This is the submitted version of a paper presented at *Pedagogies, Practices and the Future of Folk Music in Higher Education, Thursday 18 - Saturday 20 January 2018*.

Citation for the original published paper:

Is it better to learn from Näcken?: Keynote speech by Susanne Rosenberg, professor in folk singing at Royal College of Music in Stockholm
In: Joshua Dickson (ed.),

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kmh:diva-3271
“Is it better to learn from Näcken?”

Keynote speech by Susanne Rosenberg, professor in folk singing at Royal College of Music in Stockholm

SLIDE 1 - Title

I’m happy to be here at this interesting conference and in this beautiful venue. And I’m honored to have the privilege to hold a keynote at this day that is dedicated to a favorite subject of mine: Teaching and Learning

My name is Susanne Rosenberg and I am a professor in folk singing at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm I’m also head of department of folk music at the same place. And I have been working with teaching folk music at higher educations since the mid 90-ths. When I have listened to all the interesting presentations yesterday at this conference You can’t be other than impressed and a bit proud. Being into the field of folk/trad. music teaching for such a long time, this hasn’t always been the case. But, it seems to me, that we have a momentum. I want to use the title of my keynote “Is it better to learn from Näcken?” as question(s) trying it out during the nearest half hour in connection with today’s subject Teaching and Learning.

Let me first give an explanation to who Näcken is and my question.

1 The title ”Is it better to learn from Näcken” is borrowed from the title of a seminar organized by Swedish Song-archives, where questions of education in folk music were highlighted.
“Is it better to learn from Näcken - Keynote @ PEDAGOGIES, PRACTICES AND THE FUTURE OF FOLK MUSIC IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE  at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow 2018

---

SLIDE 2 – NÄCKEN by Erland Josephson

---

*Näcken* (the Neck in English) is like a bit of dangerous water spirit who plays the fiddle, lives in a stream and if you’ll be able to learn a tune from him you will be the best fiddler ever, but it comes with a prize that you have to give away your soul. In this presentation *Näcken* does stand for a kind of opposite of learning at a higher education!

I want to illustrate this with the following questions:

- What are the basic concepts of a higher education in Folk Music?
- What are the challenges and opportunities in teaching folk /traditional music on higher education?

And I divided my Keynote into these five parts

**The student**

**The teacher**

**The context**

**The qualities**

**The tradition**
The Student

Let’s start with the student. Every day we meet with the student. Arriving in the beginning of their higher education a bit scared but wanting to learn. And from day one they will need to expose themselves to new things. In a new context where they’ll find new challenges that they haven’t meet before. Starting at a higher education means that they have to decide to meet the challenge. It’s a big thing! I remember myself the feeling. The students will meet new people; teachers, musicians, class-mates, perspective and ideas that they haven’t yet experienced. They have made a decision, they have a goal, they are taking some playful risks ready for a reorientation and not really knowing the outcome.
This might be a picture of the student we (as teachers) will meet:

Starting at a higher education might be just like the first time you try out hand standing in the water. It’s a new experience. Half your body over the surface and half your body under it. Feeling both air and water at the same time, feeling the diverse density, and all of this - from an upside-down position. Just like when starting a higher education, you’ll have to: make a decision, have a goal, taking some playful risk ready for a reorientation and not really knowing the outcome. But there might also be fear in connection with you (as a student) starting a higher education. Actually, a study in Ireland showed that the thing new students were most afraid of (when starting a university education) was to become bored. And another fear could be the fear that the education actually will change you, that you might be influenced by it in a way that you cannot control, and then, by this, the risk of losing your personality.

The teachers

Then who are we? The one who teach or lead a higher education?

Some of us might recognize ourselves in the picture I just showed. Some of us might even been going through the same experience, inside or outside of the system of a higher education. Some of us might even learnt from Näcken.

So, we meet – the student and the teacher – at the higher education. But what is the context?

The Context

---

SLIDE 4 – A blank canvas

---

This might be a good way of describing it.

A blank canvas.

The context isn’t given. And this gives us a lot of opportunities and possibilities.

I mean, in many other genres, like in the western classical music, education on higher level has a long history. There is a pedagogic and methodological system since several hundred years ago in higher education. We don’t have that long a history to teach folk/traditional
“Is it better to learn from Näcken - Keynote @ PEDAGOGIES, PRACTICES AND THE FUTURE OF FOLK MUSIC IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE  at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow 2018

music within a higher education system! But (I would argue) that we do have an ever longer history of teaching! But this is outside of the higher education and the teaching methods is based primarily on tacit knowledge. This gives us both opportunities and possibilities to find a path of our own, in how to build the curriculum within the system of a higher education.

At the Royal College of Music (KMH) where I work, jazz and folk were introduced into the higher education system in the late 1970-s. It was a cultural political idea that not only western classical music should be represented at higher music educations.

