

# ON THE ORIGIN OF THE SCREECHES

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE SWEDISH BAGPIPES

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### ABSTRACT

The Swedish, or to be more accurate, Dalecarlian, bagpipe was re-discovered in 1939 and has since then, and in particular since the 1980's, seen a successful revival. This paper describes the instrument and its development over the years since the revival started, with comparisons to the historical 19th century instruments. The paper also briefly presents some theories on the instrument's origin.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Swedish Dalecarlian bagpipe was re-discovered in 1939 during an evacuation of the Nordic museum's collections [1]. A box fell down from a shelf, cracked open, and out fell about a dozen bagpipes. This was a great surprise, since it was believed at the time, notably only a man's age after the tradition were at its peak, that Sweden had not had a bagpipe tradition since the Middle Ages.

One person, though, Mats Rehnberg, had started to suspect two years earlier, in 1937, that there could have been such a tradition, when he noted that there was a verb, *dråmba*, in the Dalecarlian dialect, meaning "to play with a drone". Upon the discovery of the old bagpipes at the Nordic museum, Rehnberg started working on a licentiate thesis on the subject [2]. He soon discovered that one piper remained alive in Dalecarlia – Gudmunds Nils Larsson in Dala-Järna. Larsson still played the bagpipes at the time, but did not know any traditional tunes, which is why I sometimes claim that the *music* tradition died out before him, but the *instrument* tradition did not. Quite.

Some attempts to reconstruct the instrument were made in the following decades, the first, by Ture Gudmunsson, while Gudmunds Nils Larsson was still alive and under his supervision. American pipe maker Bob Thomas produced several instruments in the 1970's, but the revival did not really get started until the early 1980's when Leif Eriksson, a cabinet maker, and Per Gudmundson, a well known fiddler, together developed a reconstruction and Eriksson started to produce them in greater numbers.

## 2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE DALECARLIAN BAGPIPE

This section describes how the Dalecarlian bagpipe has evolved, from the historical instruments, through Eriksson's reconstruction and to the instruments in common use today.

### 2.1 THE HISTORICAL INSTRUMENTS



Image 1: Historical 19th century bagpipes from Mockfjärd (left) and Venjan (right)

The historical instruments [3] are made in birch and calf hide. The wooden parts are often carved with a knife rather than turned, and the bag is rather small. The chanter is single-reeded (cut from a straw of *Phragmites australis*), cylindrical, and has six very large, often elongated, deeply scalloped finger holes and one thumb hole. The bore is typically burned up with a hot rod, so the diameter varies. About half of the known instruments seem to have two drones, but in all cases the small drone is blind, not drilled through. This remains a mystery. The functional drone is in one piece, no tuning slide, and about the same length as the chanter. The bag is sewn with an external seam, a curved neck and the hairside out.

### 2.2 THE ERIKSSON/GUDMUNDSON ORIGINAL RECONSTRUCTION

Eriksson's first reconstruction [4] used the same materials, birch and calf hide, with a slightly larger bag. The main source of inspiration was the instrument found in Mockfjärd. The chanter was turned, drilled (6mm) and then burned, with the same number of holes as the historical instruments, six finger holes and one thumb hole, tuned to an A-minor scale with a range from e' to e''. Since then, Swedish chanters are named after the 3 finger note, not the 6 finger note which is more common internationally. The drone was tuned to e', retunable to d' by covering a tuning hole, and with a tuning slide for fine-tuning.

### 2.3 ERIKSSON'S SECOND GENERATION

Eriksson soon changed his design slightly. In the original chanter design, there was a tuning hole close to the bell, on the right hand side, which pipers soon realized could

be reached by the lower hand little finger and, when covered, would produce a d#. To facilitate this, the tuning hole was moved up front to become a 7th finger hole. He also drilled a double hole under the upper hand long finger, for c#, to facilitate playing tunes in A-major. Most pipers cover this hole semipermanently, with beeswax or a rubber ring, when playing in minor key. Eriksson also started making bags with the hairside inside, though he continued making bags with the hairside out on request. He also offered a low a-drone as an alternative to the e'-drone.



Image 2: Reconstructions by Leif Eriksson (left) and Alban Faust (right)

## 2.4 THIRD GENERATION

Other makers started making Swedish bagpipes, most notably Bengt Sundberg and Alban Faust. Sundberg remained close to Eriksson's second generation design, but Faust went further, influenced by his German bagpipe making background. Both Sundberg and Faust started making pipes in other woods, in particular fruit woods such as cherry or plum. Faust also introduced *Arundo donax* to make reeds. The natural source of reed material in Sweden, *Phragmites australis*, is more fragile and unreliable.

Faust introduced a thumb hole for the lower hand (Gnat) and, on some chanter (still rare) a double hole for the upper hand index finger (d#). His chanters had a d' at the bottom instead of d# and he offered them in other keys, G (common) and F (still rare). He changed the shape of the bag to the German style, with a straight neck and the seam on the inside.

## 2.5 SINCE THEN

Swedish bagpipes are now also available with bellows and more drones, Faust also provides individual drone switches on multi-droned sets. Some of the G- and F- chanters have a key for an extra note in the upper end. Some makers (currently none of the major Swedish makers) offer synthetic reeds.

