A Tight-rope Walk
Improvising Collectively with End Rhymes in the Style of the Swedish Medieval Ballads

What happens when contemporary folk singers improvise end rhymes in the style of the Swedish medieval ballads? In an ongoing project – Folk Song Lab – folk singers collectively improvised ballads with end rhymes using different methods. How do different improvising methods affect the result? Is it possible to acquire additional skills in rhyming via improvisation? Furthermore – how do the singer’s expertise, the number of participants in a session, and the setting in which improvisation occurs affect the result? Can improvisation sessions promote a higher degree of variation in not only the melody but also the storytelling? These questions are discussed through a presentation of results from two different collective improvising sessions.

Background – What is the Swedish Ballad?

The Swedish medieval ballad is an epic narrative song that is objectively told from a third-person perspective, structured into scenes, and progresses with dramatic dialogue. A ballad is told in strophes, commonly up to twenty or more, and the story evolves from scene to scene by leaping and lingering. Leaping and lingering means giving more attention to some parts of the story by lingering on them while jumping quickly by big leaps through other parts without making any specific transitions.

The strophes are either two or four lines with end rhymes or assonances, with either one returning refrain (omkväde) at the end of each strophe or two returning refrains (omkväden) between the lines in the strophes. The

1 Based on transcribed material, the length of Swedish medieval ballads can vary from three strophes up to hundred, and if extended to the whole Norse hemisphere, up to several hundred strophes.
2 In his article ‘Ballad and Epic’ in the Journal of American Folk-Lore in 1908, W. H. Clawson describes leaping and lingering as the following: ‘The characteristic dwelling of the ballad upon these situations, and its swift passage with scarcely a mark of transition from one to another, impart to the ballad movement a peculiar combination of rapidity and slowness, now first pointed out by Professor Gummere, aptly termed ‘leaping and lingering’ (Clawson 1908).
3 omkväde means sing again since kväda means sing, and om means again.
omkväde can either comment on the context: ‘under the grove so green’, or give clues to the overall narrative: ‘I know the grief is heavy’.

The singer of ballads uses returning expressions or formulas as ornamentations or amplification of expressions. The horse is not merely a horse, instead ‘the grey horse’ and the maiden’s hand is a ‘lily-white hand’. These returning expressions or formulas are frequently used regardless of the story itself. Some formulas might indicate an inherited meaning regarding the status of a person. The ballad singer uses *incremental repetition* or parallelism, in which a line is repeated in a changed context or with minor changes in the repeated part; ‘through the forest’, ‘…the village’, and ‘…over the plains’, or describing three hardships that need to be overcome. The stories told in the ballads are timeless and the melodies often beautiful and ‘strong’.

When listening to older traditional singers performing ballads, a high degree of presence is observable in the singing and storytelling and extensive variation in both the melody and the way the stories are told. This is storytelling through singing, varied in the moment. Other researchers have described this in different ways and from different perspectives (Bronson 1969; Buchan 1997 [1972]; Lord 2000) and Bronson’s quote on the singing of Mrs Brown gives an idea of how this can be described:

> 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: 71.)

This variation – so common in the oral tradition – where a song can potentially differ significantly from one performance to another in every structural aspect and yet still be considered the ‘same’, leads to a conceptualization of a song as something variable and intimately linked to performance, in the act of singing. That is to say, in an oral tradition, a song could be viewed as a cognitive framework that gives room for variation rather than an absolute, firm and stable entity. A fluid entity that could be interpreted as holding the singer’s unified, tacit knowledge of the song.

The singer’s cognitive framework consists of the mode, ways of musical phrasing, lyric formulation style, melodic variations, ornamentation and singing style, rhythmical pattern and narrative style, including rhyming, alliteration, and repetition (Rosenberg 2021). There is no first version of the ballad, only variations, and we can say that the singer is both the interpreter as well as the instant composer of ‘the song’ in the moment. In the singer’s cognitive framework, ‘singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act’ (Lord 2000: 13).

