Sounds of Nordic sites

Annika Lindskog
University College London

Abstract
This article interrogates the notion of north in sounds, and finds it embedded within and intrinsically linked to its geographies and sites. Considering sounds from across the spatiality of the Nordic region, and temporally from the earliest preserved examples to contemporary modernist Nordic music engaged with topographical matter, the discussion explores the music it engages with as deeply connected with the sites from which it grows, yet resisting easy definitions of a place-sound relationship. 'North' cannot be teased out of this music as a single definition, but emerges as a multi-layered, complex interaction between sounds and sites, narrated and re-narrated through their performativity and as aural experiences.

Keywords
North, music, sounds, sites, geography, Nordic

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Sounding North

> The symphony was suggested by my several visits to Scandinavia. The first and last movements may be taken to portray my general impressions – and all the themes have more or less a Northern character about them, the principal theme of the Finale being in fact adapted from an old Norwegian Volkslied. (*The Musical Times*, 1898).

Thus introduced Frederic Hymen Cowen his third symphony, the 'Scandinavian', quoted in *The Musical Times* in London in 1898. Premiered in January 1898 in the then Queen's Hall to great 'enthusiasm', and referred to as that 'excellent piece of English music' (Poston 2005: 408), the symphony explicitly set out to express Cowen's experience of the Scandinavian geography as a soundscape and aural impression. The quote in the *The Musical Times* details these connections further:

> The Adagio might represent a summer's night (moonlight reverie) on one of those lovely lakes – nights and lakes which can only be seen in the North – the theme for the four horns in the middle might be the sounds of a joyful part-song or students' song wafted across the water and breaking in upon the reverie [...]. The Scherzo might represent winter – a ride in a sleigh – the constant movement of the strings (muted) – being the noiseless gallop of the horses on the snow and the triangle the bells. Note, in the first movement, the prevailing minor seventh. The episode (tremolo) after the double bar might represent the wind moving through those immense gloomy pine forests. (*The Musical Times* 1898: 717).

While Cowen's programmatic descriptions indicate a belief that the Scandinavian landscape can be – here has been – transferred into specific orchestral sounds to be experienced by a late-nineteenth-century South Bank audience, in addition Cowen anchors his own artistic expressivity and musical articulation in a personal experience of that landscape. In his autobiography, *My Art & My Friends* (1913), he attributes the engagement with the landscape itself and the sensitivity to its embedded historical longevity as directly feeding into his compositional text:

> The grandeur of the inland fjords, the sombre mountains, the glaciers reaching down almost to the water's edge, the alternate gloom and sunshine, the old traditions and legends which make Norway so unique among European countries, all created a deep impression on my mind – **an impression that found utterance not long afterwards in my third symphony**. (Cowen 1913: 95; bold added).

Cowen's 'Scandinavian' symphony thus exemplifies an intersection between site and sound which is at once purely imagined and highly concrete, both subjectively conceived and collectively articulated. The Norwegian folk tune which allegedly forms the principal theme in the Finale is unquestionably material transfer of locality, yet its meaning in the context of the symphony is collaged by Cowen's personal interpretation, audiences' perception of the musical material, and the wider narratives of Scandinavian geographies.

Twenty years after Cowen, the Swedish composer Ture Rangström (1884–1947) wrote another 'northern'-themed symphony, but from a very different perspective. The Stockholm-born composer and conductor's output includes symphonies and symphonic poems (a kind of narrative orchestral form), three operas, piano music and over 300 songs. He subtitled his *Symphony no.2 in D-minor* (1918–19) 'Mitt land' (My country), and the three movements all have descriptive headings that are intended to detail aspects of that country: 1. *Sagan* ('The saga', or story – the historical origins); 2. *Skogen, våren, sommarnatten* ('The forest, the spring, and the summer evening' – the landscape); and 3. *Drömmen* ('The dream' – the future). The musical expression moves from a grandiose, brooding first movement of large musical gestures (contrasting strong textures and dynamics), a reflective and frequently melancholic second movement, with bucolic textures of violin and woodwind motifs, to a more restless and explorative, but still quite heavy (much brass, straight 4/4 rhythmical patterns) and large-gestured final movement, concluding in blazing and triumphant tutti chords.

The second movement of the symphony has come to dominate the understanding of Rangström's music generally: not least by seeing the Swedish landscape as a crucial source for his creative inspiration, and his relationship with it as a determining quality for his national identity (Macgregor, n.d.). Macgregor quotes descriptions of Rangström as 'gnarled as a wild oak', 'a piece of granite', 'the born singer of the sea and the archipelago', and highlights the parallels critics made between

the 'dark keys, harsh timbres and angular gestures' in the music and the 'wind-swept skerries' of the archipelago where Rangström spent his summers. An intimate connectivity between place and sound, mediated by the composition, is here not so much demonstrated as assumed. The music itself is by extension heard to explore these connections: the woody tones of the bass clarinet introducing a woodland theme, a solo violin 'singing with immense beauty against translucent woodwind chords' conveying the quiet sea, birdcalls in the woodwinds heralding dusk, the Nordic summer night atmospherically evoked, a folk dance rhythmically and sonorously evoked (ibid). The descriptive language of the music aligns with qualities of the Nordic landscape that had by then been poeticised since (at least) the mid-nineteenth century, and which emphasised, in particular, the sense of the atmospheric, the tranquil, the immense, and the locally familiar. This is not a landscape to just view or observe – indeed not that at all – but a landscape with which to connect, and whose presence can alter moods and influence experiences. Rangström's evocations strive to emulate that: the aural vistas intimated through the movement titles relate to sensory experiences of the landscape, its history and its future, fully relatable only when resounding against the known qualities of that landscape and its locational connections.

