

Polska Travels: Sweden

Swedish folk music for a baroque orchestra



25.5.2018, h. 20

Copenhagen

KoncertKirken, Blågårdsgade 6A

26.5.2018, h. 15

Malmö

S:t Andreas Kyrka, Fridhemstorget

Hurra Barockorkester

***with students from Malmö Musikhögskolan
and Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium***

Peter Spissky, concertmaster

Mats Edén, 5-string viola d'amore

dir. James Salomon Kahane

"Polska" is not simply an adjective to define something coming from Poland: it is also the name of the arguably most popular form of folk dance in Scandinavia! Soon after its central European Renaissance origin, its peculiar history brought it to Sweden where it peacefully conquered the hearts and dancing feet of nobles and peasants alike.

Polskas are also the protagonists of Krishna Nagaraja's doctoral artistic research, whose second concert hereby revisits melodies from old Swedish collections as well as traditional variants from Western Sweden, in the guise of two newly composed orchestral works.

PROGRAMME

Trad. Swedish arr. Krishna Nagaraja (1975)

A Swedish suite (2018)

- I. Overture
- II. Proportio set
- III. Polonesses
- IV. Dahlset
- V. Proportio set
- VI. Minuets
- VII. Polonesses
- VIII. Proportio set-Contradances

Gränser (2018)

for 5-string viola d'amore and string orchestra

- I. Hagfors Bruk
- II. Långlock
- III. Över gränsen

Programme notes

A Swedish suite

The compilation of the *Swedish suite* has been conducted after several months of consultation of both the available literature (essays, studies, etc.) and the original handwritten Swedish folk tunebooks from the 17th and 18th century (*spelmansböcker*). The *spelmansböcker* I used for the choice of the tunes for the suite were selected on the basis of the date of their compilation, and their availability. The history of the polska is marked by several turning points, but one major evolution took place around 1730-40, peaking around the half of the century and well into the following two decades: in that period a more "gallant" type of polonesse, full of sixteenth-notes, surpassed the older type, which was more based on eighth-notes, phrases of irregular lengths, modal language and a closer adherence to the Polish rhythms from which they descended. Due to my interest in the older type, I decided to use only tunebooks dating earlier than 1740. The tunes were therefore extracted from the following *spelmansböcker*:

- Anders Törns samling (1690)
- Brita Strobills samling (1693)
- Finnspångsamlingen (second half of 1600)
- Gustav Blidströms samling (1715)
- Pehr Anderssons notbok (1731)

The *Swedish suite* focuses on poloneses that were circulating in Sweden at the height of the second wave of the diffusion of the polska, namely the second half of 1600 going into the first decades of 1700. It includes singled-out polonesse tunes as well as poloneses within the context of a *proportio* set, following the usual tripartite scheme:

1. walking duple time tune (*polonesse*)
2. same melody in triple time (*proportio*)
3. faster tune in triple time (*serra*)

The eight movements of the suite alternate these with other tunes, to provide variety within the rhythmically homogenous context of poloneses. The first one represents an example of an *Ouverture* one could find in many baroque suites from Germany and France, where a solemn opening melody flows into a fugue or fugato, after which a slow episode, based or not based on the first one, concludes the movement. The melodies I used are respectively: a Swedish psalm normally sung upon the arrival of spring, celebrating the new awakening of nature; a famous polska, known to this day in countless variants; an original conclusive elaboration.

The second movement is a *proportio* set from Anders Törn's collection, which provided both the melody and the bass. The realization of the other voices followed a fairly simple and straightforward early baroque style. Putting several tunes in a row into a single set is probably more of a modern concept than it is historical: however, the three poloneses presented in the third movement suggested a nice organic arch that made me opt for a composite set rather than a one-tune arrangement.

The second interpolation between polonesse sets occurs with the *Dahlset*, which

presents and elaborates two examples of *daldans*, a general term sometimes occurring in old sources which refers perhaps more to the peasant-like character than to a specific provenance of the melody (Dalarna). A second proportio set is presented in the fifth movement, this time entirely transcribed (although partially re-elaborated and adapted) from the Brita Strobill's collection. The sixth movement pays homage to the polska's rival/companion, the minuet. Taken from a period when polskas and minuets were starting not only to coexist but also mingle with one another, the minuets presented here bear traces of older and purely baroque patterns, of typical minuet figures, as well as hints of polish-flavoured rhythms.

The last movement represents a formal coronation of the attempt to find variety within a homogenous landscape, since it combines a *proportio set* with two country dances or "contradances", a type rarely found in Swedish collections from that period. This long and articulated set travels from duple time to triple time and back to duple time, becoming more and more lively as it approaches its end.

***Gränser* - Concerto for 5-string Viola d'Amore and strings**

A fascination for irregularities and asymmetries has always drawn me towards a type of polska that is generally heard in the Western regions of Sweden, and which apparently becomes more and more rhythmically complex as it gets closer to the border with Norway: the uneven polskas from Värmland. These tunes constitute the main material that inspired *Gränser*, a piece written for Mats Edén and his 5-string viola d'amore with resonance strings and string orchestra.

A remarkable element in these tunes is a the tendency of the rhythmical beats to fluctuate inside the bar so that the standard polska triple-time bar with even beats ($3/4$, for instance, or $9/16$) is turned into other types of polska by stretching the duration of some beats while shrinking others (for example $2+4+3/16$, *kort-etta*, *tidig-tvåa* polskas, or $4+3+2/16$, *lång-etta*, *kort-trea* Finnskog pols). These so-called "asymmetrical metres" can challenge the basic individuation of essential metrical elements such as the downbeat, or the foot-tapping on beat 1 and 3 which is the typical "polska heartbeat". The piece is largely based on the complex relationship between asymmetrical metres and their perception.

