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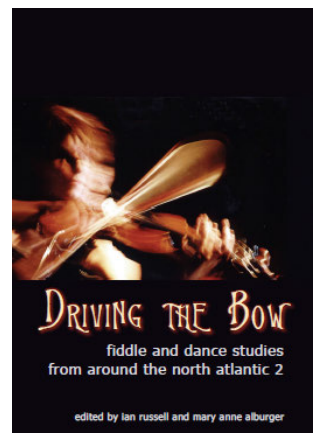

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Sweden as a crossroads: some remarks concerning Swedish folk dancing

MATS NILSSON

This article is an overview of folk dancing in Sweden. The context is mainly the organised Swedish folk-dance movement, which can be divided into at least three subcultures. Each of these folk dance subcultural contexts can be said to have links to different historical periods in Europe and Scandinavia. In this article I will try to follow these links and connect them to dancing in Sweden today, in 2006.

It is helpful to know that Sweden has not been occupied since medieval times, and, uniquely for Europe, has not been involved in a war since 1814. Since the foundation of the Kingdom of Sweden in 1523, it has been a centralised state, with few political powers for the regions. This means that Sweden, or rather the 'Swedes', have not yet needed strong, expressive national emblems. Furthermore, we do not have a formal national anthem, and it was not until 1982 that a formal national day was established, finally becoming a holiday in 2005. We can say that Swedes are still in many ways creating Swedishness, partly connected to new demands arising from the growing immigration from non-European countries since the end of the twentieth century.[1]

But of course there have still been nationalistic projects, especially as a part of the processes in other parts of Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century. But it seems that the need for these activities has been lower in this respect in Sweden than in many other countries, at least until after Sweden joined the European Union in 1994. This process of 'Swedification' combined with a growing multiculturalism asserts itself in many different ways, including folk dance and music.

The map and the cultures

Geographically, Scandinavia, including Sweden, is situated between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea in Northern Europe. Sweden is a part of Scandinavia, together with Norway and Denmark. With the addition of Finland and Iceland, this larger group is sometimes known as the Nordic Countries. All these countries are historically closely linked, and although we share many similarities, many other things are quite different. To the east we have Russia and the Baltic Countries, to

the south Poland and Germany, and to the West the British Isles and Ireland. In the middle of this map of the North we find Sweden.

These cultures, or whatever we call the things people do together, are of course influenced by all the contacts across all the political and geographical borders that we find on the map. Water unites, and in this part of the world there are, as already mentioned, at least two large and dominant bodies of water: the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, called, in Swedish, Östersjön, the East Sea, and Västerhavet, the Western Ocean.

These waters have seen warfare and commercial traffic for thousands of years, and there have been many cultural encounters and exchanges in all directions. In Sweden, in the middle of all these cultural crossroads, many cultural influences must have interacted over the centuries. After the Vikings, came the German Hanseatic League, and after that the Baltic Sea was dominated by the Swedes, Danes, Poles, and Russians, while on the North Sea the Swedes sailed alongside the Norwegians, Danish, British, Dutch, and Germans, amongst others.

My main question, then, is to find out if it is possible to trace the different influences from all these countries on what are usually called folk dances in Scandinavia, i.e. popular dances from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And, if it is possible, what of interest can be discovered about these dance forms?

From popular to folk

Dancing in Scandinavia since 1500 has been almost always only for social gatherings, and there is little evidence of any form of religious rituals connected to dance and dance music. More obvious is the use of dance in military training and courtship manners.[2] Today, we think of the dances from around 1650 until about 1920 as 'folk dances'. Dances popular before that time are usually called 'medieval dances' or, sometimes 'historical dances', while dances popular after 1920 are often labelled 'modern dances' or sometimes 'popular dances', if they are used for recreational purposes among ordinary people and the young.

