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THE STORY OF THE *MORA-HARP*:
MUSEUMISATION AND DE-MUSEUMISATION

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Subject: The making of a musical instrument into a museum specimen and its way back to the musical life.

Purpose of the study: To describe and interpret the process of how a certain *nyckelharpa* became a museum specimen and how it was revived.

Method: Culture analyses.

Key words: Folk musical instrument, museumisation, de-museumisation, *nyckelharpa*, revival.

Sometime before 1915, the famous Swedish artist Anders Zorn (1860–1920) acquired a very special *nyckelharpa*¹. The circumstances for this acquisition are very little known. According to some later sources, he bought or received the instrument from the owner of a farm in the village of Garberg, not far from his fishing-cottage at Gopsmor, situated some 15 kilometres from his home in Mora. The *nyckelharpa* was probably mediated by Zorn's attendant at the fishing cottage, Mr. Frans Estenberg, who used to provide his master with antiques.

The bow of the *nyckelharpa* was not included. It had none of its three probable strings. Moreover, the instrument missed nine of its twelve characteristic keys². In short, the *nyckelharpa* was far from playable when Anders Zorn became its owner.



The *nyckelharpa* from Mora, Sweden, called the *Mora-harp* – the museum specimen, that has been the role model for many revived instruments.

Photo: The Zorn-museum, Mora, Sweden

There is practically no knowledge about how the instrument came to the farm where it was kept before Zorn took possession of it. It is even uncertain whether the *nyckelharpa* belonged to the former owner for more than a short time. The instrument could be of local origin or built somewhere else, no one knows. Its history is definitely lacking in substance.

Unfortunately, there is no knowledge about Anders Zorn's motifs for obtaining the musical instrument³. He was indeed a great collector of local antiques: from small items for the house-hold, to entire medieval wooden houses built with so called cross-jointing technique. He bought them from professional antique-dealers as well as from private owners. Gradually his collections grew larger. Purchasing the *nyckelharpa* was perhaps a conscious choice, perhaps not. Many of the pieces he collected were old and beautiful, which seem to be the two characteristics that guided him. Actually, the *nyckelharpa* could be described with these words – useable for both experts in organology and all the visitors in the Zorn-museum in Mora, where the instrument is displayed today⁴. It belonged to the rich estate of Anders Zorn, which after the death of his wife Emma in 1942 was donated to the state of Sweden in order to establish a museum over the great painter.

The *nyckelharpa* in Mora is interesting most of all because of its age. It has some carvings on the back of its neck: “1526” and a pair of crossed arrows. Musicologist Jan Ling investigated the instrument in his doctoral dissertation (1967) on the *nyckelharpa* as a folk music-instrument in Sweden (Ling 1967; cf. Ahlbäck 1980). He especially examined the carvings and questioned whether the year 1526 could be the year when the instrument was made or not. He used the Carbon 14-method to get some reliable knowledge about the age of the wood, which then was fairly unconventional in a musicological study. He also compared the style of the carvings with hand-writings in sources from the first decades of the 16th century.

The pair of crossed arrows is puzzling, since this emblem later became the symbol for the county of Dalarna, where Mora is situated. But Ling did not see this part of the carvings as an evidence for a connection to Dalarna or Mora. The reason is simply that the symbol did not exist in the 16th century.

Ling's conclusion is that the year 1526 could be correct, that is the carvings dated from that year. No available facts deny such a statement. However, his arguments have recently been questioned (Allmo 2005). According to Ling's opponent, the *nyckelharpa* in Mora is approximately 150 years younger. But the inscribed year is still on the instrument and a revision of Ling's conclusion has difficulties in being accepted by all visitors who admires the *nyckelharpa* in its theft-proof exhibition case.