The Swedish focus of the piece seems to have been as central to its conceptions as it became problematic in a later period. In 1918, Rangström wrote in a letter to Wilhelm Stenhammar that he longed to write a 'simple, faithful homage to our old, delightful, poor land, with granite, much granite, summer nights and the Baltic and the forest and fairy-tales' (qtd in Macgregor). In 1940, however, he spoke of the piece as 'a wake-up call' to remind people of their nation's status and potential (ibid). Whatever ideological approaches this implies, it also indicates the potential embedded in the relationship between the music and the land itself, as well as its collective meaning and resonance, and points up its fluctuation and pliability according to shifting contextual perceptions. The soundscape(s) of these places might shift in turn and accordingly, not (only) in their expressions, but in how they are heard and in how they mediate spatially across temporally unfastened points of reference.[i]

As these two examples demonstrate, it is in such intersections that meaning of place in sound is formed and through which we might start to understand how music, which connects to specific locations, both expresses those sites and contributes to shaping our definitions of them. While Cowen mediates his own experiences of place into a set of musical aesthetics through which his audience might imagine a

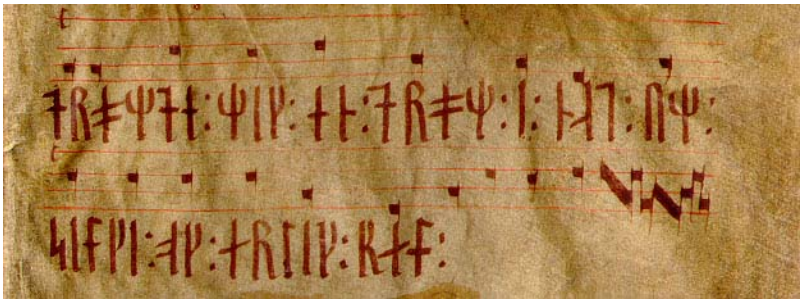
disconnected, un-experienced geographical location, Rangström uses his musical expressivity to interpret and bring forth a subjective meaning of the same Nordic topography. In both cases, the music forms part of a narrative of place, and contributes to its place-making. They demonstrate the interpretative potential of music connected to places, landscapes and geographies, and the place-making they take part in through their performativity. It is the aim of this article to explore 'North' as a relationship to Nordic and northern sites through soundscapes that relate to connections with, experiences of, and narratives around these geographies.

Singing north: songs of Northern histories

'Sound is a crucial element in the world we construct for ourselves, and the world that others construct and impose on us', state Connell and Gibson (2003: 280). This makes music, in turn, 'by nature geographical' (ibid). The inherent geographical importance of music, Kearney (2021) suggests, lies in its role in reflecting and shaping geographical processes, and, similarly, in the role of geographical processes in shaping the music that is produced (47). The sound of north cannot, then, with this understanding, be detached from or conceived apart from its geo-locality and connection to its sites of production, but should of itself be considered as performative agency of these sites. Its ley lines span both spatially across the region and its topography, and temporally across its histories.

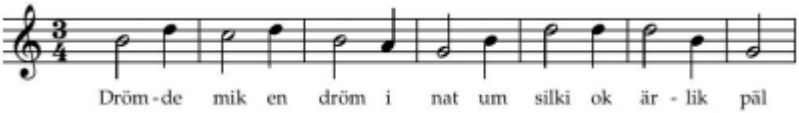
The oldest recorded secular song from the Nordic region is written in runes on vellum, and included on the last page of *Codex Runicus*, a medieval manuscript which includes a transcript of the oldest preserved Nordic provincial law, the 'Scanian Law', from around the year 1300. The song is written out on the very last page of the codex in Old East Norse, together with some musical notation, and is known as 'Drømde mik en drøm i nat' ('I dreamed a dream last night'). While interpretations of the meaning of the text diverge, it seems possible it may be calling for non-violent means of conflict resolution. Speculations as to why the song was appended to the specific codex include seeing it as a wry comment on the law itself, though it is of course possible that the scribe simply took advantage of a spare page to note down a popular song. Either way, the song's survival, and our knowledge of it, is entirely due to its physical embeddedness within the record of a seminal regional law. These laws are part of the earliest documentations of historical Scandinavia and are testament to a lived reality relatable entirely (and specifically) to their regional locality. The

song is then a highly local expression, contained and transferred across eras though its material connection with local law.



Detail of a page of the Codex Runicus, containing the oldest recorded music in Scandinavia, with the text 'Drømde mik en drøm i nat, um silki ok ærlik pæl'. Author unknown. Public domain.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2335136

The region of Scania was under Danish rule at the time, and while the region – and the law – today might count as Swedish, the song has survived mainly as a Danish expression. Relatively widely known, it has been compared to the near-contemporary English song 'Sumer is icumen in', and a version of it was used as intermission music on Danish radio for many years. The musical notation is relatively straightforward to interpret with regard to the melodic shape, while the rhythmical pattern is less definitive. The version used by Danish radio is one of the more common:

