POLYPHONIC STRATEGIES IN SWEDISH TRADITIONAL SINGING

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1. Polyphonic singing in the Swedish language

The traditional folk singing, that has been documented in the Swedish language is primarily soloistic, a capella, monophonic singing. This holds for both notations and recordings. Polyphonic singing has only, to our knowledge, been documented in some rare recordings, i.e. the phonograph cylinder recordings from the early 20th century that are addressed in this paper.

There is, however, some historical eye-witness descriptions of what could indicate heterophonic or polyphonic singing in smaller and bigger groups in Sweden; in churches, in religious gathering at home, when working together or on specific gatherings with dancing and singing epic songs (medieval ballads) together.

The collectors of folk singing have traditionally been focused on documenting “songs” as an entity, determined by lyrics and a single melody – ideally in a fixed form, and not so much focusing on the musical context in which the singing appears and how the performance of songs where varied. But even so, some of these eye-witnesses describes how singers vary melodic lines when singing together, which might have resulted in a musical performance in more than one part.

The significant number of descriptions of such, collective singing with melody variation over a long period of time indicates that polyphonic singing has been more frequent historically then what we know of from collections. Just picking a few examples of the eye-witness descriptions of singing together: In 1647 Bishop Laurentius complains about how the community improvises by singing “slower or faster” or by raising and lower their voices and ornamenting the melodies on an individual basis “turning upside down or change the melodies” (Norlind, 1930). In the 1860s a visitor in a church in Värmland county of Sweden wrote: “and the old men and women around me put their individual ornamentation in every note” which make it take quite a long time to sing a whole chorale because of all these individual interpretations. How this singing actually sounded is impossible to know, since it was neither recorded, nor transcribed.

In 1909 Finnish-Swedish folk music collector Otto Andersson documented singers Alfred Lindroos and Johannes Andersson from Stora Pellinge and later wrote:
“When they sang together, they presented proof of polyphonic singing, that in older times gave the songs a strange sound, when some of the singers followed the melody with a second part.” (Andersson, 1922).

However, unlike the earlier descriptions, in this case, we actually do have recordings of their singing and thereby can relate the eye-witness descriptions to the sound of the actual singing performances.

In order to facilitate the process of notating the melodies of the songs, Otto Andersson and others, recorded the singers on phonograph cylinders, that almost by accident has survived until today. The first phonograph recordings with Alfred Lindroos and Johannes Andersson were made in 1909. They are the oldest recordings documenting folk singing in the Swedish language and presents both polyphonic and soloistic singing (Ahlbäck, 2003; Häggman, 1992).

So, what are the typical traits in the polyphonic singing of Alfred Lindroos and Johannes Andersson, when it comes to tonality, polyphonic strategies, singing style and variation?

How does this material compare with other documented songs from the same cultural area and when it comes to tonality and singing style and variation?

Does Lindroos and Andersson represent a unique singular tradition, or is there a connection with other singing from the same folk song culture?

2. Presentation of the material

Lindroos (1859-1938) and Andersson (1864-1916) lived on the island of St Pellinge outside of Borgå, in the Swedish speaking parts in southern Finland. Their documented repertoire can be found in other Swedish-speaking areas (both in Finland and Sweden), but not in the Finnish-speaking parts of Finland. This indicates the cultural connection between Sweden and Finland, which was one country until 1809.

Lindroos and Andersson lived in a local community with a strong singing tradition. The inhabitants of St Pellinge met and sung together by the village-swing on a regular basis, often every weekend.

“The interest in singing had always been strong in Pellinge, for as long as one could remember. On Sunday evenings everybody gathered by the village-swing on the hill, and sung” (Häggman, 1992)

Lindroos was a central figure in these communal singing sessions, considered to be a “great singer” and since he was not married he had time to spend time with the singing and folk song
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traditions throughout his life. There is documentation of his repertoire over a period of 50 years. Johannes Andersson was, as well as a well-known singer, mostly known for being a good fiddler. Otto Andersson recorded Lindroos and Andersson in Helsingfors (Helsinki). From those occasions there are recordings of three songs with polyphonic singing with Andersson and Lindroos, two lyric love songs and one jocular ballad.

