

Swedish folk music

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### **1. Concepts, terminology.**

In Sweden, the term "*folkmusik*" (folk music) usually refers to orally transmitted music of the rural classes in "the old peasant society", as the Swedish expression goes. "*Populärmusik*" ("popular music") usually refers to "modern" music created foremost for a city audience. As a result of the interchange between these two emerged what may be defined as a "city folklore", which around 1920 was coined "*gammeldans*" ("old time dance music"). During the last few decades the term "*folklig musik*" ("folkish music") has become used as an umbrella term for folk music, *gammeldans* and some other forms of popular music. In the 1990s "ethnic music", and "world music" have been introduced, most often for modernised forms of non-Swedish folk and popular music.

### **2. Construction of a national Swedish folk music.**

Swedish folk music is a composite of a large number of heterogeneous styles and genres, accumulated throughout the centuries. In retrospect, however, these diverse traditions, genres, forms and styles, may seem as a more or less homogenous mass, especially in comparison to today's musical diversity. But to a large extent this homogeneity is a result of powerful ideological filtering processes, by which the heterogeneity of the musical traditions of the rural classes has become seriously reduced.

The homogenising of Swedish folk music started already in the late 1800th century, with the introduction of national-romantic ideas from German and French intellectuals, such as the notion of a "folk", with a specifically Swedish cultural tradition. Another important period was 1880-1930, when large numbers of musical transcriptions were collected and published, for example the monumental "*Svenska låtar*" ("Swedish tunes"), published 1922-1939, with approximately 8000 vocal and instrumental tunes from almost all parts of Sweden. The publication of this and other large collections led to the creation of a standard folk music repertoire, which subsequently became the content of 'the national Swedish folk music tradition'. A third important period was the 1970s

and 80s, the years of the folk music revival. During this turbulent period many young folk musicians started to search for historically authentic folk music styles of local or regional origin. Many of these revived styles had become more or less extinct, but now became available again through collections or recordings of original folk musicians. This search for "roots" led to an increasing diversity of folk music in Sweden. But at another level the homogenisation and nationalisation of folk music continued and was even reinforced. At the same time, and at yet another level, during this period Swedish folk music also became strongly influenced by jazz, classical music, and English and American pop and folk music.

### 3. Perspectives on folk music

In the construction of the "Swedish national folk music tradition", the importance of the collectors and researchers often rather narrow preconceptions of what an "original, authentic, national folk music" is and should sound like, cannot be overemphasised. From the first articles published in the early 19th century up to today, the most common approach to folk music has been a combination of two different perspectives, the **historical** and the **geographical**. The historical perspective is often a paradoxical combination of evolutionary and devolutionary ideas: on the one hand folk music is understood to be constantly developing from simple to complex, from primitive to cultivated; on the other it is also understood to be constantly corrupted, distorted, step by step vanishing, through the influence of modernisation and urbanisation.

From the geographical perspective Sweden is treated either as a single homogenous unit, or as consisting of several enclosed units, "*landskap*". The "*landskap*", a medieval administrative unit, was reintroduced as a symbolic "imagined community" in the second half of the 19th century. Since then it has become firmly established in folk taxonomy, as the main organising unit of folk traditions.

The historical-geographical perspective was seriously challenged in the mid 20th century, by the introduction of **structural-functionalist** ideas, which underlined forms, functions and social origins of folk music. A representative of this perspective is the musicologist Jan Ling, whose

works have been very influential on the development of the Swedish folk scene during the last 30 years.

In the 1970s and 80s young folk music revivalists began to apply **class perspectives** on folk music, which resulted in a peculiar unholy alliance between two strongly idealised concepts, the romantic 'folk', and the socialist 'people'. During the very last years there has been a growing interest also in folk music and **gender. Age**, yet another potentially very fruitful perspective, has been almost totally neglected, except when the musical traditions of children are being discussed. In the following, folk music in Sweden will be discussed from the point of view of each of these perspectives.