In the period before 1920 the popular dancing repertoire seems to have been dominated by couple dances like the '*polska*' (N.B. not polka), and group dances such as the quadrille and as they are called in Sweden, the '*engelska*' (English dance). Here, dancing must be seen in functional terms as something of a recreation for the dancers, who dance primarily for their own pleasure. Also, there are definitely some nationalistic, and romantic ideas which, if not found amongst people in general, can be found in parts of the bourgeoisie, the cultural elite.

The main creation of the Swedish folk dance canon occurred between 1880 and 1920, when it took off in a process that could be described as going 'from popular to folk', a process of transition where some of the popular dances – mostly group dances, such as quadrilles – move from the dance floor to the stage.[3] New dances were also created inside the growing folk dance movement. The recreational dimension for the dancers is the weekly rehearsal, but the audience most obviously wants to be entertained by rural culture on the bourgeois stages. The national-

romantic dimension is there, but it is has more romantic, than national, connotations. The concept of a past dimension is weak, and more like an 'other-dimension', where these others are also called 'the folk'.

Before the influx of American dances in the early years of the twentieth century, it was possible to see the dance forms popular among ordinary people in Sweden as three main types that also can be seen as three subgenres of folk dance. From around 1600 we find the *polska* exists as dance and as music. The connections here are obviously with Poland and Germany. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, dances such as quadrilles and *engelska* became popular. Culturally, these forms have obvious connections with France and Great Britain.[4] In the middle of the nineteenth century their popularity on the dance floor was taken over in part by the 'round dances', i.e. the waltz and the polka, and here it is possible to make cultural connections to Germany and, again, France.[5] If the folk dances were created between 1880 and 1920 in the dying 'old' society, then it was between 1920 and 1970, at the time when Sweden become modern in most senses, that the consolidation of the folk dance canon took place, through a process I will call standardisation and consolidation. Partly the 'folkdanceification' of these European dances was a reaction against the new, modern dances and music from the USA especially jazz, and other similar ways of moving to different music.

A folk dance should look the same every time it is danced wherever it is danced, at least where the members of the folk dance clubs are concerned. Sweden's National Folkdance Association Board decided which of the created and transformed dances should be seen as folk dances, and they also standardised the names of the dances, instead of using different local ones. This legitimised repertoire is dominated by group dances (having more than 3 dancers), such as quadrilles and some *engelska*s, and these dances are definitely recreational, at least for the dancers, even if their audiences don't always think so. There is also a national dimension in the discourse, but it is more against modern developments such as jazz music and dance, and makes moral judgements about good and bad culture – and youth.[6] To describe these standardised folk dances as spectacular is not really correct; it is more that the participatory and recreational part is emphasised by the folk dance association, with a weaker orientation to the past. But in Sweden, or for that case in Scandinavia, there has never been anything as close to or similar to the national or state ensembles, described by Anthony Shay as 'Choreographed Politics', that can be found in other parts of the world, not the least in eastern Europe.[7]

Around 1970 in Sweden, as in some other parts of the western world, a 'back to basics' movement began, with many red and/or green political references, that again tried to take the dances 'from the folk to the popular' arena. This was a period of revitalisation of the couple dances, i.e. the *polska* and to some extent the *engelska*, for recreational use, rather than for spectacular performances, and the national dimension becomes less important than the regional or local connections. 'The past' becomes important at least in one way, in that it returns to the dances and the way of dancing before 'the canon' was created by the National Folk Dance Association.

So, in the beginning of the twenty-first century the revivified couple dances became the vital form of popular dancing, again for recreational purposes, although a few still made minor attempts to create spectacular (or art) dances for audience. The national dimension is there in that the *polska*, especially, is seen as a very Swedish dance and a Swedish contribution to 'world dance'. In theory 'the past' might be important, but not in reality; it is the 'here and now' dancing that has become relevant.

