Sifferskrift

Early Sifferskrift

Sifferskrift is a numerical musical notation system developed for use with the psalmodikon in Norway and Sweden during the 19th century. In this system, a number is assigned to each note on the musical scale. Also, each fret on the psalmodikon is numbered. The psalmodikon player plays by ear or "by number", making it easy to learn and play music without formal training. In the churches and schools in rural areas of Norway and Sweden, congregations and students could learn new music and learn to play the homemade instrument with the help of the sifferskrift notation.

In 1825 Lars Roverud, a cantor and music teacher in Norway, modified a single-stringed instrument he had seen in Denmark in 1820. Roverud numbered the frets to correspond with music written in numerical form. While studying in Germany, Roverud had been introduced to a numerical system of musical notation called "Zifferschrift" and recognized the advantages it offered. Both Roverud and the Rev. Johan Dillner of Sweden published song books using slightly different forms of sifferskrift notation.

The use of numbers to represent music didn't begin in 19th century Scandinavia. French philosopher J. J. Rousseau (1712-1778) used a form of numerical music notation. Rousseau has been quoted to say that his system would save work, time and money.

Pythagoras, the ancient Greek philosopher and mathematician (circa 500 BC), taught that numbers were the essence of all things. The psalmodikon is similar to the Greek monochord instrument he used for measuring and demonstrating the mathematical relationship between string length and musical pitch.

Modern Sifferskrift

For this book we have adapted earlier forms of *sifferskrift* for our use. It is set up to be easily typed on a word processor. Psalmodikons are tuned to "5" or "G" below middle "C", the number one indicating "C". Tenor and bass instruments are tuned to "1" or "C" one and two octaves below middle "C" respectively.

The lowest octave notes are written in plain numbers. Numbers denoting higher notes are underlined. For instruments playing soprano and alto parts, underlining begins with the second "5", or "G" above middle "C". Less underlining is used in the notation of tenor and bass parts. The choice of playing high or low notes is left to the discretion of the player.

The fraction (such as 3/4) written at the beginning of each piece of music indicates the number of beats per measure. The "3" in 3/4 means that there are three beats (quarter notes) to each measure, as in written musical scores.

Sharps and flats are indicated by adding "+". (For example, "4+" represents F-sharp; "6+" is B-flat.) Rhythm is indicated by having each number represent one beat as shown in the examples below.

7 or <u>7</u>	=	one beat (quarter note)
7-7	=	two beats
(7)	=	1/2 beat (eighth note)
7*	=	1 1/2 beats (dotted quarter note)

In this volume, songs are written using "modern sifferskrift". Most are in four parts representing Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass parts, as found in regular choral music. Single part (S) and duet (S-T) versions of individual songs may be requested at kpeder@frontier.com .