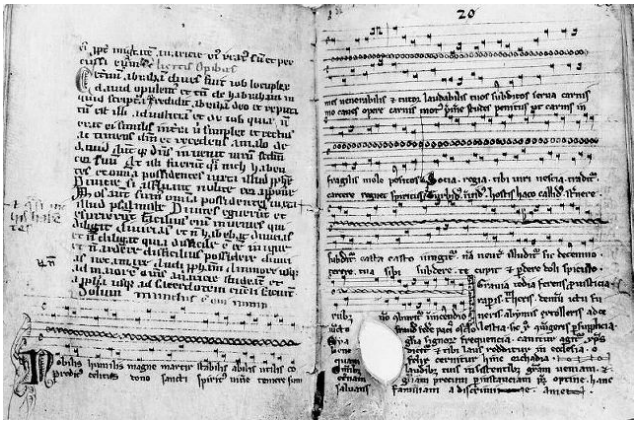


Musical notes, an interpretation of 'Drømde mik en drøm i nat'. Musical notes by Åke Persson. Public domain.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1220809

As secular music does not otherwise appear in medieval Nordic sources, *Drømde mik end drøm* gives a rare glimpse into the sounds of an earlier North (Mattson 2016). In a recent European Musical Archaeology Project (EMAP), interpretations of the song were included on 'Ice and Longboats: Ancient Music of Scandinavia', a recording of

music from the Viking period and Middle Ages. The project aims to construct a soundscape of these periods, featuring 'music improvised on Viking instruments' as well as 'notated songs and instrumental items from the early centuries of Scandinavia'.[ii]

This recording also includes 'Nobilis Humilis', or the St Magnus Hymn. This is the oldest known song notated in two parts from Scandinavia, found in a thirteenth-century manuscript currently in Uppsala. Scandinavia at this point included the Orkney Islands, and St Magnus is the saint for whom the cathedral in Kirkwall was built. According to the Orkneyinga saga, his sainthood is related to an unwillingness to bear arms and engage in violent rule, which eventually saw him slain in competition over the ruling of Orkney.[iii]



The St Magnus Hymn. 'Nobilis humilis, magen martyr stabilis /
Serva carnis fragilis mole positos'. (Oh noble, humble, great and steadfast martyr / Placed beneath the burden of the frail flesh).
Source: https://photos.orkneycommunities.co.uk/picture/number900.asp

While the hymn is included in the EMAP project in its original form and has been recorded also in several other places (by the St Magnus Cathedral Choir and Trio Medieval among others), both the hymn and the legend of St Magnus has been reincarnated further in modern soundscapes (as well as in other art forms). Peter Maxwell Davies' 1977 opera *The Martyrdom of St. Magnus* is an adaptation of George Mackay Brown's novel *Magnus*, from 1973, and English composer Clive Strutt's *St Magnus Mass* is a mass for Kirkwall cathedral for the St Magnus Day

celebrations on 16 April, composed in 1982.[iv] The latter takes the hymn tune as its central theme around which new, but related, musical material is created, and the Nordic historical engagement with the specific site is here rearticulated into new soundscapes, containing and re-expressing fragments of this spatial connection. However, the connection has also found narrative continuity in a more distant musical genre. In 2018, the overwhelming winner of the Danish Eurovision Song Contest (and going on to represent Denmark in the final in Portugal that year) was 'Higher Grounds', sung by (Jonas) Rasmussen. Its lyrics are inspired by the legend of St Magnus and are intended to promote peace and reconciliation through an interpretation of the legend in which Magnus refused to fight in the battle of Anglesey Sound in 1098.

The producer of *Dansk Melodi Grand Prix* 2018, Mads Enggaard, saw very clearly how the song's expression connects with regional historicity and a tangible cultural heritage:

> 'Higher Ground' er en virkelig potent sang, der på en meget moderne måde formår at trække tråde fra vores nordiske kulturarvegods med tydelige referencer til vikinger, brynjer og skumsprøjt.[v]
>
> ('Higher Ground' is a very potent song, which in a very modern way manages to draw connections from our Nordic cultural heritage with clear references to Vikings, breastplates, and billowing foam.)

The song, in this way, becomes a representation of the inherited values which relate to specific locational contexts and ideological values formed in those settings:

> Budskabet er stærkt og evigt aktuelt; en opfordring til at søge fredelige løsninger på konflikter og er inspireret af sagnet om vikingen Magnus Erlendsson. Vores viking, Rasmussen, er en gudsbenådet sanger, der kan levere sangen med det store overskud, der skal til, for at denne episke fortælling får vind i sejlene.[vi]

> (The message is powerfully and constantly relevant; an imperative to seek peaceful resolutions to conflicts, inspired by the saga about the Viking Magnus Erlendsson. Our Viking, Rasmussen, is a divinely gifted singer, who can deliver the song with the excess needed for this epic narrative to get wind in its sails.)

The song thus connects both across spatial geographies and temporal historical layers. The interconnectivity between the various Nordic sites is further underscored by the fact that the composers of the Danish song are a Swedish duo. And while the Eurovision entry plays with visual imagery of historic Nordicness, one final aural aspect also connects it back to the St Magnus Hymn. 'Nobilis Humilis' is sometimes noted as being of particular musicological interest for employing a liberal use of thirds in the harmonisation. The argument is that using the fourth or fifth intervals would have been more common in multipart harmony at the time, and that the harmonisation of 'Nobilis Humilis' therefore possibly implies a stronger influence of Scandinavian folk song (Smith 2002), which would further localise it. Harmonisation in thirds is however also a common feature of much of contemporary popular music or pop song: the 'loop' from 'Nobilis Humilis' to 'Higher Ground' might be seen here then as closing also aurally, demonstrating a continuous intimacy between sites, their historical aurality, and the re-sounding of northern regionality today.

