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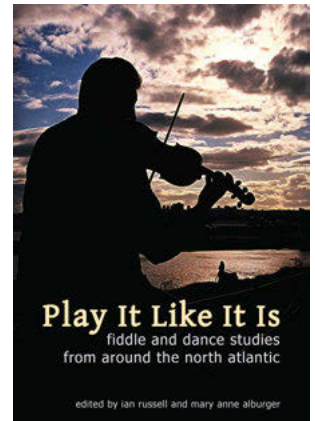
Play It Like It Is

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

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From Swedish folk music to world music: Johan Hedin's transition from keyed fiddle player to modern composer

JAN LING

Folk music in Sweden has been considered as art music since early in the twentieth century. But the first organized folk music concerts had already taken place at the Stockholm Musical Academy in the nineteenth century in the presence of the king and his family. One folk tune, with a newly-written Nordic patriotic text written by the organizer of the concerts, Richard Dybeck (1811-1877), was performed by Dybeck. Later this hymn '*Du gamla du fria*' became the Swedish National anthem, an example of the nationalistic ideology behind folk music at that time.

By the beginning of the twentieth century another justification for folk music beside patriotism appeared: that of preservation. In this, the aesthetically valuable instrumental folk music from the rich flora of tradition must be separated from the 'dubious' new fiddle music, and given to the coming generation of fiddlers as a traditional heritage from the past. However, Swedish vocal folk music was collected generally without such intentions. Instead, the goal was more or less aligned with modern anthropological thinking: to preserve all the songs a singer had in his or her repertoire.

The fiddlers' aesthetic level, however, was controlled by yearly competitions with prizes, and later with special fiddlers' awards in bronze, silver, and gold. The singers were not subjected to such official control, since they were not considered to be carriers of a national heritage. The ideological framework around this new fiddle-based culture was far removed from the framework of the original farming society. It was created by the upper class and cultivated by the middle class: the vicar, the school teacher, and so on. The middle-class intellectuals wanted to establish a national feeling not only with the help of fiddlers' music but also with dances, national costume, and old (or newly invented) ceremonies. As a result, the Swedish flag became a very important symbol in folk music festivals, and the Swedish church was always visited in connection with fiddlers' competitions. This national movement wanted to protect the country folk, especially the farmers, from the new, dangerous industrialized urban societies and to preserve traditionally orientated activities, among them the fiddlers' music. A consequence of this ideology was that

the fiddlers, originally individual players, were organized into chamber music or orchestral groups so that they could fit into concert or mass media structures.

Supporting this is the important documentation of folk music by Swedish Radio and the Swedish Song Archive from the 1950s through to the 1970s, when they tried to save the remaining traditions which were outside of, and unconnected to, the different forms of revival. According to the new trends, folk music was evaluated theoretically in order to understand and present its social function, but was more usually preserved according to the new aesthetic ambitions. Mass media played a very important role in different ways, since 'the tradition' was now spread with the help of phonographs, radio, and, later, television programmes.

Today, folk music has become part of higher music education, and it is possible to become a professor in keyed fiddle playing, something which was considered to be a bad joke only thirty years ago! Record companies, other organisations, and artists came together to provide an overview of Swedish folk music that shows musical styles and performances of the highest level, representative of a new multicultural Sweden, for example *FolkNetSweden och Rikskonserter*, a joint venture between seven independent Swedish record labels, has produced a series of boxed CDs under the title Folk Acts Sweden. This new movement was started at the end the 1960s by a generation of singers and players inspired by the 'flower power' movement, political trends (most of them left wing), and other attempts to change society to something better. Organized folk music festivals, especially the Falu folk music festival which presented folk music from different parts of the world alongside mixtures of folk music and popular music, were very influential in creating this new musical consciousness.

When, in 1967, I wrote my thesis about the keyed fiddle (the *nyckelharpa*), I thought the instrument was in its last, dying, stage.¹ But I was totally wrong. Instead of dying, it was an instrument born anew, one which would become a very important musical tool in the coming new wave of folk music. After more than thirty years working in other fields, I went back to my old interest, the keyed fiddle, to see what had happened to it. I chose a young fiddler for my case study, Johan Hedin (b. 1969), who learned to play the keyed fiddle as a child, and whose musical roots can be traced to two branches of Swedish folk music: the keyed fiddle tradition from Uppland, Eastern Sweden, and the fiddle tradition from Småland and Dalecarlia, provinces in the south and the middle of Sweden.

