

A rough translation of an article on the nyckelharpa published by the "Hildesheimer Allgemeine Zeitung", 4th May 2013.

The nyckelharpa at the Knochenhauer-Amtshaus in Hildesheim A medieval musical instrument is newly discovered

by Karsten Evers

Recently, the Swedish musicologist Per-Ulf Allmo identified a rather unknown musical instrument at the butchers guildhouse "Knochenhauer-Amtshaus" in Hildesheim, Germany: The "Schlüssselfidel" or "nyckelharpa". The author of this article tells about the instrument and its history. He started his career as an architect with the renovation of historic half-timbered houses. In a second study, he was graduated at the University of Hildesheim as MA of cultural education. Since then he works at the Academy BURG FÜRSTENECK and has, amongst others, initiated the European Nyckelharpa Training and organizes the European Nyckelharpa Cooperation.

The Knochenhauer-Amtshaus was first finished 1529 as the butchers guildhall at the market place of Hildesheim in northern Germany. It was regarded as one of the most beautiful half-timbered houses in the world. During World War II it was completely destroyed. Only 1997 it was carefully reconstructed true to the original details thanks to the initiative of the citizens of Hildesheim.

At a prominent place, exactly centered over the entrance of the 1997 reconstructed Knochenhauer-Amstshaus welcomes us an angel with a string instrument. He belongs to a group of musicians that decorate some lugs of the truss. The string instrument can easily be recognized by the bow. A waisted body with neck corresponds to the form of a historical vielle. At first glance, one would regard this as one of many late medieval pictures of vielle playing puttos.

But this angel of Hildesheim is different and unique, because the instrument he plays seems to be not a vielle but a "nyckelharpa", an instrument that is rather unknown even among musical experts. And this presentation on the Knochenhauer-Amthaus is the only early figurative image of a "Schlüssselfidel", known in Germany.

The Medieval "Schlüssselfidel"

The strings of the nyckelharpa are played with a bow as with all bowed instruments. But to change the pitch the string is shortened not with the fingers on a fretboard as with violins or guitars. Instead there are "keys" in a "key box" located under the strings, and on the keys are small wooden "tangents", which tap the strings instead of the finger: a mechanical keyboard is used - similar to the hurdy-gurdy. The keys or tangents are pressed from below against the strings. And there we find the left hand of our angel beside key box that is well recognizable, too.

We know the historical German name "Schlüssselfidel" from two music-theoretical treatises of the Renaissance. The first Martin Agricola published with the title "Musica instrumentalis deudsch" in precisely that year 1529, in which the Knochenhauer-Amtshaus was originally built. 1619, Michael Praetorius published "De Organographia" in which he treated the musical instruments of his time. In both works, the "Schlüssselfidel" is depicted and described. Both authors are still known today as composers of common hymns.

In Italy, Denmark and Sweden we got ceiling paintings in late medieval churches with angels playing nyckelharpa. The earliest of these pictures is from the year 1408, and is located in Siena, Italy. Because the instrument is so little known, even this one has only recently been identified by

a nyckelharpa player of today, although the picture is very clear and was always in public. Quite possible, therefore, that the nyckelharpa is yet to be discovered in the future on other paintings.

Most ceiling frescoes with key fiddles we find in Sweden. However, art historians assume the authors might have been German painters on the tramp. Also in Sweden, we find in a church in Gotland from the period around 1350 a small stone relief, which probably shows a nyckelharpa.

Who played the nyckelharpa those times and how it has sounded, we do not know. Relics of real key fiddles are not obtained from this early period. It can be assumed as certain that the keyboard could change only one melodic string. Other strings might have served as immutable "drones" to accompany the melody like with hurdy-gurdy and bagpipe. So the early nyckelharpa is one of the drone instruments. Hurdy-gurdy and bagpipe we find at the Knochenhauer-Amtshaus right and left of the nyckelharpa. This arrangement, the prominent central placement and the use at a bourgeois house are historically interesting.

The Swedish Nyckelharpa

In the Baroque period, the instrument fell in oblivion nearly everywhere. But almost at the same time, from the mid-17th Century, in Sweden the first instruments occur that are preserved until today. However, the body of all Swedish instruments is narrow and stretched - in contrast to the vielle form the early pictures. The Swede Per-Ulf Allmo who explores the history of the nyckelharpa for decades, has found similarities between the Swedish design with contemporaneous Sorbian instruments from area at the German-Polish border. In Swedish the instrument is called the "nyckelharpa". This is a literal equivalent of the historical German word "Schlüsselfidel" or the English "key fiddle": "Schlüssel" = "nyckel" = "key" and "Fidel" = "harpa" = "vielle" or any early "stringed instrument". Internationally this Swedish term is commonly used today. Especially in the Uppland region around the town of Uppsala, the nyckelharpa is played and developed for 400 years in an unbroken tradition as a folk music instrument. Why the nyckelharpa survived just there cannot be answered clearly.

The design of the Swedish Nyckelharpas was adapted to musical needs several times. The number of keys varies with the melodies musicians wanted to play. There have been developments with two tangents on each key to pick two strings at the same time with the same key. There were also first instruments with two rows of keys to play on two different strings. Resonating sympathetic strings contribute to the specific sound of today's nyckelharpas. They are located under the playing strings and are excited only by the resonance frequencies and help for the full sound rich in overtones and for a kind of reverberation.

Enormous progress brought developments that August Bohlin (1877-1949) and Eric Sahlström (1912-1966) added to the instrument. They provided the nyckelharpa with three rows of keys. So three of the four strings could be played chromatically. The fourth string was used in a constant pitch as a bass string. To carry the tangents from the bottom row of keys to each of the associated string, they furnished the upper keys with elaborated breakthroughs.

The fact that the nyckelharpa experienced a renaissance since the 1970s is mainly thanks to Eric Sahlström. In the middle of the last century, even in Sweden only a few old people played this instrument. A renewed extinction like in the Baroque period seemed likely. Eric Sahlström was not only talented and innovative musician, but he was able to inspire and thrill others. He achieved for instance, that the Swedish government promoted courses for building nyckelharpas at community colleges. And many famous nyckelharpa players have played with him and learned from him.

The Nyckelharpa Today

After his death the Eric Stahlström Institute was founded as the Swedish National Institute of Folk Music. Among other tasks one year full-time courses for playing nyckelharpa and two year building courses for building nyckelharpas are offered. At the Royal College of Music in Stockholm you can even study nyckelharpa. Thus in Sweden today there is a considerable number of highly qualified nyckelharpa players. One focus is on traditional and modified folk music. But many other styles of music can be played on the instrument. The whole range could be heard in August 2012 at an impressive gala concert in Uppsala honoring the 100th birthday of Eric Sahlström.

Outside of Sweden, the nyckelharpa was rediscovered since about 1980. Especially the Italian musician Marco Ambrosini, who is living in Germany, and his Belgian counterpart Didier François had their own access to the instrument by their musical background as classically trained violin soloists. Their goal was not to cultivate the tradition of Swedish music but they were excited by the unusual sound. And so they are not only among the first prominent nyckelharpa players outside Sweden but also pioneers in the use of the instrument in a variety of genres like medieval music, classical music and jazz up to contemporary avant-garde music. They have inspired many other musicians for the instrument. Even in rock and pop music the nyckelharpa is used today.

As in earlier times, the recent changes in the repertoire have led to modifications of the instrument. In Germany and France professional instrument makers built almost ever nyckelharpas, in which all four strings can be played with separate rows of keys. A drone string is omitted. There are even 5-row instruments and e-nyckelharpas. As with other instruments, an entire family has been created at different pitches from bass to soprano instrument.

Also instruments for larger or smaller children starting from kindergarten age are available. In Belgium, it is planned to include the nyckelharpa as one of the official musical instruments promoted by the government: Because of the keyboard, a faster initial success is possible than with other bowed instruments. Even violin students benefit from the nyckelharpa, because of the keyboard, the distances of the half and full tones are so clearly to understand.

The growing number of nyckelharpa players led to a need for training facilities outside of Sweden. Therefore, the German Academy BURG FÜRSTENECK in the district of Fulda, Hesse, established 2004 the "International Days of the Nyckelharpa ". Since then, annually about 80 players from many European and non-European nations join this event. Parallel workshops offer the chance of competent instruction on the nyckelharpa in different genres. Beginners are welcome and can borrow an instrument, if necessary. Exhibitions of historical and contemporary nyckelharpas provide knowledge of the instrument. A conference and a nyckelharpa concert are part of the program.

Especially to train professional musicians and music teachers on the instrument, the three-year "European Nyckelharpa Training" was developed in a Swedish-Italian-German cooperation. Members of the cooperation are the Academy BURG FÜRSTENECK, the Scuola di Musica Popolare di Forlimpopoli and the Eric Sahlström Institute. Also in France and Spain are facilities for the training. The participants are meeting 6 times a year, each meeting with duration of three days. They are trained by different teachers with special emphases.

With funding from the European Commission, the project "CADENCE - Cultural Adult Education and nyckelharpa Cooperation in Europe" could be performed. Participants from five countries attended 2010 adult education facilities in Sweden, Germany and Italy, discussed different educational and training opportunities, played music and performed finally a great nyckelharpa concert which was broadcasted by the national Germany radio "Deutschlandfunk" and is also

available on CD. This European cooperation will continue in 2013 in Italy with the project "ENCORE – European Nyckelharpa Cooperation – Orchestral Experience – between European folk music and contemporary compositions". An orchestra of more than 20 nyckelharpa soloists from 10 nations will study and perform contemporary music for nyckelharpa. A "Call for Compositions" was recently announced.

The Angel of Hildesheim before and after Reconstruction

The discovery of the unique nyckelharpa sculpture at the Knochenhauer-Amstshaus became possible as a "side effect" of the careful reconstruction, which was realized due to the commitment of many citizens of Hildesheim and the many people involved in the execution. The large and richly decorated half-timbered building was exceptional even at its first emergence. The reconstruction at a time when timber is not really the preferred construction required a unique mission. For the rebuilding 400 cubic meters of oak wood were brought from France to Bremen, where it was merged by the carpenters and then brought throughout whole Germany to the sculpture ateliers, before it could be really rebuilt on the spot in Hildesheim.

The reconstruction was only possible because photographic documentation of the still undestroyed house were made in time. Based on those photographs, drawings and clay models of all sculptures were made in a studio in Stadthagen directed by the architect Prof. Dietrich Klose. This alone employed six people. These models then were used for the execution in wood by several involved sculpture studios. In the case of our nyckelharpa player, it was the studio of Bernd Brucklachner in Augsburg, where at that time eight sculptors were employed. The goal was an as faithful copy of the original figure as possible.

No one knew the instrument "nyckelharpa" at the time of the reconstruction. Nevertheless, relevant details are clearly visible in the restored figure, a sign of the care with which the reconstruction was performed. One must not take that for granted: An artist who depicts a musical instrument is not an instrument builder; the image is always an interpretation. Richard Frederick Heyer for instance (on whom has been reported at the same Hildesheim newspaper on April 7, 2012) has painted with watercolors the Knochenhauer-Amstshaus. He painted the hand of the angel on the fretboard. So he imagined an alleged "failure" of the sculptor and "corrected" it by changing the nyckelharpa into a fiddle.

Sought after old Photos

Despite of the careful reconstruction, it would be desirable to know more details about the original character of the Hildesheim nyckelharpa. Thus, in the reconstruction the peg, where the strings are fixed and tuned, is not visible. Was it also missing in the original or was it bent backwards and therefore not visible in the frontal photograph? The key box seems to be covered with a decorative board. Were ornaments to be seen on it? The keys are indicated with a bar below this key box. Could one see more details of the keyboard in the original? The hint of a line on the body in old photos was reconstructed as a strip of wood, but technically there is no sense for that on an instrument. What was originally meant? In order to approach these and other questions, we would need more photos from before the war. Not all photos that were available during the reconstruction are already re-found in the archives.

Maybe in private family albums old photo are preserved on which the nyckelharpa is recognizable? Photos from different angles and lighting conditions could help. Whoever has this kind of pictures should please contact the author Karsten Evers (evers@burg-fuersteneck.de) or the publisher Mr. Abromeit, Gerstenberg Verlag Hildesheim. Maybe one day it will be possible to build a replica of the old instrument.

Extensive information on the nyckelharpa and the European nyckelharpa cooperation including musical videos can be found at www.nyckelharpa.eu.