---

4 Parry first introduced the concept of formula as ‘a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea’ (Parry 1930: 80), cited in Lord (2000 [1960]: 30).

5 ‘Incremental repetition, a device used in poetry of the oral tradition, especially English and Scottish ballads, in which a line is repeated in a changed context or with minor changes in the repeated part’. See ‘Incremental repetition’ Encyclopedia Britannica 1999.
Today’s Swedish folk singers often have ballads in their repertoire, and ballads are performed by soloists, folk vocal groups, and folk music ensembles, as well as being used at amateur community dancing gatherings (Åkesson 2007). The ballads are usually learnt by oral transmission from fellow singers or by listening to old traditional recordings or reading transcriptions. Old ballads are easy to find in both print and on CD, as well as through simple archive searches.

Today’s folk singers also vary their ballads. These variations usually involve omitting strophes and refrains in long ballads, altering the melody line, and adding ornamentation. There is a view amongst today’s folk singers that a ballad is often too long for concert performances and should therefore be shortened to avoid boring the listeners.

The practice of varying the melody line could be said to follow the traditional way of singing, where the melody is seen not as having a stable identity, but rather fits a cognitive framework, as mentioned above (Rosenberg 2019). On the other hand, the strategy of excluding strophes and refrains and breaking the habit of end rhymes could, arguably, be said to go against the idea of the ballad, since the incremental repetition and the omkväde gives the ballad a good pace, enabling the listener to grasp the storyline even if their attention varies as they listen. Walter Ong argues that repetition is an essential part of storytelling in an oral tradition, helping the listener to follow the narrative, and rhetorical skills are vital in order to succeed in reaching the listener with the story (Ong 1982). Ong (1982: 40) takes the following view:

Hence the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on track.

Might singers today also be able to use the cognitive framework of the ballad to obtain a freer way of telling the story when it comes to the narrative? Could methods with identified characteristics of the ballad be used as tools when improvising – methods such as returning expression, leaping and lingering, incremental repetition, returning refrain, and the use of end rhymes? Furthermore, might it be possible to sing a story without pre-designated strophes or refrains?

It is well known that improvisatory skills and creativity benefit from the use of returning forms such as a specific tonality, a harmonic sequence, and rhythmic pattern, and that internal tacit knowledge would promote being freer ‘in the moment’ (de Manzano & Ullén 2012; Pinho et al. 2016; de Manzano, Theorell, Harmat & Ullén 2010; Pinho, de Manzano, Fransson & Ullén 2014). This might suggest that tacit knowledge of a cognitive framework and specific characteristics such as the use of end rhymes, incremental repetition, refrain, and returning expression are useful when

---

6 Publication of both phonogram with traditional recordings of medieval ballads and the printed collection Sveriges Medeltida Ballader in seven volumes (Jonsson, Jersild, & Jansson 1983–2001) has made the repertoire very accessible.

https://doi.org/10.21435/sff.25
improvising. Fabb takes the view that there are different cognitive strategies for remembering already created texts: ‘It is possible that this section of text is small enough to be held all at one time in working memory, a type of memory which is limited in capacity, and holds material for a very short time’ (Fabb 2015: 171). Moreover, he continues:

Working memory is divided into subcomponent parts. One part – the phonological loop – is limited by the duration of the spoken text, and I show that this cannot be the part that holds the line as a whole unit. Instead, the line must be held as a whole unit in the modality-independent part called the episodic buffer, which can hold the equivalent of up to fifteen words of English prose. (Fabb 2015: 171.)

This implies that there may be small segments such as returning expressions that could be recalled holistically as complete units into the episodic buffer. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2013) talks about ‘system 1’ and ‘system 2’, the first being fast or intuitive thinking, where you can access your automated skills and tacit knowledge without thinking. The use of ‘system 2’, by contrast, requires one to reflect on the actions while doing them (thinking slow). In this case system 1 is primarily used. This is also consistent with the phonological loop mentioned above, which could consist of small texts such as returning expressions, or text that fills out space between returning expressions. All of this points to the usefulness of a tacit knowledge of the ballad’s cognitive framework for the ability to create in flow.