The keyed fiddle

The keyed fiddle has a very characteristic sound which has to do with its construction and the traditional playing technique with very marked attacks with the bow on the beats, important and characteristic of the special type of dances in question. On the keyed fiddle you can play your melody with a drone or what are called 'double-notes', that is, accompanying intervals usually at the third, the sixth or the octave, intervals which are also the most commonly used in parallel motion by an accompanying second or third instrument.

The harmony is strictly tonal, with a clear emphasis on the triads. The majority of the Swedish fiddle tradition is based on the musical styles of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century art music. The intervallic structure, the period building, the use of the rondo and small sonata forms, sequence building, and so on, all are associated with styles from what is called the baroque era. Many of the melodies can also be traced to this period, perhaps one of the most creative in the documented Swedish folk music tradition. There were certainly earlier music traditions which disappeared before they were written down, and there are also later traditions which were not documented because the collectors were not interested in what they considered as 'degenerate' folk music. Thus, the collectors played a very important role in the future of traditional Swedish folk music, presenting it as being as classical as symphonic and operatic music.

What has Johan Hedin made of this tradition? One of his early compositions, for example, is 'Dad's *Polska*', a birthday present for his father's fiftieth birthday. The *polska* follows the traditional model. It is in ABA form, built up through small micro motifs and longer scale figures, all in sequences. The bowing techniques are the same, but the accents are more profiled than those traditionally played. The *polska* is written in series of eight notes, groups of 2-4-3, alternated with a 3-3-3, which give a very varied rhythmical structure, with the bow giving the strongest accent to the first eighth note of the second beat. Johan also used the cello as the bass line, something very unorthodox. This indicates that Johan is beginning to break with tradition, which he emphasizes by heavily accenting the special *polska* rhythm and the accompanying figures' third and sixth notes.

In an early waltz, 'The Eagle', Johan both keeps *and* breaks with tradition. The introduction is long, far removed from the traditional waltz. But when the waltz begins, he emphasizes the hemiolic structure, which is also found in the tradition, but not as consciously used and emphasized as in Johan's interpretation.

Johan's life changed dramatically when he and one of his friends were busking on the streets in Paris, and a music manager from EMI happened to hear them. He became interested in Johan's instrument, and his playing, and immediately engaged him to play in a band, backing a singer, seventeen-year-old Milla Jovovich, a well-known fashion model and film star. Johan moved to London, where he arranged the music for Milla's band, and then toured with her in the United States, playing live concerts, and performing on radio and television.

Johan began using the keyed fiddle in quite new ways, playing fills, intros, rhythmic accompaniments, and ostinato (repeated figures of slow 'pads' under the melody). As I understand it, the music can be considered as a kind of musical mainstream, in the typical 1970s American song tradition, flavoured with country, bluegrass, and some rhythm and blues sounds. The music is not dissimilar to some English and Irish song styles connected with Swedish song tradition, inspired by Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan. Johan had assimilated and created a new musical language which became a basis for all kinds of folk music, including so called 'world music'.

When Johan returned to Sweden after the period in the States, he tried different kinds of musical education. He made contact with different groups of musicians outside of school. For example, he played for a long time with an early music ensemble in one of the alternative-living societies which grew up in Sweden in the 1960s and 70s, and this became more important to him than the traditional education. Many traces from his time with the group are found in Johan's compositions even today.

When he later got a place at the Music School in Stockholm, where he met teachers who were specialists in folk music, and composers who let him develop his own musical style, he really began to learn from others. For example, in 1998 Johan produced a record together with Harald Petterson of Stockholm. Johan plays sopranina, soprano, and tenor keyed fiddles, the old type of keyed fiddle called *moraharpa*, fiddle, *mbira*, and kettle drum, while Harald plays the bagpipe, hurdy-gurdy, willow flute, shepherd's flute, accordion, *mbira* and the Finnish bowed harp. They invite the listener into what they called: 'a wide landscape of music, using ancient instruments from the north of Europe' (see below, '*Triptyk*').² The composition represents something of the loneliness which even now is characteristic for parts of Scandinavia: we hear typical sounds from the forest, speech with echoes from a distance, a small suggestive ostinato motif, and a bordun playing. If we consider this as the basic soundscape, we can now follow how Johan paints the soundscape in different musical colours.

