



Nordic-American Psalmodikonförbundet

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



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Notes from MUSIC-ON-A-STRING

Beatrice Hole

As we begin a new year many of us have thoughts of what we can do to make some things better.

One of those “things” for me is what more can we do to enhance the tradition of psalmodikon history.

When it comes to the high tech world of the computer, I just cannot keep up. I feel so helpless. I’ve had so much support during my life with the psalmodikon and often doors open at the time I need it most. Maybe something will happen soon!

I am so thankful for the Psalmodikon website. For those who made its existence possible and for those who maintain it. I’ve seen many very informative and attractive websites and so my wish for this year is to update and assist in making the Nordic-American website will become even more informative and alive. There is a lot of history and music that is available to add to website.

I want to thank Peter Ellertsen of Springfield, Illinois for his contribution to this Newsletter. Upon his retirement, Peter has become a free-lance writer and amateur musician with interests in the dulcimer and psalmodikon. You will find it interesting to pull up his blog: hogfiddle.blogspot.com.

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

Pastor Esbjörn’s Box Zither: Reinventing a Swedish Immigrant Tradition

Peter Ellertsen

When we visit my wife’s family farm in northwestern Illinois, we like to eat out in nearby Bishop Hill where we can get Swedish meatballs with lingonberry sauce and a cup of good, strong coffee. Founded in 1846 as a Swedish religious colony, Bishop Hill nurtures its ethnic heritage, so one day after dinner we visited a museum in the town’s “Steeple Building,” a landmark built in colony days. There, in a glass display case flanked by a Swedish bible, an 1819 copy of the *Svenska Psalmboken* [the Swedish psalmbook or hymnal] and Luther’s *Small Catechism*, was a wooden box zither with a single string running from nut to bridge up a diatonic fretboard.

Whoa, I thought, what’s this? This thing looks like a dulcimer.

According to a card in the display case, it was called a “psalmodikon,” and it was made around 1870 by a local farmer. This is the story of how I learned what the instrument was, and how to play it.

The psalmodikon, it turns out, is a bowed zither. It’s sort of a first cousin to the European hummel and the Appalachian dulcimer. Swedish and Norwegian pastors used it during the mid-1800s to teach country church congregations to sing new hymns. But as the immigrants prospered and bought organs for their churches, it fell out of use before 1900 and remained half-forgotten for a hundred years.

While it wasn’t primarily a folk instrument, there has been a revival of interest in the last 25 or 30 years, both in Sweden and America, where clubs called the Nordiska Psalmodikonförbundet in Sweden and the Nordic-American Psalmodikonförbundet in Minnesota play ensemble

arrangements in four-part harmony. Several years ago I visited the Minnesota group, bought a psalmodikon and wrote up the experience in DPN (“Psalmodikon: Joyful Revival of a Stern, Square-Jawed Ethnic Heritage,” Fall 2010). But the folks up there played a slightly different kind of instrument – Norwegian instead of Swedish – and it’s too far for me to get to their meetings from my home in central Illinois. So instead of ensemble performances, I decided to use my psalmodikon as a teaching aid and recreate pioneer singing schools as an immigrant pastor might have taught them.

So I started researching Swedish-American history in Illinois, and things started to get interesting.

In Andover, 10 to 15 miles over county blacktops from Bishop Hill, a museum in the Jenny Lind Chapel has a psalmodikon that belonged to the [Rev. Lars Paul Esbjörn](#), the first Swedish pastor in town and a founder of Augustana College in Rock Island and the old Swedish-American Augustana Lutheran Synod, one of the ethnic denominations that merged into today’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In time, I had a replica made.

Esbjörn was quite a guy. A theology graduate of Uppsala University, he came to America in 1849 and settled in Andover. In 1851 when his little immigrant church was about half built, cholera struck and the lumber set aside for the building project was sawed up instead to make coffins. So Esbjörn traveled to the East Coast, where the Swedish opera star [Jenny Lind](#) was performing on a wildly successful tour of America. He was persistent and persuasive, and he came back to Andover with \$1,500, a considerable amount of money in those days. In gratitude, the church was named for Jenny Lind.

