

A SWEDISH GENERATION? ON MUSICAL CHRONOTOPES AND PENSIONERHOOD

Sverker Hyltén-Cavallius

Introduction

This article discusses how pensionerhood¹ as a social and cultural position in late 20th century Sweden is constructed musically in media addressed to elderly people. By this I mean that attitudes concerning a proper music for old-age pensioners – from pensioners' organizations, from varying entrepreneurs, artists and public institutions that care for the elderly – show so many congruencies that it is possible to speak of a social and cultural position. In some cases this position will coincide with the actual music tastes and activities of elderly people, in other cases it will not. Just to make it clear, this article will not aim at discerning the actual musical preferences or experiences of people, but rather focus on broad agreements on what kinds of music are suitable for the elderly and what kinds are not. Departing from an empirical example, I will suggest that the musical construction of this position is both temporally and spatially structured, why it might fruitfully be understood as a »chronotope« in the sense developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1991). The discussion is founded on two larger sets of material produced for a PhD thesis defended in 2006 (Hyltén-Cavallius 2005), the first being fieldwork in and around Stockholm from April 1995 through March 1998, the second a stay in a smaller industrial town in southern Sweden from November 1999 through May 2000. The initial objective was to search widely for music directed at pensioners, which led me to performance contexts, specialized »senior artists« and entrepreneurs, but also care settings – from the music activities in dementia day-care to touring radio shows

1 I use the concept of »pensionerhood« in order to stress cultural and social dimensions of aging in society rather than biological.

catering to the elderly in nursing homes. The second part of the fieldwork focused on music-making in pensioners' organizations in a smaller town, observing choirs and study circles. A unifying strand in all these contexts is that they address pensioners, forming a cultural and social position. To enter that position might be voluntary (as in the pensioners' organization) or involuntary (as in geriatric care), temporary (as in meetings) or more permanently.

Pensionerhood is formed through the interplay of a wide range of phenomena, such as stereotyping in oral tradition (Eklund 1996), institutional and economic categorization (Gaunt 1996), mass-mediated popular imagery (Blaikie 1999), interior architecture (Lundgren 2000), food (Hylttén-Cavallius 1999) and political discourse (Mannerfelt 1998). Among these phenomena I argue that music-making is an important component, which not only echoes attitudes from other areas of social life, but also actively shapes possibilities and restrictions in the concrete lives of people. Music is a basic parameter in most contexts where social categories are formed (cf. Shepherd 2003) – not only in its use as ethnic, national or generational symbol, but also in specialized kinds of music for different categories, in today's Sweden for example »children's music« (i.e. music aimed at children). Music is also a way in which people create a sense of place, of their being in the world, their past and their future (Feld 1996; Stokes et al. 1994). If we are to understand the formation of pensionerhood then, it seems fruitful to use music as a point of entry.

Swedish Favourites

Quite early on in my fieldwork, I went through one and a half years of the members' magazine of PRO (Pensionärernas Riksorganisation, The Pensioners' National Organization), *PRO-Pensionären*. PRO is the largest pensioner organization in Sweden gathering some 380.000 members. Together with the other main pensioner organizations they represent around 41 percent of the Swedes between ages 65 and 85.² These organizations can be thought of as trade unions for retired people that look after pensioners' interests in political and economic issues, give advice and support, and arrange leisurely and educational activities, travels, music-making and dancing. In this magazine (with ten issues per year), music was most frequently portrayed in terms of a shared memory and as a means to counter medical and social

2 Figures based on the organizations' membership statistics from 2003-2005.

problems associated with old age. Among the many advertisers could be found *Svenska Favoriter* (Swedish favourites), a company producing audio-cassettes for old people with Swedish music from the 1920s up until 1960 (the latter date set by copyright laws). The cassettes produced in the series numbered 129 at the time of my study, containing a total of approximately 1800 songs. *Svenska Favoriter* could either be bought in packages of ten cassettes, or be annually subscribed to (with 4 packages of 3 per year).

