

## Oldest Hummel (Folk Instrument) From Germany Identified

Translation: Christa Farnon, Pennsylvania / USA



By 2011, on the occasion of the Hummel exhibit in the museum Cloppenburg, Wilfried Ulrich had finished his extensive research of the musical instrument Hummel from the Middle Ages up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, he thought that he knew all Hummels in Germany. In the meantime, he learned that there is stuccowork on the ceiling of the entrance hall in the *Manor Damp* (on the Baltic Sea near Eckernförde) containing the image of a Hummel. On a trip to Denmark, he had

the opportunity to make a detour to said manor in order to see this image and to photograph it. In four areas on the 7m high ceiling, eight nearly life-size, lightly clad young ladies could be seen in three-dimensional stucco work, each playing a musical instrument: harp and violin, flute and chalumeau, fanfare and singing, drums and a Hummel. It was immediately apparent that these instruments were not made from gypsum, but that real instruments had been used. The depicted Hummel, however, is not shown in the typical playing style of lying on a table, but the instrument is held only at the peg head, and is bowed in viola da gamba fashion. This depiction led, in a 1976 description, to the erroneous conclusion that it was based on an Icelandic Langspil.

\*1 However, the Langspil, which is much slimmer, is played lying on a table, or more infrequently, lying on the lap. Also, the Langspil usually has only three strings. The stucco work was created in **1698** by the Northern Italian stucco craftsman Joseph Mogia (and his workshop). He would not have had any knowledge of the Icelandic Langspil since it was only by 1789 that a first, brief report about the Langspil existed. In 1810, Sir George Mackenzie of Scotland described it in detail on the occasion of a trip to Iceland.\*2. The Italian stucco craftsmen considered themselves artists and as such were also better paid than ordinary construction workers. They created a “beautiful work of art,” regardless of the typical way the instrument was played. These stucco artists were not necessarily musicians and therefore they added instruments to create a “beautiful appearance.” In this fashion, artists around 1800 depicted beautiful young society ladies with a lyra guitar which attested to their “classical education.” However, the instruments simply cannot be played in the depicted posture. Also, medieval pictures of hurdy-gurdies (symphonia) in Spain and England show rows of keys over the entire length of the sound box, which is also technically impossible. Artists have their very own view of things, so the results must not be mistaken for reality!

Taking a closer look at the Hummel instrument from the *Manor Damp*, one can see from the number of the metal pegs, that there were originally thirteen strings rather than four heavy strings. A drill hole of a missing peg can still be detected. At the end block, one can recognize the indentations which the strings pressed into the wood where they turned around behind the bridge. Above the finger board ran two double strings of the same pitch, with a wider space between each pair of double strings. This suggests the likely playing method: with the thumb on top of the noter, one presses on the first pair of double strings and glides across the frets to create the melody, while the left index finger below at the edge of the instrument ensures a constant distance of the noter. The second pair of double strings then sounds together with the drone strings. The second variation results from fingering, using the index finger or the thumb for the first pair of double strings, and creating subsequently a lower accompanying third (or a fourth or fifth) by using another finger on the second pair of double strings. The plucking of the strings with the right hand was most likely accomplished with a goose quill – or perhaps with a piece of whalebone. The third fret is missing on the finger board . However, one can still recognize the

holes of the fret staple as well as as the longish pressure mark, which the fret left on the finger board. The fret spacing is somewhat imprecise, but that is the case with all old Hummels. The spacing of the frets was determined by trial and error, via a simple song. The mathematical calculation of the fret spacing was unknown – also the fret spacing on the monochord by *Guido of Arezzo*, which is comparable to the Hummel, was not familiar to the folks in the villages. In the Damp-Hummel, the **Do** of the beginning of the scale (relatively solmisation) is produced by the open melody string. Most Hummels have the **Do** at the third fret so that the open string sounds a fourth lower.

If you adjust the photo on the PC screen to a darker image with more contrast, a peculiarity can be noticed: the soundboard of the instrument was damaged – a piece between the sound hole and the bulge was broken out, and the stucco craftsman pasted here over it a strip of linen, which meets the lower side frame in a wavy manner, resulting in an uneven arc of the outer frame. Furthermore, the glued joints between the thin boards of the side and the sound board as well as the back are loosened. From all this one can see that in **1698** an old, dilapidated Hummel without strings was used, which maybe was found by chance in an attic. The stucco craftsmen, who certainly knew the cello, thought: “Let us turn it into a sort of cello, and add four heavy strings with extra drill holes at the end block.” A Hummel with many strings on a flat straight bridge can hardly be played with a bow. That would result in a “cats’ concert” since not all strings can be bowed with the necessary even pressure of the bow.

