

It takes two - or more - to tango. Researching Traditional Music/Dance Interrelations

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Introduction

Most people like music and dance. Indeed, 'like' is too weak a word - people of today tend to invest so much time, effort, energy, money, significance and meaning in music and dance that few other activities can compare. This simple observation have important implications. One is that within only half a century, music has moved from the realms of the 'extras' to the 'ordinaries': from belonging to the "Sunday-sphere" of life, when work is over and all other duties are taken care of, music has become a major component of everyday life's soundscape. At the same time, from being an activity for the few, those especially inclined, gifted or wealthy, music has become something that almost anybody can pursue. Today, there are more music, instruments and musicians than ever before. To a lesser extent the same is true also for dance. Take Sweden as an example. Here, well into this century, dance was seen as an activity merely for the young. It was customary to stop dancing after marriage or at least after the arrival of the first child. Today dance is a favourite activity not only among the young, but also among the middle aged and the elderly. "Senior dance", a genre of specially designed "folk dances" for the elderly that was invented in Germany in the mid 80s, has since the early 90s become a popular dance genre in Sweden, and is still fast spreading (Ronström 1994).

To meet this development, the music industry has made an almost infinite number of dance and music styles, forms, types, genres etc. globally available. Taken together, all this music and dance has come to form an enormous palette of expressive forms, by which people can express and communicate the most detailed and nuanced messages about themselves, who they are, what they stand for, their wishes, dreams and hopes. If formerly you could say; "Show me what you read and I will tell who you are!" today it is more likely that it is their record-collections that will give the best clues as to what interests, belongings and values people have.

All these radical changes has made music and dance central as never before; to the formation of individual and collective identities, from local, and regional to national and international; to ways of socialising and networking; to world economy, as the music industry today has become one of the largest branches of the world; to the allocation of cultural and economical capital and power, and much more. What all this leads to is, first, that any attempt to understand contemporary human life, culture and society, that does not take music and dance into serious consideration will be inadequate and misrepresentative. Secondly, as a consequence of this rather fantastic and unexpected explosion that spread music and dance to literally every corner of society, ethnomusicologists and ethnochoreologists instead of dwelling in the peripheries of Academia, now have take on a new and crucial role in research about human life, culture and society.

Fieldwork

A way to enlarged insights into the complexities of contemporary human life goes through detailed ethnography, what anthropologist Clifford Geertz has called "thick description". Such descriptions can be produced only through meticulously performed fieldwork. Music and dance researchers often have quite an advantage before fieldworking colleagues from other disciplines, at least to begin with. Much of what is important to people is performed backstage, in the private sphere, well covered, sometimes even hidden. Access to these areas of life are often restricted for outsiders. But since music and dance belongs to those indeed rather few activities that to most of us is pleasure, delight, fun, it is usually not difficult at all to get access to the arenas and situations where music and dance is performed. After all, most people want to share what they love and think is important with others, including an eventual ethnomusicologist or ethnochoreologist. Few other so intensively meaningful and important activities are so easy accessible for researchers as music and dance.

But even if access is easy, the rest is not. For many reasons research in music and dance is a notoriously difficult task. One is the discrepancy between the insiders' and outsiders' perspective, the 'emic' and 'ethic'. What those belonging to the studied group understands is seldom the same as the newcomer from the outside. Another is the discrepancy between the subjective and the objective levels of understanding, between what those involved in the music-making and dancing feel and experience and what an more distanced onlooker hears and sees. For better or worse, music and dance research to a very large extent has been confined to the latter of these two discrepancies: observation from the outsiders perspective, interpretation from a distanced position. A third and perhaps more important difficulty is that whatever is observed in the research process becomes transformed and transposed into words. Today many in Western societies have at least some knowledge about and competence in music and dance, but often this knowledge and competence is in doing. Not many can give verbal accounts of the music or dance they are engaged in. I am not referring only to lack of specialised, technical and analytical language. Most people seem not to talk very much about music and dance at all, they rather do it. And if they talk, it is not at all certain that their words goes together well with their deeds. Much tend to be somewhat trivial statements far from the actual practice, such as "It is our tradition you know", "We have always done it like this!" or "Because I like it!". This often leaves the music and dance researchers alone with their own observations and interpretations, trapped with their own words. The important thing to remember here is that music and dance first of all is about doing, and that whatever research is about, first of all it is words. We can only research what is researchable, and what is researchable to a very high degree has to do with words. Since there is so much more to music and dance than words, much of the meaning people invest will not be transformable to words, only to more music and dance. This is most probably a reason behind the explosion of music and dance in the world today: words are not enough. This is also a good reason for dance and music researchers to acquire at least some competence in doing what they study.

