



Resource Guide for Educators and Students Grades 4–12

What is traditional music? It's music that's passed on from one person to another, music that arises from one or more cultures, from their history and geography. It's music that can tell a story or evoke emotions ranging from celebratory joy to quiet reflection. Traditional music is usually played live in community settings such as dances, people's houses and small halls.

In each 30-minute episode of Carry On™, musical explorer and TikTok sensation Hal Walker interviews a musician who plays traditional music. Episodes air live, allowing students to pose questions. Programs are then archived so you can listen to them any time from your classroom or home. Visit Carry On's [YouTube channel](#) for live shows and archived episodes.

[Episode 17](#), Olov Johansson

Olov Johansson is a master of the nyckelharpa, the Swedish "keyed fiddle." He has studied with legendary players, toured worldwide, and is a member of the Swedish folk band Väsen. In 1990 Olov was declared world champion of the nyckelharpa. In 2013 he received the Zorn Medal in gold, possibly the finest award bestowed on a traditional musician in Sweden.

The nyckelharpa has been around for more than 600 years; it is a relative of the medieval hurdy gurdy and other stringed instruments. The word "nyckel" means "key" in Swedish, and the word "harpa" indicates "strings." The modern nyckelharpa has 16 strings. Three melody strings are tuned to G-C-A (low to high) and a drone string is tuned to a low C. Three rows of keys "stop" the melody strings to create different pitches. The nyckelharpa also has 12 sympathetic strings positioned below the melody strings (possibly an innovation from Middle Eastern instruments that migrated to Europe). The short bow plays the melody and drone strings; it does not touch the sympathetic strings, which are tuned to various pitches that resonate "sympathetically" as those pitches are played on the melody strings. This extra sound creates a richer tone and more volume. As Olov says, "The sympathetic strings give a more mellow sound and help sustain the melody notes, distributing their energy for a longer time. You get all this resonance; it's like carrying a church's acoustics around all the time with you."

Nyckelharpas often vary from one instrument to another. There are nyckelharpas with alternative tunings, lower and higher ranges, different body types (wider and narrower),

different styles of bridges that support the strings, and more or fewer keys. The instrument is usually supported with a shoulder strap.

Olov began playing the nyckelharpa at age 14. His home of Uppsala, Sweden is, as he says, "the capital of the nyckelharpa," where it has been played traditionally for hundreds of years. His teachers include Eric Sahlström, who was influential in reviving the nyckelharpa in Sweden and beyond. Sahlström was a player and instrument maker who in the 1980s improved on previous versions of the instrument to perfect the three-row chromatic nyckelharpa (the type Olov plays).

In addition to Swedish folk music, Olov plays several genres of music that defy categorization. He and his band Väsen has been performing since 1983, playing tours around the world. Olov and Väsen have collaborated with all types of musicians: traditional, folk-rock, classical, bluegrass, jazz and fusion. On our episode, Olov plays the following tunes:

- [A traditional polska](#), or dance tune, by Byss-Calle, a composer who was born in 1783. The polska is a couples' folk dance originating in the 1500s. It is in 3/4 time. This video shows couples [dancing to a polska](#), spinning and turning as Olov describes.
- [A piece by nyckelharpa master Eric Sahlström](#), who was Olov's teacher. "Trollrikepolska" is a polska-type tune.
- [A video with Olov's band Väsen](#), playing a tune Olov composed for the viola player's (Mikael Marin's) 50th birthday called "IPA-Gubben." The title is a playful reference to beer for an old guy. (IPA is a type of beer, and "gubben" is an old guy.)
- [Olov's "mountain lion" tune](#) composed after his first visit to the US, when he saw a mountain lion on the road.

Vocabulary

Chromatic – Using all 12 pitches, or notes, one half-step apart. You can easily [see and hear the chromatic scale on a piano](#)—all the keys, black and white, within one octave.

Drone – A sustained sound of a single pitch that continues throughout all or most of a musical piece. "Drone" also refers to the instrument or voice that produces and sustains the sound.

Fiddle and violin – Two names for the same instrument, a portable four-string instrument made of wood with pegs for tuning the strings. The main difference between fiddle and violin is the style of music played on the instrument—it's a fiddle if you play traditional or folk-based music; it's a violin if you play classical music on it.

Genre – A particular style of music. For example, jazz, country, classical, hip hop and traditional are all different genres of music. There are often subgenres under main genres. For example, Baroque is a subgenre of classical music.

Hurdy gurdy – A stringed instrument of medieval origin from Europe or the Middle East with a mechanical wheel that rubs against the strings. It has multiple drone strings, and like the nyckelharpa, it has keys that produce pitches on the strings. [See the hurdy gurdy explained.](#)

Range – The span of notes an instrument can play, or a singer can sing, from the lowest to the highest possible notes.

Resonance, or sympathetic vibration – Musical instruments create sound by making objects vibrate. Objects can include strings and the body of the instrument, as well the air inside the instrument. Vibrations cause sound waves to start moving. Resonance amplifies sound waves when an instrument responds to sound waves of certain frequencies. For example, when different strings are tuned to the same or sympathetic frequencies, the strings resonate with each other, making the instrument "ring."

Time signature (or meter) – The division of music into patterns of repeated rhythm, or beats. In 3/4 time, three beats are repeated over and over in units called measures, or bars. The bottom number (4) means that the quarter note gets one beat. You can usually identify the meter by tapping along and noticing how often the strong beats occur.

Viola – A four-stringed instrument of the violin family; it is slightly larger than a violin and tuned one fifth (five notes) lower.