The song that will be addressed in this paper is one of the two polyphonic love-songs (Audio example 1), (Lindroos & Andersson, 1909). The song has been transcribed several times e.g. by Otto Andersson (V Folkvisor. Den äldre folkvisan, 1934), and in this analysis I have used a transcription by folk music researcher Sven Ahlbäck (2003) (Example 1). Since the phonograph cylinders, used as an aid for transcription, were in very bad shape when they were transferred to tape in the 1960s the recordings are not easy to analyse. However, despite the recording quality it conveys enough information to transcribe melody, tonality, understanding singing-style enough to provide insight in the polyphonic strategies of the singers. The actual audio-files and the transcriptions made by Ahlbäck are used for this analysis. To understand the repertoire, comparisons with variants of the same songs from other parts of Sweden were made.

“Med ängslan sorg och stort besvär” (“With anxiety, sorrow and much ado”) is a lyric sad love-song that is well-known in the older tradition. The lyrics describes the feeling of untruthful love in terms as: “wild animal in the forest” and is told in first person, ultimately stating “when you have left me I want to die”. Lindroos and Andersson sings two verses, though in the recording the very last phrase is cut before it ends. The song is in A A B A form, giving twelve A-phrases and four B-phrases for analysis.

3. Methods

The theoretical concepts of Ahlbäck, ModAl (1986b) are used as analytic tools to understand the tonality. Ahlbäck uses a method for modal analysis where the pitches in a melodic line are assigned to melodic pitch categories (scale degrees) defined by melodic movement and labelled by the distance from the tonal center (tonic), like church modes or solmisation system, allowing for microtonal deviations, but without assuming octave equivalence (Ahlbäck, 1986b) (Example 2 & 3). Within this concept, a tonality can be described as a set of related melodic pitch categories (scale degrees), where each pitch category can have different intonations extending the chroma, e.g. microtonal alteration of the third scale degree. In Ahlbäcks research different modes typical for older Swedish folk music have been identified. One of the most common and typical is called “herding-call mode” indicating the influence of herding music.
To transcribe the singer’s performance both traditional music notation, as well as Ahlbäck's melodic pitch category notation were used. Methods, developed by the author and others, to describe singing-style have been used (Gjertsen, 1985; Ramsten & Jersild, 1988; Rosenberg, 1986, 1996, 2009a). When describing singing-style many of the most important features are not possible to capture or easily notate with common musical notation, such as variation of vocal quality, articulation/onset-style, styles of ornamentation, correlation between vowels and consonants etc. Besides common notation graphical notation, developed by the author on the basis of ModAl (Ahlbäck, 1986a) is used to compare the versions of the singer’s performances to study melodic variation (Rosenberg, 2009b). Since the quality of the recordings are in such bad condition, audio analysis tools such as Melodyne has not been possible to use. The main strategy has been to try to describe the singing by listening to the recording and through these various methods mentioned above, try to describe the polyphonic style and possible strategies for their singing together.

4. Results

The singing style of the two singers shows features generally found in traditional solo singing in the Swedish language. This means relatively high register for male voice, resting on nasal consonants. Using the specific qualities of the language as a platform for creating different sound qualities in the singing as a way of variation: When singing on the vowel A, and then on the vowel I the difference is apparent the same way as in the spoken language, making a varied sonority in the singing non-equalized, with non-uniform timbre.

The onsets are varied by the both singers, from small precise grace notes to more blurred quasi-tonal, sliding grace notes with no identified pitch-start. The sonority of the singers is in general of a nasal character, with very direct, non-vibrato voice. The two singers can clearly be identified and separated in the recordings although the sound quality is very poor. One of the singers (probably Lindroos, judging from contemporary descriptions of his singing style) has a voice-quality that is a bit harsher and more nasal, while the other singer (Andersson) has a bit clearer voice-quality.

