

This article by Erik Ask-Upmark was first published in the June 2018 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Erik's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Erik

I come from Sweden's second largest city (Göteborg, on the west coast) and started out playing piano in the local music school, a rather unspectacular origin story but one that I proudly share with many fellow (and more famous) Swedish musicians! A bit later, in my twenties, I had picked up the bagpipes and some other wind instruments with which I performed at different folk and historical festivals. But I would always have liked to bring



along something more portable than a piano (and mine was a god-awful 80s synthesizer). Luckily, a friend of mine had just finished building his first harp, a cross-strung Celtic hybrid that I traded for an old violin. Considering that it was hardly a Stradivarius, I definitely came out on top in that deal! I later realized that the learning curve was unnecessarily steep, since beginning on a cross-strung harp is not the easiest. You might think that it would be simple, coming from the piano, but just being able to focus on the strings took a fair share of time! However, it was love at first sight (if slightly squinting) and I brought the harp on all my gigs, which at the time mostly consisted of different Renaissance faires, where a harper was always shown extra appreciation!

A few years later, my budding harp career took a turn for the worse - literally - when I found myself on-board a fast-moving train on the way to a concert in Basel, Switzerland. Somewhere in southern Germany a sharp turn caused my poorly propped-up harp to take an elegant nose dive to the floor, accompanied by a sickening sound of splintering wood. Disaster had struck - now what to do, with a concert the same night? These days, a quick Facebook message would surely inundate the poster with harp offerings, but this was in the Dark Ages before social media. Luckily, a friend knew a friend who knew a friend whose retired harp teacher kindly offered to lend me a Celtic harp - and it turns out that this harp was the last of a batch of harps (a gathering of harps? A string of harps? A clang of harps?) that had been donated many years earlier by a wealthy American harp patron whose only demand was that these



harp would find a home with promising young players. I was apparently deemed worthy of this moniker, and so I eventually made my way back home to Sweden with a brand new (actually quite old) 36-string Celtic lever harp, which marked a new chapter in my musical life. (I never remembered where exactly the train incident took place, but if I ever did find out the location, I had a plan to petition the closest village to change its name to Harper's Bend.)

With my new Celtic harp I dove straight into the already familiar repertoire of Irish and Scottish tunes. It was only at a festival some years later that someone asked me if I could play any Swedish tunes. Since I had been to folk festivals (so-called "stämman") in Sweden for many years, I was very familiar with the music but played it mostly on whistles and bagpipes up until then. But I soon realized that most of these tunes of course worked great on the harp as well. Apparently there was a big interest in Swedish and Nordic music abroad. The first time I gave a workshop at the Harfentreffen in Germany, I was shocked to find out that I had 35 participants in a





single class! I'm happy to see that Nordic music keeps gaining in popularity. Back then it was mostly found at the peripheries of the Celtic repertoire, but now it seems to finally come into a life of its own. I like to study and focus on some shared features (of which there are many). Sometimes I even use a moniker stolen from Oregon harper and kantele player Valerie Blessley, namely "Celtinavian music" for tunes that seem to have bobbed back and forth over the North Sea. What tends to put some people off regarding Nordic music, and why it is sometimes harder for beginners than Irish music (for example), most likely has to do with the rhythms of the most typical of Swedish tune types: the Polska. There really are a crazy number of polska variants out there, from the straight forward to the straitjacket, and it can be frustrating that certain tunes should not be played as notated - indeed, that it is impossible to notate them in the "correct" manner, whatever that is. But on the flipside, this is true of most types of traditional music to some degree, and it also adds to the challenge and allure of these tunes. That's why I keep coming back to traditional Nordic music and enjoy playing it so much (together with the odd Abba tune of course!)

At the same time that I started to focus on traditional music, I kept playing early music. I acquired a number of Gothic harps and eventually also an Italian Arpa Doppia, having to practice getting those chromatic strings right again! What I enjoy most, however, is teaching traditional music at festivals all over the world, and taking part of new and exciting collaborations with other musicians. A recent highlight was when I returned to the Harfentreffen again this year and they asked me to host a dance evening together with Adriano Sangineto from Italy and Clotilde Trouillaud from Brittany. It turned into a spectacular, spontaneous panoply of European dance harp music (who even knew that was a genre?) and we kept going until about 4 AM or so. Too bad we all had our final workshops at 9 AM the next morning . . . but that's all part of a true festival experience of course!



This year I look forward to going to Somerset Folk Harp Festival for the first time, plus more trips to Germany, Ireland and France, and even hosting my own harp festival in Sweden in November - the Nordic Harp Meeting in Lund (www.nordic-harp-meeting.eu) on November 1-4. Hope to see you somewhere!

-- Erik Ask-Upmark

Photo 1 - Cover of [The Nordic Harp Vol. 2](#) book

Photo 2 - Playing at a summer night dance session somewhere in Sweden

Photo 3 - Playing harp and the Swedish bagpipes at Rio de Janeiro Harp Festival

Photo 4 - Historical Harping I: At the Dubrovnik Early Music Festival with medieval group "Compagnia della lauda"

Photo 5 - Historical Harping II: Looking very bored, but actually being very concentrated, while playing the Arpa Doppia with a Baroque ensemble

Photo 6 - Enjoying a break in the autumn Northwestern sun at the Dusty Strings Harp Symposium in Seattle, together with Harper Tasche and Sue Richards

Photo 7 - Making wonderful music together with one of my all-time favorite harpists, Laoise Kelly from Ireland

Photo 8 - My duo Drâm on tour in Hawai'i, featuring the strange contraption known as a "Nyckelharpa" (Swedish keyed fiddle)