Have you heard of the musical instrument called a psalmodikon? It’s a dulcimer-sized rectangular wooden box with a sawtooth fretboard and one coarse string. It is played by plucking or bowing, and can be placed either across the knees or on a table top. When I was a child, one of these odd, curiously primitive instruments was displayed in a glass museum cabinet in my Midwestern small-town home church. It had accompanied congregational singing among the Scandinavian immigrant farmers who started the congregation in 1854. I recently saw another psalmodikon at a folk museum on the grounds of an immigrant era farm.

The museum guide reminded our little group that 19th century Scandinavian piety forbade using a “dance instrument” like the fiddle in worship; and a pipe organ was far, far beyond the budget of immigrants. The one-string psalmodikon, therefore, was practical both for technical reasons — almost anyone could learn to play it, and for budgetary reasons — it could be, and often was, homemade. But it is the existence of the thing itself that intrigues me. If more popular and common instruments of the day were considered too “worldly” for worship, what would have been wrong with plain old a cappella congregational singing? I guess the short answer is: nothing. And yet worshippers clearly welcomed this simple instrument in their gatherings.

It appears that the psalmodikon was developed, at least in part, as a way to simplify church music. Or, to put the matter more bluntly, to counteract the complex and elaborate music that could be heard in many churches of Europe during this time. A homemade one-string box creates a sound considerably more modest than J.S. Bach’s baroque trumpets dancing their exquisite choreography all through a cantata. And no one would ever leave worship marveling over the virtuosity of the lowly psalmodikon player. But the question still stands: if instrumental art in music is worrisome to piety, why any instrument at all?

I have done no thorough study of this, but I suspect there were at least two reasons this instrument came along with Scandinavian immigrants to North America. One had to do with “fit,” the other with “fit” also, but in a very different sense. First, the psalmodikon fit luggage, budgets and needs. Pianos don’t fit in immigrant trunks, psalmodikons do. The cost of transporting an organ doesn’t fit in an immigrant’s budget, a psalmodikon does. It also fits the need for some simple way to help a singing congregation hear a melody, agree on a pitch, and share a rhythm.

Then there is that second kind of “fit.” The human desire to combine singing and instrumentation seems to be cross-cultural and global. Something about it strikes a chord (no pun intended) in the human psyche. Christians might describe it as the right fit between “heart and hands and voices,” to borrow a line from the well-known hymn, Now Thank We All Our God. Those who sing their thanks want the work of their hands also to praise God. Adding an instrument, even a one-string instrument, to congregational singing makes that “heart and hands and voices” collaboration more real than either voice or instrument alone. I do love a cappella singing, but I also understand the motivation to pack a musical instrument in an immigrant trunk.

Peace be with you,
**SEPTMBER 6, 2015**

**TIME AFTER PENTECOST — LECXTIONARY 23 (YEAR B)**

1. (1R) Isaiah 35:4-7a
2. (PS) Psalm 146
3. (2R) James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17
4. (G) Mark 7:24-37

**O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing** (LYNghAM) – Thomas Jarman / Charles Wesley, lyricist / Andrew Watts, arranger (G)

**Humble Service** (REACH SPRING and WONDROUS LOVE) – William Walker / The Sacred Harp / American Folk Hymn, lyricist / Albert F. Bayly, lyricist / Larry L. Fleming, arranger (2R)

**All Poor Men and Humble** (OlwEn) – Welsh Traditional / Caradog Roberts, arranger (2R)

**Exsultate Jubilate: Alleluia** (Allegro), K. 165 (158a) – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (G)

**Victimae Paschali Laudes** (VICTIMAE PASCHALI) – Unknown (G)

**Lift High the Cross** (CRUCIFER) – Sydney H. Nicholson /

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"Music lets people who speak different languages do something together. Sing. In that way it is both a welcoming and a unifying force."

-Pastor Bruce Benson

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**SEPTMBER 13, 2015**

**TIME AFTER PENTECOST — LECXTIONARY 24 (YEAR B)**

1. (1R) Isaiah 50:4-9a
2. (PS) Psalm 116:1-9
3. (2R) James 3:1-12
4. (G) Mark 8:27-38

**Lift High the Cross** (CRUCIFER) – Sydney H. Nicholson /

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**SEPTEMBER 20, 2015**

**TIME AFTER PENTECOST — LECXTIONARY 25 (YEAR B)**

1. (1R) Jeremiah 11:18-20 or Wisdom of Solomon 1:16–2:1, 12–22
2. (PS) Psalm 54
3. (2R) James 3:13–4:3, 7–8a
4. (G) Mark 9:30–37

**Cantata 208: Schafe koennen sicher weiden (Sheep May Safely Graze), BWV 208 – Johann Sebastian Bach (G)**

**Cantata 208: Schafe koennen sicher weiden** (Sheep May Safely Graze) – Johann Sebastian Bach (G)

**Winnipeg Mennonite Children's Choir / Helen Litz**

**Count Your Blessings** (PRO ORGANO / CD 2230)

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**Psalm 54: Save me O God for thy Name's Sake** –

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"Neither the events of daily life or Bible stories always leave people in the mood to sing. But there is something about both life and the Bible that eventually calls for music making."

-Pastor Bruce Benson
God is Here! (ABBOTS LEIGH) – Cyril Vincent Taylor / Fred Pratt Green, lyricist / John Ferguson, arranger (1R, 2R)
The St. Olaf Choir: Northfield, MN / John Ferguson
(CD) My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord / ST. OLAF RECORDS / E-2396
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Dere's No Hidin' Place – African American Spiritual / Alice Parker, arranger / Robert Shaw, arranger
Robert Shaw Festival Singers / Robert Shaw (G)
(CD) Amazing Grace: American Hymns & Spirituals / TELARC / CD-80325
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I Wanna Be Ready – African American Spiritual / James Miller, arranger (G)
The London Adventist Chorale / Ruby Philogene, soprano / Ken Burton
(CD) Steal Away: Spirituals & Gospel Songs / EMI (ANGEL, EMI CLASSICS, EMI RECORDS, LTD) / 7243 5 69707 2 4
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If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee (WER NUR DEN LIEBEN GOTT) – Georg Newmark / Georg Newmark, lyricist / Jody Lindh, arranger / Catherine Winkworth, translator (2R)
Grace Presbyterian Choir Chancel Choir: Houston, TX / Ann Frohbieter, accompanist / Chadwick J. Edwards
(CD) O Sing Unto the Lord! / GRACE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH / GP 005
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Thank you for your gifts!
In Honor Of:
My wife Kathy's 70th birthday
Tom Lohr, director of music,
West Raleigh Presbyterian Church

Mrs. Jane Scheer, on retirement after 43 years as organist & choir director at Christ Episcopal Church,
Albemarle, North Carolina

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-Twin Falls, Idaho

“I look forward to Bruce Benson’s reflections, the last one on “Beauty invites repetition” was another gem.”
-Rochester, Minnesota

“I listened during the month of July in Anshan, Liaoning Province, China. It was a great blessing to me!”
-Nashville, North Carolina

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Thank you for your gifts!

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Mark Gullickson, St. Olaf Class of 1983
Joyce (Mrs. Robert) Harter
Alice Hudson, who loved organ music; Behany LCMS
In fond memory of
Marian Winquist Kinzinger
Frances W. McN. Lewis
Lucille Mikkelsen
Pastor Rudy & Betty Ann Ramseth
Ray Runbel, Class of 1953

(Honorariums listed inside)