»I En Söt Liten Stuga« (In A Sweet Little Cottage) performed by Ernst Rolf and Bullan Weiden (1984) can serve as an example of the music on the cassettes. The original recording was produced in the 1920s, featuring two of the most famous singers and revue performers of the time. Harmonies are simple with evident similarities to Swedish broadsheet conventions and old-time dance music, a 2/4-measure opening in a movement from tonic to dominant, and a classical schlager-arrangement with large brass section and strings. The song congenially alternates between two-part sections and question-response sections with the textual theme of the pros and cons of life in the countryside. The light, joking mode is reminiscent of later popularly acclaimed Swedish performers such as Povel Ramel and Robert Broberg. In the chorus the listener meets a Swedish summer paradise confronted by the meagre living conditions: »[Weiden:] In a sweet little cottage by the lake/ between aspens, beech and birch and maple/ [Rolf:] the room measures barely a meter...«[author's translation].³ As in so many other songs from these cassettes, the relationship between man and woman, the Swedish landscape, its cottages and its nature are in focus.

A significant amount of the music collected on these tapes, along with music that is played in other settings where pensionerhood is constructed, is drawn from old Swedish popular music – accordion-based hits from the 1940s, evergreens and music from famous musicals and films. Harmonically they differ significantly from much popular music as it has evolved since the late 1950s. Swedish musicologist Lars Lilliestam claims that older Swedish popular music was almost entirely dominated by functional harmony, while today's popular music also displays other harmonic patterns such as the twelve-bar blues (cf. Lilliestam 1998:335-336). They also differ in their sound fabric, the absence of electronically amplified, modified or distorted instruments, in rhythm, in vocal treatment, and not least on a textual level with cheerful, high-spirited, optimistic messages and the often national imagery (like the paradigmatic small red cottage by the lake), always sung in the Swedish language. It might also be added that this music was notably

3 In Swedish: »I en söt liten stuga ner vid sjön / ibland aspar, bok och björk och lönn / rummet mäter knappt en meter...«, *Svenska Favoriter* 107 (1994).

conceived of as »Swedish« by people I met during fieldwork, in contrast to today's music (which would, correspondingly, be conceived of as »foreign«).

Alongside the mentioned music the cassettes also included exoticisms among which the most central are the Hawaiian and the gypsy styles. Together, these exoticisms form a map of the world made up of easily distinguishable sonic key symbols. The Hawaiian style was established through the essential portamento effects of the slide-guitar, sometimes ukulele. Lyrics often included existing or made-up words from a Pacific language and imagery with pretty girls, waves, beaches, coral reefs and palm trees (with titles such as »Flicka Från Hawaii« [Girl From Hawaii], »En Joddlare På Tahiti« [A Yodler On Tahiti] and »Det Var På Stranden Utav Bali-Bali« [It was on the shores of Bali-Bali]). The prominent portamento effects of the slide-guitar, together with a slow 2/4-measure create a soft, relaxed atmosphere backed up by double-bass, piano and strings. Harmonically, this music was still very consistent with other genres in the use of repeated tonic-subdominant-dominant patterns. Another exoticism might be labeled the gypsy sound (the gypsy [in Swedish »zigenare«] and the traveler [»tattare«] were important exotic stereotypes in Swedish popular culture in the 1940s and 1950s, cf. Svensson 1993). These texts deal with heat, passion and deceit, against a backdrop of the camp, the fire and the wagons, accompanied by a vibrato-filled violin, minor key harmonies and tango- and habanera-like rhythms. These exoticisms were of course part of wider transnational trends: the Hawaiian sound was introduced to Sweden from the US during the 1930s, and the gypsy sound was part of a growing awareness and exoticist interest since the WW II in ethnic minorities not only in Sweden (Svensson 1993).⁴ They organized the world in a set of easily recognizable differences, which confirmed an idea of the nation-state as distinct and homogenous that was dominant in this period.

These cassette collections, in the late 1980s originally initiated as an alternative media for the elderly in opposition to the dominant radio music, have now also entered medical care institutions, and have thus transformed from commercial nostalgia trigger and a contribution to generational media politics into an aid in geriatric therapy.

