

Oral/Aural Culture in Late Modern Society? Traditional Singing as Professionalized Genre and Oral-Derived Expression

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This article discusses some expressions and elements of orality and aurality in late modern society, and the roles, functions, and limitations of these expressions. Traditional song of different cultural origin has been the subject of much analysis and scholarship within the areas of orality studies, ballad studies, and several other related fields. However, songs and singing are in many cases analyzed chiefly as verbal art and verbal performance, while less attention is given to the closely interwoven texture of words, music, rhythm, and timbre, or to the balance between verbal and music-related sides of orality. I think more frequent discussions between scholars within the disciplines of folkloristics, literature, linguistics, and ethnomusicology might be fruitful. Initiatives of this kind are continuously taken in conferences and publications, and a couple of interesting texts on musical aspects have recently been published in *Oral Tradition* itself.¹

My own discipline is ethnomusicology, and my topic is traditional singing (or vocal folk music) in a Northern European and especially Swedish/Scandinavian context, viewed as a contemporary cultural—verbal and musical—expression, and partly as an established sub-genre within the genre or field that is today labeled “folk music” or “folk and world music.” There are reasons to ask, in the early twenty-first century, what the consequences are for oral-derived singing and music-making in an era of accelerating professionalization, institutionalization, and formalization. Which elements and expressions of orality function in a cultural environment characterized by fast changes, access to innumerable cultural items, and music as a mediated, processed, and often digitized phenomenon? And what are the consequences for affinity-centered and long-term qualities of oral tradition, such as learning songs across the kitchen table and performing and developing one’s repertory during a lifetime?

This essay is based on my studies of the Swedish/Scandinavian contemporary folk music scene with some references to earlier periods of time and other European/Western music cultures. It is my belief that, despite these geographic and cultural limitations, several of my

¹ See Foster 2004 and Sborgi Lawson 2010.

observations are relevant in the wider context of the tension fields² *traditional—revival—post-revival* as well as *oral/aural—literate/mediated* in a transnational and transcultural perspective. The larger research project with which the current essay is associated focuses on music-making as an activity and meaning-making phenomenon at small-scale events, where the modes of performance may shift to and fro between the participatory and the presentational.³ This approach is in contrast to the strongly dominant discourse on music—and other cultural expressions—as products that are made by the few for the reception and consumption of the many. Thus the project includes what might be called contemporary expressions of oral/aural tradition in late modern mediatized society.⁴

Traditional singing in the Scandinavian cultural area includes ballads and other narrative songs, lyric songs, jocular songs, lullabies, work songs, hymns and religious songs, and short ditties of several kinds. The vocal tradition also comprehends two wordless types: the one is diddled dance tunes and the other is herding calls that are performed outdoors with the use of a special voice technique. Both of these wordless types, as well as singing, have played an important role in the establishment of vocal folk music as a “genre” in the post-revival sense. Diddling, or *trall*, in the Scandinavian/Nordic area shows some likeness to the Celtic and British tradition of “mouth music.” Non-semantic syllables are used in a rhythmical fashion that imitates the movements of the bow on the strings of a fiddle. The technique has been used for the accompaniment of dancers as well as for transmission of tunes; today it is performed as dance music or at concerts. Herding calls, which likewise are used at concerts and in musical arrangements, have been performed chiefly by women (and children) since cattle herding belonged to the feminine sphere of earlier rural society as a result of the gendered division of labor. There is more documentation of men having sung, for example, military songs or shanties and of women having sung ballads and lullabies, but except for the calling there are no formal gendered or age-related restrictions concerning repertory.

Besides oral transmission, song lyrics have been disseminated and transmitted via chapbooks, mainly from the eighteenth century onwards, and later by way of printed as well as hand-written song books. Singing has been performed chiefly in a domestic context, unaccompanied and often combined with story-telling and talk, while instrumental dance music and ceremonial tunes have belonged to the more public and presentational sphere of life.

² I use the concept “tension field” since it allows for continuity and several conceivable positions along a scale between oral and literate. Fields of tension may have more than two poles and make up a multi-dimensional sphere of energy (Lundberg et al. 2003:63), meaning that concepts are not regarded as dichotomies but as containing possible overlap (cf. Finnegan 1988:125). Likewise, tradition, revival, and post-revival may be regarded as overlapping fields; see Figure 1 below.

³ Cf. Turino 2008. Turino’s definition of presentational performance emphasizes a clear distinction between artist(s) and audience, and the musicians’ attention divided between themselves, the musical product, and the audience. The participatory mode is characterized by music-making as social intercourse among face-to-face participants; the roles of performer and audience may shift within the group, and focus is directed inwards (90).