All in all, the singing style shows features much alike traditional solo singing from the Nordic countries. The tonality of the song is related to the “herding call” mode (Example 4). It has a clear tonal center (1) and the pitch categories used includes variation of intonation on the third (3) and the sub-second (-2).
When it comes to the polyphonic style, the singers change roles during their singing with independent melodic lines including ornamentation and microtonality in the polyphonic setting, with phrases often ending on same pitch, in unison.

Variation of melodic lines alters between the singers as well as between verses and phrases. In this notation and melody graph of phrase A the variation both rhythmically and melodic is possible to see (Example 5 & 6).

The melody graph shows that there is no clear division between melody and accompanying voice in the two singer’s interpretation, judging by standard features such as consistent registral position or melodic activity, although Andersson more often sings in a lower register on accompanying notes. It is theoretical possible to separate the versions found in their singing and present them all as “the melody”. As can be seen in the notation and the melody graph, the phrases cross each other on some occasions and they alter between different strategies such as: parallels, drone, counter-movement, canon, unison. Each phrase A ends and start in unison, and phrase B starts and ends on unison or open intervals (fourth, fifth). The rhythmic patterns follow each other quite close, but with ornamentation and grace-notes, pre-beat as well as post-beat, which become a way of creating a dynamic in the singing. The tonality includes microtonality, hence the open intervals dominate, with not so much thirds but more often fourths, fifths, unisons which makes room for this kind of intonation-practice.

Both voices are similar in dynamics, also indicating that there is no conception of “bringing forward” one voice or melodic line over the other. They are both important and you could interpret this that as they don’t favour one melodic line over the other. A timbral ideal where you do not strive for a homogenous sonority is quite obvious. You can clearly identify that there are two singers, in contrast to e.g. Western choir music, the ideal of the singers forming a unity, one instrument, one collective body and timbre.

The song presented here are sung with phrase-wise interpretation, that is, with timing governed by lyrical phrases rather than musical meter. However, there is a general metrical structure underlying the melodic structure and the singer’s interpretation, but the interpretation is freer, and they take time between the phrases. Breathing together, and following each other, and at the same time singing with their own voices. By listening to them, you get the impression that they have been singing together for a long time.

To try to verbalize the polyphonic strategies of the two singers this can be concluded:

• Starting phrases from unison
• Ending phrases in unison or open intervals
• Making small rhythmic variations, which result in big effect e.g. pre-beat v/s after-beat.
• Using microtonality, “ornamental detours” and “transportation-notes” for variation
• Using “less” (e.g. staying on a pitch instead of moving, using drone)
• Using syllable as “base-line” for language sounds
• Changing “roles” in the polyphonic setting
• Singing in parallels: primarily fourth and fifth or unison
• Creating independent melodic phrases with strong linear interpretation
• Using counter-movements

By a limited musical material, with a varied interpretation, the polyphonic outcome is present but secondary.

5. Discussion

What are the strategies of the two singers for singing together? Do they really consider their singing as polyphonic? Or is it a conception of singing their own interpretation together as a natural way of singing, not as a concept of singing in parts? There is no evidence on how they themselves looked upon their practice. It is, however, tempting to suggest that both singers hold in their memory a kind of framework of the melodic idea of “the song” rather than a melodic line with an accompaniment. Suggesting that the singers have a perception of the mode, lyrics and melodic framework, but that the interpretation, the exact version of the song never comes out the same.