The Context of the Experiment

In the artistic research project ‘Folk Song Lab’ (Rosenberg 2014, 2019–2021) the participants, either experienced folk singers and folk musicians or experienced singers within other genres, improvise based on the concept of the cognitive framework as described above.

One of the central ideas of Folk Song Lab is to work with oral transmission and not using written material. Instead, a different kind of input is used to stimulate the oral transmission that is inherited in the folk music genre, promoting the singer’s ability to formulate in the moment and keeping the parameter of orality close to the artistic expressions. The primary resources for the methods used in the project are based on the central qualities that can be identified in older folk singing tradition⁷ (Rosenberg, in press).

⁷ Communication: You are always connected with ‘the listener,’ which could be oneself. Interactivity: You need to interact since oral transmission is the main method for learning. Interlinked: The tradition works like a chain, where every person continues and contributes new links to that chain. Cognition – Perception: The cognitive framework creates space for creativity and requires perception skills. Social Interaction: The context is the interaction on a personal level too. Singing. Listening. Learning. Interpretation: Every person creates their own performance of ‘the song.’ The act of singing is ‘the thing.’ Orality: Learning by heart, using oral transmission methods, gives you tacit knowledge to use as a tool.
The group size can vary from two up to forty participants. A session is not interrupted by breaks, and all instructions are shown or sung during the session. In the session, everybody contributes by singing and listening, either by taking turns or improvising simultaneously. Different methods are tested within that temporal space and physical place in an ongoing process.

In earlier experiments, flow-parameters (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) have been used as creative tools for setting up the context for the improvisation sessions consisting of play – risk – mimicry – reorientation – feedback – real-life-performance (Rosenberg 2013). The improvisatory approach in Folk Song Lab has a lot in common with the methods developed within theatrical improvisation (Spolin 1999), although in this case, the methods are developed from a musical point of view.

When improvising ballads, the session starts by establishing a typical ballad rhythm and pulse. Each singer in the circle attempts the task, improvising a strophe, and when the refrain is established, more attention is devoted to creating the narrative, to telling the story, by taking turns, improvising the strophes, possibly with end rhymes, whilst the other singers collectively accompany in the refrain between strophes. An improvisation session of a ballad with end rhymes lasts between twenty and thirty minutes.

Recordings and the participants’ reflections are collected to enable evaluation of the quality of the sessions. The recordings make it possible to transcribe text and melody and analyse the development of the singing over
time. Spoken and written reflections from the participants provide valuable information about the perception of the task, the conception at the level of the difficulties of execution, or the feeling of flow, as well as participants' thoughts about the mission itself.

About forty sessions with improvising ballads have been performed over a timespan of five years in the project Folk Song Lab. Several methods were tested in those sessions. This article presents two sessions that used three different methods.

The first method is called *Storyboard ballads*, where a visual input is used as inspiration when improvising the storyline. The second method is called *Weaving reuse* and is based on the idea of reusing words or rhyme-words from one sung strophe in the next. The third method is called *End rhyme at any cost*.

In both sessions, the singers were encouraged to use returning expressions and strophes where two narrative lines were interspersed with two refrain lines. The rhyme appears at the end of the narrative lines.

*Improvising from a Visual Input – the Storyboard Ballad Method*

In the first session, nine female singers participated, improvising from the storyboard method. Five of the singers were more experienced in ballad singing; all of the participants were skilled in folk singing. This experiment was carried out in 2014 and is one of the earliest sessions using the storyboard method as visual input.

The strophes below were transcribed about fifteen minutes into the session. This was the first time the story had coherent continuity lasting for more than three strophes. On some earlier occasions, narrative and end rhyme appeared but not for long.