⁴ I am also here building on earlier field work, presented in Åkesson 2006 and 2007.

Orality and Literacy in Text and Music

Let me begin by presenting some basic presuppositions and departure points for this article. As stated, my approach to the fields of orality, literacy, and mediation is from the viewpoint of ethnomusicology. I am primarily concerned with singing on a number of levels: lyrics, melody, tonality, style, content and meaning, transmission, performance, and contexts of performance. As the concept of orality—or oral tradition—is broad and multi-faceted, and verbal art and linguistics are not my own area, I speak rather of “expressions or elements of orality” in this article.

- a) Orality in traditional singing has, of course, much in common with verbal arts such as story-telling or spoken poetry, but also with other kinds of music-making by ear; singing combines verbal and musical orality. I allude to music-making that makes no or little use of notation or sheet music but that is based on memorization as well as on variation and improvisation within frameworks, for instance, jazz and blues or Arabic and Indian art music (cf. Lilliestam 1995, Foster 2004).
- b) When discussing singing, I use the combined concept of *oral/aural* with its stress on learning by listening, by ear, in the present, irrespective of which modes of transmission have been used in the past. The German terms *Gehörskultur* and *Gehörsmusik* (generally used in much European literature) can be said to cover both oral and aural culture/music. The concept *Gehör* also has more general connotations to aurality as a wider concept in music-making as a whole. In this case it stands for singing or playing by ear, without using sheet music (even if the performer can read it and the music is composed and written down) and regardless of musical genre. *Gehör*, or aurality in this wider sense, is not necessarily associated with elements like family or local tradition, formulas, and variation that are included in “oral culture.” *Gehör* in an even wider sense is sometimes used in everyday speech for something you do by ear, or from experience and (tacit) embodied knowledge, without using a written or printed model, recipe, or prescription. The term may also be used in relation to the skill of a person who has a good sense of what is correct and of what constitutes fluent spoken and written language, learned more by ear and through reading than by studying grammar.
- c) Concepts such as literacy, writing, and print may be primarily associated with the lyrics, the literally textual side of songs and singing. However, they also allude to different kinds of notated musical transcriptions, to the skill of reading and using notation (notated “text”), and to the phenomenon of music in literary or

written circulation.⁵ The basic meaning of the concept *mediation* is that music, speech, and other such elements are conveyed to their recipients via media, that is, in almost every way that is not direct and simultaneous aural communication (cf. Lundberg et al. 2003:68). Mediation includes literacy as well as the use of wax cylinders, tape recordings, CDs, MP3 files, and other types of sound recordings; it also includes film and video, and analog as well as digital media. *Mediatization* implies that items—in this case musical—are changed and adapted in ways that are decided by the structure of the media system (*idem*). It also implies that recorded, arranged, and mediatized versions of traditional songs or tunes become models and might be the only versions known to younger generations.

d) Another basic notion is that oral/aural qualities as well as approaches and techniques associated with writing, printing, or other kinds of mediation are usually to some degree simultaneously present in most societies, historically as well as today. As Ruth Finnegan has pointed out on several occasions, orality and literacy might be regarded as a continuum rather than as separate modes; they are processes for representing and communicating information that take diverse forms in differing cultures and periods, and that mutually interact and affect each other (1988:125). Many of today's scholars are well aware that elements of orality and literacy are intermixed rather than separated in the long-term transmission of traditional culture over centuries and generations in many parts of the world.⁶

Some examples of this intermixing are available from my own field: since the eighteenth century in Scandinavia, and earlier in many parts of Europe, songs of both oral and literary origin have been printed in broadsheets and chapbooks in a process simultaneous with that of oral transmission. There are numerous examples of both narrative and lyrical songs that are found in both oral/aural and literate circulation. As the lyrics accordingly in some cases have been learned or supplemented from the page, the printed versions have had some influence on, for example, the ballad tradition (cf. Jersild 2005). On the other hand, literary poems written by established authors and printed in chapbooks have entered the oral process and resulted in an endless number of variants. We do find some variability in many kinds of printed texts, for instance, in songs and poems; they are not completely stable but reveal a blurred area between the Text with a capital T and versions/variants in the plural (cf. Atkinson 2002:25). Further, though song texts may have been learned from the page of a chapbook or a song book, the print has often been put aside after a while, and the song has entered into the singer's orally maintained repertory. There are examples of the reversed process as well: many singers have written down newly learned song texts or copied song texts from others' collections for their own use. Some of these songs have

⁵ One line of thought within musicology accentuates the notion of music as a visual and literary phenomenon by approaching musical notation as a system of signification in its own right (as opposed to a mere representation of musical sound), focusing on "correctness" and, for instance, graphic scores (cf., for example, Wadle 2010).