A unit - or two independent practices?

Music and dance... Why is it that something so tightly knit together is perceived of and treated as two and not as one? True, in certain parts of society, music and dance are two entirely different practises. But this must not mislead us to think that it has been or should be the rule. On the contrary, born by the same parents, grown up together and only recently and in some places fostered in different families, music and dance is still seen as a unit in many

parts of the world. The separation into two different practices has led to a number of questions concerning the interface between music and dance: What are the relations between music and dance? How do musicians relate to dancers, and dancers to musicians? What comes first, the music or the dance? What aspects of the music are important for dancers? Such questions have been regularly, if not frequently, addressed in ethnomusicological and ethnochoreological research over the years, as in the recent volume "Dance, Ritual and Music" (Warszawa 1995)

The interrelations between music and dance are both obvious and obscure. It is obvious that people do dance to music, and that musicians play for dancing. But for many reasons, some which are already mentioned, to proceed further into what interrelations there are, how to describe and analyse them, is a difficult task. A fruitful and productive way to overcome at least some of these difficulties, is to depart from a standpoint where music and dance are seen not as two independent expressive forms, but as parts of a larger and more important analytical level, the event.

In academic discourse, it has since long been customary to treat music and dance as abstract "texts" that can be laid out and analysed as objectively existing items of art. This practice has led to a distinction between the main object of analysis - the text- and the time and place where the music and dance is performed - the context, treated at most as a secondary source of additional and less important information. But this is to turn things upside down. Music and dance is situated performance, therefore the situation, the time and place of performance cannot be overlooked, or ruled out as less important, less interesting. An event is not a mere context, but the text itself, the primary unit of observation and analysis.

Approaching music and dance as situated performance, parts of larger units of human behaviour - events - introduces a perspective that may run contrary to some established academic research practices, but in fact approaches the perspective that musicians and dancers tend to take: the performance perspective. In the 1970s this perspective was developed into a whole theory on expressive forms and aesthetically marked behaviour of different kinds, mainly by American folklorists such as Dell Hymes, Roger Abrahams, Dan Ben Amos and Richard Bauman.¹ Their basic idea was that to start from a story, a piece of music, a dance, and from there approach the situation or context, was to proceed backwards, because oral poetry, music and dance are phenomena which primary forms of existence are communicative processes. With Dell Hymes it is possible to differentiate between behaviour, which is anything people do, conduct, which is behaviour according to social norms and cultural rules, and performance, which is when one or more persons take on a special responsibility for how some behaviour is performed (Hymes 19XX). Performance is a mode of communication that binds actors and audience together by producing a mutual focus not only on what is communicated, but on how. A lot more could be said here about performance theory, but my intent is not to go further into what this perspective on music and dance is, but to give some examples of what it does.

