

# NORDIC-AMERICAN PSALMODIKONFORBUNDET

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

SPRING 2008

www.psalmodikon.com Volume 11, Issue 1

## NOTES FROM MUSIC-ON-A-STRING

*Beatrice Hole*

It has been a good winter and I have enjoyed a lot of X-country skiing. Now I'm seeing signs of spring, which indicates it is time to write the newsletter. Thank you for all your letters and greetings of the season. I always enjoy hearing from you!

I was hoping to announce the release of the new Psalmodikon CD in this issue, but it is still in the hands of the producer. We met with them last week to assist with the editing and finalize a few of the details, so we are getting close!

The Psalmodikon Quartet (Kathy, Joan, Floyd and I) traveled to Hendricks, MN last September to make the recording at the Singaas Lutheran Church. This is where our producer, Jay Nelson, had made arrangements with the recording technician and photographer to set up their recording studio. There were many different groups scheduled that weekend to record their music. The acoustics were wonderful and even the singing of the crickets did not interfere!

The Psalmodikon Quartet was scheduled with the photographer on Thursday morning to take the photos that will be in the CD liner. In the afternoon we were scheduled for an on-the-air interview with a Brookings radio station. We spent most of the day on Friday recording our music. To add variety to the CD, several tracks were recorded accompanying a Children's Choir and also the Adult Choir of the Singaas Church. We were so thankful to Ted Hollan, the church choir director, who volunteered to be our music conductor. All went well and there were only a couple of times we missed a note and had to record the song over again. (They can do wonders with the modern day digital recording equipment.) It was a tense time for us, but looking back, it was a real fun experience.

The first CD of the Singaas Church series, “**Today's Country Church**” was released last December. The Psalmodikon Quartet is honored in that our song “Children of the Heavenly Father” was included on one of the tracks.

As always, it is exciting times for the psalmodikon.

The music in this issue is copied from the original set of songbooks used by the Wisconsin Women's Psalmodikon Quartet of the 1930's, and shared by their grand-daughter, Ruth Reitan, Decorah, IA. It was interesting to see their method of writing Skifferskrift. These songs are written in pencil on a wire-bound notebook, shared by the Soprano and Alto players. (see wire binder in middle of page). The Tenor and Bass shared a notebook also.



Floyd at the editing controls in the Pulse River Recording Studio, Beresford, SD



Members of the Quartet listening to the songs they recorded in the Singaas Lutheran Church.

## ANNUAL MEETING

A date and place for the Annual Meeting/Picnic of the Nordic-American Psalmodikonforbundet has not been decided yet. Let me know if you are interested in hosting this get-together sometime this summer.

## DID YOU KNOW

..... that you are a member of a very rare and exclusive organization? There are only two organized groups of Psalmodikon players in the world!

The Nordiska Psalmodikon Society, of Norway and Sweden, was founded in 1986 and its aim is to revive the Nordic psalmodikon tradition. The Society consists of about 75 members and arranges a yearly festival where players are gathered to exchange experiences and play together. There are also courses for builders and players. In 1995, a Psalmodikon Museum was opened in Östervåla in Uppland Sweden with 40 different instruments and research material. The members of the Society are all amateurs and all efforts are purely ideal. Rodney Sjöberg, of Trollhättan Sweden, is founder and president.

The Nordic-American Psalmodikonförbundet was founded in 1997 by Beatrice Hole, of Eden Prairie, MN who also serves as President. This organization has approximately 85 members from 16 different states that attend meetings annually. The meetings are to encourage and teach members to play the music of the psalmodikon and also for the purpose of carrying on the tradition that played such an important part of our heritage.

The Nordic-American Psalmodikonförbundet has had several joint meetings with the Nordiska Psalmodikon Society of Scandinavia. These two organizations continue to be in contact with each other and as a result, strong cultural exchanges have happened. We find it to be most helpful in sharing music, the history, and playing techniques of the Psalmodikon.

Mission statement of the Nordic-American Psalmodikonförbundet:

**“A society dedicated to the education and preservations of the Psalmodikon and Sifferskrift music.”**

\*Members of the Nordic-American Psalmodikonförbundet are from the following states:

Alabama	Maryland
Arizona	Minnesota
California	North Dakota
Delaware	Oklahoma
Georgia	Oregon
Illinois	South Dakota
Iowa	Virginia
Maine	Washington
Massachusetts	Wisconsin
Norway & Sweden	

## PSALMODIKON BUILDERS TIPS

Not everyone has easy access to a shop where they may buy the components needed to build a psalmodikon. If that is the situation you're faced with and it is not convenient for you to purchase components locally, you may find it useful to order some of the parts from me. Here is a list of components and building plans that are available for anyone wanting to build a psalmodikon:

Plans	\$10.00
Fret wire*	3.00
Tuning peg	3.75
String	1.25
Fine tuner w/tailpiece	10.00
Maple fret board w/frets*	25.00
Sitka spruce top material	12.00
Cherrywood violin bow	25.00
Rosin	3.50

\*The fret board is the most difficult and time-consuming part to build on a psalmodikon and I now can offer for sale completed fret boards with the frets already pressed in place. If you buy that, there is no need to buy fret wire separately.