In fact, the *nyckelharpa* in Mora is interesting not only because of its probable age. In addition, it has so many differences compared to other old *nyckelharpas* that it nearly forms a type of its own (cf. Ahlbäck & Fredelius 1991). Its body has a very peculiar shape – like a guitar. Its ribs are made in so called wrap-technique (not carved out of a solid piece of wood like other old *nyckelharpas*) and its sound holes have an unusual shape (like hearts). It has very few strings (three) and no drone

string (which constitutes the modern *nyckelharpa*). To sum up: the *nyckelharpa* in Mora is easily recognised. Therefore, this particular musical instrument is well-known among nyckelharpa-players and aficionados.

Museumisation

Although the *nyckelharpa* in Mora has a number of unique characteristics, its path into the collections of the museum is rather typical. Many artefacts in museum-collections have unknown destinies before they became museum specimens. Only some decades ago museum curators were not that interested in the context of the objects as their modern colleagues are⁵. At best, in the catalogues were documented the name of the object, its geographical origin, its local name together the name of the salesman or donator. Regrettably, rarely the history connected to the artefact was written down. Many objects exhibited therefore appear without a history, except for the fact that they belong to a certain museum.

The making of a museum specimen can be called *museumisation*⁶. The process of collecting, describing, keeping and exhibiting an object gives it a certain value or meaning, quite different from what it had before it came into the museum. This change of meaning is the core of museumisation as a theoretical concept. However, this transformation is normally the result of the non-glamorous everyday-work in any museum. The change of statues of an object is subsequently done in small steps, which contributes to make this significant transformation more or less invisible.

Even if the term is quite established, there are differing interpretations, or let's say accentuations⁷. One element in the process is the *institutionalisation* – the transformation of an object from the private sphere to the public, from being just a thing to an object with a definite name and a unique number in the catalogue. Another accentuation stresses the *legitimation* as the most important content of the museumisation-process. This shift of cultural value happens when a collected object is incorporated in a museum's catalogue and then hallmarked as a cultural heritage. A third aspect of the term emphasises the *staging* of a collected object, that is how an object is placed in a totally different visual and physical context than it had as a privately owned thing. "Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them", as Susan Vogel drastically points out (Vogel 1991).

These three accentuations is nevertheless summarized to be a process of symbolisation, which is almost a synonym to museumisation. This is namely what happens when an artefact is collected by a museum, kept and displayed there. The object is turned to a symbol: a symbol for lots of other, uncollected objects of the same sort, a symbol for an activity connected to the object, a symbol for a historic era, a symbol for a group of people, for certain cultural values. But the symbolisation-process is not only done by the museum, the visitors are also involved in this radical change of the object's meaning. The interpretation of the object's meaning is done from both sides.

The museumisation of objects unites all kinds of museums, those working with natural history as well as those with cultural history. Consequently, music-museums are also changing the meaning of their musical instruments: from sound-producing tools to often silent symbols. (The “sounds of silence” are actually announcing the instruments’ new role.) The instruments are displayed to tell histories, not so much their own histories, because those are frequently missing, but histories of musical milieus or epochs. Standing in front of a musical instrument, we as visitors therefore see not only the object displayed, but the history it tells as a symbol. Sometimes we don’t even discover the instrument itself, because the larger history is more catching. As visitors we literary see the history through the instrument.

The incorporating of the *nyckelharpa* in Mora is a good example of museumisation. The instrument became institutionalised when it was registered and received an ID-number. At that moment, it was legitimised as a valuable *nyckelharpa*, and now it is certainly staged in its new setting: displayed in the proper spotlight with a correct narration next to its exhibition case.

As a symbol the *nyckelharpa* in Mora gives several associations. It can symbolise the wealth of Anders Zorn, who could afford to buy and keep this very special musical instrument. Or it can symbolise the proud history of folk music in Sweden. As a matter of fact, the meaning of the displayed *nyckelharpa* is something between the Zorn-museum and its visitors.

For the continuation of the story, the legitimisation of the *nyckelharpa* as an old and valuable musical instrument was the most essential part of its museumisation. The cultural value it obtained was no doubt the prerequisite for developing the museum specimen into a sound-producing tool again, which occurred in the 80s.