Esbjörn was quite a musician, too, and he must have been a good teacher. In 1853, before his

congregation had a permanent roof on the Jenny Lind Chapel, he reported he was conducting singing schools once or twice a week. We are fortunate enough to have a reminiscence of those early sessions.

“As long as [Esbjörn] sang along, the hymn went well, but when he paused, they all stopped,” said an early settler, recalling a moment familiar to anyone who has ever practiced singing choral music. “Singing the next verse, they stopped at the same place, so again he had to help them.” As they sang through all 16 verses of the hymn, they caught the melody. Esbjörn told them they didn’t just sing it once, they “sang it 16 times as all 16 verses were the same. Then everyone laughed heartily. He was always in a good mood.”

So, at least during choir practice, were his singers.

Later, as a professor at the little seminary that eventually became [Augustana College](#), Esbjörn held services in his home “both for edification and for practice ... with Swedish or Norwegian sermons and simultaneous singing out of both hymnals, using the same melody.”

In the special collections at Augie’s library in Rock Island, we even have little homemade notebooks in his handwriting, stitched together with needle and thread, with psalmodikon tablature for several dozen Swedish and Anglo-American hymns in four-part harmony.

Esbjörn’s psalmodikon also offers mute testimony that he was no ordinary musician.

THE INSTRUMENT

When Esbjörn died in 1870, his family moved back to America. And his son, Joseph Osborn (who Americanized his spelling of the family name), was the organist and choir director at a new brick church next to his father’s old chapel in Andover. Apparently they brought Pastor Esbjörn’s psalmodikon with them, and donated it to the church. Now it is on display in the original Jenny Lind Chapel, which has survived as the “mother church” of the old Swedish-American Augustana Synod and now as a shrine of ELCA’s northern Illinois synod.

Esbjörn, who could be self-deprecating at times, once suggested he learned the psalmodikon because he wasn’t a very good singer. “After my first sermon, my hostess asked me why I didn’t sing the [Swedish] Mass,” he told a youth named C. O. Hultgren while they were traveling across the prairie toward Rock Island. “I said to her, ‘I cannot sing.’ She said I should buy me a [musical instrument].” Hultgren didn’t record the conversation until 50 years afterward, and the reference to a musical instrument is ambiguous, but it sounds like what Esbjörn obtained was a psalmodikon. “I

got a few pieces of wood and made one,” Esbjörn continued, winding up the story. “I learned to sing and play. I also taught music. Now, in God’s Name, we shall continue our journey.”

Patterned after the monochords used to tune European organs, the psalmodikon was developed in the 1820s and 1830s by the state churches of Sweden and Norway to help rural congregations sing in four-part harmony. They could be put together from a few pieces of wood, like Esbjörn said, by anyone who was handy with tools. They were easy to play and, most important of all to immigrants who had exhausted their savings in getting to America, they were inexpensive.

Most psalmodikons were practical affairs, but Esbjörn’s is more sophisticated than you’d expect. The fretboard is chromatic, but it is stained in a diatonic pattern with the lighter wood marking whole steps and the darker, stained wood marking the sharps and flats – rather like the white and black keys on a piano. The sides and top are well joined, and instead of one string it had 11, a single catgut melody string over the fretboard and 10 unfretted metal strings – the Swedes call them *resonanssträngar* – that can’t be reached by a bow. Instead, they were designed to resonate or vibrate sympathetically with the bowed melody string.

All but a few of the metal strings on Esbjörn’s instrument are gone now, but the ends of the gut string are visible where it was wrapped around a woodscrew attached to the body of the instrument. The melody string was tuned with a wooden peg, and the resonant strings were tuned by tightening pins similar to those on a hammered dulcimer. All in all, Esbjörn’s psalmodikon was more elaborate than what the Forbundet folks are playing these days up in Minnesota.