The music reissued on the cassettes must be understood as a selective image of the past. Popular music of the era reveals other patterns that are rarely heard in media oriented to pensioners: the 1930s and 1940s is for example the period when jazz was introduced in Sweden on a larger scale (although some jazz pieces and elements can also be heard on the cas-

4 Interest here of course implies a wide array of companies, actors and audiences.

settes) (Fornäs 2004). Other music genres of these times are not included on these cassettes. With the end of WW II Sweden saw its first major immigration in modern times through refugees from Eastern Europe and the Baltic States and the 1950s saw a significant influx of labour immigrants, primarily from Finland, but also Italy and the Balkans. The musical worlds of these immigrants are silent on the cassettes. Sweden's massive interest in folk music during the 1950's that eventually would influence both rock music and jazz is nowhere to be found (cf. Ramsten 1992). In the latter half of the 1950s Sweden saw its first rock'n'roll-artists – with personas and a musical style that imitated American and British celebrities (Brolinson/Larsen 1984). But neither jazz, rock 'n' roll nor any music that can be associated with immigration or folk musics are to be found in these musical compilations. These exclusions point to the selective image of a past musical landscape that is developed in the collections.

A sonic narrative

Narratives are, as historian Hayden White (1981) puts it, by necessity moral. Narratives presuppose *perspectives*, both on the part of the narrating and the narrated actors. Narratives rest upon selection of what is needed to be told – thus they do not only tell of certain events but also silence others. Narratives relate some things to each other, and separate others, they hierarchise, and they structure expectations and experiences. How could the cassettes described above be understood as narratives, or perhaps as parts of larger narratives?



First of all, we might consider narrative frameworks.

The cassette sleeves are headed by the words *Svenska Favoriter*, with at least three possible interpretations in the Swedish language: it can either refer to these favourite songs as being »Swedish«, that is as having a »Swedish« quality; or refer to them as being »from Sweden«, that is made, played or distributed in Sweden; finally, it might mean being favourites among Swedes. The national frame is also enhanced through the choice of colours – the sleeve headings are coloured blue and yellow, the two colours of the Swedish flag, and the word »svenska« inscribed in a crown, a symbol of the Swedish monarchy. The primary way to buy the cassettes is through subscription, by which the subscriber receives four sendings with three cassettes in each per year. In order to link the cassettes in one sending thematically they display a photograph with the current season. Just as a substantial part of the songs deal with paradigmatic »Swedish« places (cf. Löfgren 1993), these photographs show places such as the grave mounds in Old Uppsala in winter and a summer view from somewhere in the Baltic archipelago, views that can easily be recognized as Swedish. Another narrative framework is provided in the media used to advertise for the product.

Apart from *PRO-Pensionären* they advertise in a commercial weekly paper oriented to the elderly called *Kvällsstunden*, meaning »the evening moment«⁵, that has an almost even more explicit national framing, together with a highly retrospective and nostalgic content, and the newspaper *Land* (»land«) which mostly distributes to agricultural households in the countryside. Among other music advertisements in *PRO-Pensionären* the national framing is also evident, with advertisements for products such as »Swedish singer favourites« and »Songs from the native country«. Not all of the music advertised consists of old recordings. More recent recordings tend to be either old performers singing old songs, or younger ones performing songs of dead artists. These contexts can be read as narrative frames for the music included. This frame is highly national, tying together images of physical places that are recognized as Swedish, the symbolic potential of the colours of the national flag, and the title of the product. But it is in a way also a rural frame, and through the cassette format – in a time when CD records totally dominated the main market for mass-distributed music – the music is also placed within a specific *mediascape*, to use Arjun Appadurai's term (Appadurai 1996: 34-35).

5 *Kvällsstunden* once had a substantial part of its subscribers among Swedish-speaking Americans and still claim that they are the biggest Swedish-speaking magazine in the US (the total amount of subscribers was at the time of my study 70.000). Today the magazine is mainly marketed to the 60+ age group.