In 1984 I started what came out to be an eighth year long research project among Yugoslavs in Stockholm and in Yugoslavia (Ronström 1992). The idea was to investigate into the role of music and dance in cultural-building among migrants, through detailed ethnographic

¹ Några referenser in här!

fieldwork With taperecorder and videocamera I set off to record all the music and dance I could come by. But soon I found that music and dance as separate, independent activities had little relevance to the people I was to study. What mattered were the weekly dance-evenings, the organised folk music and dance rehearsals, and the Yugoslav "cultural events" where such *folklor* were displayed to an audience. Changing my perspective from that of music and dance as objects, products, to that of events, processes and performances, I soon realised that there was much more to music and dance than simply the tones and steps that I first set off to record.

To start with, at a dance evening - a *zabava* - there were of course the musicians, young professional or semiprofessional singers and instrumentalists of Yugoslav origin, hired to play for dancing. And so they did, from four to six hours, with but a few short breaks. Then there was the paying audience, Yugoslav families from all over Stockholm, coming to dance, sing, drink and eat. And so they did, partly because there actually was not much else they could do. The music was normally so loud that talking had to be reduced to occasional screaming remarks, except of course for the short breaks. The focus was on the dancing of round-dances, such as *kolo*, *vlasko kolo*, a slow dance in 7/8 known in Stockholm as "Makedonija", and a few others. The dancing started early in the evenings and went on to the very last minute.

Apart from musicians and dancers, there were also others, that without actively participating in the dancing or music-making, played a more invisible, but nevertheless very important role. There was the personel, the people responsible for setting up the room, collecting entrance fees, serving food and drink etc. Often they were board members of the arranging associations, or their families and friends. Arranging a *zabava* was not always an easy task, and it soon became clear that there was no reason to exclude the personel from my studies, since they in reality had as much to do with the outcome of the evening as ever the musicians and dancers, and thus also to what music and dance that could be performed.

Another and perhaps even more important part of the audience, that likewise seldom took part actively in the dancing or music-making itself, was the elderly. Among the Yugoslavs dancing was perceived of as a collective phenomenon, which not only concerned the musicians and dancers, but the whole community. The role of the elderly was to represent this community, by carefully watching the dance, listening to the music, commenting upon who dances with whom, who is behaving properly and who is not. Therefor the dancing was not something that could go on in the dark, a concern only of the dancing individuals, as in most other dance events in Sweden. Instead the dancing was done for everybody to see, in full electric light. Only when the band occasionally shifted to "modern Western dance music" the rooms were darkened, as to mark the beginning of something of less interest to others than the dancers themselves.

A tango for two, or a round-dance for four - or more

By shifting focus from 'music and dance' to 'events' it became clear that an important reason for arranging dance-evenings was to actively socialise the young generation, of which the largest part was born and brought up in Sweden, into the Yugo-Swedish community in Stockholm. Important to the older generations were not only that the young could talk their parents language, but also that they could sing their songs, dance their dances, enjoy their foodways. Through the *zabave* the young were introduced to all kinds of behaviour and

conduct important to their parents, from how to eat, talk, and dress, to how to stand, walk, and move. Among the older Yugoslavs young Swedes were often held to be ignorant and sloppy, much due to a somewhat indistinct movement style. To them, "being Yugoslav" in Sweden, among other things meant to walk upright, with distinct, controlled movements. One of the very few sources where such behaviour, marking the important border between "us and" them, could be learnt and internalised, was the dancing.

Thus the *zabave* was not only a tango for two, musicians and dancers, but something like a round-dance for at least four, the personel and the elderly being as important as the other two. At some events there were even yet another part with much influence on the dancing and music-making, but a part more difficult to get grips on. A main horizon against which music and dance could be valued and judged was the "here and now". This horizon is concrete and specific, and foregrounds communication between the people present and thereby reinforces social relations. A good performance, "authentic" if you wish, is one that produces "a good atmosphere" and bring people closer together. But among the Yugoslavs there was often yet another competing horizon against which the performances could be valued and judged, the "there and then", call it "history", "tradition" or simply "the way we always have done it". This is a horizon that foregrounds the general, abstract and absent, stresses the formal and individual. A good, authentic performance is one that carefully reproduces old and highly formalised and legitimised patterns of behaviour, rather irrespective of how they are received in the present. What this horizon allows for is the invitation of all the musicians and dancers of long since bygone times that together created and passed on the performed music and dance, to take place among the present performers, and thereby also to influence and shape their performances.²