⁶ Atkinson 2002:1-38 contains a good overview of this discussion with ballads as a starting point, with references to, among other topics, reception theory and traditional referentiality (cf. Foley 1991).

entered the singer's active repertory, but others have seldom been performed and may rather be regarded as passive items in a collection (Ternhag 2008).

However, we should remember that both the popular circulation of broadsheets and chapbooks and the existence of hand-written song books imply a literacy that is restricted to the lyrics. Tunes have chiefly—in vernacular contexts and milieus more or less exclusively—been transmitted in oral/aural ways, far into the twentieth century, and into our own time. Likewise, performance style and also more general skills in traditional music-making have been transmitted aurally; in fact, these can only be transmitted aurally, whatever the music genre. Traditional singers have very seldom been able to use notation; this is one of the differences between the vocal and the instrumental traditions. Some fiddlers and other instrumentalists in the vernacular community have been able to read and write music; in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sweden it was primarily musicians who received their musical training in the military service who acquired this skill, while many peasant instrumentalists have played only by ear even into the twentieth century (a statement that of course says nothing about the respective quality of their performance). In the case of printed texts as well as notated music, these resources seem to have been used in vernacular and aural-dominated milieus mainly as a support for memory, or as a skeleton for a multi-faceted performance. Although there are numerous examples of songs that have been influenced by print and other forms of literacy, the transmission process as a whole—and the individual actors in the process—have maintained a high degree of oral-derived qualities, especially in the transmission of melodies.

Oral Elements in Living Tradition, Revival, and Post-Revival

What position, then, do verbal and musical oral elements hold today, in the late modern folk and world music scene of Sweden—and other countries or areas with similar characteristics? Are different expressions of orality found in different parts of the milieu? To begin, I would say that the present situation is characterized by roughly three partly overlapping and intermingling trends (see Figure 1 below):⁷

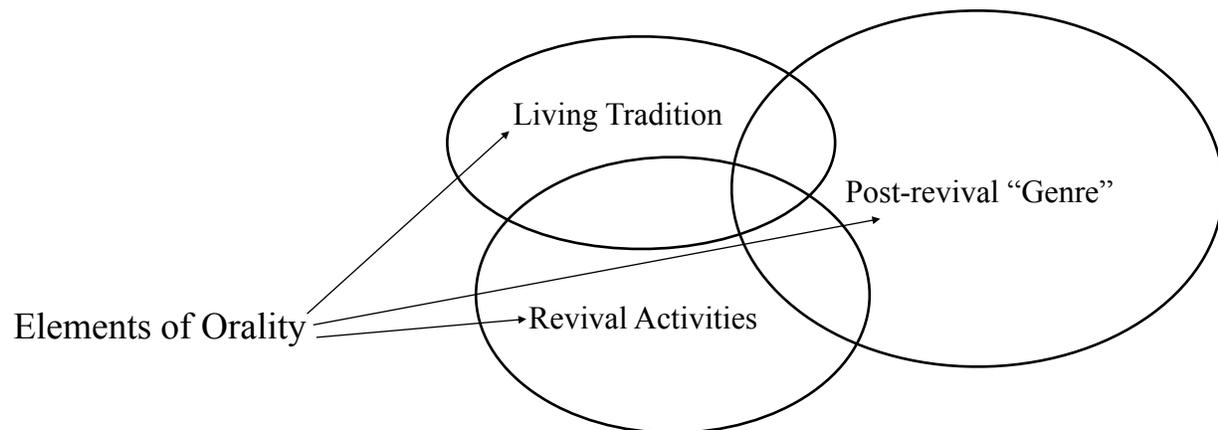


Figure 1: Three intermingling trends in late modern folk music.

⁷ This model can be regarded as an extension of Tamara Livingston's model for revivals (1999).

There is the so-called post-revival folk music “genre,” which is largely institutionalized, professionalized, and characterized by a great deal of arranged and technically processed music that is performed at large concerts and festivals as well as published as digital sound recordings by small or large companies. But we also find strands of living tradition, especially in certain musical families and in tradition-conscious areas. These strands run parallel with, and partly overlap, strands of what might be called “revival activities”—activities that rest on (and are rather similar to) the 1960s and 1970s vogue of revival or revitalization (see also Åkesson 2007:104). The “living tradition” and “revival” milieus are both mainly small-scale phenomena of the participatory and inclusive kind, in which aesthetic and social values intertwine. Phenomena such as unplugged performance, unaccompanied singing, face-to-face interaction, and a lower degree of formality characterize these milieus and can be contrasted to the greater amount of formality and organization, the elaborate instrumental arrangements, the big localities, and large audio systems along with extensive sound checks that characterize big festivals. This is not a question of absolutely separate worlds; the same musicians may partake in different kinds of events, and some festivals include participatory spaces such as workshops and jam sessions. However, one visible tendency since the 1980s has been the gradual increase in restrictions on musical meetings outside the festival stages and a greater distance between artists and audience (cf. Ronström 2001).

