

Summary: Performing the role of the *spelman* in Swedish folk music

The studies of this anthology all focus on musicians who play Swedish folk music, individuals or permanent groups of individuals. The perspective on Swedish folk fiddle music – for it is almost always the violin that is played, and certainly in the common image of Swedish instrumental folk music there's the violin up front – will here be double or sometimes triple. On the one hand, there is a tradition where a repertoire of tunes and stylistic features is passed on, expanded and changed between generations of musicians using it in social contexts changing over time. With this repertoire comes along – at least since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – a mythological image, a set of presuppositions of what an authentic *spelman* is and what he (!) does, is not and does not (The word *spelman*, pl. *spelmän*, literary means “playman”, the one who plays, but has since ca the 18<sup>th</sup> century been used only in connection with countryside music outside of official contexts). While this mythological image of the *spelman* continuously is kept alive in narratives and written accounts, new roles and images of who is to care for the folk music and pass it on are shaped for different generations. When society changes, the opinions on who is most suitable as tradition trustee in the contemporary society also changes.

Why is the role of the *spelman* important? For one thing, musicians are ascribed authority in defining the central traits of their music, and its limits. What tunes are really part of Swedish folk music, how are they to be performed, how free is a musician allowed to act in relation to established patterns and models – questions like these often are answered with a reference to named established *spelmän*, or to *de gamla spelmännen* (The old *spelmän*) as a general collective concept. A march played at a regiment in 1812 is part of folk music, because it is written down in a manuscript by a *spelman*. Another march played at the same regiment at the same time is merely military music, since no *spelman* apparently wrote it down. Old photographs of identified *spelmän* could be used as arguments for claiming a certain way of holding the bow, or playing in ensemble with accordion or guitar, as legitimate within Swedish folk music. An established folk musician can introduce new instruments and it is accepted as creativity, while a record producer at a record company not established within folk music testing the same combination of instruments will be frowned at as a commercial exploiter. Those who live up to the presuppositions of the *spelman* role thus have authority within Swedish folk music – something we should hold as a characteristic trait in this form of music. In comparison, musicians in other forms of music often have a more subordinated position – the authority may rest foremost with the composer (through his definite written-down version), the conductor, the manager, the producer or the critic.

Thus, in the ideology of Swedish folk music, the *spelman* is a powerful image and concept. The historical roots of this image aside, around the year 1910 when a great national *spelmän's* meeting at Skansen in Stockholm was held, there is a model firmly established where Swedish instrumental folk music is performed in the modern public sphere not by any musician, but by a man from the countryside, of a farming family, undoubtedly skilled in playing but without a background in formalised music education; someone who had to be “discovered” by an authority in order to get admission to the public sphere. An individual, who at the same time incarnated the image of the creative collective as it appeared within the discourse of folk culture; an “anybody” of the peasants who with no individual ambitions – maybe chosen as apprentice by a master, rather than self-consciously striving for the position – who had taken on the task of carrying the collective national tradition further on. Stories of witchcraft and contacts with natural spirits underlined this was an ancient and authentic cultural expression.

However, research on Swedish folk music focused mainly on questions of origin and history of styles and genres. This was along the dominating perspectives in international scholarship: folk music was primarily a historical survival with its value on a general level (supposedly ancient scales, instruments, playing techniques, *nr*-forms of tunes etc); the individuals who played the music were first and foremost links in a chain of generations passing the music by. The folk music, when it was identified as such, was studied as folk music *per se*, independent of whom actually had played it.

Gradually, questions started to arise. Some stylistic traits of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century art music were identified in the *spelman* music. How did they get there? By some general cultural diffusion between classes, or more specifically by certain individuals – the *spelmän*? But they were supposed not to have been influenced by official education? The image of the creative peasant collective was also questioned by the folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, who in the 1930's coined the concept of “tradition-bearer” to focus on how knowledge has to be individually embodied in order to exist, and on the existence of an aesthetic specialisation and division of labour within the supposedly homogenous peasantry. The concept of tradition-bearer was productive until the 1970's when its limitations, the image of the aesthetic specialist as solely a reproductive force without any own creativity, were beginning to be felt.

