



Using the Nyckelharpa as a Bowed String Instrument in Rudimentary Music Education

Experiential Reports on the Use of the Nyckelharpa in
Teaching Music at Pre-school and Primary-school Levels

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Translated into English by Anne Marcodes

Teaching music at the pre-school and primary-school levels involving children aged 4 to 8 offers them a platform to gain experience in the areas of music and dance. The Orff instrument plays a decisive role, among other things, due to its easy handling. Using the nyckelharpa in music education creates new and interesting possibilities.

How can the nyckelharpa as such be integrated in music education? Why use the nyckelharpa and not another bowed string instrument? What is a children's nyckelharpa? How do children respond to the interaction with this instrument? Which methods and possibilities exist to playfully use this instrument? Is the nyckelharpa an ideal complement to rudimentary music education?

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Prolog

As a music teacher I've been working for about twenty years in the field of elementary musical education with children aged between three and eight years at "Landesmusikschulwerk Oberösterreich". My main instrument is the nyckelharpa.

Giving information about all sorts of instruments is one of the major aims of my work. Various instruments are introduced in lessons, sensitive experience of different types, their specific sounds, playing techniques...

Bowed string instruments like violin, viola, cello and double bass are one option, but can only be used as 'drone' instruments. There isn't enough time for practising precise fingering and intonation, moreover it would contradict my main aim: to impart basic musical experiences. So the nyckelharpa with its keyboard, which enables the player to produce music in an easy way, seems to be ideal.

Whereas it requires years of practising to produce precise intonation on violin or 'cello the nyckelharpa beginner will succeed almost immediately: pressing the key shortens the string and changes the tone.

This makes playing more effortless and encourages playing melodies.

Annette Osann, maker of my nyckelharpa, made a children's instrument for her then three year old daughter. Fascinated by its sight and sound I had the vision to work with this instrument in elementary music lessons.

But is the nyckelharpa really suitable as an elementary musical instrument?

I commissioned two children's nyckelharpas, which I use regularly in my lessons at "Landesmusikschule Thalheim" since March 2011.

This is a documentary of the significant developments.



1. The Instrument



Measures:

longitude: ca. 63 cm

latitude: ca. 14cm

weight: ca. 600g

Strings:

small D: drone string



D1: resonant string



small A: drone string



D1: main string



The keyboard is set chromatically; it's got one octave (D1-D2) and 12 keys.

Bow:

length: 27 cm,

stringing: 22 cm.



1.1 Thoughts on the tuning

The 'scale' of the nyckelharpa should correspond the 'scale' of the children's voice and it should be possible to combine it with the mallet instruments, which are mainly tuned in the key of C major.

The below given table shows the ideal 'range' of the children's voice (three-six years, the average age of my pupils): from e1 as the lowest tone up to e2. The task was to find a compromise. Also considering instrument-making aspects, we decided to go for a tuning in D major.



(Andreas Mohr: „Die Kinderstimme“ – Funktion und Pflege, Einführungsreferat, <http://www.kinderstimmbildung.eu/funktionundpflege.pdf>)



2. Significance of the nyckelharpa in elementary music education

2.1. The passive role

In my lessons I offer a various number of different instruments.

They always sit in a certain place: percussion instruments on a black blanket,, mallet instruments and nyckelharpas in a corner of the room, nyckelharpas visible in an open case. Not all of the instruments are in constant use, depending on the children's preferences and the individual course of lessons. In such a case the nyckelharpa should be just usually perceived. The passive contact encourages valuable sensations as:

'There's another instrument, it sits in a case, it comes with a little stick, it looks a bit like a guitar.'

There might come up questions like:

'How does it sound? – How do you play it? – Is it noisy? – Heavy or light? – I'd like to give it a try!...'

2.2. The active role

2.2.1. Introduction of the instrument:

The case is closed. The children have to guess what might be in it, the flaps are opened, the lid is lifted, the cover removed... what an exciting 'birth'!

Usually everyone is keen on trying the instrument. Often they want to see me playing it. By watching me they learn about the correct handling of the instrument before they give it a try. First we try different ways to hold the instrument. The entire group is asked to help the pupil, if necessary. Very soon we can hear a sound: a beaming smile – another try – next one, please.



Elisabeth (4J-11M)



Jonas(4J-8M)



Raphael (4J-10M)



2.2.2. Games with the nyckelharpa

'Loud mail': each pupil is choosing an instrument and starting in a specific rhythm. This rhythm is taken up and repeated by the next child, the next one, the next one. When everyone's finished, the next pupil starts a new (should the nyckelharpa be part of the game, we can try different bow strokes, different strings). Variation: swap the instruments.

'Marching tunes': each pupil with the instrument of his choice. Each step is accompanied by a specific sound (nyckelharpa: coordination of steps and bow strokes). Variation: just one pupil walks and plays, while the others stand still. If the musician files up behind the back of another child it's his turn.

