

# ORCHESTRATING AND CONTROLLING THE FOREIGN: THE FESTIVAL OF DIVERSITY IN STOCKHOLM CITY HALL

By Owe Ronström

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In February 1990, the Swedish "Immigrants' Cultural Center" (*Invandrarnas Kulturcentrum*, IKC) celebrated its twentieth anniversary by organizing a folklore show at Stockholm City Hall, with participants from well over twenty nations. In this paper I shall describe this well-rehearsed orchestration of the new ethnic diversity in Sweden and suggest its interpretation as a metaphorical staging of basic patterns of organizing social and cultural diversity.<sup>1</sup> As a conclusion, I shall arrive at a tripartite model of how diversity is organized in Swedish society as a whole, a model that is staged with particular clarity in this type of event.

The Immigrants' Cultural Center is a small - some may think insignificant - organization of immigrant artists and intellectuals. Its twenty years of existence coincides with a period of profound change in Swedish society. Until the 1970s, the image of Sweden that Swedes liked to present both to themselves and to others was that of a homogeneous nation, indeed one of the most homogeneous in Europe. By contrast, present-day Sweden is often rhetorically

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<sup>1</sup> Music as an expression of identity has long been a persistent theme in ethnomusicological research (cf. Bohlman 1988). A large number of studies have been devoted to music as a symbol for feelings, affects, and identities, individual as well as collective, social as well as cultural. However, it seems that the bulk of these studies have adopted the perspectives of the individuals or groups that are being studied, while very few have considered the role of music in the social and cultural organization of diversity in a society as a whole (cf. the discussion in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1992). In her article "The Processes and Results of Musical Cultural Contact" (1981), Margaret Kartomi attempts to establish a vocabulary for such studies. In a series of articles, Mark Slobin has discussed the role of music in complex multicultural societies (e.g., Slobin 1984, 1992). Especially interesting is his attempt to identify basic processes, such as "domestication," "reinterpretation," "ethnic convergence," and "replacement" (Slobin and Ronström 1989). An interesting attempt to survey the ethnic music scene of a large modern city is the "Klangbildern" project run by Max Peter Bauman in Berlin.

depicted and represented as a *multicultural society*. The equation is simply put: as immigrants and refugees have become more numerous during the last twenty to twenty-five years, the numbers and varieties of peoples, languages, expressive styles, genres, and entire cultures have increased, which has led to the transformation of Swedish society from monocultural to multicultural.

A central concept in this new rhetorical discourse is "the immigrant" (Swedish *invandrare*). This word was introduced around 1965 by the government of the day as a legislative term for a new type of foreigner in Swedish society. Gradually it became an important epithet and a powerful tool for social categorization even in the everyday life of ordinary people.

In the 1960's, the main goal of Swedish immigrant policy was assimilation. In the early 1970s, however, pluralistic ideas grew stronger and assimilation was intensely debated. In 1975, the Swedish Parliament adopted a law which promoted *freedom of choice, equality, and partnership* as new goals for Swedish immigrant policy, a law that marked a shift in official cultural policy from assimilation to multiculturalism. The immigrants were granted rights to education in their mother tongue (in Swedish *hemspråk*, "home-language"), and through their organizations they were granted political, social, and economic support from the state. In reality, however, the immigrants still were foreigners to most Swedes, with strange and exotic traditions. Although rhetorically praised by the officials in the political and cultural bureaucracy, the influence of the immigrants' cultures in Swedish society was very limited.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, the immigrants' cultures, when publicly presented, have been cast in a number of highly elaborated generic forms. One of the most important is the "immigrant culture festival," a type of event in which strongly typified derivations of the immigrants' traditional music, dance, dress, and food are displayed. By means of such festivals, which emphasize the sensory experiences of sound, sight, smell, taste, and touch, the immigrants foreground

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<sup>2</sup> A study of the rhetorics of multiculturalism and its effects on music is Ronström 1992.

themselves as culturally different from each other and from the Swedes. But since this generic form for displaying diversity is created and controlled by the ambient Swedish society, they simultaneously become less different from each other and more "Swedish."