The Mora-harp

In 1982 a young fiddle-player and future violin-maker, Anders Norudde, happened to see a replica of the *nyckelharpa* from Mora. The instrument was made by a man who both played and made *nyckelharpas*, i.e. normally the common models. Both of them attended a course for players of the revived so called Swedish bagpipe⁸.

The quality of the replica immediately struck the young fiddler. He was very found of drone-music and played already bagpipe and bowed-harp. The replica was very close to the museum specimen. It was diatonic like its role-model and had gut-string as the old instrument most likely had. His exaltation over the instrument was so overwhelming that he instantly bought it during the course.

Anders Norudde immediately began to practice his new instrument. At the beginning he did not change the instrument, although he as a professional violin-maker definitely had the capacity to develop it. But after becoming more and more acquainted with it, he started to add keys in order to enlarge its register. The originally diatonic instrument became then more and more chromatic. The need for more tones was mainly a result of Anders Norudde’s involvement in a folk music-band. Playing together with other musicians required an instrument that was playable in more than one single key.

The process of expanding the instrument's tonal register went on gradually for several years. In stead of making a totally chromatic instrument, Norudde himself made other replicas which he tuned in other keys than the first replica. Changing keys when playing with the band forced him to alter *nyckelharpas*. When he did that on stage, it was surely a mysterious ceremony in the eyes of the audience. Seemingly identical *nyckelharpas* with seemingly the same sound! Why change then?

After some years of experience with the *nyckelharpa* from Mora, Anders Norudde got the idea to order a replica that could be stringed to function as a bass-*nyckelharpa*, tuned one octave lower. He then used modern nylon-strings on his first instrument. With thick nylon-strings on the second instrument, it could serve as a bass-*nyckelharpa*. The purpose was to be able to play in parallel octaves with the first replica. The new instrument was made by a professional maker of folk music-instruments, Mr. Leif Eriksson, who actually was as involved in launching the *nyckelharpa* from Mora as Anders Norudde. As a matter of fact, the revival of the museum-specimen would never have succeeded without the cooperation between these two creative men.

Anders Norudde recalls that the band used five (!) different versions of *nyckelharpas* in their gigs in the end of the 80s. His band – *Hedningarna* (The Heathens) – became very successful and toured in and outside Sweden⁹. During their shows the *nyckelharpa* from Mora had an essential role, both visually and musically.

Another part of the development of the *nyckelharpa* (or *nyckelharpas*) from Mora was the installing of microphones and other equipment for connecting the instruments to the band's PA-system. With a great deal of inventiveness, Anders and his band-mates modified the instruments to still look acoustic, but sound electronic. The electronic adaptation actually demanded the same amount of craftsmanship as the original making of the instruments. With all the equipment on and in the *nyckelharpas*, they had the fascinating image of a mixture between something old and super-modern. A kind of electrified ancientness!

Very crucial for the story of the revived *nyckelharpa* from Mora is the instrument's denomination. From its very first appearance on CD, which happened in 1989, it has been called the *Mora-harp* (Sw. *Moraharpa*), nothing else. Everyone within the Swedish folk music-scene speaks about *Mora-harps* with matter of course. The name can be seen on concert posters and in CD-booklets. There is no doubt that the name *Mora-harp* is well established in the particular terminology. So established in fact, that the revived instrument has become an own type, or at least an own sub-type among the *nyckelharpas*.

The dissemination of the *Mora-harp* was, from the beginning, parallel to the success of Anders Norudde's band. Their – and his – successful career inspired a number of other musicians to try the instrument, which in several cases resulted in buying a *Mora-harp* from Leif Eriksson. From his workshop he easily followed the band's impact on receptive folk musicians in Sweden. To be honest, his own interest for the instrument in question started before Anders Norudde got involved in the

process. Leif Eriksson had already made his own replica of the museum specimen, when Norudde met the instrument in 1982. Eriksson's first replica was made after a drawing of the instrument that he bought from the Music Museum in Stockholm. Although the drawing was not quite exact, its measurements gave good support for the talented craftsman Eriksson.