Solo/tutti: All pupils march and play. As soon as one child climbs on a chair, everyone is mute and stands still, just the child on the chair plays a solo. As soon as the soloist finishes, everyone starts to move again.

3. Song-accompaniment and more; observations and notes on music lessons

3.1. Documentation / March 2010 Landesmusikschule Thalheim / first contacts

Reflection

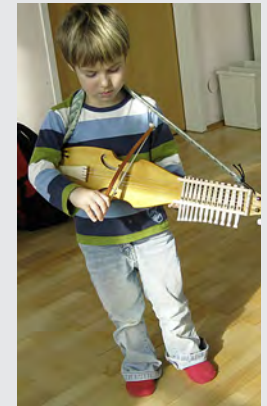
- The oldest child was six years, seven months old, the youngest four years, nine months.
- All children showed great interest (apart from one, 23 children wanted to play).
- All of them managed to produce a nice sound by bowing the strings. The preferred strings differed from child to child.
- The size of the instrument was ideal in most cases, only Catharina's (four years, ten months) arms were slightly too short.
- Most children managed to play with a very relaxed and 'natural' bow hold.



Magnus (4J-9M)



Catharina (4J-10M)



Alban (5J-4M)



Elias (5J-8M)




Lisa (6J)



3.2. Documentation / January 2011 Landesmusikschule Thalheim / Song-accompaniment

Song: „Beim verfallnen Geisterschloß“ (Gerda Bächli)¹

Pattern of accompaniment: arpeggio ⇨ 



Lisa (7J-2M)



Elias (6J-6M)

Reflection

- All children were ten months older.
- They still showed increasing interest in playing the instrument.
- Jonas tried fingering with the left hand and discovered various notes.
- Playing arpeggios went down well.

¹ Gerda Bächli is a famous Swiss composer of songs and music for children. Unfortunately, we did not achieve the permission from the editor to print her tunes here



3.3. Documentation March 2011 / 3rd year elementary music education

Transcript of a lesson, March, 28th, 5.00-6.40 p.m.

Group of six children: third year elementary musical education („music workshop“): Lisa, Fabian, Magdalena, Elias, Ruth, Lea,

aged: between six and seven.

We've been regularly working with the nyckelharpas for about one year now.

3.3.1. Wellcome Rondo: „Jetzt beginnts, wir fangen an“² (by Werner Beidinger)

Jetzt beginnts

(Werner Beidinger)



Jetzt be-ginnt, wir fan-gen an! Je-der spielt bei uns gleich mit so gut er kann!

Sin-gen, tan-zen, mu-si-ziern! Und man-ches Neu-e, aus-pro-biern!

Proceedings of a lesson:

Each child chooses an instrument to improvise the verses of the song; some minutes to experiment in advance. After finishing the song all children gather in a circle in the centre of the room.

The chorus of the song goes: “Jetzt beginnt’s” (as given above)

² With kind permission of Werner Beidinger



Instruments on offer: guiro, small drums, castagnettes, alto xylophones, two children's nyckelharpas.

Choice of instruments:

- Magdalena and Fabian: nyckelharpas,
- Elias: xylophone,
- Lea, Lisa and Ruth: percussion instruments.

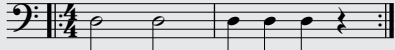
Observations:

- *Magdalena* uses all strings of the instrument. Her bow strokes are fluent with regular up- and down bows. she also plays notes of different length for about half a minute. Her way of playing is inventive, full of relish, commitment and rhythmical improvisation.
- *Fabian's* performance was shorter, choosing the notes considerably, fluent bow strokes, up- and down bows.
- *Both* children played exclusively open strings.

3.3.2.. Song-accompaniment ("Geisterschloss"³)

Line up: nyckelharpas and mallet instruments:

Elias and *Lisa* go for the nyckelharpas. They want to play this instrument at our public performance on May 20th. Today we're practising the accompaniment for the second time: that's a rhythmical pattern on the D drone.

First part: 

Second part: 

Maybe we're going to change the accompaniment of the B part in the next lesson.

3 Text and music: Gerda Bächli, see footnote Nr. 1



3.3.3. Song-accompaniment ("Fledermaus"⁴)

Lisa and *Elias* also do this part of the accompaniment on nyckelharpas. The drone is here: D1 – small A.



For the first time they have to cross strings constantly, but both of them manage well. Sometimes the bowstroke is not parallel to the bridge. Lisa tries to correct, Elias cannot yet manage this task.



4. Visions

4.1. Vision 1: The possibilities of the nyckelharpa in elementary music education

I think indeed that there will be a place for the nyckelharpa in elementary musical education in the future: Size, handling and technique correspond with the needs of the children at their stage of development and invite to playing.

