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The Story of the *Mora-Harp*

Museumization and De-museumization

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[1]

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 late 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, some fifteen kilometers from his home in Mora, Dalecarlia. The aquisition of the *nyckelharpa* was probably mediated by Zorn's attendant at the fishing cottage, Mr. Frans Estenberg, who used to provide his employer with antiques.

The bow of the *nyckelharpa* was not included. It had none of its three assumed strings. Moreover, the instrument was missing nine of its twelve characteristic keys.[\[2\]](#) In short, the *nyckelharpa* was far from playable when Anders Zorn became its owner.

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.

Unfortunately, we have no knowledge about Anders Zorn's motives for obtaining the instrument.[\[3\]](#) He was a great collector of local antiques: from small household items 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 collection

grew larger. Purchasing the *nyckelharp*a was perhaps a conscious decision, perhaps not. Many of the pieces he collected were old and beautiful, which seem to be the two characteristics that guided him. Actually, today the *nyckelharp*a is both an object of research for scholars in organology and an aesthetic artifact for the visitors in the Zorn-museum in Mora, where the instrument is displayed today.^[4] It belonged to Zorn's rich estate, which after the death of his wife Emma in 1942 was donated to the state of Sweden in order to establish a museum devoted to the great painter.

The Mora-*nyckelharp*a is interesting most of all because of its age. It has carvings on the back of its neck stating "1526" along with a pair of crossed arrows. Musicologist Jan Ling investigated the instrument in his doctoral dissertation (1967) on the *nyckelharp*a as a folk-music instrument in Sweden.^[5] He especially examined the carvings and questioned whether or not the year 1526 could be the actual year when the instrument was made. He used the Carbon-14 method to get some reliable knowledge about the age of the wood, an unconventional method in musicological research at the time. He also compared the style of the carvings with hand-writings in sources from the first decades of the sixteenth century.

The pair of crossed arrows is puzzling, since this emblem later became the emblem of the county of Dalecarlia. 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 sixteenth century. Ling's conclusion is that the year 1526 may be correct, that is, the carvings dated from that year. No facts available excluded such a statement. However, his arguments have recently been questioned by Per-Ulf Allmo,^[6] who argues that the *nyckelharp*a in Mora is approximately 150 years younger. But the inscribed year is still on the instrument and a revision of Ling's conclusion has not been accepted by all visitors who admire the *nyckelharp*a in its theft-proof exhibition case.

In fact, the *nyckelharp*a in Mora is interesting not only because of its probable age; it also has so many differences compared to other old *nyckelharpas* that it nearly forms a type of its own.^[7] 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*), its sound holes have an unusual shape (like hearts), it has only three strings and no drone string, typical of the modern *nyckelharp*a. To sum up: the *nyckelharp*a in Mora is easily recognized. Therefore, this particular musical instrument is well-known among *nyckelharp*a-players and aficionados.



Picture 1. The original Mora-harpa in the Zorn-museum, Mora, Sweden.
Photo: Lars Berglund.

[2] Museumization

Although the *nyckelharpa* in Mora has a number of unique characteristics, its path into the collections of the museum world is rather typical. Many artifacts in museum-collections have unknown destinies before they became museum specimens. Only some decades ago museum curators were not that interested in the historical context of the objects as their modern colleagues are.[\[8\]](#) 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, the history connected to the artifact was rarely 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 *museumization*.[\[9\]](#) 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 museumization as a theoretical concept. However, this transformation is normally the result of the non-glamorous everyday-work in any museum. The change of status of an object subsequently occurs in small steps, which make this significant transformation more or less invisible.

Even if the term museumization is quite established, there are contradictory interpretations, or let's say accentuations.[\[10\]](#) One element in the process is the *institutionalization*—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 *legitimization* as the most important content of the museumization-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 emphasizes 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.[\[11\]](#)

These three accentuations can nevertheless illustrate the process of symbolization, which is almost synonymous to museumization. This is namely what happens when an artifact is collected by a museum, kept and displayed there. The object is turned to a symbol: a symbol for many 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 symbolization process is not carried out only by the museum, the visitors are also involved in this radical change of the object's meaning. The interpretation of the object's meaning occurs from both sides.

The museumization 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 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 see not only the object displayed, but its symbolic history. Sometimes we don't even discover the instrument itself, because the larger history is more catching. As visitors we literally see the history through the instrument.

The incorporating of the Mora-*nyckelharpa* is a good example of museumization. The instrument became institutionalized, legitimized as a valuable *nyckelharpa* at the same moment it was registered and received an ID-number. And 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 symbolize the wealth of Anders Zorn, who could afford to buy and keep this very special musical instrument. Or it can symbolize 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 legitimization of the *nyckelharpa* as

an old and valuable musical instrument was the most essential part of its museumization. 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 1980s.

[3] The Mora-Harp

In 1982 Anders Norudde, a young fiddler-player and violinmaker, happened to see a replica of the *nyckelharpa* from Mora. The instrument was made by a man who both played and made *nyckelharpas*. Both of them attended a course for players of the revived so-called Swedish bagpipe.[\[12\]](#)

The quality of the replica immediately struck the young fiddler. He was very fond of drone-music and played bagpipe already and bowed-harp. The replica was very close to the museum specimen. It was diatonic like its 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.

