



How it All Started with Swedish Folk Music at KMH¹

A Personal Retrospect

By Ole Hjorth

Ole Hjorth, born 1930 – folk musician, violinist and violin/fiddle teacher. Started working at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm (KMH) at the middle of the 1970's. Responsible for the folk music educations at KMH until 1995.

At the beginning of the 1970's an organizational committee (OMUS) was formed, with the purpose of reforming higher education in music in Sweden. Until 1971 the *Royal Academy of Music* had the main responsibility for higher education in music, but after that the educational institutions became "musikhögskola", i.e. colleges, with responsibility for themselves. The old system was primarily concentrated on western art music. OMUS thought that the higher education in music did not correspond to the musical society of today, and set up committees and expert groups to find out how it should be instead.

These expert groups noticed, among other things, that where important parts of Swedish musical life which ought to be a part of the picture – especially Swedish folk music and afro-and jazz music, which were decided by these groups to be "neglected genres". The OMUS reform aimed at changing and bringing new things without making the running of the schools more expensive; very bad starting point for improvements. I, myself, was elected for an expert group that was, among other things, going to concern itself with what was called "neglected genres".

1 (KMH = Kungliga Musikhögskolan; Royal College of Music in Stockholm)





Swedish folk music had – via Hjort Anders Olsson (with whom I am not related) – provided my way into music on the whole and was an important part of my identity as a musician. I was, at that time, employed as a non-permanent teacher at KMH, without any connection to folk music. During the 1960's I was employed by the *Royal Opera*, playing in the *Royal Opera-House Orchestra*. Beside that I was teaching a couple of years, in the Local Council Music School (Kommunala musikskolan), through which my interest in teaching and teaching methods was developed. 1969 – 71 I studied at KMH to be a qualified violin teacher, whereupon I decided to leave the Royal Opera and focused on teaching the violin. My folk music also had a very natural position in my teaching.

My commission in the OMUS expert group suited me very well from an ideological point of view. My point of view was that Swedish folk music was treated in a very condescending way by the classical establishment, which had always deranged me. Of course folk music occurred occasionally in council music schools, but it was generally taught by teachers with a background in western classical music. For folk music as a genre that was, of course, not very satisfying.

I regarded the work of the local council music schools as being central for all music. Yet, I saw a problem in the fact that only musicians practicing western classical music could get formal qualifications to teach, which depended on the fact that the classical repertoire, without exception, was the basis for admission to the educations that trained instrumental teachers, as well as examinations of the students after the education. Musicians with another background and without a college education could, at the best, get an employment with a lower salary (at the time a salary class system was used). I saw this as, of course, very unfair.

I haven't kept my official letter to OMUS, but remember well the essential of its content. Its aim was to legalize the traditional teaching and "handing over" of folk music by giving



“spelmän”, folk musicians, the possibility to become qualified teachers, with an education that was useful on the labour market. Accordingly, the starting point was not an education for to become a folk musician, but that active folk musicians, through a formal qualification, should be given the possibility to work in a music school on the same conditions as other violin teachers. Furthermore, their particular competence could bring new elements into the ordinary teaching, and, in that way, be a great asset. From what I can see now I was right. These musicians were a great educational resource.

Concerning the question of having an education aiming at musicianship, I didn't have a clear idea about how this should, or could, be done. Therefore I let that wait for the present. It was a question of, in the first place, to get one's foot into the system, and not be to hasty. It was important to move at a slow pace. I therefore suggested that this should happen through an education called *Fiolpedagogisk fortbildning av verksamma spelmän* (Further education in violin/fiddle teaching methods for active folk musicians). I.e. a course aiming at the largest group (of folk musicians), the fiddle players. To qualify for the course the applicant would have to substantiate, through a playing test, one's instrumental, musical and stylistic skills (to show that the applicant was naturally rooted in some Swedish folk music tradition). My official letter should, according to my proposal, be referred to all folk musicians organizations in the country for consideration (In folk music Sweden of that time the only organizations where *Ungdomsringen*² and *Sveriges Spelmäns Riksförbund*³!). The responses where positive, as far as I can remember. OMUS then commissioned KMH to create such a course for folk music (as well as one for afro/jazz) and KMH, on its part, commissioned me to carry out a pilot course in the autumn of 1976. The school first suggested, precautiously, a course lasting for one term. The headmaster immediately changed it, sensibly enough, to one year. The year after, the course already became regular, with entrance exami-

2 Literally “The Youth Circle”, an organization for folklore of all kinds, now called *Folkdansringen*, “The Folk Dance Circle”.

3 The National Association for Sweden's Folk Musicians



nations. During the spring of 1977 the course was extended to two years, according to requirements from the students, and the same change was done on the classical and afro/jazz side. The corresponding classical course aimed at students who had passed through a musicians education or had equivalent qualifications, and the directions for the course intended for folk musicians was meant to be similar to that. In 1981 the option "I/E⁴ Swedish folk music" of the instrumental-/ensemble teacher study programme came into existence.

Concerning a musicians education within the genre Swedish folk music, I didn't have any ideas as to how that would be designed. I was more interested in the educational side, which I saw as the most natural way to go. Another important issue was what the education should lead to. My thought was to give folk musicians a natural way of supporting themselves by teaching their music, and at the same time they would be a significant educational resource. I realized that a certain breadth in genre knowledge was positive for the music school, which influenced the contents of the course. For me the vital point was that it is a matter of teaching music, and that it is important that the teacher knows the music that he or she is teaching.