The quantity, or strength, of living tradition is not as great in Swedish vocal traditional music as in instrumental music, partly due to the greater amount of interest and resources available for the performance, collection, and publication of instrumental music and dance during the twentieth century. Instrumental music and dance music also had stronger positions in the manifestation of national and regional identity (cf. Boström et al. 2010). Furthermore, folk music collection was primarily done with pen and paper; only a few collectors used the phonograph, and sound recordings became common only as late as the 1940s. This means that we have very few sound recordings of traditional singing from the first half of the twentieth century. There is also a visible gap between generations, which becomes manifest in traditional singing. The revival started rather late, in the years around 1970, when few traditional singers were still active in the rapidly modernized Swedish society. This situation can be compared to the British, Irish, and North American revivals that were well under way in the 1950s and to a great extent overlapped with the existence of strong strands of living tradition (cf. Brocken 2003; Russell and Atkinson 2004). The generation gap has of course had its impact on the nature and amount of oral/aural transmission of singing traditions.

Another influential feature, common to many cultures or countries, is the fact that traditional songs often have been performed publicly by opera singers, by choirs, and in schools. In that process they have been adapted into a more or less classical idiom; they have become estranged from their oral context and—maybe most important of all—they have become known to most people in that idiom. The music hall or revue scene also set its imprint, especially on the comical songs.

One consequence of these factors is that the general idea of traditional song has been rather strongly influenced by an aesthetics that is nearer to the literate and the fixed than to oral tradition. Another consequence of the generation gap and the lack of direct person-to-person transmission of performance skills is that we are very much dependent today on archival field

recordings for the study and transmission of musical style elements such as phrasing and ornamentation or the way to carry forward the narrative or content of the song—that are present only in the individual performance. Similar situations seem to be found in other Western cultures,⁸ which makes this an important empirical starting point for studying different elements of orality in the present. In the following sections, I would like to concentrate on these questions:

- Which elements of orality and aurality can be clearly discerned today and how are they used?
- What is the relationship between these elements and what might be called long-term and affinity-centered qualities of oral culture?
- What are the consequences of the present-day mixture of face-to-face oral and “mediated aural” transmission?

Contemporary Elements of Orality: Transmission, Techniques, Ideals, and Style Markers

In consideration of the first of these questions, I will briefly discuss present-day forms of oral/aural *transmission*, the use of oral/aural *techniques*, and the characterization of traditional music or folk music as a “genre” or a micromusic (Slobin 1993) in terms of oral/aural *ideals*, especially aesthetic ideals, and *style markers*. These phenomena are clearly discernible in all parts of the folk music milieu; they are present as inherent elements of traditional music or as more or less consciously used tools (the degree of consciousness or intent depending on the individual and the context). However, they do not, of course, constitute a comprehensive mapping of “present-day orality.” There are sides of oral/aural transmission—and oral-derived culture as a whole—that relate to affinities, to face-to-face encounters, to participation and blurred boundaries between performer and audience, and to the singers’ and listeners’ lifeworlds and horizons of understanding. These relations and horizons are subject to constant change; I will come back to this idea later.

While discussing the Stewarts of Fetterangus, a Traveler family of singers, pipers, and story-tellers from northeast Scotland, the folklorist Tom McKean writes that in a family with a musical and verbal tradition of that kind, in spite of the use of literacy in several forms over a long period of time, “the horizontal ‘tradition as personal relationship’ . . . is fundamentally unchanged in form and in function” throughout the twentieth century (2004:182). This description is relevant for many twentieth-century contexts and for many cultures. It may be said that this horizontal process is still discernible with many revival and post-revival singers, although the vertical oral transmission between generations has ceased. A horizontal oral/aural transmission of songs and tunes, from person to person, is fairly widespread, is encouraged by teachers of traditional music, and is regarded as the most important type of learning among most folk singers.

But how does person-to-person transmission function in a late modern context? Is the amount and impact of literacy, mediation, and institutionalization so much greater today that the

⁸ Cf. Ramnarine 2003 and Hill 2005 on Finland.

horizontal transmission changes its character? Many personal relationships are of a much more temporary and formalized kind in the twenty-first century—they might still be personal, but in the context of a music course or a series of workshops rather than in the context of a family or a local community, and one does not learn songs over the kitchen table again and again from the same person. Is it, then, the same qualities that are transmitted in this contemporary oral/aural process?