In parallel with these changes in scholarly views, the general image of Swedish Folk music also is changed. The *spelmän*, those who self-consciously is guarding the tradition, manifested their own superiority by getting together in formal regional organisations and a national organisation. In the “folk music wave” of the 1970's individuals were put forward more strongly: when music publishers and record companies earlier had put forward folk music under regional or parish

labels, now individuals as Björn Ståbi and Anders Rosén or the rock band-imagined Skäggmanslaget make records under their own names. 1979 record producer Samuel Charters publishes (with a strictly commercial record/music company) a book of interviews and portraits simply named “Spelmännen”.

This rise of interest in the spelman as individual also could be noticed within research. Jan Ling had in his 1964 book *Svensk folkmusik*, an over-view of Swedish folk music in historical times, a chapter on Spelmannen. He stressed the heterogeneity behind the concept: “Those musicians were a colourful and motley crew, the only thing in common being their tasks. The spelman could be the parish organist or parish factotum, a self-taught farmer’s son or farm-hand, a wandering tinker or soldier.” Lings book was extremely important, both in inducing a rising public interest in Swedish folk music, and in delineating and establishing the field of possible studies and research. Still, the study of style, genre, repertoires and instruments dominated during the 70’s and 80’s; the spelman did not come to the fore until Gunnar Ternhags 1992 doctoral thesis on Hjort Anders Olsson, the farmer who in the 1910’s was “discovered” as spelman and established himself as a genuine transmitter of folk tradition in the official national public sphere – a new context which had repercussions in his way of playing, choosing tunes, and speaking of his music. Together with Dan Lundberg, Ternhag has further elaborated on the possibilities and problems within the Nordic project *The individual in focus*, 2000. They stress the possibilities of studying learning processes, creativity, and the shaping of a repertoire, as well as the pedagogical gains of representing music history or a musical culture through a person. As problems they name questions of representativity, the risk of fragmenting research, the narrowing of contexts, and ethical issues of the individual’s integrity. New studies as Karin Eriksson’s 2004 thesis on the Halland regional spelmän organisation as an arena for acting, and as a independent actor in itself, and David Kaminsky’s thesis of 2005 on ideologies within the contemporary urban-based folk music movement has further contributed to the understanding of the relations and tensions between individual, collective, and ideals.

The aim of this anthology is to further investigate and make clear the changing roles of the spelman within the folk music discourses. The common image of the spelman still is an elderly, man, of the countryside (the regions of Dalarna and Hälsingland have highest priority), peasantry, who has learned his tunes from earlier generations of spelmän, preferably family relatives. Youth, women, people from Stockholm, university-trained people, who have learned by sight-reading or by records, thus represent the opposites of the ideal role – but have also been among most important categories in providing re-growth in Swedish folk music the last 50 years. It is important to study who actually are the existing spelmän, in order to underline the social

variability within the role – not only to complement and correct stereotypic images, but also in order to study what happens when individuals have to relate what they're doing to stereotyped models. The expectations of what a spelman should be and represent can be a resource – Gunnar Ternhag's study of Hjort Anders Olsson shows a man succeeding in living up to the expectations in the 1910's – but to many the mythical images is a problem to be managed.

The studies in this anthology all deal with spelmän who in one way or another depart from the common images of spelmän. For instance, the 18<sup>th</sup> century construction of the concept “folk music” drew upon a logic of contrasts. Folk music had to be different from the known music – that music which doesn't need a qualifier to be named and identified. This difference was constructed around the idea of the illiterate peasantry which in its geographical and social isolation from cities with their international education and fashion trends had preserved traits of an authentic national culture. But the musical form chosen in Sweden to represent the idea of folk music, the spelman tradition (there are other quite distinct traditions as well that could qualify), showed in many of its regional shapes obvious tracks of inspiration from 18<sup>th</sup> century international trends. The idea of cultural isolation didn't work; never the less the differentiating stylistic traits have had enough strength to keep up interest. But how did this influence take shape in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century? In his study Eric Hammarström through archival material has come close to spelmän with other characteristics than in public image – they have knowledge of sight-reading, writing music down, and in musical theory, they have, or apply for positions as parish organists, they are active in a differentiated countryside where roles and work collapse country and town, middle class and lower classes, the off-road village and the parish centre. They represent neither the freeholding farmer nor the mystic stranger from the woods. By following several family lines into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century he also pinpoints how the spelman work is estranged from education. Instead there rises an occupational role as teacher and organist – where eventually a possible voluntary task is to record, arrange and re-use spelman tunes in public contexts.