So, we have this blank canvas, our context to build on.
The student.
The teacher.
The context.

But what should we then teach? I believe it has to start with formulating what we consider to be the qualities?
The Qualities

Communication
Interactivity
Interlinked
Cognition – perception
Social interaction
Interpretation
Orality
Holistic
Presence

And above all presence and the feeling of “now”.

These are the basic concepts of the teaching models and methods that we have developed at KMH for our folk music performance and pedagogical educations: Using methods formulated...
“Is it better to learn from Näcken - Keynote @ PEDAGOGIES, PRACTICES AND THE FUTURE OF FOLK MUSIC IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow 2018

from these central qualities by what could be called a “folk music language” or the “Folk Trad Orality Method”

“Folk Trad Orality Method”

The conceptual ground for the music we play and teach is still the same even if the platform or the context is the higher education:

---

**SLIDE 6 – the folk music language**

---

There is no original - only variants
Tradition implies change and continuity
Tradition requires competence
There is no boundaries between function and art
The individual interpretation is the thing, the musician is in focus not the music as an object.

There is no original - only variants.
Tradition implies change and continuity.
Tradition requires competence.
There are no boundaries between function and art.
And most of all: The individual interpretation is “the thing”, the musician is in focus not the music as an object.
To summarize:

It is about using the concepts that you can find in the tradition, into the setting of higher music education. We as teachers facilitates the learning of the tradition. We can then still use our tacit knowledge on how to play, sing, dance and the experience in meeting with the tradition both personal and in archive as a platform for:

The student
The teacher
The context
The Quality

This *Folk Trad Orality Method* – this learning by ear concept is sometimes questioned by classical teachers, and by ethnomusicologist – that if you learn by ear and mimic it is not possible to be an individual musician. It exactly the same fear than can be said by the students. So now we come to tradition. How can you view tradition?

**The Tradition**

I will try to give some different perspective on tradition within the higher education. Since 1979 we have examined around 200 folk musicians at the Royal Collee of Music (KMH) in Stockholm. I would say that they have all chosen unique pathways through their education and ended up each one of them more unique than they were when they started. Even if this is not obvious from the beginning of their education this is how it ends up.

And this is exactly how it should be. Each and every one of them have to be individually formed musicians so that they can find their way through a tough market of freelance in the folk/ trad genre. So what do we teach? What do we learn?

**The Tradition – a study**

A couple of years ago I started a project with the students. It ended up in a research study. The starting point was the students thoughts that is was a problem to mimic what someone else did because then they didn’t end up enough individual or personal.

*“How can I become an artist – if I sound exactly like you?”*

Is it true that orality methods could be seen as a problem when to develop your own “voice”? That it is a problem that we encourage students to learn from each other and from us? That we
“Is it better to learn from Näcken - Keynote @ PEDAGOGIES, PRACTICES AND THE FUTURE OF FOLK MUSIC IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow 2018

courage them to listen carefully and mimic, so that they learn the genre and details both in terms of technique and stylistic things? Does it make them into folk music broilers? And what is it that you learn through mimicking? Let's examine that, I thought.

I made a rather big study (Rosenberg, 1996-2004, 2009), and here I will just have time to tell about a small part of the interesting results of this study.

I gave the students different tasks. One of them was this:

1. Learn this specific song (xxx) from this recording.
2. Once you've learned it, record yourself as you sing the song.
3. Then teach the song to a student friend (XXX)
4. Then ask this student friend to record the song him/her self without you being present.

Then I asked all of them to give me their recordings of the song, regardless what position they had in this chain of learning. A year passed, and then I asked every one of them to record the song again, separately, and to give me the recording. Let’s listen to what happened during that period of time.

---

**SLIDE 7 Experiment - Recording from experiment**
“Is it better to learn from Näcken - Keynote @ PEDAGOGIES, PRACTICES AND THE FUTURE OF FOLK MUSIC IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow 2018

By listening to these recordings, you understand that when you learn by ear, you really mimic everything: Melody, lyrics, phrasing, intonation, timing, singing style, etc. and you become like a mirror image of the singer you learned from. But it is also very obvious that when time passes, you will make that song your own, with your own interpretation and version, even if you always will keep and hear the "source", behind it, what you have been influenced or inspired by, it will be your own. Time is a very important tool in this. This is for me one perspective of tradition. Let’s take another one.

---

**SLIDE 8 – Jurassic Park poster**

---

**The Tradition – the dinosaurs**

"You can’t undo millions of years of evolution!"