A chronotope for pensionerhood

The cassette collection, along with a wide range of other music that is aimed at pensioners in various settings, produces a distinct feeling of place (cf. Stokes 1994). Commenting on recordings with Karl Gerhard, one of the most famous Swedish revue singers of the 1940s, a friend of mine said hearing it, it »felt like the old Sweden in some way«. From time to time people also claim that this music is »dying out«, that it lacks public representation as well as its listeners – the pensioners – are rarely visible in public media.⁶ An illustrative example forms a row of newspaper interviews with Swedish entertainer and accordionist Gnesta-Kalle on the occasion of his seventieth birthday: he describes old Swedish music as widely appreciated, but rarely played in public radio (Hyltén-Cavallius 2005: 93-94). It is safe to say that this music is widely understood in relation to place – or more specifically to a nationality – and in relation to time. It not only conjures up a homogenous, distinct and separate Sweden, but also a separate time – Sweden before the advent of rock 'n' roll. Such a timespace – temporally and spatially circumscribed – might be understood through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the »chronotope«. The idea of the chronotope, developed in the article »Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel«⁷, was a term Bakhtin borrowed from the natural sciences to refer to a category of content in narratives. Bakhtin argued that the chronotope defines genres – such as the country road in folk tales and the Adventure timespace in the Greek novel. And since the genre is defined by its chronotope, he also claims that the chronotope defines the image of Man in literature. In my view, the chronotope can be seen as a spatial and temporal setting with resources and limits for the narrated characters that defines what can possibly happen and how it may come about.

The musically established timespace in the cassettes can be seen as such a chronotope that defines a narrative of a bygone Sweden. The chronotope also has a rural quality, evident in the photographic imagery, but also

6 The argument about music claims that »their« music – as if they shared one – is consistently excluded from public media. A quite different argument has to do with the visibility and representation of elderly people in media and news coverage in general, which recently has been supported by media studies revealing an alarming discrepancy between representation and proportion of the total population (Andersson 2008: 87ff.).

7 In English in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin, University of Texas Press 1981, in Swedish in *Det Dialogiska Ordet*, with the title »Kronotopen« (Bachtin 1991).

in the recurrent textual depictions of cottages, lakes and forests.⁸ To sum up, the general chronotope in *Svenska Favoriter* is in the past, in the Swedish countryside, or in distant exotic places, creating a frame that is centrally retrospective and geographically bounded. And the chronotope might also tell us something about the musical formation of pensionerhood itself. It is created in a retrospective attitude, in a musical landscape where homogeneity and national and ethnic boundedness are central.

Conclusion

I have here tried to show how the social position of pensionerhood musically is constructed as a separate timespace, a chronotope. The chronotope is largely formed around a period that supposedly is common to pensioners, and establishes ethnic and national homogeneity and cultural distinctiveness. This can be seen on the one hand in songs which establish paradigmatic Swedish places, and on the other hand in the musical parameters that separate this music from so much other music in today's media – the primarily Swedish lyrics, the clear and straight vocal treatment, the dominant pattern of functional harmony with a centre around tonic-subdominant and dominant, and the instruments used. The sonic chronotope is consistent with attitudes that shape pensionerhood in other areas of social life. Pensionerhood, as it is shaped in settings from organizations to care institutions, is constructed as a separate part of life governed by other norms, values and patterns than those of working adults. Retrospection, an insistence on looking back to the past, as if it were a lost homeland for pensioners, runs through political meetings, musical shows and therapeutic work in geriatric homes. And pensionerhood is very much established as a Swedish position – in the memory work of institutions and in commercial products, the supposedly shared past is always Swedish. Pensionerhood considered as a sonic chronotope and as social position acquires both a spatially organized ethnic quality and a temporally organized quality that together distinguish pensionerhood as a kind of temporally fixed ethnicity. From the perspective of music, the position thus comes to exclude both that which is conceived of as »new« and that which is seen as »foreign«.⁹

8 Much of this of course goes along with modernity's central dichotomization between the safe, community-oriented countryside versus the threatening and yet attractive pulse of the individualist city, Berman 1985.