Activities and Questions for Students

Before you watch the episode—Locate the following places on [Google Maps](#) or a printed map.

Country: Sweden.

Cities: Tobo, Uppsala and Stockholm, Sweden.

After you watch the episode—Complete assigned activities and questions from this list, which progresses from simpler to more complex.

1. How would you describe the nyckelharpa to someone who hasn't heard it? What adjectives would you use to describe the way the instrument looks? How would you describe the way it sounds? Write a poem about it if the spirit moves you!
2. Olov's first teacher was his maternal uncle. What does he mean by "maternal"? What is the other kind of uncle you can have? Ask your parents or Google—describe the difference between the two types of uncles.
3. [Use this website](#) and find out what kind of government Sweden has. Trick question: Who is the traditional head of state? (Emphasis on the word "traditional.")
4. Olov and his band mate Mikael Marin have been playing together for a very long time. (Mikael plays viola.) What happens when you play music with someone again and again, over a period of time? If you don't play music, think about sports or games. How does it affect your play when you play together for a long time?
5. The last tune Olov plays was inspired by his seeing a mountain lion on the road. (He was in California at the time.) If you didn't know the story behind the song, what "inspiration story" would you make up to go with the song? What images do you see, or what does the song make you think about?
6. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of Olov, what he talked about, and the music you heard. Describe the music, your favorite things

about it, and what more you wish you could see or know about. Be sure to give your article a descriptive title!

7. Besides traditional music, Olov plays several other genres. What type(s) of music do you enjoy playing or listening to? To jog your memory, look at the very beginning of [this list on YourDictionary.com](#).
8. What genre describes Väsen's music? How would you categorize it? Your opinion, please! Making up a totally new name for the genre is allowed. (And you can look at [this list on YourDictionary.com](#) for inspiration.)
9. Name one musical characteristic of [the first tune that Olov plays](#), which is a polska. No research required—just what do you notice, in terms of rhythm, tonal organization and/or form?
10. The nyckelharpa and the viola are both bowed stringed instruments, and they have about the same musical range. [Listen to Väsen](#) play their song "Gudda." Listen with your eyes closed. Can you tell the difference between Olov's nyckelharpa and band mate Mikael's viola? Can you tell which one is playing what parts? Now open your eyes and listen again, watching the video—did you guess right?
11. How would you describe the difference in the sound the viola makes and the sound the nyckelharpa makes?
12. Väsen has gone through several changes—from a duo to a trio to a quartet, then back to a trio, then back to a duo. What do you notice about how they adapted the music to the changing instrumentation? Listen to examples of Väsen as a duo ([from their newest album Duo](#)), as a trio ([from their album Rule of 3](#)), and as a quartet ([from their album Världens Väsen](#)).
13. Analyze the structure of [the first tune](#) Olov plays. Each section has 8 bars in 3/4 time. Use letters (A, B, C, etc.) to designate different sections. How many *different* sections are there? (Don't be thrown by variations.) Map out the structure with letters, for example: AABBC AABBD. (This is *not* the structure, just an example.) What do you come up with?
14. What do you notice about some of the transitions between sections, in terms of the rhythm? Is it all in straight 3/4 time, or are there deviations? What happens, musically speaking?

Additional Resources

Olov Johansson & Musical Collaborators

[Olov's website](#). The site is in Swedish and English.

Olov's [YouTube channel](#). (The beginning of the tune "[Svampmannen](#)" has an excellent close-up of the nyckelharpa.) The [Video page](#) has quite a few videos of Olov playing with other musicians:

[Harpist Catriona McKay](#).

[Pianist Anders Bromander](#). (Olov composed the piece.)

[Violinists Erika Lindgren Liljenstolpe and Robert Larsson](#), playing a tune from the album *Maskin*.

[Guitarist Roger Tallroth](#) (formerly of Väsen), who is playing an octave mandolin.

[Olov with percussionist André Ferrari](#) (formerly of Väsen) playing a piece from their duo project called "In Beat Ween Rhythm." Their [Facebook page](#) has more videos.

Väsen

[Website for Olov's band Väsen](#). [Click on the album icons](#) on the Recordings page to listen to sample tracks from their many albums. Väsen also sells [tune books](#) with musical scores of some of their music. The site is in Swedish and English.

Väsen's [Facebook page](#).

[Väsen: NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert](#).

[Short documentary on Väsen](#), around the time of their 30th anniversary as a band.

[Väsen and Snarky Puppy](#), an American jazz fusion band.

Nyckelharpa

[The history and characteristics of the nyckelharpa](#) on Olov's website with some great close-up pictures of different nyckelharpas. (Unless you speak Swedish, be sure to click on the tab for English.)

Olov works actively to pass on his musical heritage, giving instruction at the Eric Sahlström-Institute in the village of Tobo, Sweden, and the Royal Music College in Stockholm. Along with other traditional musicians, Olov also teaches lessons online through the [Folk Music Academy](#).

Tell us what you think!

We want to make Carry On™ even more useful and enjoyable for students and educators across the country. [Send us your feedback!](#) Tell us what you liked and what we could do better. And please... tell other educators and schools about the show. Help us all carry on!

With the help of generous donors, [Carry On](#)™ is produced by the nonprofit [Northeast Ohio Musical Heritage Association](#) (NEOMHA). The show is programmed by [Laura Lewis](#), artistic director of NEOMHA's [Lake Erie Folk Fest](#). Carry On's resource guides are the work of writer and musician [Rita Lewis](#).

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