These seven improvised strophes with end rhymes appear creative, inventive, with spinning associative twists in the storytelling. Notably, these strophes were started by the most experienced singers, who happened to be sitting beside each other in the circle and who are familiar with the ballad form. In the recording of the session a high level of presence is observable amongst all participants: everyone takes part in the story, even when not singing, and there is a lot of laughter when one singer suggests the dragon.

---

8 The Weaving reuse method could be described as a method that promotes the repetition and reuse of words and expression in more than one strophe, also using incremental repetition, which gives the story a slower pace and weaves the storyline together by intertwining old and new words and expressions. Other words that could be used for this method: crocheting, recycling, lingering reuse, spinning, braiding, linking, ballad recycling, story reuse, chain.

9 The Storyboard ballad method: The singers paint a storyboard with a loose storyline that includes the cast of the story (who), the context (where), and indicate the storyline and the highlights in the story (what). The inspiration could emanate from an existing ballad or narrative or be newly invented. When the storyboard has been chosen it is placed within the session circle, providing fuel for the singing to begin.
A Tight-rope Walk

would also like to have a coffee machine. In the rest of the improvisation session, which lasted for twenty-two minutes, some coherent narratives with end rhymes appeared, but not for more than three strophes in a row (illustration 3).

In the second session, in 2019, four professional female folk singers improvised a narrative with end rhymes for twenty-five minutes. The singers used the cognitive framework of a melody already known to the singers beforehand. The storyline was improvised without specific input. Instead, two other methods were used: Weaving reuse and End rhyme at any cost.

The Weaving reuse method involves the use of returning expression and incremental repetition – using words or scenes that have just been heard and repeating or slightly altering them in the next strophe, adding a lingering slowness to the storytelling. The End rhyme at any cost method involves rhyming on the end word in the first sentence even if it does not fit correctly into the meaning – in other words, prioritizing end rhyme over narrative. Below are some of the transcribed strophes.

The story in the second session starts by reflecting on the task itself: improvising and rhyming. Then the story continues onward, sailing across the sea and ending up on an island, after which the improvising returns to the difficulty of the task of rhyming, and finally ends up in a long story about a troll (giant) in the mountain and a mission to kill it and steal 'the ring'.

Illustration 2. A ballad storyboard showing a storyline created by one of the singers in what is referred to as the first session (Jürventaus 2014).
Illustration 3. An excerpt of seven strophes with improvised end rhymes. The end rhymes are underlined in Swedish. Transcribed from fifteen minutes into the session with nine singers. A different singer sings each strophe. On the right is a rough translation into English, to make it possible to follow the storyline.

Ja draken känner sig stor och sliten
Uti gröna lunden
Han vill vara jätteliten
Uti gröna lunden

Och bära sitt hus på axlarna små
Uti gröna lunden
Med vita knutar och körsbärsså
Uti gröna lunden

"Jag vill också ha en kaffemaskin"
Uti gröna lunden
"Att bära runt i mitt skal så fin"
Uti gröna lunden

Å draken han söker upp en häxa
Uti gröna lunden
"Jag vill inte växa"
Uti gröna lunden

"Se där, se där jag har en liljerot"
Uti gröna lunden
"Den ska du smörja på din stora fot"
Uti gröna lunden

"För om du vill bli liten så ska du det få"
Uti gröna lunden
"Så ska du va glad och må"
Uti gröna lunden

Å liljeroten han smörjde på
Uti gröna lunden
och vips blev han så liten som en liten lilltå
Uti gröna lunden

The dragon feels big and worn out
In the green grove
He wants to be tiny
In the green grove
And carry his house on his shoulders small
In the green grove
With white knots and cherry blossoms "berså"
In the green grove
"I also want a coffee machine"
In the green grove
"To carry around in my shell so nicely"
In the green grove
And the dragon seeks out a witch
In the green grove
"I don’t want to grow"
In the green grove
"See there, see where I have a lily root"
In the green grove
"That you should anoint on your big foot"
In the green grove
"If you want to be small, so be it."
In the green grove
"Then you will be happy"
In the green grove
And he anointed with the lily root
In the green grove
And immediately, he became small as a small pinkie-toe
In the green grove

https://doi.org/10.21435/sff.25
Vi sitter och sjunger i vårat gång
Det blir rätt så bra och fint litet sväng

