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## Olof Misgeld

### On Variation and Melodic Improvisation in Swedish Folk Music

As a fiddle player, folk musician and teacher of folk music, my interest in the traditional playing of dance tunes – "låtspel" in Swedish – has continued to grow over the years. My fascination emerged from the basic things: how to learn tunes, to play them and hopefully be able to do it in a traditional but personal and innovative way. But the tunes have been played for generations and cultured and perfected by a long list of musicians. How can a player add something or create something unique within such a framework?

A "låt", a traditional tune, could be described as a melody consisting of musical ideas that have been orally transmitted through a chain of different individuals, and therefore exist in a large number of variants. There is usually no original or final version of a tune and most tunes share features with other closely related tunes in a way that you can't really tell where one tune ends and the next one begin. You could argue with the Danish folklorist Thorkild Knudsen that a tune or melody "kun eksisterer som summen af samtlige varianter" (Knudsen, 1961) – only exists as the sum of all variants. This is a common feature of most oral music traditions in Sweden – and around the world.

Many accounts from players involve stories on how they have changed and varied tunes – sometimes in older times to avoid a competing musician to get hold of it! In spite of that – the tunes that fiddlers like myself learn and play, often come from a very specific source; sometimes from a certain musician and in many cases from one specific recording.

#### Transcription

A method often used for getting into how tunes have previously been played is through transcription. Since notation has

a longer history than recording technology there is an extensive body of folk music transcribed into musical notation that goes back over 400 years. Sometimes notation is used for remembering tunes – but for music that belongs to a living oral tradition detailed notation is usually a tool for description, collection and analysis. A notation is often seen as a representation of how a tune was played once by one specific player – but not necessarily how another player, or even the same player, would play it at another moment in time or place and certainly not as the only correct version of the tune.

To transcribe or notate a piece of music is to translate something sounding into a written language. Thus it involves translating from one medium (recording, live performance) to another (into writing) – but also from a temporal mode (in progress, in the present) to another (static, independent of time) and from one sense (hearing) to another (vision). Walter J. Ong has written in depth about this in his book *Oral and written culture* (1982). The auditory impression of music or judgement by ear differs from the visual impact of sheet music or reading written text. While hearing puts the listener in the centre of an event, reading and writing places the reader outside in a specifically distanced relation.

The translation of sound into writing means to divide something perceived as a whole into parts. To delineate and generalize, to denote certain sounds as belonging to specific musical categories defined by a specific musical discourse and technology (i.e. the technology of notation).

#### Models on meter and tonality in Swedish traditional music

To describe the metrical structure and tonality of older Swedish folk music the

fiddle player, and Professor of folk music Sven Ahlbäck, has suggested models (Ahlbäck, 1995) that I will shortly recapitulate here.

One of the dominant dance tune types of older Swedish folk music is the "polska". References to *polska* in Sweden goes back to the 16th century and since then *polska* has developed into a great number of variants in Sweden. The ways to play a *polska* can differ in meter and groove as well as in tonality, melody and variations on ornamentation, articulation and microtonal intonations.

In order to describe what creates the meter and the specific groove in a certain kind of *polska*, transcriptions of individual tunes might not be enough. Unless you get the context behind the specific you might miss what the scope of the variation is. You need to understand what's behind the specific means of expressions. One way to avoid this is to make a graphic model based on pulse, pulse layering, the marking of pulse in the music and rhythmic patterns and articulation. How is the groove created in the music – how is the meter varied?

A graphical description of the musical pulse and how it is articulated together with a precise rhythmic notation gives a symbolic representation of the groove in a tune.



Figure 1: metrical articulation in *Polska* efter Peckos Per.