Rasmussen performing at the Eurovision Song Contest, 2018. Source: https://www.eurovisionary.com/?attachment_id=161370

Songs like many others: singing cultural memories of sites

One of the earliest preserved comments on Nordic music, preceding both the above examples, come from a relatively oft-quoted observation by a Spanish Arab, Al-Tartushi, visiting Hedeby (in Viking Denmark, now Schleswig-Holstein, a UNESCO World Heritage site) in the second half of the 900s. Al-Tartushi, visiting from a more developed southern Europe, seems to have been less than impressed: 'Never did I hear singing fouler than that of the Schleswegians, it is a rumbling emanating from their throats, similar to that of a dog, but even more bestial'.[vii]

Whether a purely musical or aesthetic evaluation, or more indicative of cultural unfamiliarity of an other, these more primitive sounds, a thousand years, and a Jenny Lind and Jussi Björling (among others) later, are now understood to have been exchanged for an enhanced development in art music, closely entwined with and strongly influenced by dominating European musical practices. In the world of modern art music, one of the Nordic exports recently on the increase is the Scandinavian art song.[viii] Art song had a domestic 'golden age' in the late-nineteenth century (see e.g. Nordenfors 1992), in part in conjunction with an increased output and quality in Scandinavian poetic production. A dominating feature of the poetry, and what the songs in turn enhanced, was a heightened sense for, and importance placed on, nature and the landscape: as poetic-aesthetic quality as well as a significant feature in a developing national collective consciousness (in Sweden and Norway in particular). As the song settings rearticulated and reinterpreted the lyrical preoccupations, they related themselves to and became further expressions of connections with that landscape. In the realm of nature, embedded historical narratives, emotional experiences and a hierarchy of values and commodities could be found, and the landscape settings acted as both repository of inherited meanings and a stage for contemporary experiences.

The north, Bohlman claims, can be considered as a 'place both realised and imagined through music', just as the 'geographies of borealism' are 'both real and imaged' (2017, online). Bohlman draws attention to the narrative performativity of both music and sites: their ability to be both tangible entities and formed by our cultural and

aesthetic visualisation of their meaning. These places and their narratives are embedded also in the music that relates to them: 'both historically and contemporarily there are strong links between music and senses of place and identity, both of people and places', as Hudson suggests (2006: 626). Songs that relate to specific places are particularly potent in shaping such imagery, and in the Swedish song repertoire, narratives set in the forest-scape are a powerful example of a culturally contingent site relationship: while the songs might recite a subjective experience or individual poeticised reflection, they simultaneously take part in shaping the significance and character of the specific landscape site in which those experiences are enacted.

An easily parsed example of this is 'En visa som många andra' (A song like many others, J.A. Josephsson, 1843), a two-verse song set to a relatively simple folk-like melody. In a very recognisably melancholic or pensive minor mood, it is an early and straight-forward illustration of the potency of the forest as such a localised site of experience. A first-person narrator wanders through the forest setting while remembering and mourning his lost love:

> Och linden hon grönskar och sommarn är när, konvaljerna dofta i skogen.
> Men borta är vännen som jag haft så kär, och ensam jag vandrar i skogen.
>
> (And the linden tree blossoms, and summer is near, the lilies of the valley scents the forest.
> But gone is the sweetheart I held so dear, and alone I wander through the forest.)

The sense of loss is heightened by the contrast with nature bursting into spring and summer: while nature blossoms, the heart is heavy with sorrow and lost love. In the second verse this sorrow is intensified by summer turning to winter, the winter landscape heightening the poetic emotions and made tactile through descriptions of the forest-scape.

The song is an effective illustrative example of the way the forest is expected to function as a known site of reflection and a kind of 'embedded' experience: the emotional exploration of the narrator is contained in the landscape, which also allows for temporal intersection between the lived moment and the eternity of the forest. The song is very deliberate in its simplicity – its form is closer to a 'visa', a simpler, traditional song style, than a more elaborate art song form – and

through its form also connects to folk tradition, thereby creating deeply persuasive connections between site, historicity, experience, and song.

A slightly later example of the same site-song interaction, 'När jag för mig själv i mörka skogen går' ('When I wander lonely in the dark forest', Wilhelm Peterson-Berger, 1892, text Wendela Hebbe), illustrates how the aesthetic and artistic use of the forest as site develops towards the end of the century and into the twentieth century. The lyrical focus here too is on remembrance and longing, and the narrator is again contemplating lost love. The forest landscape imbues the mood (the 'dark forest'), but clearly still functions as a space which enables these memories, and the song itself becomes an act of remembering (singing of 'the beloved friend from childhood days'). The landscape here is further full of 'props', and the second verse lists a number of (positive) landscape features which would be given in exchange for the lost love if possible. While the song still employs a strophic-narrative structure and expresses a pensive mood through its minor tonality, the enhanced development of expression is contained in subtle variations of the vocal lines which allow for emphasis on selected vocabulary, in the twice-appearing bird call in the piano, and in an unexpected harmonic change in the final line which complexifies the song's expression. The song thus illustrates a continued aural and artistic engagement with the forest-scape which seeks to develop more sophisticated and nuanced musical expressions articulating the interaction with and experience of these sites.