Hammarström also sketches out a general development where the *spelmansmusik* (fiddler's music) becomes part of a national culture project which in its turn takes different shapes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is possible to read the public society's interest in folk music from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards as a process where during different periods there has been a re-negotiation of what is central to the folk music concept, what genres are the most important and what the arch-typical musician looks like. In a given historical context a dominating view of folk music is construed, which subsequently forms a structural frame for the existence of folk music for some decades. Then a new dynamic phase begins – which can be the manifestation of new group

relations, technological or ideological change, generation shifts etc – where the understanding of folk music gets a new focus, at the same time as earlier structures of thought continue to be working. So, we have in part an additive history where the “discovery” of the ballad in the 1810s is complemented with the pastoral songs in the 1840s, and with the instrumental *spelmansmusik* and singing games at the end of the century; during the 20<sup>th</sup> century these genres continue to be valid, but at the same time they are aesthetically re-defined and transferred to new categories of practisers and are supposedly continuing to blossom in new social situations.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century public society opened its stages only to established members of the society. Folk music was presented by researcher/publicist Rickard Dybeck and opera singer Kristina Nilsson, was played by musicians at the national Opera, and by the amateurs of the bourgeois salon. At the same time folk music was supposed to exist in the countryside among the anonymous collective of the people.

A few years after the turn of the century, folk music got new faces. By artist Anders Zorn’s initiative, *spelmän* competitions started in order to secure the continuous existence of folk music in the country, with an individualisation of the musicians as a result (cf. the description of Hjort Anders Olsson, above). The new contexts available are to begin with the adult education movement and the regional homestead movement, from the 1920s also the folk dance movement and, to a selected few *spelmän*, radio (the Swedish broadcasting corporation). Alongside the genuine peasant fiddler there was also space for the well-educated violinist who integrated *spelman* tunes with his high culture repertoire, for instance Sven Kjellström, academy teacher who toured Sweden for decades with his string quartet or as a soloist, along with serving as judge in *spelmän* competitions. Also worth noting in the 1920’s and 30’s is young people simultaneously taking up *spelman* music and taking part in symphonic amateur orchestras. For this type of music-making arrangements are made of *spelman*’s tunes, for string quartets and orchestras, in suite or rhapsody form.

After World War II the *spelman* team rises as a new form. Here, the sporadic regional networking among musicians got an institutionalised form, often with a parish, a few neighbouring parishes or possibly a county as base. Here a new type of *spelman* makes entrance: one with administrative skills, who can persuade local politicians and teachers, and at the same time has knowledge of musical theory and can arrange tunes for two or three voices and teach them by rote. Wictor Johansson’s study pinpoint how *Nordergutarnas spelmanslag* (a team of northern Gotland) with leader Svante Pettersson come to personify the *spelman* music of Gotland for some decades, and how the team relates to older tradition as well as younger generations of Gotland folk musicians.

Around 1970 there is yet another *spelman*'s role formed, which corresponds to the new youth generation: men with long hair, beards, and denim clothes, to be seen as likely in a Vietnam War demonstration as at a country fiddlers' meeting. They are individuals, and independent groups with rock band-types of names. Jens Erik Eriksson in his essay analyses how the Skäggmanslaget ("the bearded men's team") in their second LP album, produced by blues producer Samuel Charters, represent many new attitudes: the repertoire are from many counties and even includes Sámi yoik, they add bass, saxophone and tablas, it is recorded at a party session with several friends as guest musicians in the country, and has cover art in a contemporary style. The team was popularised by mass media as representatives of a new generation, mixing folk and rock.