In Steven Spielbergs movie Jurassic Park (1993) there is a scene, right in the beginning, were the paleontologist – who until then has spent his life digging up skeleton of old dinosaurs, get the chance of experiencing a live dinosaur. On the fictive island Isla Nubla, he gets to see these fantastic creatures – the dinosaurs - that is being recreated with the help of modern DNA-technique. How this happened, we should not immerse ourselves in here. In the scene...
the paleontologist’s goes out of his jeep on a big open field and in front of him there is this brachiosaurus alive and kicking. And everything falls into place for Dr. Grant and Dr. Sattler. Things that they before this moment only could have imagine shows to be true, while other things are the very opposite! Dr. Grant says when seeing the Brachiosaurus: “We can call of the theory of cold-blooded. It’s wrong they are warm-blooded!” Dr. Sattler calls out: “They don’t live in swamps, (as we thought), they live in the fields and the neck is eight meters long!” Dr. Grant then discovers, just as he thought: “They are moving in herds – they do move in herds!”

Each time I watch this scene I start crying! It feels like it could have been me, who finally hear the folksinger Ingegerd Gunnarsdottir from the 17th century sing the old ballads that I so far only had seen in transcription, and there and then I suddenly understand everything. All the thoughts I have had about the singing style and the songs from that time. O yes, that’s how it sounded when she started that phrases! Aha, she sang soooo slowly /quickly! Ok, that is the rhythmic timing!

That film-scene in the Jurassic Park is, in transferred sense, for me like being moved back to my predecessors in singing listening to Ingegerd Gunnardotter when she sang her ballads for the King’s attendant 1650.

But. The feeling soon goes away, and the singer Susanne takes over from “paleontologist” Susanne. And as it will appear in the movie, it’s no good idea trying to recreate what has previously been extinct. It is not meant that man and dinosaur should walk on Earth together, or as chaos theorist Dr. Malcolm says another sequence in the film: ”You can't undo millions of years of evolution!”

Tradition - the chain

What the chaos theorist says about evolution could be translated into our folk music world as: “You can’t make hundred years of tradition undone!” It was never meant that I and Ingegerd Gunnarsdotter should meet. Instead me and all the other folk singers today share the same chain where the links naturally follow each other. We are all part of the oral tradition. A
tradition where the individual expression and interpretation is in focus. Songs and tunes travel through time through this individual musicianship. And what we sing today is no less authentic than what Ingegerd sang in 1650, just different. We are all links in the chain.

Tradition – the higher education

So how does the form of higher education contribute to the tradition? How do we contribute to the development and competence of tradition as teachers? Let’s get back to the water in the beginning and use it as yet another metaphor.

Who is in the water?
It’s us – the teachers!

Being in the water means being able to understand first hand and describe the feeling of being in the water - The water being the tradition. Let me elaborate on this metaphor for a while: If
you are in the water, then you would know something of the feeling of being in the water. Density. Temperature. etc. Standing on the shore looking at the people in the water, may give perspective, but it doesn’t tell how it feels to be in the water. It doesn’t tell what the important things of this feeling would be. For a person in the water it is possible, taking this knowledge, evaluating it, weigh in what is most important and how it is best described. Taking the knowledge being in the water into describing it is the thing.

Therefore, it makes all the difference, to be able to formulate important stylistic traits in the music, dancing, singing. To give just one example. In Scandinavian folk music, intonation-praxis (with pitches not found on a piano) is used as a musical means of expression. Quarter-tones. Intonation-praxis, which is a part of a specific tonality. For a long time, "coastal people" have assessed this intonation practice (if they even heard it) as false-singing or that the fingers playing on the fiddle were too thick to be able to intonate correctly. But when in the water, the tradition, you know something about this intonation praxis that gives you opportunity to evaluate, in this case, that the quarter-tones are part of a complex style of music.

Knowing about what is important and what is not, makes the difference between what is important to formulate and teach and what is not. This makes all the difference higher education in folk music can be. We have then the students, we have the teachers (us) – we have the conceptual ground for developing the curriculum (turning tacit knowledge into communicable tools). – But there is one more ingredient. And that is the context itself.

The higher education takes place where there are: Students, teachers, other genres, other opinions, classrooms, practice rooms, teaching rooms, concert-halls, sessions, audiences, class-mates etc.. This wonderful mix of people and possibilities are very important ingredients to why it is important to have higher education in folk music. We meet. We communicate. We play together. We hear new things. And we all contribute to this mix of music, aesthetic choices, methods. We meet We communicate. We form new subcultures. Together. And this is something that is the most important thing. It spurs you to meet others.

So, let’s get back to the original questions:
The original Question

Is it better to learn for Näcken?

Meaning why bother reach for a higher education in Folk Music when you can learn all that from Näcken? And I think that the importance answer for me lies in the importance of us being part of today’s world. That is essential.

The student
The teacher
The context
The qualities
The tradition

Education in folk music is nothing new. The forms we educate are in some parts new and it gives us great possibilities.

"Tradition is not a form to be imitated but the discipline that gives integrity to the new"

Thank you for listening!
“Is it better to learn from Näcken - Keynote @ PEDAGOGIES, PRACTICES AND THE FUTURE OF FOLK MUSIC IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow 2018

References: