



The Norwegian Seljefløyte

by Dr. Kathleen Joyce-Grendahl

An enchanting land full of visual splendor, a vibrant culture, and a remarkable mythology, Norway is located in northern Europe. It is a land replete with numinous fjords created by receding glaciers; eye-catching northern lights extravaganzas; vast mountains, lush rivers, and moors; and intriguing Arctic islands. Like the Vikings who were an integral part of its cultural history, Norway draws its life and stability from the sea, being foremost in the areas of fishing and seafood world sales, as well as oil extraction, refining, and exportation. Of cultural

significance, in the Arctic tundra, Norway's aborigines, the Sami or Lapps, tend to a considerable quantity of reindeer. The Sami or Lapps constitute the most prevalent population of Arctic reindeer herders, numbering close to 30,000 people. Of particular interest in Norway is the area of the Arctic Circle and Finnmark, typically referred to as the "Land of the Midnight Sun" because the sun never completely sets during the summer months. Significant Norwegians include Romantic composer Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), best known for his *Peer Gynt Suites*; playwright and poet Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), commonly referred to as the "Godfather of Modern Drama;" and expressionist painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944), most notable for his creation of *The Scream* (1893).

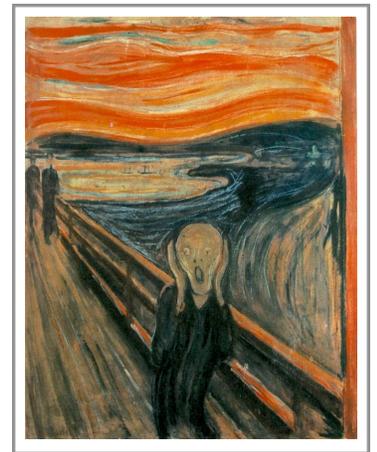
Like many countries, Norway went through a revival of interest in its folklore, folk music, and folk dance traditions. This renewed cultural awareness manifested in conjunction with a nationalistic awakening and the trend of the Romantic movement. After attaining autonomy from Denmark in 1814, Norway endeavored to advance its unique cultural persona during the 19th century. In search of the authentic voice of the Norwegian people, scholars began to travel the countryside collecting songs, folktales, and dances. Two scholars of note were Peter Christen Asbjørnsen (1812-1885), a zoologist and forester, and Jørgen Moe (1813-1882), a clergyman who eventually became a bishop. Both men viewed their work in uncovering the true voice of Norway as important. Moe stated that, "No cultivated person now doubts the scientific importance of the folk tales ... they help to determine a people's unique character and outlook" (Christiansen, 1968). Today, we refer to scholars like Asbjørnsen and Moe as ethnomusicologists and folklorists.

In their research, Asbjørnsen and Moe identified four classifications within the folk-narrative genre, of which one category applies to the folktale surrounding the Norwegian overtone flute, the seljefløyte: *eventyr*, *sagn*, *folke*, and *huldre*. Fairytales and, essentially, all oral tradition tales are encompassed within the term *eventyr*. Tales that are associated with a specific locale, like a house or a castle, are referred to as *sagn*. The term *folke* designates the traditional folktales with all of the rural intricacies indicative of the country people, unlike the recycled tales that underwent modification to be more palatable to the general civic masses. The *huldre* category consists of supernatural entities like goblins, trolls, various monsters, and elves (Christiansen, 1968).

The Mysterious Flute

Like many instruments across the cultural spectrum, the sole purpose of the flute is not just to play pleasing melodies in a preplanned musical setting. Often, musical instruments are attached to myths, legends, folktales, supernatural associations, mystical spirituality, and other extra musical ideas and functions. The flute is imbued with many thoughts and ideas outside of its purely musical function. For example, in both Japan and India, the flute is thought to have the ability to mesmerize snakes. According to a Japanese legend, a flutist of great renown perpetrated a particularly heinous transgression. To escape punishment, he escaped and concealed himself within the inner recesses of a dank, obscure cave. While in hiding, a large snake approached the flutist, who shook uncontrollably with thoughts of his impending doom. Believing the situation to be quite hopeless, he soothed himself by playing his beloved flute. Much to the flutist's astonishment, the snake ceased its forward progression and listened, seeming to enjoy the music. Eventually, the snake withdrew, leaving the flutist alive and greatly relieved.

In various parts of Native America, the flute is a courting instrument or a love flute. Traditionally, a young man wooed the woman of his desire, expressing his love and longing for her by playing lovely, enchanting melodies on his flute. The music was a means to win her attention and, ultimately, her heart. The young man would play outside of the woman's home, as she lived with her parents, and would continue to play until his amorous attentions were either accepted or he was shooed away. Once his romantic intentions were accepted, the young man's flute melodies took on a different meaning. The flute songs became codes that only the two sweethearts would understand. He might play a melody that meant that he loved her and was thinking about her, or perhaps another melody that meant for her to meet him by the river to talk and perhaps canoodle. In essence, the lilting flute melodies became a secret love language.



Edvard Munch's
The Scream

Unfortunately, the flute was not an honorable instrument according to the ancient Greeks, because it produced overly sensuous sounds that brought out the baser human behavioral traits. Aristotle stated that the flute “was not a moral instrument ... such as is proper for the sober purposes of education” (Fitzgibbon, 1928). Plato eliminated the flute completely from society.

