"We hear what we know"
- On the power of concepts and how traditional fiddle music in contemporary society may benefit from folk music theory

Keynote Lecture at North Atlantic Fiddle Convention 2021,
University of Limerick 24/6 2021

Sven Ahlbäck, Royal College of Music, Stockholm
Why Folk Music theory?

• Isn’t *folk music theory* an anomaly - theory for a music that has developed without theory

• What is it about? Isn’t music theory common for all musics?

• What do you need it for? You don’t need theory to play folk music

• What is the basis of the concept?

Why do I care?

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Gössa Anders Andersson (1878-1964), Orsa, Dalarna, Sweden with Orsa fiddlers team

"A portrait of Gössa Anders Andersson", Swedish Television 1963

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Something like this…

turns more and more into something like this…

What happens?
*Intonation, Articulation, Vibrato, Accompaniment*

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The power of concepts

We hear what we know!

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Why bother? Music change, so what?

• Expressional qualities

• Expressional potential

• If we take music expression seriously, we must care

• In a multi-stylistic music society, we need to choose ways of expression

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there is no such thing as a conceptual vacuum
Why Folk Music Theory

• Concepts that serve development of musical practice
• Develop musical "language" skills
• Communication
• Sources & Musical literacy
• concepts can be transferred and translated, allowing for new ways of expression: *improvise, interpret, compose, arrange*

• systematic and formulated knowledge gives possibility for other means of expression; freedom of expression, new contexts, ”language skills”

• concepts can be translated and which allows for communication by other means than the music itself

• To see structures can make it easier to learn and consciously change
A long time ago:
Kungliga Musikhögskolan 1979
Fiddlers becoming violin teachers

Terminology is linked to style:
Where are "roll bowing", "snake strokes", "diatt", "jiri-jiri" in the chart?
A long time ago:
Kungliga Musikhögskolan 1981 - Folk music theory starts to find its way into the curriculum

We needed a language/terminology to describe our music

‘Harmony’ becomes ‘tradition knowledge’
Why Folk Music Theory?

Music Theory is there either you want it or not

The quest

Develop theory that serves our musical practice
One tune, two examples

Tonality
Fiddle music: Vallåtspolskan played by Gössa Anders Andersson, Orsa (rec. 1949)

Denna polska har Gössa Anders lärt av sin fader, i det följande benämnd Gössa Anders Andersson d. ä. (Se i övrigt anm. vid n:r 96.)

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Vallåtspolskan audio-to-midi conversion note-by-note

Avvikelse i cent: referens: al liksvävande temp.

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Pitch set - according to audio analysis

duration av respektive tonhöjd (skala om 10 cent) för Vallåtpolska spelad av Gössa Anders

Greater variation of intonation
Intonation categories

With intermediate notes 15-20 cents needed to categorise

max semitone interval ca 120 cent

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"Herding tune mode" in "Vallåtspolskan"

Major or Minor?
- Mode categorization in terms of variable and stable 'scale degrees' rather than major/minor scale

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The “herding tune” mode - basic description

- variable 3rd, 4th and -2, most often all three
- ca 57% of vocal folk music in a large collection “Svenska låtar, Dalarna”, very frequent in herding tunes
- When a sixth is added it is usually high or variable
- When a seventh is added it is usually variable, in-between or low

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Is the variation of intonation arbitrary?
Intonation consistency: Vallåtpolskan played by Gössa Anders Andersson, Orsa, Dalarna

When does the f # appear?
The “43#1” pattern

- A falling second plus third is tuned towards minor 2nd - major 3rd, even if the intonation of variable scale degrees has to be altered in relation to stepwise motion.
‘Assimilation’ of Intonation in Gössa Anders music in the 20th century

Svenska låtar (1921)

Younger local fiddlers (1970s)

Gössa

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‘Assimilation’ of Gössa Anders music

Variable third becomes Minor

Melody and Ornamentation survives

‘Conceptual filtering’

Younger local fiddlers
(1960s-1980s) Olle Moraeus & Nicke Göthe

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One tune, two examples

Meter & Rhythm
What determines what and how we dance in Swedish folk music?

There are many melodies for the same dance: not primarily the notes...

That thing with the time:
*Do we dance in time or in rhythm? - meter and rhythm*
"Rhythm"
the cognition of temporal structure in music

"Rhythm"
gestalt/grouping
figure, phrase, motif melody rhythm...
a gesture - singular
speech
birds

"Meter"
periodicity
pulse, time, period...
continuous - plural
walking, running
the watch

Exists perceptually separately and jointly

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What is absolutely minimum for dancers and fiddlers to identify a tune type?

• Evaluating analysis-by-synthesis
  The "polska" metronome: Tune type generation

  a) pulse - flat sine wave notes
  b) + "roll" accent envelope
  c) + even pulse layering double tempo
  d) + measure period accentuation

"Even polska" - "Slängpolska"

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Vallåtspolskan played by Gössa Anders Andersson, Orsa

from Svenska Låtar
N. Andersson (1921)

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Vallåtspolskan measure 3

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Rhythmical and metrical principal structure

\[ \begin{array}{cccc}
\text{3} & \text{1} & \text{2} & \text{and} \\
\text{and} & & & 3 \\
\end{array} \]

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Notated Asymmetrical Beat
Gössa Anders spel av Vallåtspolskan
Asymmetrical beat notation - Notation of Model/Principle
Not absolute ratios/true subdivision

Alternation between more straight and more asymmetrical measures - generally melody dependent and somewhat typical for Northern Dalarna
Why bother?

• Expressional qualities
• Expressional potential
• Freedom & communication
• Tradition & change in a multi-stylistic society
The Power of Concepts:
We hear and play what we know

Orsa tunes over 100 years…


och vidare…

Väsen (1995)

Development influenced by concepts
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The Power of Concepts:
We hear and play what we know

Transforming style into new tunes, instruments and expressions

Sven Ahlbäck, Royal College of Music, Stockholm
Thank you for listening!
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