You may order any of the above directly from me.

Floyd Foslien  
567 High Ridge Drive  
Hudson, WI 54016  
[ffoslien@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ffoslien@sbcglobal.net)

## MEMBER VISITS SEATTLE

Recently Richard Lundgren, Edina, MN visited the Nordic Museum in Ballard, WA. There was a psalmodikon on display in a glass case with this inscription.

## PSALMODIKON

The Psalmodikon is a long, narrow box zither played with a bow and was used in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark to accompany hymn singing. The instrument, in its simplest form, is a hollowed out piece of wood with a numbered fret board on the top. One sheep gut string is stretched across a bridge and tightened with a tuning peg. To play the Psalmodikon, a person holds down the string with their finger upon the desired fret position while running a bow across the string.

Fiddles, and sometimes even the organ, were banned from the earlier churches for they were

thought to be the “devil’s music”. The Orthodox Lutherans of Norway did not approve of the use of instruments to accompany their hymn singing during worship services. However, the Psalmodikon was allowed to be used for it was thought that the use of only one string was austere, and thus simple, pure, and good. The Psalmodikon was very popular for 50 years in Norwegian and Swedish schools, up until 1860. [www.marym@nordicmuseum.org](http://www.marym@nordicmuseum.org)

*It is always interesting to hear about museums in other states exhibiting the psalmodikon of long ago.*

Thank you for your support.
The Nordic-American Psalmodikonforbundet Newsletter is published in the Spring, Summer and Fall. We are always looking for news worthy items and photos. We welcome articles that you want to share with other readers.
We try to keep our membership records accurate and up to date, however if there is an error, let me know. <b>Check the date on your mailing label which indicates if your dues are current.</b>
Your \$8.00 membership fee helps to cover the cost of printing and postage for the Newsletter. You may send your dues to Beatrice Hole, 6560 Leesborough Av, Eden Prairie, MN 55346.

### PLAYING THE MONOCHORD



I found this photo and excerpt in an old Wisconsin library book.

**Old World Wisconsin: Around Europe in the Badger State** Fred L. Holmes, Copyright 1944  
Chapter V - Page 91

### FESTIVE VIKINGS DEVOUR LUTEFISK

Stoughton and Westby

The nostalgia of exiled peoples has enriched the world of music and literature. I sensed this keenly one evening as I approached a vine-festooned farm home in the tobacco district of Southern Dane County and heard from the open window the soft tones of a monochord. It touched me as the vibrant appeal of a lonely heart.

Early taught to sing the psalms to the music of the one-stringed salmodikon, Norwegian daughters of Wisconsin have carried this Old Word custom to heights of folk festival glory. With it, family quartets awaken dreams of the native land at homecomings and at special church events. Before the advent of the organ, the salmodikon was used to lead the singing in the churches and for teaching to school children the melodies of the hymns. Stoughton has many who still play it with that richness of tone that must have awakened the lonely hearts of the pioneers. One quartet from McFarland has attracted wide attention on the folk festival programs conducted at State Fairs, the Century of Progress at Chicago, and three national folk gatherings in Washington.

“When originally played, only one string was employed.” said Mrs. Elsie Thompson, leader of the McFarland group. “With my two daughters and niece to assist, we believe we have improved the system by playing four salmodikons in ensemble, something that was never done in Norway.”

### PRINTED BY PERMISSION

*Grandfather’s Psalmodikon, or the Psalmodikon in America, is a small booklet that was introduced to me by Harlis Anderson in 1991. At that time it was the only bit of history we could locate on the psalmodikon. Ardith K. Melloh has done a remarkable job in researching for this article and Harlis and I referred to it many times over. My only regret is that Melloh died before I had a chance to meet her.*

*Just recently I received permission to print this from “The Swedish-American Historical Society.” Because of its length, it will appear in the next three publications of the Psalmodikon Newsletter.*

## GRANDFATHER'S PSALMODIKON, OR THE PSALMODIKON IN AMERICA

Ardith K. Melloh

Reprinted with permission from  
The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly  
October 1981

About ten years ago my uncle showed me a little 4 by 2-1/2 inch songbook and told me that as a child he had watched his father copy the numbers in the book onto a stiff sheet of paper. Then propping it up on a table and holding the book, he looked from the words in the book to the numbers on the paper as he sang. Uncle said his father loved to sing, but could not read music and probably had never played any instrument.

Neither of us could read the "number" music in the little book. However, "Sopran," "Alt" and "Bas" by the rows of numbers clearly showed that it was written for three voices. We did recognize the words for one song, "När juldagsmorgon glimmar" ("When Christmas Morn is Dawning") and could tell that each number represented one note. The book consisted of three booklets bound together in cheap leather-covered cardboard with the title *Andeliga Sångers för Barn* (Sacred Songs for Children) by "B. E." Instructions for reading the numerical notation, called *sifferskrift*, appeared at the end of each booklet.

After the old Gothic script was deciphered the instructions proved very helpful, but they seemed to assume the reader had some prior knowledge of the notation and they did not clearly explain how to determine the key in which the songs were written or why this rather clumsy and limited *sifferskrift* was used instead of regular notation. Relatives and friends said they had never seen or heard of it. A search of musical references and the few books available on Swedish music in local libraries produced nothing. Finally I took the book to a professor of musicology. While he did not read Swedish he could read the notation and hum the melodies. It was a surprise to hear him say that this music was written in modes and not in keys, and he thought it might have been used for instructional purposes. In what I had read on Swedish music there had been nothing about the use of modes. How could Grandfather, who could not read musical notes or play an instrument, have known the ancient Greek and ecclesiastical Modes?

For several years the mystery remained unsolved. Then one day a book, whose title is now forgotten, mentioned that a musical instrument called the *psalmodikon* had been played by Swedish immigrants and that the Goodhue County Historical Society Museum in Red Wing, Minnesota, had one. My letter of inquiry was forwarded to the Vasa Lutheran Church Museum, which had a book of music for the instrument. Mildred C. Collins answered my letter and copied some of the music from *Melodierna till Swenska Kyrkans Psalmer* (Melodies for the Swedish Church Psalms) with a foreword by John Dillner. It was *sifferskrift*!

Now with the name of the instrument and of an individual, information was found in histories of the early Swedish Lutheran churches in this country and in publications of the Augustana Synod. However, the use of modes was not explained and I found no details about how to make the instrument. The latter had to exist since it was claimed that any good carpenter could make one. Later my aunt gave me Grandfather's other songbook, the 1846 edition of the Swedish hymnal (*psalmbok*) with melodies in *sifferskrift*, which we believe Great-grandfather brought with him from Sweden in 1858. In this I found the detailed instructions for making and playing the psalmodikon, for reading *sifferskrift* and the reason for using modes. Next, a relative in Sweden wrote that she had seen several kinds of psalmodikons and had heard them played. Then I was referred to *Fil. doktor* Karl Gösta Gilstring of Linköping, Sweden, "the man who knows more about the instrument than anyone else." He is a collector of folk life information and has worked for a number of years on an inventory of privately owned psalmodikons, personally visiting the owners to examine the instruments, learn their history and determine if they were still being played. I am indebted to him for most of my reference material on its history and use in Sweden. Moreover, the material he sent shows how extensive the knowledge of the psalmodikon must have been during the immigration era. (Errors in translation and interpretation of this material are mine, not Dr. Gilstring's.)

In the difficult times of the early nineteenth century many congregations in rural Sweden were much too poor to install pipe organs in their churches. This mattered little as people had been singing their favorites from the old hymnal without organs to lead them since 1695. It was different after 1819, when a new hymnal, edited by Johan Wallin, was prescribed for use in all churches. Only about half of the old hymns, in more or less their old form, were retained in the new book; almost 140 were new, with original words by Wallin and other contemporary writers; hymns from other editions of hymnals were also added. Now with new words as well as new melodies and no organ, congregational singing became a "song uproar." Many members soon ceased to sing at all. Among the pastors distressed by this was Johannes Dillner (1775-1862) in Östra Ryd parish, Uppland, in the Stockholm area, who had had musical training and possessed a beautiful voice. Like Martin Luther he considered congregational singing an important part of the service and believed the people would gladly sing if they could read the music and learn the melodies. As it was they could not afford to buy an instrument. And who would teach them to play it or read music if they did have one?

Dillner was certain he had the answer when in 1828 he constructed an extremely simple and inexpensive instrument called the “*psalmodikon*.” He said that when his congregation had practiced with it only two Sunday afternoons he found that by the third Sunday the singing was greatly improved. On New Year’s Day, 1830, he published the melodies for the Swedish church psalms in his numerical notation, “*sifferskrift*,” together with instructions for reading it and for making and playing the psalmodikon, including tables giving the length and divisions of the fingerboard and the modes. There was also a message to fellow pastors and all friends of church music, pointing out the advantages of his method for improving church singing and urging them to promote its use in their parishes. The response must have been favorable as that same year a royal letter went out calling on the cathedrals to further the improvement of church singing by using Dillner’s method.

So successful was the method that Dillner came to be considered the inventor of the psalmodikon, although he himself never made that claim. It was a monochord, a primitive instrument that dates back to ancient Greece and is still used by physicists for measuring the mathematical relations of musical sounds. Dillner was aware of this and included a chart in the explanation of his method that gives the divisions of the octave and their names, both according to the German physicist Chladni and his own *sifferskrift*. He also mentioned that in other countries numbers had for some time

successfully been used instead of notes to teach church singing. A recent book on Dillner by Leif Eeg-Olofsson states that a psalmodikon and numerical notation were used as early as 1822-23 in Denmark, but were discontinued after about five years. In Norway, Christian Gotfried Bohr published numerical music in 1825. Its widespread use there, however, was due to Lars Roverud who improved the instrument and made changes in the notation. Like Dillner, he deplored poor congregational singing and the two men could have exchanged ideas when Roverud visited Stockholm in 1828. Dillner also made changes to simplify and improve the instrument and its notation, but basically the Norwegian and Swedish instruments were the same: a single string stretched over a long wooden box with a fretted, hard-wood fingerboard marked in half-steps and the notation numbers marked beside the fingerboard. On Swedish psalmodikons the spaces between the frets were colored white and black. Dillner’s notation used numbers one through eight together with some simple signs; Norwegians used numbers one through seven. Placing the instrument and music on a table, the

standing or seated player looked from the music to the numbers beside the fingerboard and pressed down the single sheep-gut string in the correct place as he played it with a violin bow. Being a monochord, only one melody line could be played on an instrument. When more parts were needed two to four instruments were used. To change key, Norwegians used a set of thin boards with different scales that could be easily attached beside the fingerboard.

Dillner omitted these transpositional boards by having the player retune the string. A capital letter placed below the number of the psalm was the note on the organ to which the open string should be tuned and it was followed by the scale of the mode in which the music was written. Players and singers had to memorize the six mode scales just as they do key signatures today. However, as most songs were in the Ionic mode, there was little need for retuning the string. The use of modes even made exact tuning unnecessary when the instrument was played alone and the string only needed to be loosened or tightened to suit the player or the singer.

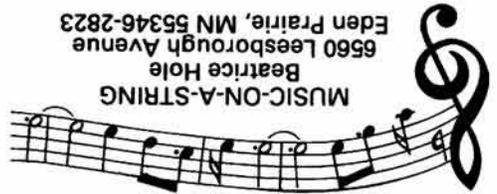
Dillner continued to work for the improvement of church singing when he went to Funbo, Uppland, in 1831 and then to Östervåla in Västmanland in 1839, where he stayed until his death. A second edition of his publication came out in 1840, and Americans have referred to both editions as Dillner’s *Note Book*. He also had a number of other *sifferskrift* publications, some in several editions, some for schools, and one for *sångskolor*, as the practice singing sessions for members of the congregation were called. Östervåla had many fine furniture makers who began making psalmodikons for their own use after Dillner’s arrival. Soon every family had one. It was said that as the demand increased, psalmodikon-making became an industry in the parish and that in Uppland booklets of playing instructions were sold with each psalmodikon. In 1837 one pastor said he believed from 200 to 300 psalmodikons could be found in his parish. However, like many others, he spoke disparagingly of the cheap, wooden soundbox, ridiculing it as a “tinkling instrument.” A number of pastors would not permit it to be used in their churches. To what extent it actually was used at church services is not clear. Dr. Gilstring doubts if its small tone could be heard well enough for it to be effective in leading congregational singing, but even churches with organs bought it for choir practice, *sångskolor*, and their church schools. Because of its success as a teaching instrument it was widely used in teacher-training schools and almost every elementary school had one. The first common school statute in 1842 made the singing of chorales and suitable songs a required subject and before long the knowledge of Dillner’s method must have been common in all of Sweden. Its use spread to Finland and even to Estonia. However, its greatest use was in Sweden where a recent catalog shows there were around 200 musical works published, not counting new editions. This was far more than the combined totals for other countries.

To be continued in next issue -----

Address label

Psalmmodikon website: <http://www.psalmodikon.org>

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NORDIC-AMERICAN  
PSALMODIKONFORBUNDET

Handwritten musical notation on a spiral-bound notebook page. The page features a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes a series of numbers (fingerings) and some notes. The lyrics "The little ones, dear Lord, Are We" are written below the staff, with "Soprano" written at the end. The page is filled with handwritten musical notation, including a series of numbers (fingerings) and some notes. The lyrics "The little ones, dear Lord, Are We" are written below the staff, with "Soprano" written at the end.

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