Although Johan can take steps back into the tradition, he prefers to connect his music with influences from jazz or classical chamber music, for example. This occurs in '*Triptyk*', where he uses a very well known Dalecarlia tune, which he treats very traditionally in playing-style and with accompanying second and third parts at intervals of thirds and sixths. But the tempo is very slow, which gives the tune a new character and allows a new way of hearing it. The title, '*Triptyk*', refers to the three instruments – fiddle, *nyckelharpa*, and saxophone – which each give their special interpretation of the borrowed tune. Another tune, 'The Land of Gods in the Woods (Trägudar's Land)', comes from the title of a well known novel by Swedish writer Jan Fridegård. The novel is about Sweden during the Stone Age, and much of the rhythmic structure and the ostinato figures in the instruments are influenced by the novel's atmosphere, as well as having connections with modern Irish folk music, which has been popular in Sweden since the 1970s.

In Johan's '*Diarium Spirituale*', he uses a new compositional technique, a sweet melody splintered into very short figures which break in free combinations, producing hard dissonances that clash, but end in unison cadences. Johan is leaving the traditional soundscape for something new.

The band which Johan worked with at the beginning of this century is Bazar Blue. His old friend, bass player, and singer Björn Meyer is a member, and also Fredrik Gille, who plays *cajon*, *udu*, *tablas*, *ghatan*, *framdreum*, *darbouke*, *kanjira*, *bendir*, *kaimba*, and many other percussion instruments, and also sings. Johan describes the creative process when they produce a record:

When I write for B[azar B[lue] I think of what they can and what they could learn, much out of my spontaneous intuition. Mostly I teach them the melody in the first place so I can correct where I find they must play in another way. When we record the tunes we often have played them live sometimes, but we try to get rid of the live situation because we believe that all possibilities will stream through the brain: we are only three people with limited equipment. We consider the CD as a whole, from the first to the last track... is [as] a homogenous work of art, directed to the listener. Under [During] the recording process the band is developing its creativity more than when we are playing live. To play live is more or less to try to recreate what we have done on the record. The studio work takes a fortnight, which is a long time... [for] folk music... but short compared with pop [music]... where one track can take the same time. We would like very much to work longer, but we are not paid for the studio work by the record company. Some of the tunes have so many sound[s] that we must take time to separate them... [by] different acoustical means.³

The tune 'BB cool' starts with a sound montage, the distortion of instruments, and synthesized song. But suddenly there is a dialogue playing between keyed fiddle and bass which is transformed into improvisation around small motifs leading to a new sound montage. The sound structure is very complex and there is a contradiction between the complexity and the very short track, not more than 4-6 minutes.

I anticipate that in the future the pieces will be much longer if Johan continues with his new compositional technique. Another piece, 'Still', is also filled with experimental sound, where the percussion of birds and cowbells punctuates the melody in the solo bass. The keyed fiddle takes over the melody that later moves into synthesized sounds, and the instrumental ostinato is transformed in a variation of electronic and instrumental sounds.

Conclusion

Johan Hedin started as a traditional keyed fiddler, but since then he has built his music on different musical layers, which he has learnt by walking around in the musical landscape. It is interesting to follow his career: when he feels 'this is not my way', he immediately stops, like a walker who finds that he is on the wrong path. Sometimes he returns to his roots, and you can always recognize his 'folk music style', even when he experiments with new sounds.

In many ways, Johan's development from fiddler to composer represents the transition of Swedish folk music to art music during the twentieth century. The exploration of sound, rhythm, and pitch in the worldwide musical landscape, just to satisfy one's inner, aesthetical individual voice, without ideological thinking about tradition or national heritage, has given Swedish folk music a new dimension and brought international recognition.

Notes

- ¹ Jan Ling, *Nyckelharpan, Studier i ett folkligt musikinstrument*, Musikhistoriska museets skrifter, 2 (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1967).
- ² Ola Backstrom, Johan Hedin, Jonas Knutsson, 'Triptyk', Atrium CD 3984-22197-2, 1999.
- ³ Translation of an interview with Johan Hedin by the author in 2000, see 'Svensk folkmusik blir världsmusik' in *Allt under linden den gröna. Studier i folkmusik och folklore tillägnade Ann-Mari Häggman*, ed. Anders G. Lindqvist (Vasa: Finlands svenska folkmusikinstitut, 2001), pp. 335-56 (p. 352).