So I taught myself a little Swedish, brushed up on my German and hit the books. According to Swedish ethnomusicologist Stig Walin’s *Die Schwedische Hummel*, the psalmodikon was influenced by that diatonically fretted box zither. I suspect that’s why a chromatic fretboard would show a hummel’s – and a dulcimer’s – diatonic pattern. At first I had no idea how the resonant strings were tuned, but by surveying Swedish museum catalogs on line, I determined it was not uncommon for a Swedish psalmodikon to have from two to 14 resonant strings.

At this point I was getting really interested.

A 21ST-CENTURY REPLICA

Since I had an invitation to demonstrate the psalmodikon at a Founders Day celebration earlier this year at Esbjörn’s church in Andover, I got permission to measure his instru-

ment and take photos. With that information in hand, I got in touch with luthier Steve Endsley of Canton, Illinois, and asked him to build me a modern replica.

Steve decided to replace the gut melody string with a 0.023 wound string and to add two more resonant strings so they make up a full chromatic scale. “The Jenny Lind replica has 12 sympathetic strings about an eighth of an inch above the soundboard on each side of the finger board,” he explains. “With these strings at a low tension, whenever the wound 0.023 is bowed and fretted, the sympathetic strings will vibrate and sound. For example, the bowed and fretted D will cause the sympathetic string tuned to D to vibrate and sound as well. All the unfretted strings are tuned a half step above each other to make them chromatic and correspond with the fretted notes on the finger board.”

Steve’s replica is a sophisticated instrument. I’m still experimenting with different bows and generally getting used to a bowed instrument, but it has a deep cello-like tone and it rings out loudly enough, with the resonant strings sounding, that a 19th-century congregation could have heard it.

Greater volume, I am certain, was the reason for the extra strings. One pioneer Swedish pastor recalled the time a chicken flew in the window during a communion service, scattering the bread and wine. Today we don’t have clucking chickens to contend with, but in a small room, or a chapel the size of Jenny Lind, my psalmodikon doesn’t have to be miked.

In the early days of Swedish immigration, the psalmodikon became sort of an icon for planting the pioneers’ old church in a new land. And the instrument was perfect for Sunday services in pioneer homes and rented rooms before the immigrants could afford to build churches.

THE MUSIC

Today’s Lutherans often look back with nostalgia to a day of red, blue and black hymnals and congregations that sang confidently in four-part harmony. But it wasn’t always like that. In Lars Paul Esbjörn’s day, the 1819 psalmbook, or hymnal, was still relatively new. At the same time, a “pietist” revival, stressing individual piety instead of Lutheran doctrine and inspired in part by English evangelists, was sweeping Sweden and bringing with it a new kind of gospel music. The psalmodikon was made to order for untrained musicians who had to learn a lot of new songs.

Esbjörn was heavily involved in both movements. Before he left Sweden for America, he edited music for [Johan Dillner](#), a Swedish pastor who published a version of the 1819 psalmbook in tablature for psalmodikon, and he taught his rural parish choir to sing in four-part harmony. Years later they remembered how grand it was to sing revival songs from a church balcony in the old country. Dillner’s tablature, called *sifferskrift*

[numerical writing], matched numbers to the degrees of the scale, and it enabled Swedes who didn't read standard musical notation to pick out the melodies.

It also enables 21st-century Americans to learn the old Swedish psalms, since some of the basic sources are available online.

Dillner's 1830 edition of *Melodierna till Svenska Kyrkans Psalmer, Noterade med Ziffer* [Melodies of the Swedish Church's Psalms, in Notation with Numbers] is available in Google Books under the inaccurate title "Psalmodikon." Also available online in standard musical notation are the Augustana Synod's 1892 Swedish-language edition of the 1819 psalmbook, titled *Svenska Psalm-Boken af år 1819: Förenad med Koral-Bok och Svenska Messan* [Swedish Psalmbook of the year 1819 Together with the Chorale Book and Swedish Mass], and the synod's English-language *Hymnal and Service Book for Churches and Sunday Schools* published in 1901. The 1901 hymnal has many of the older hymns, as well as a table that correlates its hymns with the 1819 psalmbook and other songbooks.