### **3.a Historical layers of music**

The oldest layer of music in Sweden, probably of medieval origin, consists of songs, ballads, herding music and dance music, that share certain common traits: modal scales, narrow ambitus, repeated short formulaic melodic motives, such as:

(musical example 1)

This common motive is especially predominant in herding calls, lyrical songs, flute-, bagpipe-, and violin melodies, based on the scale:

(musical example 2) (note the lacking lower sixth!)

In musical practice the positions 1, 4, 5, and 8 of this commonly used scale are stable, while the positions -1, 3, 6, and 7 may be subject to alterations. The same functional position in the scale thus can occur in three different variants, low, medium or high. The alterations can occur from one performance to another, within one rendition of a tune, or even within one and the same melodic phrase.

(musical example 3)

Alterations of this kind have been and still are fairly common. However, most collections and scientific studies bear but few marks of this musical practice. The first generations of folk music collectors and scholars often "corrected" the alterations, on the grounds that they were mistakes, or results of "false intonation".

Another scale of medieval origin, used for songs and dance melodies, is:

(musical example 4)

A second distinctive layer consists of dance music and songs of the 1700th and 1800th centuries, often derivations of popular dance music in baroque style. These tunes have many formal and structural traits in common with "the galante style": theme-development-theme form, sequential chains of sixteenth notes, larger ambitus, often over two octaves, arpeggios over broken chords, etc.

(Musical example 5)

A third layer consists of dance music, such as polka, schottis, waltz, etc., characterised by rather simple diatonic melodies, built on major or minor scales, with implicit regular harmonic progression (tonic, subdominant, dominant), normally moving by seconds, mainly in semiquaver rhythm. This kind of music was introduced in the last century, together with new kinds of instruments and instrumental ensembles, such as button-accordions, mouth harps and brass bands.

(musical example 6)

Swedish folk music of the 20th century consists on the one hand of, for aesthetical and/or political reasons, consciously revived and reinterpreted older forms and styles; and on the other hand also of new forms and styles, characterised by larger forms, more and longer phrases, wider ambitus and more complex harmonic structures. This expansion of form and style is coupled to an expansion also in the field of musical instruments. Swedish folk music today is played on the older instrumentarium (violins, keyed fiddles, bagpipes, flutes), but also many modern instruments are used (synthesisers, electric guitars, drumsets, saxophones, often in combination with instruments from other parts of the world, for example darbuka, berimbau, congas, etc.) This expansion is in turn coupled to a search for new functions of folk music, which has brought one part of today's folk music scene to the stage, to become a type of chamber music; and another part to the dance halls, to become again popular dance music.

### **3 b. Geographic distribution of styles, forms and types.**

A common way to describe the stylistical differences within Sweden is to speak about "musical dialects", as were folk music styles direct

counterparts to language dialects. At a local level, an abundance of dialects have been identified - in certain parts of Sweden, for example Dalecarlia, even one for each village. These dialects are grouped together to form larger dialectal districts, which in turn are grouped to form 24 large regions, more or less exactly corresponding to the distribution of the 24 "landscapes" of Sweden.

Another common way to divide Sweden, especially among folk musicians themselves, is according to the distribution of *polska* types. The polska is a dance in 3/4 time, known in Sweden from the late 1600th century and up to the early 20th century the most popular. The dance has two parts, walking and turning. It is unregulated and improvisative, and therefore exists in many types, forms and variants. The polska was also the fiddlers favourite genre. Tens of thousands of polska tunes have been preserved, many of them not primarily intended for dancing, but for listening. Also the tunes exist in many types, forms and variants.

Parts of south Sweden, (Skåne, Blekinge, Småland, Halland) once belonged to Denmark, and the proximity to Danish and German culture is clearly recognisable in the folk music. A large and important part of the repertoire show influences from the musics of the upper classes of the 17th and the 18th centuries, but there are also many reminiscents of more ancient styles. The south of Sweden, the east coast (Småland, Östergötland, Södermanland, Uppland, Gästrikland, Hälsingland and Ångermanland) and the islands of the Baltic sea (Gotland and Öland), are marked by the economic boom in the 1800th century, which brought new instruments, new dances, new musical forms and styles to even the most remote villages. In landscapes like Ångermanland, Hälsingland, and Gotland, the dance music became dominated by violin music in a style known in Sweden as "folk baroque". Both in South and Eastern Sweden major modes are very common, especially in tunes of more recent origin. There are many "*åttondelspolskor*" ("polskas in semiquaver rhythm"), but the predominant type is "*sextondelspolskor*" ("polskas in sixteenth rhythm").