Since *Hedningarna*'s break-through, Leif Eriksson has made more than 50 *Mora-harps* for approximately the same amount of musicians. This number tells a lot about the dissemination of the instrument, although there are some other makers as well. According to Eriksson, several of the players of the *Mora-harp* are professional or semi-professional musicians, who also play the modern *nyckelharpas*. Even if Eriksson want to make true copies of the museum-specimen, every customer can decide the number of keys and the scale of the instrument. Almost everyone uses this option, which means that every instrument coming from Eriksson's workshop is unique. That is to say: they look the same, but do not function and sound the same.

Today, the *Mora-harp* is heard not only in folk music-bands of different sorts; it is also used in bands playing so called early music, as well as in bands that appear in medieval re-enactments.

The *Mora-harp* seems most of all to be liked by a growing number of musicians because of its musical potential, which means its specific sound and its adaptability to different genres. It is also relatively easy to learn, an advantage one should not underestimate. Further, compared to modern *nyckelharpas*, the *Mora-harp* is more practical to handle and to carry: smaller and more robust. In short, its success is understandable if seen from the musicians' point of view.

Pioneer Anders Norudde has continued to develop the instrument. He has made a *Mora-Oud*, which is a plucked variant of the instrument, i.e. without keys. The neck of this instrument has no frets. Recently he has made a *Mora-Dulcimer*: another keyless variant, but with frets on its neck and playable also when lying on a table. Both variants have the original shape of the body. His innovations foreshadow that the *Mora-harp* will soon be a family of related instruments.

Certainly, the *Mora-harp* has had a remarkable way from the exhibition case in the Zorn-museum to today's bandstands and recording-studios. Today it exists in many variants: acoustic and amplified, with different number of keys and different scales, even bowed and plucked, and is heard in many kinds of music¹⁰. The *Mora-harp* is without doubt back in business again¹¹.

De-museumisation

Even though the return of the *Mora-harp* is an unmistakable revival and there are relevant terms for describing such a phenomenon¹², it is tempting to regard the success of the instrument as a reverse process of museumisation, or an example of *de-museumisation*. In contrast to its history before Anders Zorn acquired the instrument and when it turned into a museum specimen after his death, its revival is quite simple to reconstruct. The entrepreneurs are still active, like the ones just mentioned, and its

appearances on records have left certain traces of the dissemination of the instrument. Most important, all revived *Mora-harps* are extant, either still played on or hanging on living room-walls. This difference of knowledge is probably significant for many revived musical instruments. Consequently, their modern stories are more known than their pre-histories, although the latter are considered more appealing. In this article, however, the *Mora-harp*'s revival is as fascinating as its early history.

This case of de-museumisation also has its accentuations, but they are interestingly enough not the same as when the old *nyckelharpa* was incorporated in the collections of the museum in Mora.

Firstly, it is very obvious that the de-museumisation of the *nyckelharpa* in Mora has resulted in a *de-institutionalisation*. The new-made musical instruments with the *Mora-harp* as a prototype are, with a few exceptions, privately owned. They are certainly not registered or even numbered. Lying or hanging beside other musical instruments in a musician's collection, a new-made *Mora-harp* represents one of several tools for music making. In this respect its status does not differ from the other musical instruments which the musician can choose between. In its revived form, the *Mora-harp* has become a musical instrument among others.

The question whether the revived *Mora-harp* has gone through a *de-legitimisation* or not is a bit complicated. On one hand, the revival of the instrument had never happened without its position as a hallmarked cultural object. Its status as a highly estimated museum specimen has definitely served as a prerequisite for the whole development described above. Already the denomination of the instrument underlines the connection between the ancient *nyckelharpa* in the museum in Mora and all modified copies of it.