When Swedish immigrants came to America, the books they were most likely to bring with them were a Bible and the 1819 psalmbook. It was put together by a gifted poet named Johan Olof Wallin, who wrote or translated 151 of its 500 hymns, or psalms. (The Swedes use the same word, psalmer, for both types of religious poetry.)

Wallin's words-only psalmbook was supplemented by a chorale book by [Johann Christian Friedrich Häffner](#), who arranged melodies for the hymns. A native of Germany who studied in Leipzig before moving to Sweden, Häffner followed the style of his day by favoring simplified, isometric arrangements of the old Lutheran chorales, in which all the notes had the same duration and the hymns were sung very slowly. Like many hymnists of his day, he also swapped melodies and texts around freely.

So when Johan Dillner arranged the *Melodierna till Svenska Kyrkans Psalmer* for psalmodikon, he was actually working with Häffner's chorale book. As the title implies, it only gives the melodies without harmony.

Since it doesn't include the revival songs, Dillner's tablature covers about half of what Swedish immigrants would have sung in a church like that in Andover. Some of the hymns are very old, going back to the first days of the Protestant Reformation and earlier. The chants for the communion service are included (pages 198-200), as are Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is our God" (No. 124) and his Christmas chorale "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" (No. 63), as well as pre-Reformation Christmas songs like "All Praise to Thee,

Eternal Lord" (No. 62), which dates to the 1300s with added verses by Luther. Chorales by Philipp Nicolai and Paul Gerhardt are also among those included.

Other hymns in the 1819 psalmbook are purely Swedish, or strongly associated with Swedish history, including Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus' war hymn "Be Not Dismayed, Thou Little Flock" (No. 378); "Now is the Time of Flowers," best known by its Swedish title "Den blomstertid nu kommer" (No. 394); "Again, Thy Glorious Sun Doth Rise," or "Din klara sol" in Swedish (No. 420); and the Advent hymn "Prepare the Way, O Zion" (No. 53).

PASTOR ESBJÖRN'S WORKSHOP

In April, Esbjörn's old church in Andover celebrated the 165th anniversary of Jenny Lind Chapel and the 155th anniversary of the Augustana Synod. It was a gala two-day event, attended by dignitaries including ELCA presiding bishop Elizabeth Eaton and radio personality Orion Samuelson of the nationally syndicated U.S. Farm Report show. As one of a half dozen workshop presenters on Swedish-American and Lutheran history, I played the psalmodikon for a sung table grace at the Saturday night smörgåsbord ("Be present at our table, Lord ..." to the tune of the doxology) and demonstrated it in workshops billed as "Pastor Esbjörn's Singing School."

In my singing school workshop, I chose three psalms, or hymns, from the 1819 psalmbook, 18th-century German and Swedish chorales "Again, Thy Glorious Sun Doth Rise" and "Blessed Jesus, at Thy Word" [Hit o Jesu! Samloms vi in Swedish, No. 328], as well as a Christmas chorale by German composer Philipp Nicolai known to Swedish-Americans as "All Hail to Thee, O Blessed Morn."

Basing my presentation partly on hints I found in Scandinavian immigrant histories, and partly on my knowledge of 19th-century American shape-note singing schools, I introduced each hymn by playing it on the psalmodikon and leading my audience in singing the numbers. (If you've ever wanted to know, "A Mighty Fortress" begins "8-8-8-5-7 8-6-5" in sifferskrift.) Since I figured most of us wouldn't know the Swedish, I cheated a little—I brought in copies of the old "black" Augustana Synod with the words in English.