Two final examples might illustrate how the atmosphere created by the musical setting drives the sensory and narrative experience of the forest-scape itself: Wilhelm Stenhammar's 'I skogen' ('In the forest', 1887 – an early composition which remains one of his most popular songs, setting text by A. T. Gellerstedt), and Hugo Alfven's 'Skogen sover' ('The forest sleeps', 1908, text E. Thiel). In 'I skogen', the piano provides a lush 'carpet' of sounds through its constantly moving quavers, above which the vocal line moves in contemplation and reflection. The poem is a philosophical imperative and uses nature as a metaphorical device, i.e. imploring nature to inspire a certain attitude to life by seeking inspiration first from the "nattviol" (a lesser spotted butterfly orchid, fragrant at dusk and frequently encountered in Swedish lyrical narrative) and then the song thrush, who trills at dusk in anticipation of the dawn approaching (also a common actor in Swedish nature poetry). The poetic expression emphasises the philosophical core, which is further elevated by the musical setting through mood enhancement and rhythmical and textual emphasis.[ix]

In ‘Skogen sover’, equally, the forest-scape created through an ethereally light piano texture is the site where the beloved’s soft sleep is embedded in the stillness and light of the summer night, while the singer – and we – watch over them. The title and the opening line of the song are in fact the only explicit references to the forest, but they enable a setting in which the subsequent poetic expression can form. Through the musical setting, the forest here becomes a site of true emotional and sensory experience, suffused by the light of the Scandinavian summer night. The song functions more like a tableau than a narration, and the setting, with its delicate piano accompaniment of lightly broken chords and a vocal line that floats very lightly and very gently above it, is intensely atmospheric, creating a shimmering, dream-like effect. The aural emphasis is on mood and atmosphere, as evoked by the space and the light of the site itself: two seminal characteristics of the Scandinavian landscape that become the main agents for the experience of the forest through the song.

The forest-scape, then, repeatedly functions as a point of reference, which connects these songs to a specific locality, resonating with accumulated experiences of that site and allowing re-narrations of place-related experiences. These narrations in turn emerge as deeply rooted in their own place constructions, entangled with site-historic layers of meaning. In Swedish historical development in particular, the forest-scape has considerable longevity as a potent site for both activities and experiences. Orvar Löfgren (1979) outlines a historical significance of the forest for northern Scandinavian society as a multifaceted resource and constant companion: in addition to its narrative and poetic potency, it has over time provided timber and fuel, offered livelihood and protection, and in industrialised contexts represented one the most significant and profitable natural resources. The use of the forest, and the understanding of the forest-scape has changed throughout history, Löfgren points out, as has its role as a site of experience: culturally embedded in folklore, poetry and song, the poetic qualities of the forest are something, he underlines, that has emerged through narratives around it, created and shaped through continuous retellings (45–71). Like much of the Nordic understanding of its landscapes then, the forest is therefore simultaneously a concrete place and space constructed allegorically and symbolically.

This chimes with Hudson’s contention that ‘places are complex entities, ensembles of [..] objects, people, and systems of social relationships’, and as such they are ‘continually in the process of becoming […] open and porous to a variety of flows in and out’ (2006: 627). Analyses of the forest in Swedish songs demonstrates that

potential meanings of music depend on the past and present identity of the site around which it is made: making music in this context is to produce place.

Sounds of northern natures

According to Bohlman (2017), the images of and sound of nature 'pervade the music of the North', and 'chart the landscapes across which musical practices stretch' (online). However, '[r]epresentations of landscape and nature are a celebrated, and profoundly problematic, characteristic of much early twentieth-century Nordic music', in the view of Nordic music expert Daniel Grimley. While they are 'commonly heard as exemplars of the picturesque, or as evocation of local colour', images of nature in Nordic music in fact [should], he argues, 'invite more radical interpretations that pose questions about the relationship between humans, sound, and nature' (Grimley 2011: 396).

Grimley is here discussing *Tapiola*, a tone poem by Jean Sibelius from 1926. Referencing the character Tapiola, the forest god from the Finnish national epic Kalevala, the tone poem plays on expectations of both the forest-scape and the mythological narration of the Kalevala, occasioning interpretative responses that hear 'wood sprites in the gloom' weaving 'magic secrets', and enhancing the cultural tradition of the forest as a 'mysterious, twilit domain of folk music' (ibid). These narrative interpretations are, however, not Sibelius' own, nor do they quite articulate in the music itself. Grimley describes the tone poem as a 'bleak musical response' to the forest-scape, describing its progression through the keywords 'gust of wind – austere – brooding – storm sequence – anguished outcry – silence' (ibid, 397). The landscape here, heard through its own soundscape, is a much grittier version of the poeticised and culturally constructed site frequently assumed.

Stories told often enough 'calcify into truth', says Tom Service (2002), when discussing *Tapiola* and Sibelius' Fifth Symphony, the latter often referenced for the swans that are supposed to have inspired the final theme in the last movement – as if this music *is* the swans, and is the composer's gaze on them. But Sibelius' music, and his response to the landscape, is not, Service argues, a reflected gaze on the natural world, not a description, not a prettified version of the Finnish landscape and its wilderness. *Tapiola*, rather, uses a natural principle of self-similarity, as one musical idea throughout drives the development of the piece and generates its musical wildness. The tone poem then becomes music of desolation, of wilderness overwhelming

us, until it ends in silence. Silence however, Service points out, is also sound, full of echoes, and also part of nature. The idea of nature, Grimley underscores, is 'an act of representation (both political and aesthetic): but it is as much an epistemology, a critical practice or way of knowing' (2011: 398). Sibelius' music has, through the interconnections between his status as a national composer and the collective self-narration around landscape as a culturally representative space in Finland, frequently been read as simplified statements about how site and sound interact.[x] It is these practices both Grimley and Service aim to challenge, and the next two examples for discussion will consider further.