### **The place of the event**

The IKC celebrated its twentieth anniversary in the famous Blue Hall at Stockholm City Hall, venue for the illustrious Nobel banquets. It is a large and exquisitely decorated hall, indeed one of the most splendid and formal in Sweden. For the leaders of the IKC, there were indeed strong symbolic and strategic reasons for choosing this hall. The message was something like: "Yes, we are immigrants, but we nevertheless have a right to the symbolic capital assembled in the arenas of the Swedish power elite." That the Blue Hall is not at all suited to music and dance performances (in fact, it is the nearest one can get to an acoustic disaster) was probably not important to them in this instance.

### **The stageprogram**

The main overall frame and key word for the event was *formal representation*. The establishing of this frame entailed certain expectations about what could and should happen, and of course also *how* it would happen. The first part of the evening was designed as a cavalcade of ten-minute displays of traditional music and dance by artists from a large number of ethnic groups before a seated audience. Their repertoires, instruments, and costumes were carefully chosen to be representative of their ethnic group, folk group, or nation. The audience, too, was formally attired and representative, some in elegant suits and gowns, others in "national costumes."

The first group to enter the stage was announced as the "Barozda, Hungarian music ensemble." Indeed, with their drooping black mustaches, dark baggy trousers, roomy white folkloric shirts, and playing the hurdy-gurdy and variously sized fiddles, it cannot have been too difficult for the audience to identify the five men on stage as Hungarian. In their performance of *ugros* dance songs from Transdanubia, the hurdy-gurdy was visually and audibly foregrounded, as a kind of Hungarian "brand-name," a sign of the "folk" that

was to be represented.

Following the Hungarians, group after group appeared on the stage to perform their dances and music. Taken together the performances of the groups formed a physical representation of two of the most common types of metaphors of "multicultural Sweden ": the mosaic and the string of pearls. Like the stones in a mosaic, the groups were all different in colors and shapes. But at the same time they were all of the same size and made of the same kind of material. By means of a small and well-codified representative repertoire of melodies, instruments, sounds, performance styles, dress, colors, props, and ways of moving, all with a pronounced symbolic relationship to a specific region or nation, the groups showed off their peculiarities and foregrounded their differences.

Most of the groups had access to signs and symbols familiar to those interacting in the Blue Hall and probably also to the Swedish population at large. Using this knowledge - "we know that you know that we know" (Hannerz 1992) - made the task of deciding how best to display their ethnic origin easier for many groups: the dark-skinned youngsters from the Eritrean association danced barefoot in raffia skirts to the music of a homemade North African lyre, hand claps, and drums backed by electric guitars; a group of young women from Thailand danced to gong music, in iridescent dresses and with the graceful hand movements so typical of Southeast Asian traditional dance; the Turkish ensemble Sameyda, although dressed in black trousers, white shirts, and black ties, was nevertheless distinctively Turkish in the way it handled the melodies and instruments; Sakura, the Japanese women 's choir, in kimonos and waving plastic cherry-blossom branches, performed pentatonic songs; the Södra Bergens Balalaikor, a large ensemble of singers and instrumentalists dressed up in Russian-style folkloric costumes, performed an arrangement of a Russian folksong accompanied by balalaikas, domras, and a bayan. Even though the latter ensemble was announced both on the posters and by the compere as a "Swedish orchestra," there was no difficulty in recognizing it as Russian, because of the balalaika 's indisputable status as a symbol of Russia and a sign of Russianness.

But for others it was not so easy. For example, Greece was represented by a well-known concert pianist. Dressed in a black gown, she made a classical soloist's entrance, took her place behind the piano and played, not Skalkottas, Hadjidakis, nor any other Greek composer, but the famous theme from the film *Zorba the Greek*. This pianist's problem, experienced as well by the other invited opera singers and piano soloists, was that neither her dress, her repertoire, her instrument, nor her way of performing could in any way communicate her ethnic origin. Her solution was to rely upon a small and well-known repertoire of typified national melodies, a kind of auditory ethnic brand name.