Among the Yugoslavs both the "here and now" and the "there and then" horizons were always available. At the *zabave* the "here and now" horizon was the normal. But at any time also the "there and then" could be introduced, thereby changing the focus, mode of interaction, and meaning of the event. At the *folklor* the normal was for both performers and audience to filter their communication through a "there end then"- horizon, outside their direct control, which they called "down there", "our old traditions" or "the Yugoslav way..." But there were also instances when the musicians and dancers started to invest such energy, intensity and competence into their performances that this horizon was moved to the background and the "here and now" became more relevant for how the dancing and music-making was to be interpreted and valued.

What happened when I changed perspective and made the event my main unit of observation and analysis, was that the event became a prism, in which my searchlight could split in several directions: the microlevel of steps and tones; the intermediate level of human relations, interaction patterns; and the macro level of tradition, history, culture and society. At the events all these levels were enacted simultaneously. Now my understanding could approach my informants': it was exactly in this way most musicians and dancers understood what they were doing, not as tones or steps, nor as "culture" or "tradition", but as interaction, communication through certain expressive forms, of which steps and tones, as well as culture and tradition are constitutive parts.

² The argument here is based on Berger & Luckman 1979, Bernstein 1964, and Schutz 1951.

Who follows whom?

A question sometimes discussed among ethnomusicologists and ethnochoreologists is who actually follows whom in a music and dance performance? To such a general question it is always possible to give a general answer. In theory, at least, there are not so many possibilities. Either the dancers follow the musicians, or the musicians follow the dancers, or the both parties in some way or another follow each other, or the musicians and dancers don't interrelate at all.

A quick glance on music and dance traditions throughout the world reveals that all these theoretical possibilities have their empirical counterparts. In most parts of Europe the rule is for the dancers to follow the musicians, as for example in Serbia, where the traditional saying goes "start to dance when you wish, finish when you may" (Mladenovic 1973). In Central Asia and India there are highly developed genres in which the musicians carefully follow the dancers. Setting up my video camera behind the musicians in a Indian Kathak performance and filming over the tabla player's shoulder revealed how the dancer controlled the performance through small and intricate signals to the musicians.

According to Janine Elliott the ideal in English Morris dancing is a complete sympathy between the music and the dance. When this happens "it may be impossible to sort out who is leading and who is following, although both are occurring constantly" (Elliott 1995:187) The same ideal is common also among fans of the traditional Swedish *polska*. Some fiddlers hold that it is impossible to be a good dance musician without being an experienced dancer. In reality though, many traditional fiddlers do not dance very well. My own experience is that a more common attitude among Swedish folk musicians is: "I don't care if and what they dance as long as I can play what I want." Many Swedish folk dancers claim that dance and music has to closely follow each other, but in reality it is usually enough if the musicians can provide a steady beat and good rhythm.

I do not of any genre in which the rule is that there should be no interrelation at all between dance and music. But my guess is that most experienced music and dance researchers know of instances where no other plausible explanation to what is occurring seems possible. The Swedish ethnochoreologist Mats Nilsson, who is currently studying dance life in Gothenburg during the past 60 years, found among some elderly workers a type of dancing called "sailing". This is a kind of waltz, often done to medium tempo fox-trot music, and the fun of it seems to lie in not relating to the beat, rhythm or tempo of the music. But then even such a "anti-relation" is of course a relation, although somewhat unusual and odd.