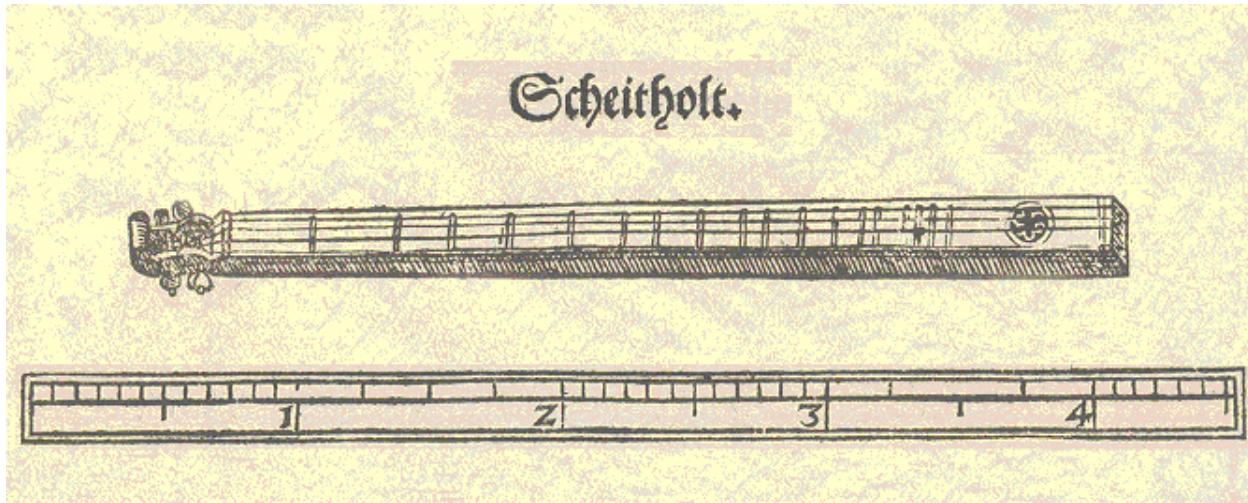
But there is a **1699** report of playing the Hummel with a bow:

*“Het speelen wort van sommige gedaan met twee pennetjes / met de eene schrabbense over de snaaren / en met de andere strijkense langs de voorste snaare over de toonen: Andere strijken met een strijkstok op de snaaren / en met de nagel van de slinker duim strijkense op de voorste snaare over de toonen / en speelen alsoo de voysen”. \*3*

*“Some play with two noters / with one they scratch over the strings / with the other they glide over the frets on the string at the very front: others play the strings with a bow / and with the left thumb nail they glide over the frets of the first string and thus play the melodies.”*

The instrument’s name *Noordsche Balke* (Nordic Beam) indicates a beam shaped instrument – a rather slim, straight instrument with few strings. The oldest original from **1608**, which is 6 cm wide, is in the *Gemeente Museum* in Den Haag. One can indeed make music on its three strings with a bow by mainly bowing the melody string and in-between bowing the few other drone strings as a simple bass accompaniment – as drones. The small width of the instrument, however, makes it awkward! The later instruments with a bulge on one side \*4 retained the old name *Noordsche Balke* although they did not have the shape of a beam. They also have only three or four strings.

How long had the dilapidated *Damp-Hummel* been lying in the attic **before 1698**? How long before that was it still in use, delighting the farm hands and maids during barn dances (“*Danz op de Deel*”) when it was still playable? Perhaps sixty years? Maybe more? Surely, this Hummel was built during the first third of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This puts the instrument close to the Scheitholt of *Michael Praetorius*.