Susanne Odell's paper has several levels. On one level, it is a narrative of a Sámi who also was a *spelman* in Swedish villages – a not uncommon ethnic dimension seldom noticed in the image of Swedish folk music. In this case, where the "Lapp boy" was killed by envious rival *spelman* during a village dance, the ethnic power structures are made visible. On another level, it tells of narrative tradition about *spelmän* among *spelmän*, that is, the *spelman*'s role that *spelmän* themselves construct. Who is remembered as an important *spelman*, and what qualities does s/he represent? How does such an internal canonisation process take place? Lastly, the paper also describes a contemporary *spelman*, Thomas Andersson, who has extended his public appearances with narrating, and further developed this into one-man theatre. He has taken the story of the death of the "Lapp boy" and turned it into a morality play, just as he has combined folk music with other narratives he has come across in the countryside while doing field trips collecting folk music.

Maria Larsson problemizes the second element of "spelman" – why is the word gendered, what presuppositions of sex are connected to *spelman* music, what gender-related experiences do women have who play folk music in public? She has interviewed some women *spelmän* who speak of a lack of female models, and a male gaze which subordinates musicality to gender, as hindrances they have to learn to cope with.

Eva Deivert in her essay studies what meanings Swedish folk music has on an individual level by five men and women fiddlers; what relation do they have to this music, and what values do they think it represents? She contrasts the social aspects that are ascribed folk music today, where the joy of playing together and the joy in learning are two aspects, with a more anti-social secrecy among 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century *spelmän*. The music is said to represent values as simplicity, easiness, informality, acceptance and contact with other people – which also can be seen as an image of qualities among those playing folk music, or as presuppositions forming the image of the contemporary *spelman* role.

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As a conclusion, here is an attempt to make an analytical “check-list”, far from complete, but hopefully a methodological tool which may inspire ethnomusicological studies no matter what style or genre. It comes as a series of questions to use as starting-points.

Who is the musician – or ought to be? Sex, age, social and geographical background, studies? There are two dimensions: the visible musician which the audience directly can identify and classify from performances, pictures and ways of speaking, and questions of origin, where authenticity is brought to the fore within folk music genres.

Where does the musician play? In what situations does the musician meet his/her audience, in what contexts? At a concert, on record, at home? Different forms of music have their different privileged situations, where the music is heard at its best, where the ideal audience is to be found. The question, for whom is the musician playing, is also a question of the musician’s background – does the musician have to “represent” the audience by having identical origin? Or is the acceptance of the audience of the individual as its musician what really matters?

What does the musician play? The repertoire should have the “right” composition, certain genres are approved of. Who has authority in choice of music? The musician through his/her professional knowledge, or the audience through its wishes? In the performance is also the question of how the musician is playing. The ideal musician has to be an exponent of the preferred musical style – something that varies over time.

What does the musician mean? Besides the issues of background and relation to the audience, the opinions and interpretations by critics and the audience may be of great importance. Musicians can be associated with identities, values, positive and negative qualities, religious or political symbolic content, which can be of great importance for the composition of the audience and its expectations. A significant example is how Bob Dylan from the mid-60’s several times tried to defend himself from the meanings put into his artist’s role by large audience segments, by changing musical style, song topics, and public appearance. Even *spelmän* in Swedish folk music have some times had an uneasy position, for instance through expectations of nationalist ethos.

What also plays a part is the process whereby history is written and the past is evaluated. What musicians become in retrospect important models (that is, what qualities are highly valued in the present, and are sought for in time passed)? How are musicians written into a history – as keepers, innovators, popularisers, as people in power who can’t be neglected? Do musicians in

retrospect turn into negative examples, or get defined out of a position they earlier have occupied?

Questions like these can help in clarifying what makes up the historically and socially embedded musicians' role, and thereby increase the understanding of questions of who succeeds within a musical form at a certain time, what possibilities a certain role brings socially and musically, and what restrictions they are put under in terms of repertoire, style and context. The successes, failures and stagnation of individual musicians and musical genres as a whole can be tested from the point of what space or lack thereof is available to a musicians' role, and the possibilities to perform it with credibility.