## 2.6 IS IT STILL SWEDISH?



*Image 3: A bellows blown Swedish bagpipe in with three drones and stop-switches.*

So, where's the limit? How much can an instrument be modified before it becomes something else? This is of course a matter of opinion and debate. Some (few) Swedish pipers consider only Eriksson's design to be a true Swedish bagpipe, some are more pragmatic – if it behaves, sounds and feels like a Swedish bagpipe, it is. I, personally, belong to the latter group and to me the crucial element is the chanter design, not the number of drones or how the bag is inflated. Faust's bellows blown 3-drone sets may look like Irish Uilleann pipes, and was certainly inspired by them, but sounds, feels and behaves very differently.

## 3. WHERE DID THE IT COME FROM?

There are plenty of traces of other forms of bagpipes in Sweden from the 14th century and later [3], but the Dalecarlian bagpipe was the only model to survive long enough to be possible to revive. It also seems to be the only Swedish bagpipe with a single-reeded cylindrical chanter, which would suggest an East European cultural influence [6]. Other traces of bagpipes in Sweden rather seem to be of West European origin – depicted bagpipes with conical chanters and, presumably, double reeds. The areas of Sweden where these depictions are found were much closer to Germany, culturally, socially and in communication, than to the very remote Western Dalecarlia. The artisans were probably Germans, or possibly Swedes trained in Germany, and they probably used templates from the continent. So, the connection between these depictions and Swedish rural life is weak at best.

It is not known how the Dalecarlian bagpipe came to Sweden, but given its construction and since Sweden throughout its history has waged many wars in Eastern Europe, all the way down to Turkey, it is likely to have been brought home by returning soldiers. The oldest traces of the Dalecarlian bagpipe are found in Venjan which was a very remote and poor area, so many men in the region joined the military for their income. Soldiers in Venjan belonged to Mora kompani, a regiment which sent very many soldiers abroad.

Many of the known pipers were indeed soldiers, but all of them are too young to be the first. The two oldest pipers known today are Nisbil Pehr Andersson Kättström (1749-1821) and his son, Per Persson Öhman (1783-1859) in Venjan. Both were

soldiers but only the younger seem to have been at war. Per Persson Öhman's pipes remain, and are supposed to have been carved with a knife when he was a prisoner-of-war in Denmark in 1814.

There are other indications, both historical and organological, suggesting influences from the west. The sewn bag and the drone's position are both more typical of western bagpipes. Two drones in a common stock, even though one of them is blind in the Swedish case, is also a more West European than East European feature.

The only recorded story about the origin of the Dalecarlian bagpipe, tells a story of a Spanish prisoner of war, caught when fighting as a mercenary for the Danes in a battle in Venjan in 1521 [5]. This story has been considered far-fetched, but I don't think it can be dismissed entirely. The battle did indeed take place, and the Danes using Spanish mercenaries is quite possible – the Danish and Spanish kings at the time were brothers-in-law. Spain may not have any surviving cylindrical single-reeded bagpipes today, but they most likely had before, as suggested for example by the images in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* from the 13th century. There are still bagpipes with cylindrical chanters both to the north (The Boha in Gascogne, France) and to the south (North Africa). Besides, even if the original inspiration was a double-reeded bagpipe, it may have degenerated to a single-reeded cylindrical bagpipes due to environmental constraints when brought to Sweden – cylindrical chanters are easier to make and there is, to my knowledge, no material growing in Sweden suitable to make double reeds. On the other hand, why would a prisoner-of-war be kept in such a remote area as Venjan for a time long enough to make a musical impression on the locals?

The idea that the bagpipes were introduced by returning soldiers from the east is still the most likely, in my opinion, but a West European influence, maybe later as a second step, can not be dismissed. On the contrary, there are several indications pointing in that direction.

## 4. CURRENT STATE

Eriksson retired recently and Jan Nordkvist has taken over his production. Sundberg stopped making bagpipes in the end of the 90's and was in effect replaced by Börs Anders Öhman. These two and Alban Faust are the three major makers in Sweden today. There are 4-5 more semi-professional makers in Sweden, with smaller production figures. Many pipemakers abroad have taken up production of Swedish bagpipes as well, e.g. in Germany, Belgium, Russia, USA and Canada.

Swedish bagpipes are (again) an accepted part of Swedish music tradition and is for example eligible for the Zorn silver medal (the *Riksspelman* title). There are currently 7 holders of the title – Anders Norudde and Bengt Sundberg (1989), Erik Ask-Upmark (2004), Anna Rynefors (2005), Olle Gällmo (2008), and Alban Faust and Ulf Karlsson (2009). In 2006, the Zorn gold medal was awarded to Per Gudmundson for his many contributions to Swedish traditional music, including the revival of the Swedish bagpipe. Gudmundson was already *Riksspelman*, on the fiddle, when the revival started.

At least 1500 instruments (a very conservative estimate) have been made since the revival, but there are probably not more than 200 pipers in Sweden, most of which only play for family and friends. There are perhaps 40 performing pipers. Most pipes produced are collecting dust on shelves and attics, due to owners losing patience with severe reed issues. Therefore it is nice to see the recent trend to experiment with synthetic reeds for Swedish bagpipes. The first viable such reeds available for purchase, came in 2011. The sound of synthetic reeds is not perfect, but for a beginner reliability is probably more important than sound quality. Maybe these reeds can encourage owners of some of the old unused pipes to pick them up again.

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