If going back to the eyewitnesses quoted in the beginning, they tell about how singers sing their own versions together, but in parallel with one another. It can be characterized as a different concept of “singing together” then what we in the Western culture mean by that today. In an oral tradition the song could be described as a framework rather than something absolute, firm and stable. Going back to the concept that has been pointed out and described by e.g. Bronson in “Mrs Brown and the Ballad” (1969), where he, when describing the singer Mrs Brown states:

\[
\text{What, was it she had carried in her memory? Not a text, but a ballad: a fluid entity soluble in the mind, to be concretely realized at will in words and music. (Bronson, 1969)}
\]

If so, it is as well tempting to conclude that these rare recordings addressed in this paper are rare because this kind of singing with more than one person at the time singing never has been transcribed or recorded but documented in writing by eye witnesses, which may relate to that the endeavour of the collectors of folk songs during the 19th and 20th centuries was mainly to collect the songs separated from their performance, in terms of lyrics and melody. In other cultures, close to
the Scandinavian peninsula, such as the British Isles one can find recorded documentations of collective heterophonic singing in numerous occasions e.g. Gaelic Psalm-singing (Gaelic Psalms from Lewis, 1994). In these recordings you can clearly hear each singer collectively, in a community setting, sing “their own version”, still within the same musical framework, singing the same “song”. Considering the concept of a song, as Bronson suggest, can be looked upon rather as container or a framework for the performance of the song, the action of singing – something that emerges in the act of singing, tonality, formal structure etc. are interpreted each time you sing. From this perspective there might have been more examples of singing the way Lindroos and Andersson present on these phonograph recordings.

To summarize – one could then speculate what would be the “song-frame” that the singers relate to, by presenting a tonal framework and “syllable skeleton” of the song as presented in this example (Example 7).

Remembering that in this primarily oral musical practice the song exists only in the minds of the singers and opens for new creation and interpretation each time they sing. The skeleton melody can be viewed upon as a shared cognitive frame from which the two singers’ polyphonic strategies is expressed in the act of singing. A tacit knowledge not needed to be addressed in any other way but when and by singing it. If so, the possibility of relating to this kind of structures or framework, gives room for a whole lot of versions yet to come: From one singer singing the song, to several singers singing that will be giving heterophonic or polyphonic versions from the concept of “making your own”.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Example 1: Transcription by Sven Ahlbäck of “Med ängslan sorg och stort besvä” sung by Alfred Lindroos & Johannes Andersson. The transcription can also be found on this website together with the recording of the song.
https://my.scorecloud.com/song/4a7a9abe416600ab0e9e8c4fccc5eff0/Sad-lovesong-by-A-Lindroos-J-Andersson

Example 2: Herding call mode, example with G as tonal centre.

Example 3: A graphic representation of Herding call mode.

Example 4: Presentation of the mode of this specific song.

Example 5: Transcription of phrase A. This phrase can also be viewed and listened to on this website: https://my.scorecloud.com/song/58ac6d1154f595dcedab958f70af555/Phrase-A

Example 6: A graphic representation of the within the twelve different phrases A.

Example 7: A graphic representation of a possible skeleton melody /cognitive framework of the song, and the same also transcribed.

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i On this website the transcription can be listened to (with microtonality) as well as the phonographic recording with the two singers Alfred Lindroos and Johannes Andersson.  
https://my.scorecloud.com/song/4a7a9abe416600ab0e9e8c4fccc5eff0/Sad-lovesong-by-A-Lindroos-J-Andersson

ii The lyric presented in this transcription is other than the singers when it comes to verse 2. Verse 1 is the same as the singer present in the recording.
Example 1

\[ j = 80 \]

\[
\text{Med ängslan sorg och stort be-svär jag mig en vi-sa göre}
\]

\[
\text{som gomnas bör hos dig min vän allt till den bleka död}
\]

\[
\text{Gud nåde den som falsker är och har en annan kär}
\]

\[
\text{Den liknar jag vid vilda djur som uti skogen är.}
\]

\[
\text{Din kärlek liknas vid en snö som faller i april}
\]
Example 2

Example 2: Herding call mode, example with G as tonal centre.

Example 3
Example 4

Example 4: Mode in the song.
Example 5

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Example 6
Example 7:
A graphic representation and a transcription of a skeleton melody /cognitive framework of the song.