

NORDIC-AMERICAN PSALMODIKONFORBUNDET

“A Society dedicated to the education and preservation of the Psalmodikon and Sifferskrift Music”

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NOTES FROM MUSIC-ON-A-STRING

By Beatrice Hole

I am sorry that this Psalmodikon Newsletter is a bit late this time. Rodger and I spent the last two months in Florida, trying to escape this long winter.

I have not been doing many psalmodikon programs lately but I do enjoy responding to all the psalmodikon enthusiasts that contact us. I wish I could share all the stories and questions with you folks. I hear of psalmodikons being sold on such places as e-bay, others who question this odd shaped box they found in Grandpa's attic, and others sharing articles they themselves have found in surfing the internet. The Psalmodikon web site plays a big part in this. I am very grateful to Rob Graber of Woodbury, MN who maintains the web site and keeps it up to date.

Your articles are always a big help to me in putting together a Newsletter. In this issue you will read an article from Pete Ellertsen, Springfield, IL, a member of the Nordic-American Psalmodikonforbundet.

We are now sold out of the first printing of the Psalmodikon Songbook. We are expecting the second edition back from the Printer soon. I want to thank Kathy Pedersen for all the time she has spent on this project by revising and making corrections needed on the old book, along with a few additions. There has been a slight delay on this project as I spent part of the Winter in Florida and Kathy had hip surgery (and by the way, she is having a fast recovery!) Thanks for your patience.

May you always have a song in your heart
and music at your fingertips!

Dulcimer and Psalmodikon: Diverse Traditions

By Pete Ellertsen



Jerry Barton plays dulcimer while he displays a Swedish-style psalmodikon at Bishop Hill, Illinois

Put an Appalachian dulcimer and psalmodikon side by side, and they look practically the same. They're both box zithers, a technical term that means their strings are fretted on the sound box instead of on the neck like a fiddle or guitar. They're both fairly easy to play, and you can find them both at roots music festivals. But neither one's loud enough for a bluegrass band. So they must be related somehow.

Exactly how they're related is a little harder to sort out. I've seen speculation about it in online message boards, and my dulcimer-playing friends have asked me since I wrote an article on the psalmodikon for the Fall 2010 issue of *Dulcimer Players News*.

If they're relatives, they're more like cousins. If they're cousins, they're cousins by marriage.

Their origins are very different, but now they've both taken on new life as reflections of our diverse American musical heritage.

Unlike other European box zithers, the psalmodikon isn't really a folk instrument. It's more closely related to the monochord, which has its roots in ancient Greece and has been used throughout the centuries. In the 1200s Guido of Arezzo, who gave us written notation and the do-re-mi scale, used a monochord to teach choirboys to sing Gregorian chant correctly, and it was used in schools and to tune organs into the 19th century. So when Lars Roverud and Johannes Dillner adapted the psalmodikon to Norwegian and Swedish psalmbooks in the 1830s, they followed in a long tradition of music education.

Of course, Norwegians and Swedes also played the psalmodikon at home for the pure enjoyment of it. And in Lutheran areas of the Baltic nations, ethnomusicologist Valdis Muktupāvels of the University of Latvia says the psalmodikon "was above all a church musical instrument, but apart from that context, it turned out to be good for use in secular musical activities such as choral singing, music education and even to produce dance music." So it can be played like a folk instrument.

Did the dulcimer and the psalmodikon ever get together before folk festivals came along?

There are those who say they did. In a widely reprinted article for the New York Folklore Society, dulcimer builder and teacher Nils Caspersson says his "research has revealed obvious Swedish musical ancestors to the fretted dulcimer as it exists in the United States today." He adds, "Immigrants from the region of Lake Siljan in central Sweden and south to Stockholm brought their folk music and instruments (the psalmodikon, *hummel*, and perhaps the diatonic key pattern of the *moraharpa*) to America beginning in the seventeenth century. More than any other immigrant group, these musicians sparked the development of the fretted dulcimer."

Caspersson doesn't cite evidence, however, and I haven't been able to turn up any mention of Swedish instruments in the isolated areas in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia and Ohio where Appalachian dulcimers traditionally were played.

So until I'm convinced otherwise, I'll stick with dulcimer historian Ralph Lee Smith's theory that the dulcimer came from "Pennsylvania Dutch" settlers in Virginia in the early 1800s. The Germans called it a scheitholt (a dialect word for firewood) and played it at home for their own enjoyment. "The scheitholt," says Smith, "entered the early Appalachian frontier with early German settlers as a scheitholt, passed across cultures to the English and Scotch-Irish, and emerged as a dulcimer." But maybe the technicalities of historical research and documenting cultural exchange aren't the most important thing here.

When I visit the Swedish-American *midsommar* and *jordbruksdagarna* (ag days) festivals at the old Swedish colony of Bishop Hill, Illinois, I hear dulcimers and guitars playing American folk songs as well as the recorded music the Nordic Folk Dancers troupe brings out from Chicago. So the cultural heritage is mixed. Jerry Barton of Geneva, Illinois, who has built a psalmodikon modeled after the instrument in Bishop Hill's heritage museum, plays the mountain dulcimer and gives dulcimer lessons. Over the years, the festivals have celebrated American and small-town Midwestern values as much as Scandinavian. But they're a reminder that little farm towns like Bishop Hill in north-central Illinois were once the epicenter of Swedish immigration. Like other Scandinavians, they quickly adapted to life in America, but that's also part of the heritage.

So is the age-old idea you can play a musical instrument for the pure enjoyment of it, even if it isn't loud enough for a bluegrass band.

Pete Ellertsen is a retired journalism teacher at Benedictine University in Springfield, Illinois. He has studied Appalachian dulcimer and traditional music at Western Carolina University and the John Campbell Folk School, and is trying to learn the psalmodikon.

Further Reading

The Whipple Museum of the History of Science at England's Cambridge University has a brief but very informative article, "Monochord: An Ancient Musical And Scientific Instrument" by Torben Rees on its website. Nils Caspersson's "Diatonisk and Dulcimer" appeared in *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* 34 (Fall-Winter 2008) and is available online.

("Diatonisk" is the Swedish word for diatonic; Swedish psalmodikons are fretted diatonically.) Ethnomusicologist Valdis Muktupāvels' survey of "Musical Instruments in the Baltic Region: Historiography and Traditions" is available on the *Music in Latvia* website.

Ralph Lee Smith, who is recognized as a leading historian of the dulcimer's origins, sums up his theory in "The Appalachian Dulcimer's History: On the Trail of the Mountains' Secrets," in the online magazine *Mel Bay's Dulcimer Sessions* (July 2003). Folklorist Lucy Long of the University of North Carolina has a good overall history on the Bear Meadow Appalachian Dulcimers website. My article "Psalmodikon – Joyous Revival of a Stern, Square-Jawed Ethnic Heritage" appeared in the Fall 2010 issue of *Dulcimer Players News*, and I have a history of the Appalachian dulcimer and some of its European antecedents titled "Drones, Picks and Popsicle Sticks" on the EverythingDulcimer.com website. My blog *Hogfiddle* has unedited research notes.



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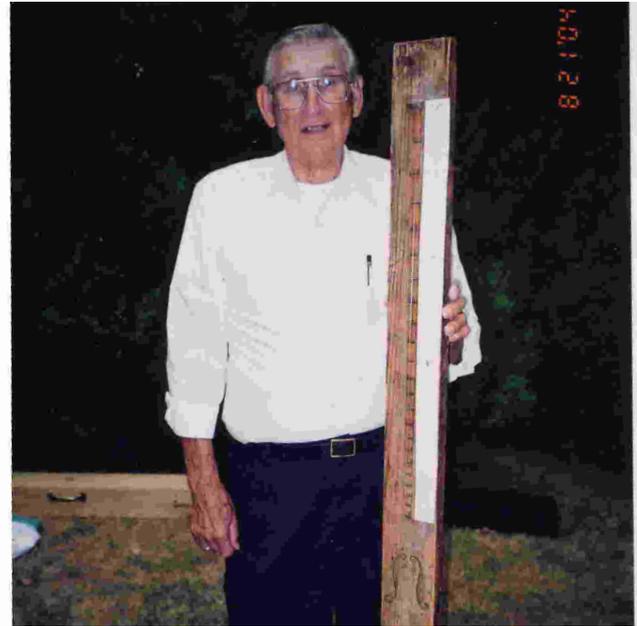
The Nordic-American Psalmodikonforbundet Newsletter is published in the Spring, Summer and Fall. The **Membership fee is \$8.00** which covers the cost of printing and postage for the Newsletter and some of the expenses for the Annual Psalmodikon meeting.