And, I was relieved to discover, it worked. We didn't repeat the melodies 16 times, but after a couple of run-throughs with the psalmodikon and the sifferskrift numbers, we were singing the hymns. Pastor Esbjörn's teaching method, as best I was able to reconstruct it, actually worked.

Then something happened that I hadn't expected.

Also sung to Philipp Nicolai's chorale melody in the 1819 psalmbook was a Swedish new year's hymn known as "Vår tid är ganska flyktig här" [our time here is very fleeting]. I quoted it in the handout I prepared for the workshop sessions, because the fourth verse was sung at the organizational meeting of the first Swedish-American Lutheran church in Chicago in 1853. It followed a prayer and a sermon on Jeremiah 6:16, "Stand at the crossroads, and look and ask for the ancient paths," and it asked God's blessing on the new congregation in what then was a rough-hewn boom town of 30,000. The pastor who wrote it up for the history books said the occasion was emotional, and it "brought tears to the eyes of most" that day in the little church on the North Side of Chicago.

Since we had the words in my handout, someone in the audience suggested we sing it. I wasn't sure we could pull that off—the quotation was in Swedish, my translation (which was mostly Google's translation anyway) didn't scan and my Swedish is worse than awful. But it was a good audience, and everybody was game to give it a try. So we began singing:

*O Gud! ditt ord och sakrament
Låt aldrig bliva från oss vändt.
Sjelf din församling skydda.
Vår kristeliga öfvet
Gif helsa, lycka salighet;
Bevara slott och hydda.
Låt sist, O Krist!
Oss i friden, Rätta tiden
Til dig fara.
Ewig nyår shall der vara!*

[O God, let your word and sacrament never be turned from us. Protect your congregation. Our Christian powers give to us health, happiness and bliss; preserve palace and hut. Let us finally, O Christ, go in peace at the right time: Eternally shall there be a New Year.]

And as we got into the song, our voices rose and we came to a lovely passage where I like to play the melody with a little bit of hesitation between "Låt sist" and "O Krist" [let finally ... O Christ], and we paused for maybe half a beat and went on with our voices swelling to the end

And for a moment, just for a fleeting moment there, I felt like we experienced a little taste of what it must have been like for Pastor Esbjörn and his Swedish immigrant congregations of 160 years ago to stand at a crossroads and seek the old paths in a new land. 

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Peter Ellertsen is a regular contributor to Dulcimer Players News. He coordinates dulcimer-friendly slow jams in Springfield, Illinois, and demonstrates the psalmodikon at churches in the northern part of the state.



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Notes from Floyd:

These are usually the most difficult components for builders to obtain. I can, however, provide all of the other component parts required to make *psalmodikons*, if the builder is unable to make them or find them locally. You may contact me for prices.

I also sell a complete kit of parts to make a *psalmodikon* for \$130.00. This kit instrument is modelled after an antique Norwegian *salmodikon* (Norwegian spelling) similar to one used by Lars Roverud. He was the "Father" of the Norwegian *salmodikon* and is credited with using transposition sticks to allow playing in various keys without re-tuning so this kit includes a transposition stick. The parts are cut to size and need only to be glued together, sanded, and finished with varnish or lacquer.

Letter from the Editor

This month again there were no Letters from Readers. I think I will mention a couple of items then.

One of the items I was going to put above per Floyd's request. Hopefully folks read this in addition... That way I can leave "Floyd's page" as-is and still get the "news" out. Floyd wanted to pass along that **there is a psalmodikon available for purchase by whomever is interested**. It is one that he had made last year for someone else who will no longer be able to enjoy it. It is Serial Number 56, and it is being listed as "\$350 or best offer". Please contact Floyd if you are interested.

What I also wanted to mention is that this edition has a very nice article contribution from Peter Ellertsen. It is very informative, and I trust you all enjoy reading it as I have. Many thanks to Peter.

— Kristen



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The **\$8.00 membership fee** helps to cover the cost of printing and postage for the Newsletter, annual fee for the Psalmodikon Web Site, and annual meeting expenses.