Cantus Arcticus – Concerto for birds and orchestra

Einojuhani Rautavaara's *Cantus Arcticus* (1972) was a commission from Oulu University for its first doctoral degree ceremony, and is a concerto in three movements, two of which feature recordings of bird sounds from the Liminka Nature reserve near Oulu. The first of the three movements is 'The Bog', in which two flutes are asked to 'think of autumn and Tchaikovsky' during a duet, before being joined by woodwind, birds, and the rest of the orchestra, with repeated shifts between major and minor thirds from trumpets and oboes which reference Beethoven's sixth symphony, 'The Pastoral'. The second movement, 'Melancholy', features a slowed-down recording of two shore larks calling back and forth, embedded by a choral-like texture in the strings. The last movement, 'Swans migrating', mimics the movements of birds: four groups of instruments in each of which the instruments move within the same space but not together, co-ordinated but not in perfect synch, over a recording of whooper swans. Gradually the different sound groups melt together, until they and the piece disappear over our aural horizon. The composition plays with notions of what might be considered 'real' and 'not real': on the one hand it combines 'live' orchestral sounds with taped, pre-recorded aural material, on the other the recorded bird song is 'real' bird song, which the orchestral instruments ultimately can only imitate.

Liminganlahti, near Oulo, Finland. By Estormiz. Licensed under CC0.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=88549178

The cantata relates to its location and geography in several different ways, with the landscape itself embedded within its multi-layered content:

1) The landscape functions as 'text'. The cantata was commissioned for a special occasion, where the text of the cantata would have been expected to create linkage between the music and the intended celebrant. Instead of textual material, however, Rautavaara uses birdsong collected from the nearby landscape, thereby creating aural and contextual connections to Oulo as a place and location. As a celebratory university cantata, it would traditionally have been expected to incorporate a (university) choir, which is here replaced by the bird 'choir': the voices from within the academic context are thereby excluded, and the connection to the *place* instead enacted through the bird song.[xi]

2) The piece is further localised through the raw material of the birdsong and its centralised position within the piece, as it easily connects with – and can be heard as – exoticised imagery of Finnish landscape and wildlife (Burton 2021: 9). At the same time, however, the soundscape itself is aurally evocative of wide-open spaces, and as such can be considered removed from or disentangled from specific

places (ibid). The musical evocation of landscapes that is taking place connects with a more generalised ideological landscape imagery. *Cantus* thereby simultaneously engages with a natural space, which is both highly specific and localised as well as generalised and geographically neutral.

3) At the same time, the cantata, and the recorded birdsong in particular, also articulate highly subjective relationships to the landscape it incorporates. It connects to the University of Oulu by directly incorporating its physical surroundings, while Rautavaara has his own personal relationship to and experience of this site: his mother's family comes from Oulu, where he recalls spending childhood summers at Liminka Bay Nature Reserve.

4) This personal connection with the landscape is however also culturally contingent. No one in Finland, claims Rautavaara, 'can avoid being touched by the Finnish landscape', and centralising nature in the composition, Burton (2021) notes, also chimes with the cultural value Finland, as a society, places on the landscape and on interaction with nature (20). The connectivity between the cantata and Finland itself is further embedded in the use of the sounds of the whooper swan in the third movement: the swan is the national bird and symbol of Finland, and the swan features prominently also in the music of Sibelius (e.g *The Swan of Tuonela*, and assumedly in the Fifth Symphony, as discussed above). The inclusion of *Cantus* (alongside Sibelius' *Finlandia*), in the official *Finland 100* celebrations in 2017 confirms this inter-relationship between landscape, music, and national symbolism.

5) Lastly, *Cantus* and its ready connectivity with the landscape, can and have been used to 'brand' a particular idea of an 'idealized northernly world' (ibid) by including it on compilation CDs (for example) of music collected under headings such as 'Northern Lights' or similar, which connects it to this imagined-idealised landscape, underscored with a particular set of imagery.

The recorded birdsong, then, serves to bring the Arctic marshes into the concert hall, quite literally, and place them in the auditory foreground, while also functioning as a kind of 'textural counterpoint' (counterpoint being the interweaving of separate parts into interrelated patterns in musical composition; citing Burton: 18). The musical expressions and the interaction of the different textures might

also be considered to evoke or imitate the *feeling* of being in a particular environment, a tangible, sensory experience of being in a particular landscape or at a specific geographical location, imparted through the soundscape.

The recorded birds also enable an aural exploration of the landscape as both static (e.g. the recollection of a specific landscape at a particular, locked-in moment) and as a site of movement, across which the bird calls sound and resound, just as they move across the score and across the aural spatiality of our listening. *Cantus Arcticus* thus relates to a specific landscape and a simultaneously specific and generic geography: it both is and is not necessarily Finland and demonstrates perhaps most of all our own dual relationship with landscapes as both real and imagined, concrete and abstract, both highly specific and impossible to fully concretise and decode.

Schnee – Canons for nine instruments

The tension between stasis and motion, and an aural experience which allows for simultaneous exploration of both, also form part of the soundscape created in Hans Abrahamson's *Schnee* (Snow 2008). Abrahamson's first major composition after nearly ten years of creational rectitude (in which he concentrated on re-workings and studies, among others of canons by Bach), *Schnee* consists of ten canons for nine instruments. The five sets of canons, interspersed with two interludes, gradually diminish in length, until the last set only takes two minutes each, and 'time runs out' (Abrahamsen, qtd in Ertz 2013: 191).