Today we have the three main folk dance types, *polska*, *engelska*/quadrille, and waltz/polka, which flourish in different contexts in Sweden. But, interestingly, there are also some mixed types. Or at least, sometimes it is possible to see that the forms are not 'closed', and that the dances actually have elements and motifs that cut across whatever borders or genres that were created by dance associations, scholars, or dancers. I will now discuss some of the similarities and differences in the ways Scandinavians dance the *polska* and *engelska*. There are certain things that are the same, such as dancing in couples, but also differences, such as the metre of the music.

Engelska and *polska*

In my part of the world, as mentioned above, we usually say that there are three main folk dance (and dance music) types: the waltz and the polka (also called Old Time dances), almost always danced in couples in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the Swedish Gammaldans,[8] although this is not discussed here. The other two main types are the quadrille/*engelska* and *polska*.

Both the *engelska* and the *polska* are traceable back to sources from the latter part of seventeenth century. They may be older, of course, but, since there are no written sources, we may never know. From the formal aspect, the Swedish *engelska* is very similar to longways reels, jigs, and square dances common in the British Isles. They are danced in couples, or rather at least two couples or more, or perhaps three persons together, trios, in any number. Music is usually played in 2/4 and 4/4 time, although there is one frequent example danced to a 3/4 beat. You dance in circles, make figures and flirt with your partner, change places with other couples and move in chains, and sometimes whirl on the spot together with your partner.[9]

The *polska* is nearly always a couple dance, with a few variants for two couples, danced to music in a 3/4 'rubber band', or elastic, beat. That means that even if the metre and beat is strictly on the pulse, the musician plays the notes a little too early or little too late, in order to create a musical tension. The dancer can then follow either the metre and the beat or the musicians' stretching of the music, which gives a very special feeling to the dancing. The dance motifs are dominated by walking steps with turning and whirling, and turnings around the couples' own axis. This couple turning can be on the spot, just turning around at the same place, or moving forward in what is usually called a waltz circle, around the dance floor.

In Sweden, Denmark, and Finland we also have examples where the dance is a *polska* but the music is not 3/4 *polska* music, and also where the music is a *polska*

but the dance is not. For instance in Sönderho on Fanö, western Denmark, they have a dance to music in 2/4 time that is similar to the Swedish *polska*, and in some Danish sources these are called *Engelsk Pols*.[10] These types of dances are also found in Sweden danced to both 3/4 and 2/4 music, under different local names,[11] and there are variants of the Swedish *polska* that use the same movement as 'swing your partners', in British and Irish dances, performed to 3/4 'rubber band' music.[12]

A crossroads

In conclusion, Sweden can be seen as a crossroads, where folk music and dance is split between two, or possibly three, 'big' cultural traditions. These traditions are in some ways connected to the geographic and political areas around the waters of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, the British Isles, and the Polish/German parts of the European continent. But they are also rooted in different historical periods. The *polska* whirling couple dances of the Polish/German areas go back to at least 1650; similarly the *engelska* longways and square formation dances, which came from the British Isles, are also from the middle of the seventeenth century; while the waltz/polka dances, with ties to Germany and Central Europe, date from the nineteenth century.

However, an opposite conclusion could also be reached: that there is no pure Swedish 'folk' (or popular) dance. All of our folk dances have relatives in neighbouring countries, and if there is a cultural border, they exist as much within Sweden as they do at the country's border, a division that is primarily east-west and partly north-south. Perhaps we can say that the way we perform folk dance and music is 'Swedish' – West Swedish or East Swedish or even more local – but we use the same material, the same tunes, and the same body movements, with no basic differences.