Oral/aural transmission of songs, tunes, and style is consciously used as a pedagogical tool in traditional music education by teachers who themselves started out in the revival of the 1970s in Sweden, or who were themselves taught by revivalists. (We find a similar situation in Finland, especially at the Sibelius Academy of Helsinki; see Hill 2005.) An important issue of the revival was to replace the use of notation with learning by ear from live musicians, or from archival recordings, thus focusing on playing and singing style, idiom, sound, and individuality rather than just the songs and tunes. Pedagogues urge students to return to the sounding sources—the archival recordings—and to learn to master the idiom and style of traditional music, that is, to work orally and aurally. It is a common notion that if you have managed to master the idiom and use the tools you have acquired, you can learn songs and tunes also from print and notation and perform them in the same way as the songs you have learned directly from another singer (cf. Åkesson 2007:166, 228).

As very few people today are brought up immersed in family or local tradition, few singers learn songs by hearing them from childhood onwards. The most common ways to learn traditional music are to attend workshops and courses or to learn from recordings. If you want to become a professional musician, you probably train at one of the music colleges that nowadays include traditional music. Oral transmission is *re-contextualized* into the education system. I would argue that it is also being *re-negotiated* through the combination of, on the one hand, (horizontal) face-to-face transmission by ear and, on the other hand, field recordings as well as the use of recording equipment such as cell phones or mini discs in the classroom setting, where students record the singing of their teachers and their fellow students and learn songs that way. This interchange between face-to-face transmission and recordings is part of what I call “mediated aural.” By this term I allude to a conscious recycling process: a sound recording of one separate performance represents one frozen version of a song, but by learning the song and creating one’s own individual version of it, that is, by subjecting it once more to variation and interpretation, this recorded and acquired item may be “recycled” or re-entered into a process that is chiefly oral/aural, though certain levels are out of necessity mediated. The process comprehends obvious oral elements as long as the song is not a fixed version but subject to possible continuous change and variation with each new singer.⁹

The educational use of mediated aural transmission is a characteristic of this era of disembedded traditions, when knowledge of traditional material is to a great extent institutionalized and the acquisition of this knowledge is part of an education. But the

⁹ However, the song in question may at a certain time become fixed and elaborately arranged, recorded, or performed on a big concert stage and disseminated to many listeners in that form; thus it becomes subject to another, more decidedly mediated and mediatized type of change. In this shape the song has become more of a work of art; it is much more difficult to imagine this version’s re-entrance into something that might be termed oral tradition. Cf. Glassie 1995.

phenomenon is not merely connected to present-day audio and recording technologies; there is a similarity to the way song texts have moved between oral transmission and printed media such as chapbooks. The element of mediation or literacy leaves a trace but does not make the whole chain of transmission non-oral. Another parallel is instrumental tunes being learned from transcriptions (when these are the only existing source material) but internalized and in the next phase played and taught only by ear (cf. Ramsten 1991). For these wanderings between written or sound recordings on the one hand, and present-moment orality on the other, we may use the terms *de-mediatization* and *re-mediatization*.¹⁰

A widely disseminated concept is, of course, “secondary oral tradition.” But if we look at transmission of songs historically as an intermingling of oral and literate or mediated elements, it is not easy to decide exactly where the border lies between “primary” and “secondary.” How much influence from mediation or literacy is accepted within a process that we may term “chiefly oral” or “oral-derived” is an open question; as Ruth Finnegan pointed out (1988:125), the literary and oral modes mutually interact. One point of view here might be that time and maturation are crucial for the recycling of a musical item into an oral-dominated process: the singer or musician in question needs to put the recording or sheet aside and internalize the song or the tune, performing it again and again over a long time, and develop her/his own individual version in terms of nuances, ornamentation, and variability. This is the declared intention and acknowledged ideal from the teachers’ side, but there is not much space today in the “folk and world music” genre for the time-consuming maturation that characterizes oral transmission as a wider concept.

Oral/aural techniques for textual and musical re-creation, transformation, arrangement, and other such processes differ from the ones typical for literature or musical notation. These techniques may be used intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously. Some contemporary Swedish performers and teachers have analyzed older singing styles in archival recordings, both for their own use and to create pedagogical models. These oral/aural techniques are now taught in contemporary folk music education. Some of them concern a micro level of performance, such as ornamentation, the use of grace notes, slight changes of wording, or the phrasing of the melody in free rhythm. Others concern macro level changes and exchanges of text and melody, such as adding or omitting phrases, stanzas, or motifs; making compilations of different text variants; or exchanging refrains or melodies.