Schnee plays with qualities of time through its variations of related material. Different phrases, rhythms and textures move in and out of focus, between background and foreground, and back again, and the perpetual variety within the repetitions creates unusual effects of mobile stillness (Howell & Powell 2020: 213; Griffiths 2010: 424). Kehrs (2021) has identified a rhythmical pattern Abrahamsen has returned to in different compositions over 20 years, and it turns up in *Schnee* in the very last set of canons (5a & 5b). The formal properties of this pattern lend it a 'marked asymmetry' and the pivotal use of it in the final minutes of *Schnee* – the very last thing the listener hears – underlines *Schnee*'s structural and symmetrical preoccupations (18 & 22). This is music that is deliberately and self-consciously constructed, and which can even be understood as foregrounding its 'own sense of becoming, its use of processes' (March 2021: 50).

But *Schnee* is at the same time, and equally compellingly, a highly aural experience. It creates a remarkable sound world: precise, rhythmically pointed, crystalline, with the 'shimmering effect of light in an icy environment skilfully evoked' (Howell & Powell: 207), articulating the 'poetry of winter' – of 'whiteness, crystal form, quietude, expectations' (Griffiths: 422) – and creating a wintry landscape in timbre and texture, with added iciness through use of the piano's higher registers and extreme treble (especially in the opening canon). To underscore the linkage between *Schnee* and the experience of snow, Kehrs points out that the opening of Abrahamsen's opera *The Snow Queen* is 'lifted wholesale' from *Schnee*, with xylophone and glockenspiel in particular referencing *Schnee*'s snowy imagery (18). To strengthen its intertextual references to snow and winter further, Abrahamsen borrows the sleigh-bells from Mozart's 'Sleighride German Dance' and the instrumental scores come with inserted texts highlighting a narrative around snow (e.g 'Kindern hoffen es gibt Schnee!' (Children hope that it will snow!), written in below the violin, viola, flute, and clarinet parts in Canon 4a (bb.1–3) (qtd in Howell & Powell: 215).

Schnee's various extra-musical connections with snow complexifies the aural experience of its textures and variations of repeated patterns and material. Abrahamsen admits to a 'life-long fascination' with winter and its effects: 'snow can transform a landscape […] it allows us to imagine something different' (in Molleson, 2015, also qtd in Howell & Powell: 204), and *Schnee*'s ability to give new perspectives of same sets of materials in its paired canons mimic the way that snow can transform a known landscape and enable new ways of viewing familiar scenes (Howell & Powell: 204). The experience of listening to *Schnee* might conjure up 'fascinating imagery of snow […] and its many variations' (Ertz: 191) or evoke 'the manifold experiences of snow' (March: 47). The resemblance with snow is also embedded in *Schnee*'s material structure: consisting of infinite variations of particles, forming and re-forming, consistent yet perpetually different in its eternally variable matter. And while *Schnee* is tightly constructed and exerts high control over its matter and material, it is also never predictable: it consistently cuts across expected patterns, constructing deliberate instability, and creating a sense of lack of a cohesive and predictable structure (March: 64). In this way, it further relates to our experience of snow and snowing, or nature in general: it remains out of our control, familiar, yet in its nuances and variations unpredictable, ultimately undefinable.

Schnee joins an oeuvre of Abrahamsen's that frequently references the natural environment, or aspects of our being in that environment: *Winternacht*, *Walden*, *Herbst*, *Flowersongs*, *Universe Birds*, *Marchenbilder* etc. 'Seasons,' says Abrahamsen, 'are very basic in our lives, [and] winter is a time of slow transition' (in Molleson 2015). Howell and Powell point out that Abrahamsen trained in Denmark and has lived there most of his life, in a society where the natural environment can be said to have a distinct cultural impact. Yet no specific connection has ever been articulated between *Schnee* and Danish snow: indeed, the cover image for the first recording details snowfall in Tokyo, and the piece itself, with its German title, was commissioned for the *Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik* in Germany. Howell and Powell refer to the title of *Schnee* (and the other piece in their discussion, Kaija Saariaho's *Light and matter*), as of 'elemental simplicity', which in their essential generality prevent the fettering of the pieces to a specific locale or [geographical] region (Howell & Powell: 194). Yet, they also maintain that the concept of environment forms part of a composer's mentality, and Saariaho refers specifically to the environment as a 'catalyst' for creation, reflection, reconsideration, and communication, where nature might function as a starting point also when no concrete 'depiction' is sought or intended (ibid).[xii] In the case of *Schnee*, the piece is on the one hand, as Griffiths suggests, 'unlike anything else […], remarkable for its lack of rhetoric, [...] nothing seems to be pushing here but the music itself, nothing speaks but the music alone' (Griffiths: 424). Yet, *Schnee* also gives us an unequivocal experience of snow: an aural, sensory, immersive but ungraspable sense of the universal constituents of time, matter, repetition, variety, and atmosphere. As such, it also rearticulates a site-relationship demonstrating a geo-locality, which is both an abstract structural reference and an experience of site-related specificities, simultaneously a generalised commonality and a temporally, historically, and environmentally localised interpretation of place.

Nature, landscape, and a sense of place: a geo-local reality

'What appears to be quintessentially Finnish about a work like *Tapiola*', says Tim Howell (2006), 'is its highly characteristic manipulations of musical timescale since this seems to originate from Sibelius' perception of landscape, the seasons working on that landscape and

from the timeless quality evoked by extreme periods of darkness and light' (26).