In middle and west Sweden there are many old style tunes in minor modes. From the lake Mälaren and north (with the exception of the

eastern coast) "*åttondelspolskor*" are most common, while in western Sweden "*triolpolskor*" ("triplet polskas") dominate. The folk music styles of Western Sweden have much in common with those in Eastern Norway; in many respects the Scandic mountain region form a rather homogenous culture. Further south, along the Western coast, there are many traces of close contacts with inhabitant of the British Isles.

Folk music in the Far North reflects the different waves of colonisation in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. While along the coast and the rivers, there are old as well as new styles, in the more recently colonised areas further North and West, the popular styles of the late 1900th century dominate. In the more populated areas along the border to Finland there are many influences from Finnish folk musical styles. The music of the Sami, who live scattered over vast areas in northern Sweden, have left but few marks on the musics of their neighbours.

### **3 c. Forms and functions.**

Swedish **folk songs** in general are sung monophonically and in a rather straightforward and "objective" manner: low or medium register, relatively slow, low volume, few ornaments. There are however also more ornamented styles, and styles sung at a very high pitch. Many folk songs have a solemn character and have been sung as hymns. Others, adapted to work, festivities or dance, are sung more lively and rhythmically. In this century singing in parallel thirds have become widespread, also many of the older monophonic songs are today sung with a second or a third voice.

Ballads were once widespread throughout the country. Many are of medieval origin, with parallels in other parts of Scandinavia, the British Isles and other European countries. Although collected since the 1700th century and much praised by urban intellectuals as the most important genre, ballads have, with some notable exceptions, gone out of musical practice already in the 1800th century. Two genres commonly in use up to this century are "*skillingtryck*" ("broadside ballads") and lyrical songs. Some can be traced back to the 16th century, but most are of more recent origin. Ballads, lyrical songs and the broadside ballads are examples of genres that have survived through a dialectical interplay between oral tradition and written or printed texts. Two very popular

genres are drinking songs and erotic songs. Thousands of drinking songs are in living practice, many of which are known by almost all Swedes. New songs are constantly composed, often of a rather burlesque character. Also a rather large number of old erotic songs are still sung, for example among teenagers. As with the drinking songs, new songs are constantly created, often to popular melodies. Most drinking songs and erotic songs have been and still are orally transmitted without support from printed textbooks. There are also a large number of dance songs all over Sweden, with lyrical, comical or burlesque texts. Many dance songs have more or less meaningless words, mainly for remembering the melody more easily. In some regions, like for example Dalecarlia, a specific way of singing, "trallning" ("diddling"), has been developed, in which the violin is imitated by onomatopoeic syllables, like "tidadi, dili-diliadi", etc.

## Dance

Chain dances of the farandole type have been widespread, at least since the Middle Ages. Many are commonly practised at midsummer and Christmas still today. As already have been mentioned, the *polska* has been the most popular dance from the 1700th century up to today. The great variation in polska dancing can be explained by the popularity of dance, but also by renaming and assimilating older dances into the polska type. During the 18th century a large number of contra-dances (*kadrilj, angläs, cottiljon*, etc.) entered the repertoire, especially in south and east Sweden. These older dances were either unregulated and danced by only one or two couples at the time, or by many people arranged in lines, circles and squares. In contrast, the dances that became popular in the 19th century, waltz, polka, schottis and mazurka, were danced by many couples following after each other in a big circle. To meet the needs of these new dance forms, large outdoor dance pavilions were erected in almost every village around the turn of the century. At these, the old polska became replaced by its modernised version, the regulated, non-improvised *hambo*, and the fiddlers became replaced by accordionists as main instrumentalists. The 20th century brought new dance patterns again: the ballroom dances, in Sweden often called "jazz dances". In many places local variations of such dances soon emerged, for example "jumpa" (two-step).