My more extensive study (Åkesson 2007) of ballad singing in the present as well as in older sources can provide examples of such oral/aural techniques. If we observe the variation and transformation of ballad singing in historical sources (including written documents) and compare it to present-time arrangements, we of course become aware of differences: in older source material the singers often seem to have reinforced oral elements such as incremental repetition and parallelism, while today most musicians tend to shorten the length of the ballad, omit repetition and parallelism, and replace them with instrumental introductions and interludes. These latter techniques demand some degree of musical literacy as a prerequisite, as well as a general modernist and “non-traditional” approach to lyrical and musical material. Literacy and

¹⁰ Cf. Lundberg et al. 2003:68, where the authors use the terms *de-mediaization* and *re-mediaization*, coined by Roger Wallis and Krister Malm (1984). In this text I use the forms *de-mediatization* and *re-mediatization* respectively, in accordance with the general use of the term *mediatization*.

mediation probably also lie behind the wide-ranging use of bricolage because of so many versions being accessible in print or in sound recordings and thus inviting singers to mix and blend; bricolage is certainly also an element of late modernity. The same prerequisites lie behind the elaborated musical arrangement—used with inspiration from other genres—such as changing melody and meter within a song. Naturally, most of these oral/aural techniques are common to several song cultures and not specifically Scandinavian.¹¹

The following techniques that are used today seem to be oral-derived:

- borrowing stanzas from other ballads
- borrowing refrains from other ballads
- completing the narrative
- stressing certain motifs
- melodic variation (ornaments, intonation, and so forth)
- minor changes to text
- creating stanzas from formulaic elements
- creating new melodies

These techniques are all parts of an orally/aurally dominated transmission, and are today used rather spontaneously as well as taught in folk music education, which means that they constitute a strong element in contemporary performances. Certainly these techniques are used much more intentionally and consciously today, and in more formalized contexts. Elements of orality and aurality are formalized in late modern society.

Orality/aurality may also be discussed in the context of a genre's *style and aesthetic ideals*. These ideals are shown through the use of style markers, which are derived from and modeled on archival recordings, filtered through contemporary performers' notions, and influenced somewhat by idioms of world music, early music, chamber music, jazz, and rock—that is, genres that are characterized by both orality and literacy. Some of the revival pioneers have approached songs and singing mostly intuitively, absorbing some stylistic traits from their models but without verbalizing this process. Other pioneers have analyzed, verbalized, and constructed pedagogical models for teaching and transmitting older singing styles (cf. Åkesson 2007:214). The point here is that whether they are verbalized or not, the ideals are based on aural sources.

Again, because of the lack of living tradition in the shape of live, traditional, unaccompanied, and unarranged singing in contemporary formal or informal contexts, singers as well as scholars in Sweden depend very much on archival sound recordings. There are also other kinds of sources—for instance, literary descriptions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, earlier collectors' field notes, and the collectors' transcriptions of tunes as both drafts and fair copies—that give us information about the way traditional singing was performed before the strong impact of school and choir singing, radio, and gramophone records in the early twentieth

¹¹ See, for example, Sweers 2005 on similar elements in the English folk song revival.

century.¹² To be able to make what we may call more or less “historically informed” performances and interpretations of songs (or “historically informed” scholarly presentations and analyses) we must use all these sources.

Some important style markers regarding singing style that have been put forward by scholars and pedagogues are the following:¹³

- chest voice
- relatively low women’s voices and high men’s voices
- no “classical” vibrato
- placing of sound in the front part of the voice cavity
- approaching the pitch from below or above
- the use of sounding and even ornamented consonants
- grace notes applied individually, with a blurred boundary to ornaments
- ornamentation ruled by sound and phoneme qualities, not semantic ones

Several of these style elements are to be found in traditional singing from different parts of the world, and also in classical singing from areas outside the Western world, but they are seldom found in Western school or choir singing. Most of them are impossible to discern from written music (except for some ornaments and grace notes); they must be learned by ear, by an aural process. Style elements such as these have become an important means for giving traditional music as a genre its profile—contrasted to traditional songs performed by choirs or by classically trained singers. The highlighted stylistic traits are, of course, selected in one way or another by pioneers of the vocal revival as well as by scholars.¹⁴ This ambition to (re)construct a singing style should be regarded as a parallel to a similar process that took place among fiddlers about two decades earlier, which highlighted drones and other older musical elements such as multi-stringed bowing techniques.