The model may look like this (Ahlbäck 1995:16): Below the staff with the transcription of the melody – in this case a *polska* played by the fiddle player Hjorth Anders Olsson (1865–1952) – are two different pulse layers represented by graphic notation. Both layers exist simultaneously and are implemented differently by rhythms and articulations in the melody as two different ways of expressing the meter. By alternately playing on either one of the two pulse layers both are kept alive in the

listener's and the player's consciousness. The aim of a metric model can be to find the key to a "groove" in the tension between different metrical and rhythmic possibilities in a metric context. The tension can lay in how the tune is put into rhythm – one example is to play in between even eighths and triplets. It may be found in the polymetrical layering-like in the *polska* above – or by various pulse markings. Metric groove emerges from challenging and stretching the boundaries of the meter.

The above model of metrical layers represents the underlying context to which the surface – melody – refers. The built-in tension in the model – different possible pulse layers and pulse markings – give way for endless opportunities to create variations by applying the model to tunes in different ways and to alternate between the various layers in the structure.

Another example is from a *polska* with the fiddle player Gössa Anders Andersson (1878–1963) from Orsa in county Dalarna in central Sweden. This is a transcription



Figure 2: *Polska efter Jämt-Olle* representing the asymmetry of the beats.

of one of his *polskas* from a film by the Swedish Radio from the 1960s: In many of Gössa Anders' *polskas* there are asymmetric pulse variations typical for *polska* styles in these parts of Sweden (as in many parts of Norway). This means that

the first beat is sometimes shorter, and the second beat longer – giving the impression of an "early" second beat. The relative duration of the three beats are often close to the ratio 2:4:3 (see also figure 3). Sometimes though there are symmetric measures too - with three equally long pulse beats 1:1:1. In the transcription the time signature 2+4+3/16 is used, but in some measures the note beaming of 3+3+3/16 is used to show when the pulse is symmetric. The relative beat durations are not fixed – but subject to variation of expression. The same phrase can sometimes be played both in

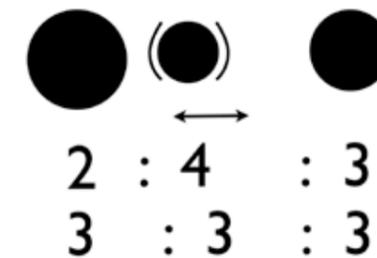


Figure 3: A representation of the general asymmetry of the beats.

a "straight" and "asymmetric" way in the same tune.

#### Microtonal variation

The tonality of the *polska* by Gössa Anders has some typical features of older Swedish folk music. One is the variable intonation and micro intonation of certain scale

degrees. These different intonations are represented in the transcription above. This (figure 4) shows that in Gössa Anders' playing the scale degree represented by "f" has the largest variants of micro intonations – a quartertone between f and f#, a slightly lower f# and an f#. The "g" is also varied by Gössa and the "c" is generally played as a quartertone between c and c#.

If the tonic centre is perceived as "d", the variable scale categories are the mediant (3), the subdominant (4) and the subtonic (-2). This conforms with the tonality of a lot of older Swedish folk music connected to the herding practise – a tonality that by Ahlbäck is referred to as the "Vallåtsmodus" – the mode of the herding music (Ahlbäck, 1995). The mode is found to be typical of herding calls and herding music – vocal as well as played on instruments like cow horns, flutes etc - but also for the older instrumental dance music where the fiddle was the dominant instrument.

The use of micro intonation is an important part of the tonal colour palette in this music. As both notated and recorded material indicates it has been a common and widely spread practice. How different musicians use micro intonation is something that's dependent on and can be indicative of a player's personal style. The same tune played by different players can present different micro intonation variations.

From this I would conclude that a very untraditional way of playing a traditional tune would be to reproduce a previous version by another performer. To actually play in the tradition means to create one's

Figure 4: The scale with the microtonal inflections.