Ja alla vi sjunger ju refräng
Men inte så ska vi nu gå i sjäng

Det här det är ett jätteskönt häng
Det är också så att det kanske blir ett sväng

Ett sväng är just vad vi vill ha
Jag tycker det gungar ganska bra

Det gungar som skeppet, det gungar på hay
Å skeppet det seglar nu inte i kvav

Nej skeppet det seglar till främmande land
Och där kan jag finna en annan man

Det gungar härligt med en så’n vind
Det blåser salta stänk mot min kind

Så kanske vi alla ska segla ut
Så kanske vi kommer att få ett skjut

Vem kan veta vad som händer där
Vi kanske kan hitta någon kär

Ja, oj vilka underbara idéer
Vi kanske är några lycko-feer

Ja man kan undra vad man finner där
Det kanske finns flera man kan hålla kär

Att äkta flera det tror jag på
Man kanske kan få åtminstone två

Ja, mister du en står det flera igen
För pojkarnas ord de är svåra igen

Ja ofta vi sjunger om ungersven
Men vem vill ha en när man kan få många igen

Ja, Sven o Sven det är en härlig vän
Han kanske vi också känner igen

Att kopiera den som är bra
Det tror jag nog att jag vill ha

We sit and sing in our “gang”
It creates a pretty good and nice little “swing”

Yes, all of us are singing the refrain
If not, we should now go to bed

This is a really lovely “hang out”
It is also the case that I may be a “swing”

A “swing” is precisely what we want
I think it sways pretty good

It sways like the ship. It sways on the sea
The ship is sailing and does not sink

No, the ship it sails to a foreign land
And there I can find another man

It rocks wonderfully with such a wind
it blows salty splashes against my cheek

So maybe we’re all going to sail out
So maybe we will all get ”laid”

Who knows what’s going to happen there
Maybe we can find someone to love

Yes, oops, what wonderful ideas
maybe we are some lucky-fairies

Yes, you can wonder what you would find there
there may be many more that you can love

To marry many that I believe in
You may be able to get at least two

Yes, If you lose one, there are several again
For the boys’ words, they are difficult again

Yes, often we sing about “young man” [young Sven]
But who wants one when you can get many again

Yes, Sven, oh Sven, that is a lovely friend
Maybe we will all recognize him

To copy who is good
I think that’s probably what I want

Illustration 4. An excerpt of sixteen strophes with improvised end rhymes. The end rhymes are underlined. Transcribed from five minutes into a twenty-five-minute-long session with four singers. The four singers alternate between the strophes in the same order. On the right is a rough translation into English to make it possible to follow the storyline.
Results

After a session in Folk Song Lab, the participants reflect both orally and by writing down their thoughts. These reflections lead to the observation that the task of improvising with end rhyme is quite demanding, especially when improvising the narrative and rhyme at the same time, and that this could be too great a challenge even for an experienced singer. However, using a known melody and form with returning refrain can be considered as a restriction that helps. This gives the singer space to focus on improvising narrative, with the refrain offering a point of rest for the singer.

The Time Span

In a session, the participants act as both singers and listeners, and it is evident that it takes some time for the participants to become creative when performing the task. In both these cases, it is notable that successful use of narrative with end rhyme is more prominent after a while. In the first session, it took almost fifteen minutes before any coherent inter-participant storytelling appeared, while in the second experiment, it only took five minutes for a story to evolve. A session is a collective creation, and one might suspect that the participants need a couple of rounds of the circle to become familiar with the other participants and establish communication. Regarding this aspect, it is notable that it took around three minutes to complete a circle in the first session, while in the second it took only one minute. One might suspect that this also contributes to the result, as the singers have more opportunities to improvise when there are fewer participants.