### 3 d. Gender and age.

As in many other countries in Europe, men have been more closely connected to instrumental music and women to vocal music. But also men sing: lyrical songs, comic songs, drinking songs, work songs and rhymes are among genres belonging to the male sphere, as women do play instruments: in the northern part of Sweden female fiddlers were not uncommon. There is also a large repertoire of songs and instrumental tunes connected to the traditional methods of intensive cattle breeding used in the northern parts of Sweden. Cattle breeding was considered solely a female task, therefore (with the exception of Skåne) only women worked as shepherds. (Sweden is probably the only European country with a law against male shepherds!) The female shepherds used singing, shouting, and instrumental playing on horns, birch bark lures, etc. in different work situations. Beside music used as a mere tool in the working process, there was also music performed for its own aesthetical goals and qualities. Especially the herding calls, *lockrop*, developed into very complex aesthetical structures. These high-pitched calls, a parallel to the alpine *Kuhreigen*, are based on a few bearing tones richly elaborated with improvised melismatic figures, sung with a very tensed larynx. Today this kind of vocal technique is also used outside its original context, in staged folk music performances, jazz and art music, often as an audial symbol of "old rural Sweden".  
(musical example 7)

A rather typical example of gender differences in Swedish folk music is the fiddler "Florsen Burs" and his wife Elisabeth Olofsdotter, living in Gotland in the middle of the last century. Both were musically very active, in their respective ways, and a large part of their repertoires was collected and published by their son, himself a well-known fiddler. The father, a rather poor peasant, became the most well known fiddler of his time. Many of his tunes, and certainly the ones the son wanted to preserve for the future, are elegant, sometimes even virtuous dance tunes of the kind that became fashionable among the peasantry in Gotland in the first part of the last century.

While the father's repertoire was intended for use in the public sphere, the mother's musical activity was restrained to the domestic sphere. She had a large repertoire of lyrical songs, love songs, lullabies, ditties, etc.

Stylistically her repertoire clearly belongs to the oldest layer of Swedish folk music. In this case, as in the traditional musical culture of Sweden in general up to recently, the 'male', 'instrumental', 'public', and 'modern' are closely connected, as are the 'female', 'vocal', 'domestic', and 'old'.

To the domestic sphere belong also nursery rhymes and lullabies and other genres for and of children. Rhymes and lullabies are often improvised over certain formulaic motives. A common motive in rhymes and children's songs in Sweden is the well-known "teasing-motive", that can be found all over Europe:

(Musical example 8)

Similarly, the most common lullaby type, recorded in hundreds, if not thousands of variants, is based on a simple five-tone formulaic melody, a parallel to a melody found in a French manuscript from the 12th century:

(Musical example 9)

These two and other formulaic motives are still common among children today, along with more recent genres, such as the hand-clapping games that have spread especially among girls from 8 to ten years old during the last 15 to 20 years.

### **3 e. Class**

There have been attempts to explain the aestechical bricolage that make up Swedish folk music as "gesunkenes kulturgut": "classical" or "high" forms and styles that have been taken over and reinterpreted by the peasants. There have also been attempts to describe the folk music as created solely by the peasants (or in a later version, "the people", "the working classes"), without influences from the upper classes or from foreign countries. A more careful look reveals that Swedish folk music is a mixture from many diverse sources, a result of a constant process of interchange between high and low, new and old, rural and urban, local and foreign.

Often overlooked are the large and important differences that existed also within the rural classes. These can be illustrated by a comparison between two fiddlers and their repertoires. Olof Jonsson From, or "From

Olle", lived in Järvsö parish, in Hälsingland, in the first part of the 19th century. As the most renowned fiddler of the time he was hired to play at weddings of the better-off peasants all over the region. For every wedding he composed two new tunes, and according to his own notes he played at 416 weddings! From Olle was a brilliant fiddler, which rendered him a reputation of having learnt from "Näcken", a mythical figure living in streams and waterfalls. His compositions, most of which have been preserved in local tradition, bear marks of his well-developed technique; they are full of broken chords, arpeggios, and leaps, and show a close relation to popular dance music of the upper classes. In the same period, in Bergsjö, not far from Järvsö, Hälsingland, lived another renowned fiddler, commonly known as "Hultkläppen". He made a living from walking around from village to village playing his fiddle for food. He has been described as an odd character, in old-fashioned, worn-out clothes, shoes made of birch-bark, and with long lanky hair. He was known to play wildly, "in the most powerful fortissimo", and there was often a cloud of confomium around him. Also many of his tunes have been preserved in local tradition, and in contrast to From Olle's tunes they are reminiscent of older stylistical layers; often modal, with narrow ambitus, and many repeated formulaic motives. These two fiddlers represent the two ends of an aesthetical continuum, from "high" to "low", from "modern" to "old", that today's notion of Swedish folk music is derived from.