**Polska efter Jämt-Olle**  
transkriberad av Olof Misgeld 2007 efter film med Gössa Anders

Figure 5: Analysis of the opening bars of Polska efter Jämt-Olle.

own variants – in dialogue with the tradition. Music researcher and singer Susanne Rosenberg has studied how songs inevitably change when passed along orally and/or are varied by singers over time (Rosenberg, 2009). In an oral tradition, pieces of music exist only through the people that remember, sing or play them, and are subject to those people's memory and modes of expressions. However, traditional musicians who lack direct contact with living performers from an older tradition often spend a tremendous amount of time trying to learn every detail of older player's versions from recordings – and by that inevitably creating fixed versions of tunes. So the question is how to "unfix" fixed versions of tunes in a more conscious way – in order to paradoxically play in a more traditional way.

#### Improvising on structural frameworks

In this section I will describe a method of melodic improvisation created by Sven Ahlbäck that could be an approach to traditional tunes that moves beyond copying the surface structure of the music. The basic idea of the method is to reduce a melody into a skeletal form consisting of the structurally most important notes of the melody, along with the basic form and phrase structure. The analysis also addresses the tonality including global or local modal shifts. The skeletal form could have different "resolutions" – from modules of single measures to longer sections of the melody. Each module has a structurally

important note as final note – which is represented by a scale degree number. Scale degree numbering is positive above the tonic centre and negative below. -2c means that the tone has an intonation of a quartertone. (-2a would be c# and -2e would be c). The tonic centre (1) is assumed to be d.

The beginning of an analysis of the 'skeletal form' of the Gössa Anders polska could look like this:

The music is here divided into phrase modules and shows the final note and its beat/measure position in each module. This particular form offers two different interpretations of the metrical structure – one that sticks to the three-beat metric structure, and another with two-beat melodic phrases – both being possible interpretations of the skeleton form.

An overview of the entire structure (for simplicity I'm sticking to the three-beat metrical structure) could look like this:

Mode: D – vallåtsmodus (herding call mode in "d")

A  
/ -2c/ 5/ 1/ 2 /  
/ -2c/ 5/ 1/ 2 / (repeat)

B  
/ 1/ -4 / 5/ -4 / 3c/ -4 /  
/ 1/ -4 / 5/ -4 / 3c/ -4 :// (repeat)

Important to note is the role of the 4 (a), the fourth below the tonic, which is to be perceived modally as a second tonic centre – and as such a resting point. The A-part

could be perceived as having a more dominant character by ending on scale degree 2, while the B-part is more conclusive with its movements towards scale degree -4 where the piece also ends (in many recordings of this tune with Gössa Anders though the last note is replaced by a "d" – in the last round only).

The skeletal form can then be "dressed up" with improvised material – new motifs or variations. Like described above, the new material could be variations in the meter or tonality, but it could also be new material: new melodic lines or rhythmical figures. A skeletal form can also serve as base for a piece in a completely different style, type or genre.

By analysing the most common melodic patterns in the tunes and songs of the herding music, "vallåtar", of central Sweden Ahlbäck has put together a collection of common melodic patterns or melodic phrases representing different ways of arriving at different scale degrees. These can be regarded as a vocabulary or a set of building blocks. They can be pinned onto the 'skeleton forms' giving way for smaller variations but also completely independent versions - in the style of the herding music.

Instead of sticking to the learned, fixed version, using this method for improvisation when playing tunes offers the challenge to make variations in the moment that will more or less differ from the original. The more this is practised, the more "un-fixed tunes" will appear, and the more one will find oneself shaping lines over a reduced form instead of delivering a melody predetermined in all its details. More successful variations often stick to – and gradually become variants of – the tune, creating alternative routes of the starting version. The tune transforms from a fixed melodic sequence to a more open form or shape that holds something untouched about it – an open playground.

In addition to the improvisational freedom in shaping the tunes as a soloist, the aim is of course toward greater freedom in the interplay with other musicians and/or dancers, and to have possibility for increased subtleness for musical impulses and communication through the flow of music. Getting into the field of stylistic and idiomatic variations creates a space

for improvisation – but also underlines the notion that playing in the tradition implies rethinking, recreating and creating variations – acknowledging that the music only really exists in the moment it is played!

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