Furthermore, the singers in the second session knew each other beforehand and are used to singing together, whereas the singers in the first session did not know each other so well. To conclude, when improvising ballads, an introductory period is also needed to get into the singing, which – in these experiments – took at least five minutes. A time span of about 25 minutes is preferred for the whole session since the most exciting narratives seem to appear after a while. When there are fewer singers there are more opportunities to improvise, which might be a good thing.

In these two cases, the group sizes varied between nine and four singers. Unsurprisingly, the session involving four skilled singers resulted in a story that was more coherent overall and constantly used end rhymes.

Improvising in First or Third Person Perspective

The perspective of the storytelling was not stipulated in the instructions for either of these two sessions; even so, it was different in each case. In the first session, the singers used dialogue and third-person perspective throughout the session. In the second session, with four singers, the story was told mainly from the first-person perspective – the singer’s own voice – and also including singing about ‘us’ as a collective but never used the

10 This is also an observation that applies to other sessions when improvising in the style of the ballad.
11 This was also observed in other sessions when improvising ballad singing.
third-person perspective. This difference might reflect an effect of the use of a ballad storyboard, which may be a more effective method of nudging the singers into the third-person perspective, and seeing the story as something outside of themselves, from a storyteller’s point of view.

**Improvising the Story**

Both sessions used scenes and dialogue as a way to move the story forward. In the first session, the singers kept to the story in the painting; even with detours, the ‘cast’, (girl, boy, dragon), was used throughout the session. In the second session, the four singers start by reflecting on the task itself: improvising and rhyming. Next the story evolves, travelling by ship across the sea and ending up on an island, then returns to the task of rhyming and concludes with a long story about a troll (giant) in the mountain, and a mission to kill it and steal ‘the ring’.

When using the visual input, as in the first session, the story always returned to the painted ballad storyboard. It seemed to create a middle point and an important focal point in the storytelling. The focus in the singing lay in using the painted story creatively, and the storyboard was also something to turn back to when creativity waned.

However, creating the rhyme and the story seemed to be a collective and intuitive process. When the storyline was presented to the singers in the second session at a later stage they could not identify who had improvised which strophe. The story could therefore be considered a truly collaborative creation, and not primarily as a collection of individual contributions.

**Improvising End Rhyme**

As mentioned above, the use of the End rhyme at any cost method nudged the singers in the second session into using and reusing rhyme words in a creative way throughout the story they created. Some words that are easy to rhyme seemed to lead the way throughout the session.

When the singers are left to find the story on their own, with the narrative taking its own direction off the top of the singers’ head, end-rhyming can offer more focus. The rhyming is placed at the centre of the singers’ attention, and the story emerges from the rhyme pairs that appeared.

In her research on the cognitive process of improvisation, Venla Sykäri cites the following possibilities for improvised composition of a couplet with end rhyme:

(a) The performer formulates the second line in advance and adds the first line while performing.
(b) The performer selects two (or several) rhyme words and formulates the clauses (or a series of clauses) that end with those words.
(c) The performer selects the first rhyme word, starts creating a clause ending with that word, and when performing the verse line, he or she determines the second rhyme and then creates the second line.

(Sykäri 2017: 146)
In the present case, alternative c would be the most plausible action, since all were experienced singers and improvisers, but they were not yet fluent in the oral composition to the degree that they could systematically think up the second line before the first line. When including the method Weaving reuse the singers had to give attention to what happens before they themselves improvise; this gives an opportunity to use and reuse rhyme words from the verse they just heard. It can be suspected that this could give a more alert attention to the rhyme words and the way they could be used again. Still, no indication could be found in the reflections of this being a deliberate strategy.

In the first session, end-rhyming did not receive as much attention; instead, it was relegated to the ‘backseat’ in the storytelling process. On the other hand, when it appeared successfully, it drew a lot of attention.