Instruments too can be used as ethnic markers. The Estonian group Erü Kassari, with some twenty younger and middle-aged members, perform Estonian folk music and dance in a style that to Swedes is very similar to that of most Swedish and Finnish folk dance groups. The Estonian folklore groups use the same kinds of instruments, mainly accordions and fiddles, to accompany their dances, and they also use basically the same type of folk costume as their Swedish and Finnish counterparts. As a result, when performing their Estonian songs and dances, the members of this group often have trouble being recognized as Estonian. But there are ways to solve this problem. One is to foreground the *jauram*, a stick with bells attached that is beaten rhythmically on the floor. This instrument, once played in different versions all over Europe, was appropriated and nationalized as "typically Estonian" during the first half of this century and has today become a "trade mark" characteristic of Estonian folklore groups. In Erü Kassari's performance of Estonian quadrilles and round dances in the Blue Hall, the *jauram*, played by one of the group's leaders, fulfilled two equally important roles, that of a musical instrument and that of an ethnic symbol, a mark of Estonianness.

### **Dancing for everybody "**

After several hours of ten-minute performances, the compere announced the second part of the event: "dancing for everybody" (Swedish *dans för alla*). A small Swedish band struck up a traditional Swedish fiddle tune, but then

switched to domesticated versions of "All of Me," "Whispering," and other American jazz standards. Soon the dance floor was crowded with couples dancing one-step, fox-trot, and jive, in a variety of styles and all at once. Here were the elderly, dancing slowly and lightly; the middle-aged dancing more energetically; young couples who had been taking courses, trying out what they had learned; and even children, finding their own ways to dance. Many of the artists also took part in the dance, some in folk costume but most in "civvies."

Within just a few minutes, the formal and strictly ordered mode of interaction had been replaced by informal social dancing. The audience became the most important actors. It was no longer possible to distinguish ethnic identity. Now the mosaic or string of pearls was replaced by another common type of metaphor for "multicultural Sweden," that of a long drink, a salad bowl, or a cultural cocktail mixed from a multitude of colors, styles, and forms. The variegated folk costumes were replaced by dark suits and long skirts, or jeans and shirts of the latest Western fashion. The great number of different groups, instruments, tunes, sounds, rhythms, and dances displayed on stage had been replaced by a small band only, but one that performed in a variety of ways. The Domesticated Swedish versions of American popular music clearly provided a kind of supra-ethnic repertoire, belonging simultaneously to everyone and yet to no one in particular.

## **Backstage**

While all this was going on in the hall, a radically different type of interaction took place in the basement below the stage, where the artists were dressing and warming up. Two Lankesian girls rehearsed their steps next to the Finnish accordionist, who assiduously tried to master "Carnival of Venice." A man in a gigantic Mexican sombrero attempted "O Sole Mio." With a big smile, he suddenly switched to one of the most common blues riffs and finished by gesturing "V" for victory to a couple of Eritrean youngsters who passed by. When they asked him to play something they could dance to, he promptly responded by playing standard Spanish-style chord progressions, after which they all laughed together. Down here, almost everyone spoke Swedish, but one could also hear words and phrases in other languages, A Yugoslav girl from a

Stockholm suburb showed her beautiful, borrowed costume to the girls in the Kurdish ensemble. With her Stockholm dialect, her long hair plaited Rasta-style, she was taken to be Swedish by the Kurdish girls; the Serbian *kolo* she showed them was accepted as a Swedish folk dance. She, on the other hand, took the black-eyed young girls to be Turkish.

It was all a mishmash. The live music from guitar, zurna, accordion, and homemade Eritrean lyre blended with hip hop, soul, funk, and popular music of all kinds from portable cassette-recorders and Walkmans. The ensemble Barozda, which had so successfully represented Hungary, turned out in fact to be Hungarian-speaking Romanian citizens who had learned to play their Transdanubian folk music in Romania, from the same records and cassettes as their Swedish fellow-musician playing the *kontra* (a three-stringed brätsche, or viola). The members of the Eritrean ensemble were nearly all born or raised in Sweden, and most of them also had acquired their competence to perform Eritrean music and dance in Sweden. The teachers and musicians of the Kurdish ensemble were Turks from Istanbul who spoke scarcely a word of Kurdish. The man performing as a Mexican in poncho and big sombrero was actually a Chilean who liked Mexican music.