On the other hand, both makers and musicians have obviously felt a certain amount of freedom to alter the newly-made instruments in relation to the role-model. All the variations of the revived *Mora-harp* could then be regarded as an evidence for a loss of the legitimisation: the replica takes its own life. At least, the high cultural prestige of the *nyckelharpa* as a museum specimen has forced few makers, if any, to make true replicas. When it comes to the musicians they have hardly been obliged to play only traditional music of the original *Mora-harp*. The diversity of the instruments and the many kinds of music played on revived *Mora-harps* could be interpreted as signs of a de-legitimisation.

Actually, the legitimisation and the de-legitimisation are connected powers. Even if the high cultural status of the instrument was the requirement for the revival, the new-made *Mora-harps* must be modified – modernised, if you wish – in order to function as musical instruments of today. In the hands of the musicians the instruments are *both* part of a cultural heritage and musical instruments like many others. This combination of vital values is most likely the secret behind the success of the instrument.

Thirdly, the revived *Mora-harps* are unquestionably heard and seen in other contexts than the exhibited *nyckelharpa* in the Zorn-museum. They are therefore differently presented – strictly speaking, staged in totally different ways. Thus, it is

a matter of *re-staging*, not de-staging. The modern *Mora-harps* are normally seen in the hands of their owners, played upon and heard together with other musical instruments, acoustic ones as well as electronic. Principally, the handling of them does not differ from other instruments. With their adaptability to different genres, the visual contexts vary. In an authentic folk music band, a *Mora-harp* has one image, while in an early music-band it has another. Already a study of how the new-made *Mora-harp* is embedded visually would say a lot about its position in today's musical life.

These three aspects of de-museumisation constitute parts of an ongoing symbolisation, which gives the *Mora-harp* new meaning(s) in its new settings. Obviously, outside its exhibition case this musical instrument is no longer any museum specimen, although that status was the prerequisite for the revival. Its former status is interestingly enough preserved in the name of the instrument. Talking and writing about the *Mora-harp* is then a way of reminding people of the prototype in the museum, with all its associations. In its revived forms, the *Mora-harp* has kept something of its power as a symbol for high cultural prestige.

Since the revived *Mora-harps* are used as musical instruments among others, they are probably looked upon as just musical instruments. The more specific meaning of a revived instrument is principally determined by its context, i.e. how it is combined with other instruments, the musical genre which it appears in, if it is played acoustically or amplified, etc. The most important point, however, is that a new-made *Mora-harp* has quite another meaning than the displayed prototype.

Conclusions

The story of the *nyckelharpa* from Mora is in deed fascinating. The old museum specimen in the Zorn-museum has indisputably both historical and musical qualities, which make it a valuable object in its safe exhibition case. But the museumisation of this musical instrument is not very unique; it is the same old story with many missing details.

Its journey from the museum back to the musical life again is, however, rather exceptional. This development, here called a de-museumisation, has several thought-provoking traits. It tells about some very few energetic musicians who discovered the musical potential of the displayed instrument and then liberated it from its original context.

Can this reverse process be called *de-museumisation*? A purpose of this article was to test that term in order to find a comprehensive word that describes a rather common transformation in today's musical life. Not only the *Mora-harp* has undergone this change: other instruments too have gone from being a soundless museum specimen to replicas that are used as sound-producing tools again.

However, with its de-museumisation the *Mora-harp* has only partly lost its status as a museum specimen. The denomination preserves the connection between the new-made musical instruments and the museum specimen in Mora, Sweden. But

principally, all the revived *nyckelharpas* are considered as musical instruments among others.

The story is not over yet. The *Mora-harp* will continue to be both a museum specimen and living musical instrument and the relation between these two will be interesting to follow.

NOTES

¹ See <<http://www.visarkiv.se/ordlista/N/nyckelharpa.htm>> for an introduction in Swedish to the nyckelharpa, see <<http://www.nyckelharpa.org/resources/index.html>> for a similar introduction in English.