If the relationship seems easy enough at a general and abstract level, a closer look to any dance music and dance genre when actually practised reveals a much larger complexity. Again performance theory can be helpful, because of the focus it produces on the event as a whole, and on communication between the performers. The interaction between musicians and dancers depend on type of event, arena, style or genre, level of formality and competence. A change in any one of these factors can totally alter the overall communication. As already noted, in Western Europe the rule is for the dancers to follow the music. But when performing informally, the musicians and dancers may interact so closely that it is hard to tell who is following whom. If the level of formality rises, both parties can start to interact with a real or imagined audience, outside the event itself. When folk dances are performed on stage, both the dancers and the musicians can start to reproduce the music and dance as if it was

objectively existing, and as if they themselves were part of a script everybody have to follow. In such cases the role of the musicians is often reduced to a secondary, merely accompanying role, even if the script prescribes the musicians to take a leading role. This gap between what is supposed to and what is actually performed sometimes is so big that an unintentional comical effect is produced.

The music-dance relation can of course change also within one and the same event. Much has to do with who is in focus, who is performing and "where the action is".³ During a fieldtrip to Transsylvania, Rumania, I and some colleagues more or less stumbled into a gypsy wedding in a small village not far from Cluj. After the prescribed ceremonial and ritual music, the band went on with the dance music. The tunes were combined into long sets, up to twenty minutes or more, beginning with a slow couple dance, the *putata*, passing through a number of couple dances in a constantly rising tempo, and finishing off with a *hrtag*, a couple dance in a wild, breathtaking tempo. To begin with, the musicians took the lead. The violinist and the singer alternated as primary focus of attention. The wedding guests obviously were triggered off by the interest from the unexpected extra guests, but even though some of the attention was directed towards the dancers by our video camera, it was clear that it was the musicians that were in charge. But after some time, when the dance couples began to find their feet, they began to increase their intensity, their jumps became higher, their leaps and turns more complicated. Towards the end the focus of the performance had moved from the musicians to the space in between the musicians and the dancers, and at the very end, approaching the absolute maximum tempo, the two performing parts finally merged into one closely interacting unit. After a short break the musicians moved on to the next set of dances, repeating the same scheme over again.

A little later the musicians were asked to play the *fecioresc rar*, a solo dance for men. One by one a number of young men jumped up to dance, directly in front of and facing the musicians. Now it was the dancers who were in charge. The musicians followed the many intricate leaps and jumps very carefully, slightly changing tempo when needed, emphasising accents with beats on the drum etc. After some five or six men (and one woman!) had danced, the band shifted back to the couple dances, thereby again taking the lead.

Much of the answer to who is following whom, has to do with the level of competence and intensity of the performance. An increase of competence and intensity can change the flow of interaction even in one and the same dance. In Stockholm in the mid 80s a Yugoslavian association had invited a gypsy brass band from southern Serbia to perform during a three-day *zabava*, in memory of the legendary Vuk Karadzic. A lot of people attended and the band willingly played whatever traditional and modern dances that was asked for, *kolo*, *cacak*, *cocek*, and many more. They took little if any notice of the dancing that was going on around them, which I later gathered, depended on their discontent with the level of competence among the dancers, of which most were young "Yugo-swedes". But late one of the evenings a young talented male dancer arrived and at once took the lead of the *kolo* round dance. His exquisite dancing immediately made the musicians turn their instruments towards him, and follow his footwork as closely as possible. The increased competence and intensity of the dance performance almost immediately moved the focus from the musicians to the dancers.

³ To paraphrase Ervin Goffman.

Conclusion

Without doubt, music and dance has become more intensively meaningful as expressive forms than ever before, communicating important messages about people, culture and society. Therefore a road to a better understanding of what peoples lives goes through dance and music research. Such research is dependant on detailed ethnography achieved through fieldwork. But it is also dependant on a perspective to music and dance that leaves room for more than just the tones and steps that for so long have occupied music and dance scholars. Since music and dance first of all are situated performances, much of the understanding of what is going on is dependant of an understanding of the event as a main unit of observation and analysis.

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