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

The process of expanding the instrument's tonal register went on gradually for several years. Instead of making a totally chromatic instrument, he created other replicas which he tuned in keys other than those of the first replica. Changing keys when playing with the band forced him to change instruments, as his instruments were only playable in one key. 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, Leif Eriksson, who was actually as involved as Anders Norudde in launching the *nyckelharpa* from Mora. As of 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 1980s. His band—*Hedningarna* (The Heathens)—became very successful and toured in and outside Sweden.[\[13\]](#) In 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. Through inventive design Anders and his band-mates modified the instruments to still look acoustic, but sound electronic. The electronic adaptation demanded the same amount of craftsmanship as the original making of the instruments. And 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 in 1989, it has been called the *Mora-Harp* (Swedish *Moraharpa*), nothing else. Everyone within the Swedish folk music-scene speaks about *Mora-Harps* as a 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 that the revived instrument has become its own type, or at least its own sub-type, of *nyckelharpas*.

The dissemination of the *Mora-Harp* paralleled from the beginning the success of Anders Norudde's band. Their successful careers inspired a number of other musicians to try the instrument, which in several cases resulted in the purchase of a *Mora-Harp* from Leif Eriksson. From his workshop he easily followed the band's impact on receptive folk musicians in Sweden. In all fairness, his own interest in 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 based on 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 built more than fifty *Mora-Harps* for approximately the same number 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 most of all wants 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: They look the same, but don't 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 to be liked by a growing number of musicians most of all 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 without keys. The neck of this instrument has no frets. Recently he has made a *Mora-Dulcimer*: another key-less variant, but with frets on its neck and playable also when lying on a table. Both versions have the original shape of the body. His innovations foreshadow the emergence of an independent *Mora-Harp* family of instruments.

Certainly, the *Mora-Harp* has had a remarkable path 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 it can be heard in many kinds of music. The *Mora-Harp* is without doubt back in business again. Here are two sounding examples of Moraharp, "[Polska från Mora](#)," after Ljuder Anders Ersson, Mora, performed by Lennart Carlsson ([Nodus Mix Recording](#)), and "[Varm och ute](#)," composed and played by Anders Norudde (from the album "Kan själv," [Drone](#); both examples used by kind permission).



Picture 2. A modified replica of the Mora-harpa, made by Leif Eriksson, Insjön, Sweden.

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

[4] De-Museumization

Even though the return of the *Mora-Harp* is an unmistakable revival and there are relevant terms for describing such a phenomenon,[14] it is tempting to regard the success of the instrument as a reverse process of museumization, or an example of *de-museumization*. In contrast to its history before Anders Zorn's 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 still existing, either still in use 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 as more appealing. In this article, however, its revival is as fascinating as its early history.

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

Firstly, it is quite obvious that the de-museumization of the *Mora-nyckelharpa* has resulted in a *de-institutionalisation*. The new-made musical instruments with the *Mora-Harp* as a prototype are with 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 to create music. 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-legitimization* is more complicated. On one hand, the revival of the instrument would never have happened if not for 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 freedom to alter the newly-made instruments in relation to the model. All the variations of the revived *Mora-Harp* could then be regarded as an evidence for a loss of the legitimization: The replica takes on 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 music contemporary with 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-legitimization.

Actually, the legitimization and the de-legitimization 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—modernized, 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 contexts other than that of the exhibited *nyckelharpa* in the Zorn-museum. They are 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 about 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-museumization constitute parts of an ongoing symbolization, which gives the *Mora-Harp* new meanings 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, that is, how it is combined with other instruments, the musical genre in which it appears, if it is played acoustically or amplified, etc. The most important point is anyhow that a new-made *Mora-Harp* has quite another meaning than the displayed prototype.

[5] Finally

The story of the *nyckelharpa* from Mora is fascinating, indeed. The old museum specimen in the Zorn-museum indisputably has both historical and musical qualities, which makes it a valuable object in its safe exhibition case. But the museumization of this musical instrument is not unique. On the contrary, 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, has several thought-provoking traits. It is the story of a 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 paper was to test that term in order to find a comprehensive word that describes a rather common transformation in today's musical life. The *Mora-Harp* is not the only instrument to have undergone this change: 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. But most of all, the revived *nyckelharpas* are considered as musical instruments equal 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.

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Footnotes

[1] See <http://www.visarkiv.se/ordlista/N/nyckelharpa.htm> for an introduction in Swedish of 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] Ling 1967:33ff. Cf Ahlbäck 1980:46f.

[6] Allmo 2005:162ff.

[7] Cf Ahlbäck & Fredelius 1991.

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

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

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

[11] Vogel 1991:191.

[12] About the revival of the so-called Swedish bagpipe, see Ronström 1989 and [Ternhag 2004](#).

[13] For information about *Hedningarna*, see the band’s website:
<http://www.silence.se/hedningarna/>

[14] 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 essay by Neil V. Rosenberg and Jeff Todd Titon).

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