Check the date on your mailing label which indicates if your dues are current.

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WEST COAST REPORT

from Jean Akre



On November 15, 2015, the West Coast Psalmodikons and Joan Paddock on Lur and Trumpet, from Linfield College, were invited to give a demonstration and play for the Sons of Norway's Young Adventurers Group at Norse Hall in Portland, Oregon. There were about six to ten children from ages 2–15 present. The very youngest of the group, Leona Montgomery (she is half Norwegian, as her mother is from Norway), decided she would like to play the psalmodikon. She did not want to stop when time came for the players to pack up their psalmodikons.

We will keep her in mind in the future when she gets old enough to stand and reach the top of the psalmodikon.



SALVAGING HISTORY

from Beatrice Hole

In 1995 Pastor Sørensen of Trondheim, Norway, was a Pastor serving Mindekirken in Minneapolis. He found a psalmodikon (pictured) in one of the storage rooms of the church, and it has been in a prominent display case ever since. No history is known about it.

This brings me to the thought of another large psalmodikon that has been displayed for many years at the Chisago Lakes Lutheran Church in Center City, Minnesota. The following is an excerpt taken from an article, "Grandfather's Psalmodikon".

The psalmodikon in Center City was made in 1868 and signed on the bottom by its maker, James Lindstrom of Carver, Minnesota, and later owned by Earl Porter of Minneapolis. When Lindstrom left the Chisago Lake congregation, where he had been a parochial teacher, he sold his instrument to Mr. Porter's uncle, William Longquist.

Earl Porter writes: *I salvaged the psalmodikon from my grandmother's attic back in the 1930s, where water from a leaking roof had dripped on it and about a dozen ground cherry shells had found their way into it. In spite of this neglect,*

my instrument is in the best condition of the five or six I have seen.

It is 40" long, 8" wide at the bottom, 5" at the top, and 4" deep. Originally it had eight drone strings, but Mr. Porter prefers to use just a cello A-string tuned to C below middle C. With little squares of masking tape he marks the notes, E, G, C, and E as an aid in finding his way around the long finger board and rests his psalmodikon on a table. Both Mr. Porter and Dr. Emeroy Johnson took part in the annual 1971 Swedish Communion Service at Chisago Lake, their home church. Dr. Johnson preached the sermon and Mr. Porter played Hymn No. 66 in the 1819 *Koral-Bok* ("Se Jesus är ett trostrikt namn") first alone and then accompanying the choir as it sang the four verses. This was the first time those attending the service had heard a psalmodikon.

Later a tape was made of Mr. Porter playing two Christmas hymns. Hearing the slight buzz of the string as he played the well-loved No. 55, it was easy to believe that such deep, rather cello-like music had led early immigrants as they sang "Var hälsad sköna morgonstund" (All Hail To Thee, O Blessed Mom) at Julotta on a cold Christmas morning.



Photos from Pastor Esbjörn's Box Zither Article



Engraving of Esbjörn in Korsbaneret: Kristlig Kalendar för 1880.



Replica of Pastor Esbjörn's psalmodikon demonstrated in Jenny Lind Chapel museum. Original is on top of display case at right of picture. †



Tuning pegs of original psalmodikon (below) and replica (below right) show placement of sympathetic strings. †

† Photographs courtesy of Jenny Lind Chapel. High-resolution pictures available in "Psalmodikon" album on [Jenny Lind Chapel website](#) – Click on "Flickr" link in the Photo collection.



Jenny Lind Chapel (right) decorated for Advent and Christmas. (Photo by Peter Ellertsen.) †





Photos above were taken on December 2, 2015 at the West Immanuel Lutheran Church of rural Osceola, Wisconsin.

A group of psalmodikon players got together just to have a jam session of playing only the beautiful music of Christmas. We played every Christmas song in the book and had such a fun time doing so. Seldom do we find time to get the psalmodikon players together during the Christmas season. We had such a good time playing that afternoon followed by a Potluck Coffee buffet.

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