Two girls who had so gracefully performed Macedonian dances in beautiful Macedonian costumes were Serbian - or Swedish, as both were born and raised in Stockholm. The "Russian" choir and orchestra turned out to be exactly what they had been announced to be, a Swedish ensemble, having no other connection with Russia than an affection for Russian music.

While they were performing, it was easy to see who was Estonian, Kurdish, Yugoslav, or Thai. But after the show, they once again became middle-aged Stockholmers, dressed in modern jackets and party dresses, or urban youngsters with similar make-up, clothes, and jargon. Of course, differences among them remained for those sensitive to distinctive styles, forms, colors, and fragrances. But the differences were not deliberately foregrounded as on stage and therefore did not play a decisive role in the social interaction. Nor was there any common locus of interaction, as there was in the social dancing that

followed the stage performances, which effectively downplayed the boundaries between groups. Backstage, a kind of free zone was established, a social space characterized, not by ethnic representation nor by "dancing for everybody," but by ad hoc groupings, playful use of expressive forms, and complex switchings between many different frames of interpretation. The Chilean with his guitar, the Eritrean teenagers, the Yugoslav girls - all seemed aware of this absence of a self-evident frame of interpretation. They also seemed to take every opportunity to shift between different ways of understanding and managing the situation, often in a self-ironic way.

### **A model for interpreting the organization of diversity in Sweden**

After more than six hours of music and dance, the anniversary celebration or the IKC came to a close. It could be interpreted as a metaphoric staging of a new and multicultural Sweden, a Sweden where "multiculturalism" is not reduced to "people from many nations" but instead refers to the capacity of human beings to shift between radically different modes of interaction.

Here, at this event, we found at least three such modes. First was the *representative mosaic* of the stage performances, where the stereotyped differences of the ethnic groups were foregrounded. Here the important thing was not to *be* somebody, but to *act* as somebody. Myriad details were displayed as ethnic markers: physical attributes, clothing, instruments, sounds, melodies, bearing, movements, and symbols. Fiddles, hurdy-gurdy, and mustaches - Hungarians; cherry-blossom and kimonos-Japanese; the Zorba theme-Greek.

Then came the *"dancing for everybody,"* a mode in which ethnic differences were subdued and "that which unites" was emphasized by the use of a repertoire people could perform without formal training, one that simultaneously was everyone's and no-one's. Here it was the swing standards of the 1940s and 1950s, but it might also have been popular Viennese waltzes, some forms of pop and rock, etc. This frame made no demands on displaying the typical or the authentic. Common bonds were stressed, rather than things

that divide, and as a result a "cultural truce" was established and diversity muted.

Lastly, the complex "*backstage diversity*" made way for new forms and groupings, where ethnic diversity and homogeneity gave way to constant transformations and negotiations. Here we found a mixture of styles, forms, and colors and an interaction not defined or controlled by the norms and values of any particular group. As a result we also found the most unexpected and unforeseeable mixtures among repertoires, genres, and styles.

Thus, at one and the same event we found three radically different frames, modes of interaction, and also three types of organizing diversity, all of them enacted by the people in Blue Hall, in Stockholm City Hall. To each of the three types belong certain kinds of behavior and certain expressive forms and styles. They are enacted for a multitude of reasons, and the outcome might be more or less as expected, or it might escape all given forms and categories. But whichever frame, mode of interaction, or type of organizing diversity employed, the people involved cannot escape being circumscribed by the overall frame of Swedish society of which they all are a part. Crowned as it is by three golden crowns (the Swedish national emblem), Stockholm City Hall can thus be seen as a concrete representation of Swedish society, which surrounds, defines, and also restrains the possibilities of the many different ethnic groups to create and maintain a culture of their own in their new homeland. Just as the festival was shaped and controlled by being enclosed within the walls of Stockholm City Hall, so too is social and cultural diversity in Sweden shaped and controlled by being enclosed by Swedish society.

## **Note**

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