The flute has a long association with Pagan beliefs, rituals, and folklore, as well as an association with the devil himself. Because of this, the churches in various ways regularly shunned the flute and its players. For example, because of its Pagan and evil associations, flute players were denied sacraments of the church like communion and baptism. St. Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310-403), an archbishop in the Catholic Church, stated that the flute “was modelled [sic] from the serpent in Eden, and compares the gestures of a flute player to those of the devil himself when blaspheming,” a view wholeheartedly shared by the early English Puritans. (Fitzgibbon, 1928).

The Seljefløyte

A Norwegian folk flute and traditional shepherd’s flute, the seljefløyte plays a significant role in the lives of the people within the folktale of Nøkken Draugen. Widespread throughout Norway, the seljefløyte or borkfløyte (willow bark flute or sallow flute) is considered to be an instrument of spring, as that is the easiest time to harvest the willow bark needed to make flutes. The seljefløyte varies from between 15 inches and 31 inches in length. One end of the flute is stopped with a block of wood to direct the airflow, thereby producing sound. Lacking finger holes, pitch is altered on the seljefløyte, an overtone flute, by overblowing and altering the speed of the air flow, as well as by employing the index finger to open, partially open, and completely close the open distal end of the flute. The notes available to the player fall within the natural overtone series, also called the “natural” scale. It was, and still is, used to play folk tunes and dance tunes.

The seljefløyte is thought to have existed for an extended time, but because it is made from willow bark that breaks down over time it is difficult to find any artifacts that reveal just how long the flute has been in use. Now, many seljefløytes are made from plastic or plastic with bark wrapped around it, as it is capable of producing a wider range of pitches and it is more stable and durable than willow bark alone. Egil Storbekken created the plastic version of the seljefløyte in the 1960s.

The overtone flute is found elsewhere in the world, as well. For example, the Slovakian overtone flute is called a *koncovka*, with the bass version of this country’s overtone flute called the *fujara*. The Russian overtone flute is called a *kalyuka*.

The Seljefløyte in Norwegian Folktale

The seljefløyte or the fiddle appears to work interchangeably in the folktale of Nøkken Draugen, a being that is one of the *huldre*. There are several versions of this tale. A *draug* is a disturbing, malicious creature and his presence is a portent of looming tragedy. The being is similar to a ghost or, more precisely, a living dead person or a zombie. A *nøkk* resides in waterfalls, deep ponds, and rivers, and claims what he feels is rightfully owed to him in the form of human victims. According to Ivar Lunde, Jr., an award-winning composer, musician, and sound engineer/owner of Skyline Studio in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, who is originally from Norway, Nøkken Draugen is a troll-like being associated with living fresh water (personal communication, May 19, 2010). Often, he is described as a dark, sinister monster with his eyes just above the surface, watching as people obliviously walk by.

Recording artist, scholar, Grammy-nominee, and world flutist Peter Phippen tells the story of Nøkken Draugen in his educational/musical presentations, having heard the story while in Norway playing bass, quenacho, and Native American-style flute with a Native American rock band during the 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer. Peter’s version of this folktale is as follows:

“Norwegian folklore tells of a malignant spirit who lives in the deep rivers, lakes, and waterfalls of the land. His name is Nøkken Draugen and he has a profound hatred for human beings. He plays dulcet and evocative music on the seljefløyte. (In some versions of the tale, Nøkken Draugen plays the fiddle.) In times of great distress and turmoil, an individual can hear beautiful, alluring music emanating from the deep forests. Unable to deny the enchanting sounds, he or she sets out in focused pursuit to locate the source. If the person sees Nøkken Draugen, he appears as a captivatingly handsome young man. In reality, he is a wretched looking creature. Hideous to look upon, he is half man and half animal. Nøkken Draugen senses when a human being is listening to his music; he knows when he has captured the heart and soul of a person who is almost devoid of hope and self-preservation. With his sweet and beautiful seljefløyte melodies, he leads the desperate individual to the edge of a large, deep body of water. When he has the person mesmerized, Nøkken Draugen tricks him or her. His playing becomes hyper, frantic, and chaotic. The poor human being who initially set out to listen to the beauty of the seljefløyte becomes confused and disillusioned. Unable to reclaim control of himself or herself, the person falls or jumps into the water and drowns. Nøkken Draugen laughs maniacally, because he is rid of one more human being. It is said that when pregnant, unwed mothers throw themselves to the sea, it is from having heard the flute music of Nøkken Draugen (personal communication, May 22, 2010).



Nøkken Draugen

The story of Nøkken Draugen is still used today by parents to torment young Norwegian children. Parents will say things like, “You better behave or tonight we will put you outside and Nøkken Draugen will drag you away,” or “You had better eat all of your supper or out you will go, the door will be locked, and Nøkken Draugen will come for you.” Ivar Lunde, Jr. heard this tale as a child, growing up in Norway. He states that, “By hearing these tales, I was very scared of the dark woods and deep lakes, those very deep ones with black water and marshes. I think it was told deliberately to scare kids, so they would not enter certain places like the forests and lakes and moving water, thereby keeping them safe. I grew up on the coast and went in the water anyway, but only on the coast, not in the scary woods” (personal communication, May 20, 2010).



Peter Phippen's wooden seljefløyte



Winne Clement, an instrument maker in Belgium, playing a traditional fresh willow bark flute that he created.

Photo: Winne Clement, www.fujaraflutes.com

Winne Clement has created a video that illustrates how to make a traditional seljefløyte out of fresh willow bark. The only tool needed is a knife.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSrXDZdwihU

Winne Clement's basic tutorial about how to play the seljefløyte:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=unX-em53pGk

Visit Winne Clement on the Internet: **www.fujaraflutes.com** He make many interesting flutes.

References

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Nøkken Draugen Painting: **<https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%B8kk>**