so far in a self-organized manner?
2. What successes did you have?
3. What failures did you have?
4. What difficulties and problems did you encounter?
5. What methods and media did you use?
6. Did you learn alone or with others?
7. In which situations / conditions did you learn well? Where and when did you have positive learning experiences?
8. Would you like to have had support / assistance in your learning project? How, why?"<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Müller, 2001



Self-organized learning can involve using a wide range of methods (eg grades, learning by ear, instructional videos, personal encounters, ...). The student, apart from searching for suitable media, is often willing to further develop his skills with teachers or learning companions. As I discovered in Section 5 of Nyckelharpa player interviews, all respondents had taken part in a workshop and found the system of workshops good, implying that all had experience in learning from teaching assistants.

#### Tasks of the facilitator

For this reason, self-directed learning often requires an appropriate form of support from professional facilitators and educational institutions. Its mission is to:

- “bring people together with similar interests or problems
- provide rooms / facilities, etc.
- provide organizational and administrative assistance
- consult about learning materials, advice on the selection
- provide learning consulting
- facilitate discussions
- provide its own expert assistance
- arrange experts
- develop learning media“<sup>11</sup>

#### Examples of self-paced learning on the nyckelharpa

As stated above, the nyckelharpa player is automatically faced with the high demands of self-paced learning because of the current teaching situation for the instrument, and so themselves must / may develop their own approach to learning. As already mentioned, there are worldwide only a very limited number of training opportunities and the teaching material is not very extensive.

<sup>11</sup> Ulrich Müller, 2001





To get an insight into the learning of different musical approach of nyckelharpa players, I visited a nyckelharpa workshop at the Academy Castle Fürsteneck and interviewed four students and the tutor in the first week of January 2007. I was also able to interview another player 2 days later and 1 month later, in private, two other nyckelharpa players. In the following I would like to cite my interview questions and, following a summary of interviewees answers. The eight interviewees were 21-43 years old.

### Interview questions and explanations of these

#### 1. When did you start playing Nyckelharpa?

This question I put to my interviewees, as the teaching situation for the instrument Nyckelharpa in the last 15 years has changed much, and so the starting point to learn Nyckelharpa playing for each interviewee was probably very different.

#### 2. Why did you start playing nyckelharpa, what was your motivation and why no other instrument?

As Ulrich Müller 2001 and Malcolm Knowles in 1975 (above) cited in their studies of independent learning, the motivation for being self-taught is an essential issue.

#### 3. Have you taught yourself to play the nyckelharpa, or did you start in a course?

With this question I wanted to find out what the procedure was at the beginning of learning from the respondents.

#### 4. Did you previously play a different instrument, and did you learn it this self-taught or by a teacher?

What interests me here is whether the approach to learning of the individuals changed if they have previously learned an instrument or not.

#### 4a. Was / is much music made in your home as a child?



It would be interesting to see whether the musical habits of the parents have a direct influence on the choice of instruments and musical learning or not (unfortunately I have only asked 2 of my interview partners this question).

#### 5. In what area do you use the nyckelharpa and what are your goals on the instrument? (Alone or in ensemble, private or in public)

In order to move forward in learning it is very important to set goals. I want to find out with this question whether and to what extent the interviewees have made thought about goals on the instrument ever or not.

#### 6. What is your approach to practice, are you using a set practice scheme?

Two requirements that Ulrich Müller 2001 provides (so) to the learner are creativity and problem solving skills. To learn how the interviewees demonstrate these, I asked the question about the problem of the how to practice. Do you follow a system?

#### 7. Can you read music and can you play by ear or reading or both?

With this question I wanted to find out how the interviewees make music. Do they all have the ability to use written music?

#### 8. Do you play a specific repertoire / style or are you do not set in this?

Hereby I wanted to document the range of styles used on the instrument.

#### 9. Do you learn better self-taught in combination with visiting a single course or would you find it good if it would be a popular instrument taught at music schools?