My overall view is that there are many similarities in dance and dance music throughout Europe, perhaps even with its own particularly European way of dancing. I think that the Swedish musicologist Jan Ling's expression 'A Uniform Diversity'[13] expresses this very well. This statement goes in the same direction as the British historian Peter Burke, writing about popular culture in general:

> In any one region this stock or repertoire was fairly limited. Its riches and variety are apparent only when the inventory is extended to the whole of Europe; when this is done, the variety is so bewildering as almost to hide the recurrence of a few basic types of artefact and performance. They are never quite the same in any two regions, but they are not all that different either: unique combinations of recurrent elements, local variations on European themes.[14]

My point is that these cultures around the North Sea and the Baltic Sea have been for a long time intensely involved with each other, not least in Sweden, which becomes a sort of a crossroads between the cultural streams around the northern seas. But this is not a sudden or a one-way cultural influence. Perhaps it is better to

see it as one cultural area, or rather as two large continuously intermingling cultural areas with many sub-cultures. We often emphasise geographical and political borders a little too much in connection with 'folk' cultures. The divisions (if there are any) between different cultures might perhaps fit better elsewhere.

Notes

[1] See Billy Ehn, Jonas Frykman, and Orvar Löfgren, *Försvenskningen av Sverige: Det nationellas förvandlingar* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1993).

[2] Ernst Klein, *Om folkdans* (Stockholm: LTs förlag, 1978); Mats Rehnberg, 'Från svärdsdans till menuett', *Det glada Sverige: Våra fester och högtider genom tiderna*, Gösta I. Berg (ed.), vol. 2 (Stockholm, 1948), 133–82; Mats Rehnberg, '1700-talet dansar', *Det glada Sverige: Våra fester och högtider genom tiderna*, Gösta I. Berg (ed.), vol. 2 (Stockholm, 1948); Tobias Norlind, *Dansens historia: Med särskild hänsyn till dansen i Sverige* (Stockholm: Nordisk rotogravyr, 1941); Matts Stenström, *Dansen Dess utveckling från urtiden till danspalatsens tidevarv* (Stockholm: Lars Hökerbergs förlag, 1918).

[3] See Mats Wahlberg (ed.), *Philochoros 1880–1980: Minnesskildringar utgivna av föreningen Philochoros* (Uppsala: Upplands Grafiska, 1980); Katarina Korsfeldt and Mats Wahlberg (eds), *Philochoros 125 år. Minnesskrift utgiven av föreningen Phildochoros* (Uppsala: Reklam-och katalogtryck, 2005).

[4] See Egil Bakka (ed.), *Nordisk folkedanstypologi: En systematisk katalog over publiserte nordiske folkedanser* (Trondheim: Nordisk forening for folkedansforskning & Rådet for folkemusikk og folkedans, 1997).

[5] See Egil Bakka, Henry Sjöberg, and Hening Urup (eds), *Gammaldans i Norden: Rapport från ett forskningsprojekt*, Komparativ analyse av ein folkeleg dansegenere i utvalde nordisk lokalsamfunn (Trondheim: Nordisk forening for folkedansforskning, 1988).

[6] See Mats Nilsson, 'Folkdjävlar – om moralisk panik', in Kerstin Gunnemark and Magnus Mörck (eds), *Vardagslivets fronter* (Göteborg: Arkipelag, 2006).

[7] See Anthony Shay, *Choreographic Politics: State Folkdance Companies, Representation and Power* (Middleton: Welsleyan University Press, 2002).

[8] See Bakka (1988).

[9] See Bakka (1997).

[10] See Jens Henrik Koudal, 'Polsk and Polonaise in Denmark 1600–1860: Music, Dance and Symbol: A Riddle with Several Solutions', in *The Polish Dance in Scandinavia and Poland*, ed. Märta Ramsten (Stockholm; Svenskt Visarkiv, 2003), p. 34.

[11] See *Tretakt i Skåne*, DVD, 2005 and also *Gamla Dansar i Skåne*, VHS 1992.

[12] See *Svenska Folkdanser och Sällskapsdanser*, VHS, 8 vols (Stockholm: Samrbetsnämnden för folklig dans, 1992), VIII.

[13] Jan Ling, *A History of European Folk Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997), p. 220.

[14] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978; revd repr. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), p. 116.