Send membership dues to: Beatrice Hole
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Eden Prairie, MN 55346

Quote: "Music has something to do with the arrest of attention in the midst of distraction."



WITH OUR SYMPATHIES



Eugene Holm, Tulare, SD

I recently received a letter from Mary Holm, daughter of Eugene Holm, informing me that her Dad passed away on November 14, 2010 after a struggle with cancer. Because her Dad so enjoyed his Norwegian heritage and the psalmodikon, she decided to become a member of the Nordic-American Psalmodikonforbundet and hopes to learn to play the psalmodikon. Welcome!

Eugene was a charter member of the Nordic-American Psalmodikonforbundet. He was an accomplished musician in playing his very large psalmodikon. In 2001, Eugene traveled with us to the Psalmodikon meeting in Portland, OR.

We will miss Eugene and his enthusiasm for carrying on the psalmodikon heritage.

Scott Foslien, age 49, of Hudson, WI died unexpectedly on December 21, 2010. He was the son of Fran and Floyd Foslien. On behalf of the Nordic-American Psalmodikonforbundet, I express our sympathy to Scott's family.

Ken Nordsletten, Seattle, WA, passed away on September 1, 2010 after being diagnosed with an inoperable cancer on August 20th. Ken was a very supportive member of the Nordic-American Psalmodikonforbundet. He had recently made three psalmodikons – one for himself, one for his son and one for his church which he displayed in a case he had made. (See Fall 2007 issue of the psalmodikon newsletter.)

Another touching moment – The pastor’s wife played the psalmodikon in honor of Ken during his last days and also at the Memorial service. Ken’s psalmodikon has been given to the pastor’s wife, who wanted one and plans on teaching her son to play it. We know Ken would be very pleased.

I recently received a letter from Richard Hulan of Springfield, VA. He had found an article on the Internet that Johannes Dillner, of (Swedish) fame, owned what may be the oldest (diatonic) accordion that now exists. Sort of the free-reed equivalent of a psalmodikon; and guess that Countess Brahe thought so, too, when she gave it to him. Not that I believe everything that is written on the Internet but it does give for an interesting read. See more at: http://free-reed.net/essays/dillner_interview.html

SWEDISH VISITORS

The most recent update from Goran Kelly, member of the Psalmodikon group in Sweden, is that they are thinking of coming to the USA to visit us in April 2012. He is going to submit an article in their May Newsletter to see how many members would be interested in making this trip.

Psalmodikon Quartet CD

I receive many favorable comments from folks such as Ed Hopf, Timonium, MD who says “it is a great CD both from the Ethnic Folk music side and for Christian worship! The four psalmodikons almost sound like a harmonium.”



How many times have we heard that the early churches believed dancing was sinful and would not allow the violin to be played in church? It was said that the violin was an “instrument of the devil” and we know that was how the psalmodikon came into use. I thought this drawing depicted that thought very well!

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Psalmodikon website: <http://www.psalmodikon.com>

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Boil 'em Cabbage Down				
3	3	3	3	3
4-4	4-4	3	3	3
2-2	2-2	2-2	2-2	2-2
3	3	3	3	3
4-4	4-4	3	3	2
1-1	1-1	1-1	1-1	1-1

Boil 'em Cabbage Down (Harmony)				
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<u>6-6</u>	<u>6-6</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>
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Boil 'em Cabbage Down (Bass Accompaniment)				
1-1	5-5	2-2	5-5	1-1
5-5	7-7	5-5	5-5	5-5
1-1	5-5	2-2	5-5	1-1
5-5	1-1	5-5	5-5	1-1

The song I have chosen for this issue is from a variety of tunes Ross Sutter provides to his music students. It is simple and easy to play and has a fun harmony for two or more players.