4 Music: Gerda Bächli, see footnote 1, text: Susanne Brameshuber



4.1.1. A comparison between mallet instruments and nyckelharpa

Mallet Instruments	Children's Nyckelharpa
Visual aspect: Visual invitation to playing: most children take up the mallets immediately and are very keen on giving it a try.	Visual aspect: Visual invitation to playing: the sight provokes awe, curiosity, joy. One can sense, that most children are charmed by the instrument. They see the nyckelharpa as a highlight, a climax and an enrichment of their music lessons.
Tuning: Constant tuning – they hardly ever are out of tune.	Tuning: Strings can 'drop' – they have to be tuned.
Acoustic aspect: The hearing is trained in the tonal system (tones and semi tones). Tones which lie 'in between' cannot be experienced. The quality of the sound is gained by the stroke of the mallets.	Acoustic aspect: Hearing abilities are developed and trained through the tuning experience. The quality of the sound is gained by bowing the strings. New valuable sensitive experiences through new sound effects and sound colours.
Emotional aspect: Playing with mallets is quite attractive, motivating and challenging.	Emotional aspect: Producing sounds by stroking a bow makes curious and gives way to valuable new experiences. Motivating in a highly emotional way.
Cognitive aspect: Stimulation of both hemispheres of the brain and training in coordination by use of both hands.	Cognitive aspect: Coordination between both hemispheres of the brain is more extensively trained and activated through different activities of the left (fingering) and the right (bowing) hand.
Technical aspect: The correct hold and use of the mallet has to be trained.	Technical aspect: Correct bowhold and positioning of the instrument has to be trained and that takes some time. Individual holds and positions are possible.



4.1.2. A comparison between violin and nyckelharpa

Violin	Children's Nyckelharpa
Strings: Four strings: small G, D1, A1, E2	Strings: Four strings: small D (drone string), D1 (resonant string), small A, D1
Size of the instrument: Different sizes, suitable for all age groups, even for very young children.	Size of the instrument: Suitable for young children. (Different models for older children and adults available.)
Producing of tones: A sequence of tones through fingering. This requires constant practising, well-trained hearing abilities and expertise. In elementary music education the violin should be used only as a drone instrument.	Producing of tones: A sequence of tones through pressing the keys. It is possible to hit the right note without a properly trained hearing. Practising and expertise are necessary. The keyboard is the huge advantage of the nyckelharpa: in elementary music education it can be used as a drone instrument as well as a melody instrument.
Position: The correct position is very important and has to be trained very precisely.	Position: Individual position, no time-consuming training. Each child finds his own position
Bow stroke: Producing of tones with a relatively long bow. Correct bowing techniques require a very long time of practising.	Bow stroke: Individual bow hold through experience while playing.



4.1.3. Aims of the curriculum of elementary music education (Conference of the music schools of Austria) encourage the use of this instrument

- Basic playing on traditional instruments.
- Experiencing different ways to produce tones.
- Deriving pleasure from playing music, the sound of the voice, the body movements.
- Getting to know material and different sounds.
- Learning to treat the instruments carefully.
- Getting to know different types of instruments. Trying and describing them, filing them into different groups.
- Song-accompaniment.
- Correct handling of mallet instruments and other basic percussion instruments (use of mallets) – learning how to produce various sounds and dynamics.
- Finding differentiating ways of expression with voice, body, instruments and other objects.
- Discovering and experiencing, recognizing of musical phenomena through playful acting with material, objects and instruments.

4.2. Vision 2: The nyckelharpa as a new instrument in music schools

A wish? A vision? Future prospects? Anyway – there are a lot of tasks and challenges waiting to be tackled.

In “Landesmusikschule Thalheim” I found a lot of support and encouragement in using the nyckelharpa in elementary music education.

So would it be possible to install the subject nyckelharpa in Austria?

4.3. Vision 3: The nyckelharpa as a subject taught at music college

A post-graduate course for trained music teachers would be helpful to popularize the instrument and support developing professional standards of playing.



4.4. Vision 4: The nyckelharpa as an orchestra-instrument

The nyckelharpa in viola/violin tuning is well suitable to be played in an orchestra. It's sound mingles nicely with other bowed string instruments.

The idea of a nyckelharpa-orchestra would be exciting – this should also be the right setting for the use of the bass-nyckelharpa ('cello-tuning).

4.5. Vision 5: The nyckelharpa as a suitable instrument for adult beginners

Experience shows that this instrument can be learned properly in a relatively short time. This fact makes it also interesting for adult beginners. The 'nyckelharpa-virus' has been spreading very fast in Austria. Five aficionados in my circle of friends already bought an instrument, which they now play regularly and enthusiastically!

That's why – in my opinion – the future looks bright for the nyckelharpa. It might find it's place in music education.

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All photos: Susanne Brameshuber

Photo: Hans Brameshuber