The court Kapellmeister of Wolfenbüttel described for the first time in **1619** how to play the Scheitholt, which can be transferred exactly to the Hummel. So, is it by pure chance that Michael Praetorius described a Scheitholt and not a Hummel in his description of contemporary musical instruments? Is the Scheitholt not at all the remote ancestor of all fretted zithers as so far commonly thought, but just a very simple variant? A Hummel is mentioned already in **1508** in Cologne since it was played together with other instruments in a procession. Critiques of this text, which point out that it does not necessarily refer to the string instrument since there existed the *Hümmelchen* – a small bagpipe – are not valid, because bagpipes are mentioned separately in the text. There is a woodcut from Augsburg (Schema monochordi) \*5 from **1516**, showing more beautiful instruments than the Scheitholt. However, they are still described as monochords. There is a well preserved *Langeleik* (Norwegian Hummel) from the year 1524 which is still played even today (privately owned). Praetorius described the instrument as an “*Instrument for Beggars*”. But the noble masters (von Ahlefeldt) of *Manor Damp* had included a Hummel in a prominent place in the entrance hall and the music hall and thus dignified the instrument. Was the instrument conceivably not only for farmhands and maids, but also a musical toy for the leisure-time entertainment of the nobility? Did Margarethe von Ahlefeldt (1613/4-1681) or one of her daughters play the Hummel, just as a short time later the Queen of France and her daughters played the folk instrument hurdy-gurdy? Surely, Bendix von Ahlefeldt would not have considered an “instrument for beggars” worthy to decorate the ceiling of his manor house next to important instruments of his time.

Besides the eight lady musicians, there are two allegorical female figures holding banners, depicted next to the staircase. One text reads in translation, "This orchestra brings forth in competition celebrated joys." The other reads "MUSARUM NUTRIX PAX OPTIMA EST RERUM" -- "Peace, the nurse of the muses, is the most splendid of things."

Not a bad slogan - also for today!

The fact that the Hummel was not considered an "instrument for beggars" by the nobility of Schleswig-Holstein is also evident in another stuccowork of the former summer residence of the Duke of Mecklenburg in *Ratzeburg* (Adolph Friedrich IV. of Mecklenburg-Strelitz). The original castle of 1660 was demolished in 1764 and replaced by a lavish new building. Various musical instruments were sculpted in the festive Rococo hall. One figure consists of a Hummel and a bagpipe. Since the sound hole of the Hummel is outlined only by scratched carving work and the fingerboard shows a rather peculiar arrangement of the frets it is possible that this instrument is simply a decoration.



All the same - here again the Hummel was nobilitated.

Ulrich made a precise analysis with all measurements of the instrument during a trip to Schleswig-Holstein.

The book “The Story of the Hummel” – History of a Folk Instrument from the Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century is available from Ulrich. (Engl. ed., 22,- €, + 7,- € postage)

[www.ulrich-instrumente.de](http://www.ulrich-instrumente.de) , Mail: [ulricus.norden@t-online.de](mailto:ulricus.norden@t-online.de)

\*1 Stocks / Schütz, *Adeliges Gut Damp*, München + Zürich, 1976

\*2 Sir G. Mackenzie, *Travels in the Island of Iceland During the Summer of the year MDCCCX* (1810),

In: [http://www.musik.is/Paelingin/Langspil\\_and\\_Icelandic\\_Fidla.pdf](http://www.musik.is/Paelingin/Langspil_and_Icelandic_Fidla.pdf) (Sept. 2013)

\*3 *Claas Douwes: Grondig onderzoek van de toonen der musijk* (1699) ,  
Hoofdstuk XIV, *Van Noordsche Balken*.

\*4 Instruments in *Fries Museum*, Leeuwarden and *Museum W. van Haaren*, Heerenveen

\*5 Johannes Aventinus, *Musicae Rudimenta*, Augsburg 1516,  
Bayr. Staatsbibliothek, München, Sig.: 4 Mus. Th. 44

Measurements were taken in July 2015.

	Gut Damp – Hummel	Ratzeburg - Hummel
Total length :	80,0 cm	85,5 cm
Head	14,2 cm	15,5 cm
Width	22,4 cm	16,5 cm , 10,0 at head
Height of soundbox	7,3 cm	5,0 cm , 4,5 at head
Stringlength	63,5 cm	66 cm
Strings	2 + 2 + 9	2 + 6
Frets	<i>Do</i> at open string, diatonic	Curious fret spacing!



Hummel Manor – Damp



Hummel : Castle Ratzeburg (changed with Mandolin pegs)