Metre is an inferred structure, created in the mind of the performer and the listener; its grid can be seen as a shape made of imaginary lines, borders between areas that can be crossed in order to explore new territories and mix the elements one carries from one area to the other. The whole piece can be seen as a journey to cross several boundaries: between folk and classical or contemporary; between baroque players (the orchestra) and folk fiddlers (Mats Edén); between arrangement and composition; between a repertoire that is oral *par excellence* and notated music; between musical forms such as different types of asymmetrical polskas; and ultimately between nations. In sum, *Gränser* is a musical reflection on the concept of borders, inspired by traditional tunes that are typical from a border region.

The piece is based on several folk tunes used as sources:

I. Hagfors Bruk

- **Vallåt**

Improvised by Mats Edén upon a traditional tune from Värmland, Sweden.

- **Hagfors Bruk**

Traditional polska from Värmland, also known as "Polska efter CJ Björklund".

II. Långlock

- **Långlock**

Traditional tune after Johan Hollseter from Trysil, Eastern Norway close to the boundary with Värmland.

III. Över gränsen

- **Polska efter Olof Andersson i Höltebergshaget**

Traditional tune from Eda, Värmland.

- **Puken i kjerketårnet**

Traditional tune after Magne Halberget from Gravberget, Eastern Norway close to the boundary with Värmland.

The overall form of the concerto rests upon the two pillars of the first and last movement, both arrangements and re-inventions of Värmland polskas. They are both introduced by slower, improvisatory moments presenting a *vallåt* (as a simple short introduction to Hagfors Bruk) and a *långlock* (that becomes a full-length second movement flowing directly into the final movement).

I. Hagfors Bruk

In the first movement, the core idea is to have the "polska heartbeat", namely the beating on beat 1 and 3 of the bar, as a reference grid inside which the placement of beat 2 can fluctuate until a common consensus of the players and the soloist is reached. This is achieved by giving the movement the form of a "fiddle workshop" where the teacher (Mats Edén) presents the tune while the students (the orchestra) learn it by focusing on single aspects. It is conceived as a written improvisation where the concatenation of events reflects a possible system to learn a tune like Hagfors Bruk, one that I would apply myself in such situation. The double bass, for instance, has the responsibility of making the ground pulse appear at the beginning of the improvisatory part, while the other players start focusing on more melodic material. The first part of the movement is devoted to the "learning" of the actual tune.

Subsequently, a *divertissement* on some key elements of the B part of the tune begins; through a dense polyrhythmic episode, the music leads us to where the full arrangement of the tune finally appears. Once the trajectory from 1-3 beating to 2+4+3/16 groove has been completed, it is then time to travel even further: the third and last part of the movement aims at stretching the 2+4+3/16 pattern from within, literally inflating the second beat of the bar until, at the end, it "bursts" into silence.

II. Långlock

The main role here is given back to the soloist, who presents the tune while the orchestra, this time, barely listens and participates in the short episodes where the "herd call" is echoed and bounces through imaginary mountains and valleys. The strings are only invited to play the melody - and challenge themselves with microtonal intonation - towards the end, from which the Värmland polska groove slowly emerges again.

III. Över gränsen

The idea behind this movement came to me when I listened to a YouTube video of Mats Berglund playing a [polska after Olof Andersson](#). Not knowing the tune, I didn't know what kind of polska it was, and while trying to figure out the placement of the downbeat, I perceived it as a 4+3+2/16 polska, namely a Finnskog pols with a long first beat, a regular second beat and a short third beat. To my surprise though, when I listened to other versions of the tune, I noticed that they unmistakably interpreted it as a 2+4+3/16 polska. I went back to Mats Berglund's rendition and realised that my beat perception had been somewhat fooled: the accentuation of beat 2 was so strong that to my ears it sounded like the 1 of a Finnskog pols. I repeated this experiment with a couple of baroque musicians who had no real knowledge of asymmetrical polskas, and they both had a similar interpretation, proving that the performing style can truly stretch the outline of a tune type.

I decided to if enact a similar auditory illusion in the third movement of the concerto, where the original *kort-etta* polska after Olof Andersson is transformed into a mutant *lång-etta* "pols after Olof Andersson". To make this trajectory more articulated, I decided to involve another tune into the dialectics, one that was originally a Finnskog pols and that could reversely be transformed into a *kort-etta* polska. I found the perfect match in [Puken i kjerketårnet](#), whose repetitive and hypnotic B part was flexible enough to be stretched and pulled into another time signature. Based on these two mirroring tunes, I devised the following formal arch – ironically very symmetrical, in spite of the rhythmical asymmetry of the tunes:

1. Polska after Olof Andersson, in the original form 2+4+3/16
2. Puken i Kjerketårnet, in the mutated form 2+4+3/16
3. Pattern switch
4. Puken i Kjerketårnet, in the original form 4+3+2/16 (I used an approximated 3+3+2/16 version, for practical reasons)
5. Polska after Olof Andersson, in the mutated form 3+3+2/16

The crucial pattern switch is the "passport" to cross the line between *kort-etta* and *lång-etta* (and metaphorically from Sweden to Norway). The border is crossed almost without notice, and the travel of transformation can now continue until the end.

K. Nagaraja