Therefore, strictly materialistically, my view was – especially with the limited resources with regards to time and money – that the content should be concentrated mostly on what needed to be supplemented, and least on what the students were already best at. With that as a starting point, they had, so to say, already been examined in their own genre when passing the entrance examination. In practice this meant that western classical music was prioritized during the education, regarding their main instrument. This was received positively. I, similarly, had an idea that the students on the classical side also needed to broaden their horizons with an addition of folk music. I never got any response to that. The people on that side had a different way of thinking. There's no money for that, the word was. To me it was a question of prioritizing.

⁴ I/E, instrumental and ensemble teacher, is the common education to have for teachers in music schools. It extends over four years (240 ECTS credits).



Insufficient resources and a lack of specialized teachers in some subjects meant compromises. The meagre allowances for guest teachers constituted a great problem. Subjects within the main genre of the course, Swedish folk music, were teaching methods and practical experience of teaching adults, and folk dance. Important parts were teaching adults, aiming at folk music, and making good use of the students own repertoire, in the way that they should contribute as much as possible with tunes that we analysed and, in part, used in the practical activities.

The lessons in teaching methods for children were held together with the classical students. The purpose was to create a greater acceptance on the labour market, but it was also good for the students to study together with others.

The practice with adult beginners meant teaching in groups of total beginners. My idea was that it is a good basic experience to have a group of pupils that have never touched a violin/fiddle before. The students did this as team project with me as the tutor. Adult beginners on fiddle/violin was, commonly, a neglected group, which it felt quite natural for us to take care of. The practice with children took place both internally, together with classical students, and externally through classroom observations⁵ and participation in my own teaching of whole classes in primary school⁶.

Concerning higher levels of teaching it was a question of both group and private lessons. The folk music subjects were my responsibility, except for dancing, where Henry Sjöberg was the obvious choice.

That the tuition of the students own main instrument (violin/fiddle) was "classical" owed to the fact that the emphasis was on training fiddle/violin teachers with Swedish folk music as their main genre for working at local council music schools. Yet another type of one-sided teachers was not desirable. The fiddle was the most common folk music instrument and the closest possibilities for work were places as fiddle/violin teachers.

⁵ We went to see quite a number of skilled violin teachers.

⁶ /Ditte'r remark.

⁶ Ages 7 – 9



The ensemble subject assumed, over the years, a nice form, and the (four year) instrumental/ensemble teacher education was designed to open the educational door for musicians on other instruments (than the fiddle) as well as broaden and strengthen the folk music genre at the Royal College.

We did a number of study trips, to the Shetlands for example, and Hungary and Finland, and participated in a few ESTA⁷ conferences. We played concerts, like lunch hour concerts at the Concert Hall in Stockholm, and shows, among others at the Cultural Centre in Stockholm, where people who had never played before were taught how to play the fiddle/violin for half an hour or so. We provided the instruments. Those were experiences that I have continued to develop even after my retirement from the Royal College. They have exerted influence on my view of teaching.

We played students concerts. The one which is the most vivid in my memory as an example of our position at the Royal College, was the time when the audience consisted of three buddies of one of the students, and the college's director of studies. That was the situation back then.

The scarce economy resulted in the idea that the students should participate in the lessons with the classical students, with teachers that had an understanding of the situation. Meaning compromises. When, for example, guest teachers were invited to the teaching methods lessons concerned with teaching children, this was coordinated by the "classical" side.

The resources for the folk music courses' own genre were far to meagre. The curriculum for the lessons in "Music and society"⁸ were, as an example, utterly disgracefully useless for the folk music students, and they protested forcefully.

After having stipulated the subjects of the course, the number of lessons were decided on, and that was that. It was extremely difficult to bring about any changes. All changes of the con-

⁷ European String Teachers Association

⁸ What is commonly called "music history".



tent of the course had to be agreed on by the study board, and that was not a simple process.

The main problem for us working with the folk music educations was not real reluctance as much as an monumental ignorance at influential levels, together with a sort of amiable lack of interest. That is the toughest type of resistance you can have, since it is so difficult to answer to. Nor did our presence at the college arouse any interesting issues for the college as a whole, as I experienced it. Among the folk musicians themselves that happened quite a lot, which was a good thing. Classical music was the all-embracing genre, who knew everything. This was reflected in the fact that the term violin meant classical violin, piano meant classical piano etc. The expression "seriös musik" is still synonymous with western art music. All the way up to the Royal Music Academy.

One year before my retirement a door was opened for Swedish folk music when I/we "got" our own department, with budget and all. I got fantastic help from Sven Ahlbäck to manage that whole year. Retirement came at the right moment. The new possibilities could be taken over by young, knowledgeable and keen people.

When I look back upon these years I get a tremendous feeling of what I feel that I have taken part in. So much enjoyable and inspiring and so much to learn from, but also, as is evident in the above, tough times. What carried me through all the hard work was the incredibly positive power from the students.

This article, which was printed in the book *1976 – 2006, 30 år med folk-musik på KMH* (1976 – 2006, 30 years with folk music at the Royal College), is translated by Ditte Andersson, and published here with the permission of Ole Hjorth, the author, and Susanne Rosenberg, the head of the department of folk music at the Royal College. All the footnotes are by Ditte Andersson.