Diatonisk & the Dulcimer

A Swedish American Folk Music History
by Nils R. Caspersson
The fretted dulcimer has distinctive design and musical qualities linking it directly with Swedish folk music instruments existing in America today. With a diatonic (diantonisk) fret pattern it is very easy to play and can be considered a true "folk" music instrument. 17th-20th century Swedish immigrants from the area of Dalarna and Lake Siljan, central Sweden, and south to Stockholm brought their folk music and instruments (psalmodikon, hummel, and perhaps the diatonic key pattern of the moraharpa) to America and sparked the development of the fretted dulcimer more than any other immigrant culture.
Psalmodikon player - 19th century.
Dalecarlia, Dalarna, Sweden
Played on the lap or on a table top, the psalmodikon was popularly used in rural 19th C. Swedish churches.
Musikmuseet, Stockholm, Sweden, 2007

Psalmodikon - 19th century.
Dalarna, Sweden
Aquisition year 1904 (from the mill owner Brant Nils Eriksson, Risforsen).
Musikmuseet, Stockholm, Sweden, 2005
Psalmodikon, Angermanland, Sweden, 19th C.

Woodland people created unique music
A simple shift of this fingerboard results in an hourglass shaped fretted dulcimer!

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Psalmodikon fretboard detail - 19th C.
Dalarna, Sweden
When metal fretwire was unavailable a Swedish luthier cut fret spaces individually.

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Encouraged singing and 4-part harmony
Rev. Dillner improved the psalmodikon in Sweden to teach his church choirs to sing, sångskolor.
Svenskt biografiskt handlexikon

Rev. Dillner's Psalmodikon, acquired 1876.
An instrument for the rural masses
Estimates are there were more than 10,000 psalmodikons throughout central and southern Sweden.
Musikmuseet, Stockholm, Sweden
Swedish Drone Instruments At Korrö 2010

• What originally started as a small drone-music festival gathering, the Korrö Festival, Växjö, Sweden, has now become one of Sweden's and Scandinavia's biggest folk music festivals! It is arranged by the music organization Musik i Syd and last year the festival celebrated its 25-year anniversary. • Harald Elofsson, an elementary education teacher and furniture maker from the Korrö Festival area, born in 1916 and now deceased, built the pictured langeleik within the past 50 years and a wide variety of other stringed drone instruments on display at Korrö Festival 2010. • A close inspection of his instruments revealed an amazing attention to contemporary details, wonderful craftsmanship and unique solutions to building problems, including a variety of finishes, tuning peg settings, and proportions. • The diatonic fret pattern of his langeleik did not include the 6th fret, but did include the 6-1/2 fret for the natural major scale. • Perhaps the unusual fret pattern was taken from a more modern source. • Some isolated Scandinavian musical cultures also have an additional key, an "H" as A-flat! • A hummel, with a 6-1/2 fret, 3 playing strings/7 drones, was tuned in open fifths, called "silverbasharpa."
A crown and quiet reflection in wood
Made of maple & spruce w/ rosewood details, Elofsson's langeleik reflects unique Swedish traditions.

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How did Swedish instruments come to America?

• Adam S. Johnston, a soldier in the 79th Regiment of Pa. Vols. Infantry, kept a diary from September 14, 1861 to October 2, 1864. It was entered according to an Act of Congress, April 13, 1867, in the District Court of the U. S. for the Western District of Pennsylvania. On June 4, 1862, Johnston wrote, "Left Cowen's Station and marched over the Cumberland mountains to Cumberland Gap or Sweden Valley...June 5. Left Sweden Cove Valley camp and marched through Jaspertown..." • Sandy Conatser and David Schnaufer, Nashville, Tennessee, 1997, have documented numerous "Tennessee music boxes" found throughout southern middle Tennessee and dated by family histories between 1870 and 1940. • In 1633 the New South Company was formed by Dutch and Swedish investors to establish a settlement in America. They first settled near present-day Wilmington, Delaware, 1637 and named the area New Sweden. • The great immigration from Sweden started in 1845 when thousands of Swedes were encouraged by their government to settle in America. Chicago became the American Swedish center, 40,000+ in 1880, then followed by Minnesota, Maine, Kansas, and western New York.
Painted poplar and walnut, raised fingerboard, 1913.

A very stylized Appalachian 3-string dulcimer

James E. Thomas, c. 1850-1933, was a prolific dulcimer maker from Bath, southeastern Kentucky.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA

Best when playing in the snow!
An 8-stringed dulcimer of Adirondack spruce & curly maple with 4 sympathetic strings inside the fretboard.

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