This question was to find out whether the interviewees would find it good if there was a greater range of nyckelharpa lessons available, or whether they find the current situation suitable.



## Presentation of the results

### Summary of responses:

1. Interviewees were playing at the time of the interview, between 3 months and 11 years nyckelharpa. Two-three months, two for 1 year, one for 3 years, two for 10 years and 11 years.
2. All of them said that they started to learn the instrument because they liked the sound. They had either heard it in concerts or recordings on CD. One interviewee, who has been playing for 11 years, heard the instrument on a Scandinavian holiday and then bought one in Sweden. One interviewee who has been playing the nyckelharpa for 10 years, discovered the instrument while studying at the Violin-Making School in Mitlenwald and it was not only the beautiful sound of the instrument, but also the design and structure that interested her both professionally and as a result, she has become a very successful nyckelharpa builder. Another musician said that she wanted to learn a string instrument and thought violin would be difficult to learn self-taught, so she chose the key fiddle, because of its keys, and she already could play a keyboard instrument (accordion). All interviewees were greatly motivated at the beginning to learn the instrument. Especially for those who play for some time, it was not easy to buy an instrument (in the case of the violin maker to build one) because there were not so many instruments in circulation in Germany.
3. Five of the eight musicians began learning nyckelharpa by themselves, the other three went to a workshop. Two of those who have learned first alone, attended their first course after about 3 months because they did not feel they could get ahead alone.
4. All but one of the interviewees had previously played at least one instrument (this one, however, taught himself a song on the piano as a teenager). Three interviewees had learnt their instruments through self-study (with some later course visits and teachers) and four had learnt their instruments in the usual



way with a teacher (usually in childhood). One interviewee indicated that she would take a few lessons from a violin teacher in the absence of a nyckelharpa teacher nearby.

4.a The two nyckelharpa players that I interviewed later, reported to my question that music was not and would not be made in the home. The other interviewees were unfortunately not asked this question. Therefore I can not draw any conclusions whether the musical habits of the family home has an influence or not.

5. Two interviewees play exclusively privately, and do want to perform outside the home. Three of the other six interviewees play professionally in various ensembles, including one who in addition teaches the nyckelharpa as a lecturer. The remaining three interviewees currently play semi-professionally, and want to expand in the professional field of music with the nyckelharpa. The goal was primarily to play better on the instrument. A nyckelharpa player stated that when she is past the beginner stage she would like to make music with her family, but exclusively in private. Another interviewee said, his goal for the future would be "to produce a more beautiful sound". One of the nyckelharpa players stated that other than enhancing his own sound, his goal is "to enthuse others for the instrument".

6. Seven of the interviewees said they have a practice plan, and many parallels could be seen to exercise regimens that come from the classical teaching. A mixture of technical exercises and repertoire in a continually repeated way were used. I found it amazing that there were so many similarities in the way of practice. Maybe it was because all interviewees had already participated in music education in some form. Only one interviewee indicated that she does not use a practice plan. Sometimes she would only practice technical exercises for two hours, another time by just playing repertoire.

7. Four of the eight musicians could read music very badly, but want to practice it in order to play pieces from sight. Four can





read music but also want to play by ear so as to train their musical ear. Thus, all the interviewees have the opportunity to use written music, even if it is difficult for some interviewees to use it to learn.

8. One of the interviewees plays almost exclusively Baroque music, all the others play folk and early music, however, four of which tend in the direction of baroque or classical music. Everyone is open to try new or different types of music such as tango, jazz, etc. on the instrument. All are open-minded to other types of music which are different from their normal listening and playing habits.

9. Six participants of the interview said it would be good if the nyckelharpa would be a popular instrument at music schools, two said it was not so important, because they prefer to learn self-taught and would not use the services anyway. All stated that they have visited at least one nyckelharpa workshop and it would be nice if there were more opportunities to learn the instrument, such as textbooks, video courses or more workshops.