It is notable that some words are more prominently used and reused in the second session, and often they are more general words that can be useful without jeopardising the storyline. The Swedish language has a relatively large number of words with multiple meanings. This is very useful when rhyming. Just as an example, the word gång can mean both time, point, once again, occasion, walk, and the word man is both a preposition and a ‘male.’ The end rhyme words are plotted in the word cloud below, with size reflecting frequency of occurrence. Where words are larger, they have been used many times. Some word-pairs are used more often: sjunga : tunga [sing : tongue] / sång : gång [a song: (ambiguous term, see above)]. The use of the end rhymes in this second session appeared to be very innovative, and end rhymes were reused in a creative way – at several points the participants used the double meaning of the word as an extra challenge. The End rhyme at any cost method did affect the focus of the session, and in the ninety-six strophes that were improvised, there were only a few rare occasions when a singer failed to rhyme.

As mentioned above, the storyline was affected by the End rhyme at any cost method: Some quite odd turns in the story appeared when the singers had to find a suitable rhyme-word that might lead the story in a new direction. It seemed useful for the singers to use the same rhyme-word in the next strophe – instead of inventing a new one, they could use/rest on that one and apply their creativity to the narrative development.

**Improvising with the Weaving Reuse Method**

Although only the singers in the second session were instructed to use the Weaving reuse method, which emphasises the use of incremental repetition and returning expression, this method was actually used a lot in both sessions. Building a story with the Weaving reuse method appears to be part of the tacit knowledge of what a ballad is. Moreover, one might suspect that when singers are improvising just one strophe each, it is good to repeat and alter parts from strophe the singer heard last. There is a difference between the two groups, in that the four singers applied the Weaving reuse method to a much greater extent, probably influenced by the instruction, which encouraged them to focus on it. The singers ‘dared’ to stay in scenes a bit longer by using incremental repetition, thereby giving the story a richness
through variation. Returning expression also appeared in both sessions, although it was more prominent in the second.

**The Refrain**

In both these sessions, the refrain seems to help in the task of improvisation, providing an opportunity to catch up in the story, and giving the current singer breathing space. The alternating role as lead singer and chorus singer keeps everybody occupied all the time and may keep the singer in flow.

**Discussion**

The more the singer has tacit knowledge about the holistic part of a ballad’s cognitive framework, the more focus there will be on creating, improvising, and listening. When improvising, it is an advantage to be familiar with the features included in the cognitive framework: the tonality, the use of incremental repetition, returning expressions, refrain, and end rhymes.

The different methods promote a different focus when improvising, as shown by the results. However, all the methods used in Folk Song Lab are deliberately designed primarily to stimulate challenging aspects such as rapid thinking and automated skills. The singers use their tacit knowledge when improvising and at the same time push the boundaries of their ability using the flow-tools, thereby promoting learning new skills that may increase their ability. The sessions are carried out in a real-life situation, very close to a performance set-up, and train skills in creating new ballads on the spot.

These skills may then become more automated, in line with Pinho et al.’s findings about improvising pianists: ‘the greater functional connectivity seen in experienced improvisers may reflect a more efficient exchange of
information within associative networks of importance for musical creativity’ (Pinho et al. 2016). This implies that access to the associative network in the brain is essential when improvising more freely. ‘These results indicate that even neural mechanisms involved in creative behaviours, which require a flexible online generation of novel and meaningful output, can be automated by training’ (Pinho et al. 2016).

Participants in the sessions show signs of having experiences that are typical for a person in flow and using flow-parameters: the feeling of being in the present and forgetting time. However, participants also comment that it is hard, and they experience no flow, when improvising narrative with end rhymes at the same time. In addition to this, they improvised the melody in the first example, which made their task even more difficult. It seems as if, to a much greater extent than when improvising only the melodies, singers improvising narrative and end rhymes also need to access ‘system 2’. This is the system where simultaneous reflection is necessary during the action, requiring slow thinking, and the use of categories and analytical thinking. At the same time, the act of improvising may simultaneously limit the possibility of thinking slowly, resulting in frustration and an absence of flow. The optimal challenge needs to be found.