9 This is a strong thread through many more recent studies of the cultural construction of ageing, cf. e.g. Eklund (1999) and Lundgren (2000). There are naturalistic answers to this, such as that people like to hear the music of their

References

- Andersson, Lars (2008). *Ålderism*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Appadurai, Arjun (1996). *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bachtin, Michail [Bakhtin, Mikhail] (1991). *Det dialogiska ordet*. Gråbo: Anthropos (2nd ed.).
- Berman, Marshall (1985). *Allt som är fast förflyktigas. Om modernism och modernitet*. Lund: Arkiv.
- Blaikie, Andrew (1999). *Ageing and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brolinsson, Per-Erik / Larsen, Holger (1984). *När rocken slog i Sverige. Svensk rockhistoria 1955-1965*. Falköping: Sweden Music.
- Eklund, Charlotte (1996). *Farliga kärringar och lortgubbar. Kön, tradition, modernitet i folklöre om äldre*. Stockholm: Socialtjänsten.
- Feld, Steven (1996). »Waterfalls of sound. An acoustemology of place resounding in Bosavi, New Guinea.« In: *Senses of Place*. Ed. by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 91-136.
- Fornäs, Johan (2004). *Moderna människor. Folkhemmet och jazzen*. Stockholm: Norstedt.
- Gaunt, David (1996). »Svenskarna upptäcker åldersdiskriminering inom arbetslivet.« In: *Arbeta! Mot passivitet och isolering! Kampen för äldres rätt till arbete och aktivitet i Sverige 1950–1990*. Ed. by Ulrika Sutorius. Stockholm: Socialtjänsten, pp. 7-26.
- Hyltén-Cavallius, Charlotte (1999). *Näring för minnet. Pensionärsmat, smak och historia*. Stockholm: Socialtjänsten.
- Hyltén-Cavallius, Sverker (2005). *Minnets spelrum. Om musik och pensionärskap*. Falun & Hedemora: Gidlunds.
- Lilliestam, Lars (1998). *Svensk rock. Musik, lyrik, historik*. Göteborg: Bo Ejeby förlag.
- Lundgren, Eva (2000). »Homelike housing for elderly people.« In: *Housing, Theory and Society* 2000:17, pp. 109-120.
- Löfgren, Orvar (1993). »Nationella arenor.« In: *Försvenskningen av Sverige. Det svenska förvandlingar*. Ed. by Billy Ehn, Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, pp. 21-117.
- Mannerfelt, Lotta (1998). »Hårt bröd med lingon och de som byggde landet. Pensionärspolitik på radio.« In: *Pigga pensionärer och populärkultur*. Ed. by Owe Ronström. Stockholm: Carlsson, pp.124-165.
- Ramsten, Märta (1992). *Återklang. Svensk folkmusik i förändring 1950-1980*. Göteborg: Musikvetenskapliga institutionen.
- Shepherd, John (2003). »Music and Social Categories.« In: *The Cultural Study of Music. A Critical Introduction*. Ed. by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert and Richard Middleton. London: Routledge, pp. 69-79.

adolescence and that Sweden was a homogenous country in that period. But one can also see parallels with the competition for public attention in some pensioners' parties that have contrasted the interests of immigrants and pensioners, which point to the difficult implications of creating pensionerhood as a past-Swedish ethnicity.

- Stokes, Martin (1994). »Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music.« In: *Ethnicity, Identity and Music. The Musical Construction of Place*. Ed. by Martin Stokes. Oxford, Providence: Berg, pp. 1-28.
- Svensson, Birgitta (1993). *Bortom all ära och redlighet. Tattarnas spel med rättvisan*. Stockholm: Nordiska Museet.
- White, Hayden (1981). »The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality.« In: *On Narrative*. Ed. by William J. Thomas Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 5-27.

Discography

- Rolf, Ernst / Weiden, Bullan (1994). »I En Söt Liten Stuga.« On: *Svenska favoriter* 107, Solna.