### Analysis of the interviews

From the individual interviews, one can draw the conclusion that all the musicians are very dedicated to their instrument. They operate with great effort to learn this, for example, they drive hundreds of kilometres to a course, or have been waiting for some 1 ½ years for their instrument from the instrument maker. So one can say that all interviewees were very capable to meet the demands required by learning in this form, such as to take initiative, have high motivation, work-discipline and problem solving skills as stated by Knowles, Weinert and Müller.

The motivation is often very high in self-taught learning, so that much effort and enthusiasm is shown. One interviewee said, for example, "you alone must be aware of more things than



when you have a teacher." And another said: "I can decide when and how much I practice, the pressure from a teacher would stop me. With accordion, I stopped because the teacher did not have the same pace. "

However, by purely self-taught interviewees there is often a lack of technical proficiency on the instrument because an external feedback is missing.

A statement by an interviewee was: "Without teachers one can not progress as is needed." All were of the opinion that sooner or later, lessons with a teacher are needed if you want to progress on the instrument (the survey mainly took place on a weekend course and all interviewees had participated in at least one nyckelharpa workshop).

### Situation for nyckelharpa players

For the growing number of nyckelharpa players the learning and teaching situation in recent years has changed dramatically. That the three institutions ("Eric Sahlström Institute", "Scuola di Musica Popolare di Forlimpopoli" and "Academy BURG FÜRSTENECK) offer lessons on the nyckelharpa and cooperate with each other, it has become much easier to create your own learning concept. The lecturers or teaching assistants teach using different styles and teaching strategies based on their different countries of origin and education. Due to the cooperation of the institutions these styles and strategies are linked to each other and exchanged.

With the growing number of interest in the nyckelharpa there is now more material available about and for the instrument. First, the number of videos for and about nyckelharpa (eg [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)), have increased and there are now more and more composers who compose for nyckelharpa (eg Boris Koller, Marco Ambrosini, Johan Hedin, Lisma Project, ...). Through the amount of courses a common standard repertoire is being created which is passed on largely by rote.



Obviously, the motivation of the players is absolutely crucial, and through this the melodies are spread and access is made for a greater audience. It is evident that the ways and means mentioned in the new culture of learning, such as the use of Internet or weekend workshops are very important for nyckelharpa players and are used frequently.

Finally, I hope I could give an insight into different models of self-paced learning and make helpful suggestions in the new learning culture of the musical field for nyckelharpa players and teachers that can be used in their daily musical lives.

### Interviews:

- Interviews 02.01.2007 with:  
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- Interview 04.01.2007 with:  
Tilman Teuscher
- Interviews 23.01.2007 with:  
Dirk Kilian, Silvia Lehmeier
- Interview 23.01.2009 with:  
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[www.nyckelharpa.org](http://www.nyckelharpa.org)  
[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)



Photo: Mike Lörler

### Jule Bauer (Germany)

Vocal studies (main focus on medieval music) with Diane Severson and Franziska Schäfer-Vondru (Frankfurt). Master courses in singing with Cornelius Reid and Carol Baggett-Forte at Dr. Hoch's conservatory of music (Frankfurt) and with Montserrat Figueras at the academy of music Trossingen. Study of nyckelharpa at the Scuola di Musica Popolare di Forlimpopoli (Italy). First graduate of the "European Nyckelharpa training". Study of musicology and music pedagogy at the J.W. Goethe university Frankfurt am Main.

Since 1995 she has been performing international concerts and recordings with the ensembles Helut, Sava, Triskilian, Asfur and Oni Wytars. Since 2003 she has been teaching at different courses for early music (medieval music), traditional music and world music. Since 2009 teacher for nyckelharpa at the Academy BURG FÜRSTENECK (Germany) and the Scuola di Musica Popolare di Forlimpopoli (Italy).

[www.triskilian.de](http://www.triskilian.de)