What we see here is roughly a question of fortifying certain style markers from earlier layers of time, and of combining ideals of the ancient with ideals of the unusual. The style markers or stylistic traits were certainly present in the performance of older singers, but in many cases they were not all present simultaneously in the performance of one individual. Some of the younger singers today, however, use many of the style elements at once, and more frequently than in archival recordings. The need to identify a contemporary style or genre of traditional music among a great number of available genres has led to what Ramsten terms “fortified tradition” (1992:37). There is also a strong connection to the focus on musical performance and

¹² There have been extensive discussions on source criticism associated with the transcription of traditional music, not least because of the late introduction of sound recordings by Swedish collectors. For an overview, see Jersild and Åkesson 2000.

¹³ Cf. Jersild and Ramsten 1988; Rosenberg 1993; Jersild and Åkesson 2000, chapters 8 and 9.

¹⁴ I would like to emphasize that this analytical work has been carried out in a cumulative way, where Scandinavian (mostly Swedish and Norwegian) scholars and singers/pedagogues have alternated and used each other’s analyses.

voice qualities, rather than on narrative and content, in the Swedish vocal vogue of the 1980s onward (cf. Åkesson 2007:301).

Oral Techniques and Style Markers versus Oral-Derived Culture in a Wider Sense

Traditional music is a large, disparate, multi-faceted body of text, music, styles, persons, content, and contexts. It is a common cultural heritage, which is continually both created and handed down. Today it is also a subculture, a micromusic or “genre.” This dual nature certainly raises some questions about the quantity, the qualities, and the characteristics of present-day orality. Much of the present-day use of oral/aural transmission, techniques, and style markers is associated with the institutionalized and professionalized folk and world music milieus, where identity as a musician is a matter of both status and making a living. Many of the more affinity-related and participation-centered values are stronger in small-scale, living tradition or revival circles, in which musical identity may embrace a wider and more holistic field. If we regard these contexts as both separate and overlapping, as I proposed at the beginning of this article, the pattern might be illustrated as in Figure 2.

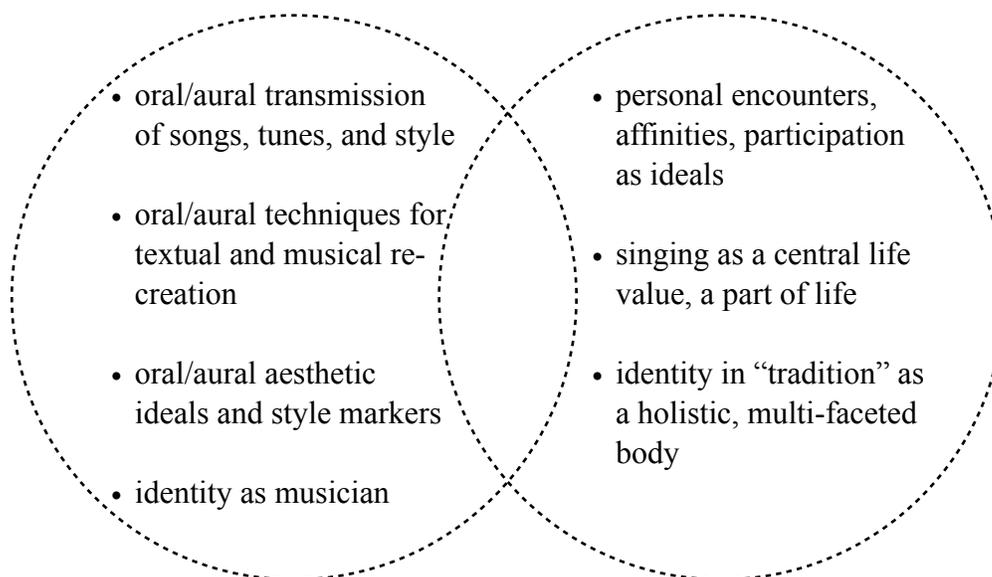


Figure 2: Ideals in different but overlapping contemporary folk song milieus.

When orality and aurality are regarded as ideals and techniques as in the discussion above, they are attached primarily to the aesthetic and formal side of singing and represent a rather narrow aspect of orality. The ideals and techniques are associated with performance-as-form and performance-as-sound. In becoming a tool, orality in this sense runs some risk of being regarded as a technical quality of transmission and performance. There is less space for other qualities of oral culture, such as those attached to singing as a central life value and as an important everyday activity; that kind of approach was expressed by many older singers in archival interviews. There is also less space for personal relations to forerunners and affinities for

singers not only as singers and sources of information, but also as individuals. Some young professional folk musicians with a conservatory education, several of whom try to make their living as artists, seem to stress idiom more than affinity and emphasize richness of arrangement more than richness of repertory. Many are not particularly interested in, for example, the maintenance of traditional repertoires as such. In a more “traditional” context, the singers who knew many songs were regarded as good and important singers; they were the keepers of collective memory. Besides repertory, the singers’ general knowledge of tradition and local history was valued together with their performance, story-telling ability, style, and voice quality.