In their discussion of Kaia Saariaho and Hans Abrahamsen in *The Nature of Nordic Music* (2020) quoted from earlier, Howell and Powell ask to what extent the readings of their respective pieces can be considered Nordic, not least since much of their growing popularity seems to rest on an international, universal appeal. They note in response that both composers respond to elemental forces, which manifest in a distinct way in the Nordic region (216). The centrality interaction with nature is given in these pieces might be understood, they suggest, to gain their resonance at least in part from the composers' experiences of living in a region where the relationship with the landscape, the climate, and the geographical regionality is a highly concrete part of everyday life, historical developments, and at times in strategies for survival.

In the same way, the music discussed in this article can be understood to negotiate and articulate connections with 'north' as place, region, environment, and space. It relates to 'north' through the sites it engages with, sounding its geography and topography, and performing its cultural heritage and contemporary narratives. These sites and their landscapes then become sites of performance, *and* part of the performativity itself: performing and sounding north through a relationship to Nordic sites. The sounds of north resonate, then, not primarily in notes or harmonies, but in the relationship and approach to [the] north as situated geography, and as engagement with sites redolent with their own environment, geography, and context.

Place-making is an inherently networked process, and for Pierce, Martin and Murphy (2011), 'the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live' (54). For Heith (2020) it is a fundamental starting point that cultural production contributes to place-making, as 'texts contribute to giving place its identity by representing it as an experience geography' (12). This involves a performative dimension as place is constantly re-articulated by 're-invention, re-interpretation, re-negotiation' (ibid: 17). Place-making is intimately connected to cultural identity (ibid: 18), and cultural identity in turn may be established through external activities, artefacts, and external factors in the environment (Erling Wande 2005: 106; qtd in Heith: 18). Music takes part in such place-making as it exists and resounds as representations of places and ideas, the localised meanings of those places, and the experience of life lived in site-specific geographies.

'Nordic song is not one thing,' says Bohlman (2017, online) in his exploration of Nordic musical borealism, nor one specific genre or single expression. Its historical narratives are both part of and separate from larger European structures. The music of the north is, however, intimately connected to its northern sites and geographies, where, as Matless believes, the power of a/the landscape resides in it 'being simultaneously a site of economic, social, political and aesthetic value, each embedded in [...] each other' (Matless 1998/2016: 28). Jeff Malpas and Edward Casey's understanding of 'true topography' as 'a matter of mapping out a region from within the specificities of the region itself' (Casey in Malpas 2008: xii), is particularly applicable here: the everyday relationship to nature, the landscape, and geographical realities is part of a Nordic cultural heritage, which, while in part universal, is ultimately also fundamentally highly localised and locally contingent. Articulated as site-specific and topographically embedded musical engagements, the sound of north truly resonates.

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i See also S. Rotter-Broman. (2021). 'Formzeitliche und transgenerische Reflexionsebenen in Wilhelm Stenhammars und Tura Rangströms symphonischer Kantate *Sången* (1921)', in Kirsch, K. and A. Lotzow (eds.). *'Music is different' – isn't it? Bedeutungen und Bedingungen musikalischer Autonomie.* Bärenreiter: Kassel, for further discussion of Rangström and a 'Nordic' expression.

ii See http://www.emaproject.eu/content/audio/cd-2-ice-and-longboats.html

iii Note however that this account seems to be based on an earlier Latin Vita, Vita Sancti Magni – see e.g. https://wikihost.uib.no/medieval/index.php/Sanctus_Magnus_dux, and Antonsson, H. (2004). 'St Magnús of Orkney and St. Thomas of Canterbury: Two twelfth-century saints', in Williams, G. and P. Bibire (eds), *Sagas, Saints and Settlements*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, pp. 41–64. See also Wallin, N. L. (1961). 'Hymnus in honorem Sancti Magni comitis Orchadiae: Codex Upsaliensis C 233', *Svensk tidskrift för Musikforskning*, 43: 339–54.

iv Other compositions/versions exist, e.g. *Communion Service for the Day of St Magnus, Earl of Orkney and Martyr*, which is a complete church service for 16 April (St Magnus' Day), and '*Variations and Fugue* on the Mediaeval Hymn to Saint Magnus' (1971), intended for a concert to inaugurate the newly rebuilt organ in the Cathedral in Kirkwall.

v See https://www.dr.dk/event/melodigrandprix/alt-om-vinderen-vikingen-rasmussen. Accessed 29 March 2022.

vi Ibid.

vii Translated quote from Royal Danish Consulate General, New York: https://web.archive.org/web/20060113013845/http://www.denmark.org/about_denmark/factsheets_articles/factsheets_vikings.html.

viii Seen in, for example, more frequent programming of Nordic songs in the UK, a recent increase and interest in recordings of Nordic songs, or in recent

volumes published as aid for English-speaking singers in taking on the Nordic song repertoire.

ix See further discussion on this song in 'Situated sounds of place in the songs of Wilhelm Stenhammar: Interpreting sites in songs', forthcoming.

x See Hepokoski, J. (1993). Sibelius: *Symphony No.5*, Cambridge Music Handbooks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Mäkelä, T. (2013). *Jean Sibelius und seiner Zeit*. Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, for more critical examinations of the relationship between Sibelius and Finnish nature.

xi I am very grateful to Professor Signe Rotter-Broman for this last point. See also Heiter, S, (2021). *Von Admiral bis Zebrafink: Tiere un Tierlaute in der Musik nach 1950*. Schliengen: Edition Argus.

xii Kate Molleson also references Saariaho as saying that nature was an essential part of her music and her entire being and 'an innate aspect of being Finnish'. Molleson, Radio 3 Breakfast, 12 June 2023, @17.17.