² The word *key* (Sw. *nyckel*) here refers to the mechanism, which the musician presses in order to shorten a melody-string and by doing so create a certain tone.

³ See Sandström 1999 for Anders Zorn's biography.

⁴ See the website of the Zorn-museum in Mora, Sweden: <<http://www.zorn.se>>

⁵ "In a museum, there are often many instruments with little or no documentation concerning their musical context", musicologist Tellef Kvifte (1989: 53) writes.

⁶ The term has actually several meanings. It was originally coined in 1976 by geographer Edward Relph in his book *Place and Placelessness*. With museumisation he pointed out how a landscape is "frozen" to a certain shape by regulations and other interventions.

⁷ From Lindvall 1999. Stefan Bohman (2003: 17f) has another analysis of the museumisation-process, when he regards it from a chronological perspective and then divides it into three steps: *Identification*, *Change of context* and *Symbolisation*.

⁸ About the revival of the so called Swedish bagpipe, see Ronström 1989 and Ternhag 2004.

⁹ For information about *Hedningarna*, see the band's website: <<http://www.silence.se/hedningarna>>

¹⁰ For listening to a Moraharp, go to <http://home.swipnet.se/lennartc_nodus/sound/ljuderan.mp3>

¹¹ For photos of new-made *Moraharps*, see <<http://www.tongang.se/liraman/jweng/emoraharpa.html>> or <<http://web.telia.com/~u15211290/moraharpa.html>> or <http://home.swipnet.se/lennartc_nodus/instr2.htm>

¹² See for example Livingston 1999 (which includes a model of folk music revitalisations) and Rosenberg 1993 (that has several relevant contributions, among them an interesting introductory essay by Neil V. Rosenberg and Jeff Todd Titon).

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MOROS ARFOS ISTORIJA: „SUMUZIEJINIMAS“ IR „IŠMUZIEJINIMAS“

GUNNAR TERNHAG

Santrauka

Šio straipsnio tikslas – pristatyti nuostabų muzikos instrumentą ir pateikti terminą jo atgimimui apibūdinti.

Kažkuriuo metu iki 1915 metų garsus švedų menininkas Andersas Zornas (1860–1920) įsigijo ypatingą instrumentą, vadinamą *nyckelharpa* – strykinį chordofoną su raktiniu mechanizmu, jungiančiu jo tris stygas. Šis instrumentas, ko gero, yra pati seniausia iki mūsų dienų išlikusi *nyckelharpa*. A. Zornui mirus, ji pateko į Švedijos Moros mieste kuriamo muziejaus kolekciją, apimančią visą didžiojo dailininko palikimą.

XX amžiaus devintojo dešimtmečio pradžioje vienas jaunas liaudies muzikantas atsitiktinai pamatė naujai padarytą Moros arfos (taip šis instrumentas ilgainiui pradėtas vadinti) kopiją. Jis tučtuojau užsisakė tokį pat egzempliorių, ir tas žingsnis davė pradžią stulbinamam instrumento atgimimui. Dabar Moros arfa yra gerai žinoma švedų liaudies muzikos scenoje, esama keleto jos variantų, ja groja daugelis liaudies muzikantų.

Tam tikro daikto pavertimą muziejaus eksponatu būtų galima vadinti *sumuziejiniu*. Šis terminas apima ir reikšmės pokytį, kuris ištinka kiekvieną muziejinį eksponatą pakeliui į muziejaus kolekciją.

Galbūt atvirkštinį procesą tiktų pavadinti *išmuziejiniu*? Juk Moros arfą pavyko išlaisvinti iš muziejaus ekspozicijos vitrinos, ir šiandien ji gyvuoja daugeliu naujai padirbtų variantų. Jos sąsają su originaliu muzikos instrumentu rodo atgimusio instrumento pavadinimas ir visa jo sėkmingo išsiliejimo į švedų liaudies muzikos instrumentarijų istorija.

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