Improvising collectively in sessions is an act that resembles a tight-rope walk: keeping your balance while moving forward and not thinking of anything else while you do it. Even the more experienced singers will find it difficult to be in the moment and be creative when there is too much to do because they must improvise narrative and end rhyme, sometimes even the melody, all at the same time. To exclude one parameter, such as improvising the melody, makes the task more easy to fulfil.

One participant reflects that ‘[a]s usual, rhyming with a pulse is difficult and a bit demanding. It requires a lot of concentration, needs to evolve more.’ Another one thinks that it is ‘[a] challenge to sing [improvise] and rhyme with a beat’. Moreover, one participant makes this short comment: ‘rhyming is hard.’ There are, however, indications that when skills and challenges are met in a (holistic) action of improvising, new skills are obtained – which is consistent with the findings by Pinho et al. mentioned above.

Some participants in these sessions commented that when they do not achieve flow they experience fear of failure, and that in turn prevents them from creating whole-heartedly, and being in the moment, suggesting that the challenge might be too great. On the other hand, one comment also indicates that this balancing act between failure and great accomplishment stimulates and trains one’s ability, leading instead to great success. ‘Fun with rhythm and rhyme improvisation, it is nice to laugh’. One other singer reflected:

It is always challenging with rhyming, this time with the ballad form, where we had a little more time to think during refrains. Perhaps it was easier to try to listen and repeat what someone else did [before] – a challenge to try to put together a coherent story. We undertake our own exercises!

12 All quotations from the collected reflections presented are translated by the author.
Another singer noted:

Today was perhaps the first time that the rhyming worked [for me]. Usually feels more complicated, in our previous experiments. Maybe it was also easier now because the melody was so familiar [...]. Or maybe it is a bit more familiar now after our previous attempts, how to pick up a thread from the previous verse. I heard good rhyme words from others that I thought I could 'spin on', but when it was my turn, new rhyming words popped up instead, [because] the story had been moving forward, or just got some new input, becoming something new.

As said before, the aim of the Folk Song Lab sessions is to promote and provide space for the singers’ creativity in a collaborative setting without using any written instruction but instead presenting different methods of collective folk song improvisation 'by doing', through practice and participation. Furthermore, one important perspective is that these sessions include several singers, all with different types and levels of expertise. This promotes a learning experience for all participants in a session. Learning by listening and intuitively improvising in sessions may lead to the acquisition of new skills in the use of returning expression, incremental repetition, leaping and lingering, and end rhyme, if these elements are stipulated as conditions or rules for the session. The participants challenge and give each other inspiration and ideas to create the story together and invent rhyme words.

This study shows that it is possible, in a collaborative setting, to improvise narrative with typical features of the Swedish medieval ballad such as refrain and end rhyme, while using incremental repetition and returning expression. The contemporary folk singers participated in a challenging real-life collective setting both as improvising soloists and listeners, learning by example from the others. The expertise of the singers affected the outcome of the sessions, resulting in coherent stories and more use of end rhymes by the experienced singers. By nudging the singers towards a specific focus, through methods such as Storyboard ballad, Weaving reuse and End rhyme at any cost slightly different results were obtained, and the participants may learn new skills that could be automated in the future and used more freely in subsequent sessions. It can be observed that the focus on using flow-parameters promotes the intuitive, tacit knowledge of the singer, which can in turn result in a collective flow experience. This may be an alternative way of performing a ballad, where it is considered as a fluid entity that must be invented from the cognitive framework every time it is performed. Focusing on ballad singing as an improvisatory action promotes storytelling by singing that is varied in the moment.

References

Sources


https://doi.org/10.21435/sff.25

Bibliography