#### 4. Instruments

Folk music instruments were used as signal tools at work or to accompany dance and song, but also for their own musical qualities. Some of the instruments can be traced back to prehistoric times (bone flutes, horns). Many drone instruments from the Middle Ages are still played as folk music instruments: "*hummel*" (a plucked dulcimer), "*mungiga*" (jew's harp), "*spelpipa*" (flute of the recorder type), "*säckpipa*" (bagpipe), "*vev-lira*" (hurdy-gurdy), "*nyckelharpa*" and fiddle.

The violin was brought to Sweden in the 17th century, by French musicians hired to perform at the court of Queen Kristina. In the 18th century the violin conquered the rural population and soon became the most popular folk instrument. On the one hand the musicians continued

to play the same type of tunes as before, but on the other hand they also learnt new styles, related to virtuoso late baroque music and pre-classical violin style. Some of the musicians also learned to play written music.

The keyed fiddle was once played only in a small region north east of Stockholm, but after a vigorous revival movement in the 1970s and 80s, it is today played by many thousands all over Sweden. A similar revival met the bagpipe in the 1980s. Although there are traces of at least three different types of bagpipes in Sweden from medieval times, it was probably never a commonly used instrument. A rather peculiar type, with a small stitched bag, one chanter and a short drone, was used in villages in Western Dalecarlia up to the 1940's. This type provided the model for the revival movement and is today known as "the Swedish bagpipe".

An important, but often overlooked instrument is the "*psalmodikon*", a bowed monochord invented by the priest Johannes Dillner in the 1840's, for the purpose of supporting psalm-singing in homes. In the same period the clarinet became popular, through influences from military bands. Brass instruments, also popularised by military bands, became important as dance music orchestras, especially in the small industrial centres in south Sweden.

In the latter part of 19th century the accordion became the most popular instrument, especially among the rapidly growing urban working class. The accordion even became a symbol of the workers, and of 'progress', 'modernity', and 'industrialisation'. For this reason it was furiously fought by the spokesmen of the "authentic" or "original folk culture", most of which belonged to the urban bourgeoisie. They instead promoted the violin as their symbol of the rich folk heritage of Sweden that was to be preserved. In their view, richly represented in all kinds of texts on folk music, the violin and the music played on it was positive, because it was handmade, precious, high, cultivated, rich and Swedish. By the same token the accordion was negative, because it was factory-made, cheap, simple, low, uncultivated, foreign, etc. This attitude towards accordions has prevailed up to date among many in the educated classes. However, among ordinary people, the fiddle and the

accordion soon became an inseparable pair. The very popular "*gammaldans*" ("old time dance music"), a synthesis of old and new, is typically performed by bands with accordions, fiddle, bass, guitar and drums.

As a rule, folk music in Sweden has been performed solistically, or by two musicians playing in unison or in octaves. In the late part of 19th century specialised accompanying functions had developed, based on either simple harmonic progression, or by adding to the melody an improvised second voice, based on octaves, thirds and sixths. During the mid 20th century this latter way of accompanying spread and has now become established as the norm all over Sweden.

A popular ensemble that developed in the first half of the 20th century, under influence from military brass bands and middle class dance music, is the "*spelmanslag*", ("fiddler's ensemble"). The first of these ensembles consisted of fiddlers only, from five to fifty or more. Also today they consist mainly of fiddlers, but many also include accordions, flutes, guitars, double-basses and drums. The *spelmanslag* perform folk music or "*gammeldans*", according to different musical functions and ideologies.