Today, in late modern society, there has been a shift of focus: it is primarily style and voice quality, together with technical skill and elaborated arrangements, that are valued, just as they are in jazz or art music. This shift is understandable when many try to make a living through their music-making; we are regarding the inevitable consequences of professionalization and a closer connection to official cultural institutions as well as to the music market. In this process, however, traditional music becomes something performed by the few for the consumption of the many, rather than performed in a company where the roles of listener and performer shift to and fro, and where participatory and presentational sides of performance are valued as equal. This development indicates a doubtful future for oral culture regarded as a broader phenomenon—although I, of course, have made some simplifications in order to render a clear image of the present situation.

Formalization and institutionalization are no doubt necessary processes for the future existence of traditional music in late modern society. It would, however, be an oversimplification to regard the present as a post-traditional society (cf. Giddens 1994) and focus merely on “orality as a tool.” A great part of the concert and festival audience consists of people who are involved in different kinds of informal, small-scale activities that are more closely connected to affinities, everyday aesthetics, and lifeworlds. Within the field of traditional music, both dancing and playing of an instrument lead quite a strong existence as participatory cultural expressions, and singing is not wholly dedicated to stage performance. Outside that field there is little general interest in expressions of immaterial oral culture in Swedish society, and folkloristics has ceased to exist as an academic discipline. However, a revival of story-telling started in the 1990s.

Further, oral tradition as a wider concept contains and rests on, among other things, a great amount of extra-musical and extra-textual knowledge, which is probably also necessary for the future understanding of traditional culture. When listening to old songs, tales, or other expressions of oral-derived culture, the audience needs some knowledge of the background and the genre to make the sometimes obscure texts—or modal tunes—comprehensible. In small communities, traditional singing has been performed as communication between a singer and a knowledgeable audience, with different individuals taking turns as performers and with a sufficient distribution of knowledge covering the need for traditional referentiality (Foley 1991).

This kind of knowledge is mostly to be found in small-scale folk music milieus today, where enthusiasts strive to create and make accessible common frames of reference.¹⁵

The acquisition of knowledge and skill in songs and singing, as well as extra-musical and extra-textual knowledge, are time-consuming procedures, and are issues involved with maturity. A feature common to oral and oral-derived traditions worldwide is the notion that it takes time to become a performer or an expert; it takes more than skill and necessitates internalizing one's own life experience into performance. Becoming a singer or story-teller is regarded as a lifelong mission or object, not a pastime to which one gives a couple of years and then leaves for something else. But here is another of the current obstacles for the long-term qualities of oral traditions: today one is expected to move on through life from one project to the next, and to alternate between different cultural areas. There is little time and space in an educational curriculum for a deep immersion in a tradition, even though most teachers try their best to stimulate their students to continue studying on their own. However, there is a certain amount of fluidity in the musical and social spaces; there are blurred boundaries and some comings and goings between the institutionalized and professionalized milieus on one side and the informal revival circles on the other. In that kind of exchange are probably embedded the possibilities, such as they are, for a continuance of wider oral/aural values and qualities.

Conclusion

In late modern societies traditional arts tend to become disembedded from a functioning vernacular milieu and at least partly become absorbed into institutionalized and formalized structures. Traditional singing in present-day Sweden is one evident example of an area where oral tradition as a comprehensive concept, characterized by elements such as affinities to tradition-bearers, long-term immersion, and participatory performance, is being transformed and renegotiated into a selection of oral techniques, style markers, and aesthetic ideals connected to the post-revival music scene as well as to music education. Oral transmission is to a great extent recontextualized and mixed with mediated aurality as an interchange between face-to-face, by-ear transmission and audiovisual recordings. Certain oral-derived elements, techniques, and ideals are being fortified and carried into the field of post-revival traditional music. It is rather in the simultaneously existing milieus where the strands of living tradition and revival are strong that we find other expressions connected to oral tradition, such as an emphasis on extra-textual and extra-musical knowledge, participatory ideals, and an idea of singing as meaning-making and a central life value.

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¹⁵ Though such issues are beyond the scope of the current essay, I am aware that this kind of extra-textual knowledge should be further discussed in connection with the notion of musical or expressive specialists being appointed by knowledgeable peers (cf. Merriam 1964:123-40; Herndon and McLeod 1982:92-102); issues concerning ethnopoeitics, the role of the audience, and traditional referentiality (Briggs 1988:5-22; Foley 1991:7-12 and 1995:6-11); and, furthermore, ideas of embodied knowledge.

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