

ON SUMMER, SEASONS, SEAS AND SWEET MELANCHOLY: EXPLORING LANDSCAPE IN SWEDISH SONG

For CMC Newsletter October 2017

'Let Nature have you for a while!' wrote Edvard Grieg to Danish poet and fellow occasional mountain hiker Julius Drachmann in July 1892. 'Nature' referred to the well-being, freshness, and inspiration Grieg and his friends felt they acquired during hikes in the Norwegian mountains, in this case in the region of Norway's 'national' mountains, the Jotunheimen range. Drachmann had been expressing a sense of staidness and frustration, and Grieg suggested the best, if not only, antidote he knew.

The belief in the physically and psychologically beneficial properties nature offered was widespread in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Scandinavia. So too were the national ideologies that revolved around this nature, as well as the many, recurring artistic engagements with nature.

Swedish art song, known in Swedish as *romanser*, is one of these categories and experienced a 'golden age' in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, while being continuously explored in the twentieth. All of Sweden's most renowned early twentieth-century composers – like Stenhammar, Rangström, Alfvén – engaged with the genre alongside many other lesser-known composers. The resulting pool of these songs is consequently reasonably substantial – not all of these engage with nature, but a substantial majority do.

To (the) Sea

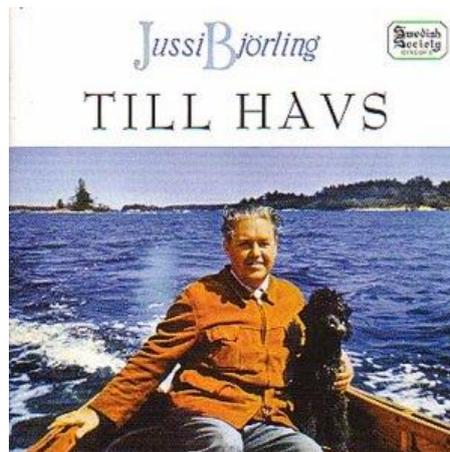
It is perhaps fair to assume, however, that the average reader has not come across a huge number of these songs. There are non-Scandinavian singers who schedule them occasionally and bravely take on the unknown language, and some listeners might have come across them through recordings by some of the internationally renowned Swedish singers: Ann-Sofie von Otter, Elisabeth Söderström, Jussi Björling, Nicolai Gedda, Håkan Hagegård, Ingvar Wixell etc. But they are still relatively unknown, and are not – yet – properly part of any mainstream repertoire.

One of those you might have heard is *Till havs*, or 'To the Sea', by Gustaf Nordqvist. This once got much airtime through being frequently used by Jussi Björling as an encore, and its memorable refrain – opening on an upward leap of a sixth – is familiar to most in Sweden. Somewhat ironically, it is however rather atypical as a Nordic landscape-related song. *Till havs* is vigorous, ferocious, expansive and most of all forward- and outward-looking. It calls for action, to set sail, to brave storms and winds, to be strong and courageous and to explore the wide, unknown, enchanting world. In short, it imbues value onto the onwards and elsewhere, the energy required underlined in the whirling and driving accompaniment, and the daring expressed in the ever-higher upward vocal leaps and harmonic tension on 'storms'.

None of these sentiments can be said to be common occurrences in Swedish art songs. As an on-line review of one of Ann-Sofie von Otter's discs of Swedish songs summarises it: 'the various atmospheres are variations on the same abstract mood; a Northern-tinged, nostalgic, colourful and slightly distanced temper with scents of spring flowers, rustles of the brook running in misty meadows, pond-ripples, gently rolling waves, longing and half-lights'. These are moods of reflection, of contemplation, dreaming, longing and wistfulness, rather than of action. But *Till havs* does represent one core aspect in the relationship between landscape and Swedish song: that of the

physical, tangible nearness of the landscape. The author Jonatan Reuter (1859-1947), whose text Nordqvist (and others, including Sibelius) set, lived in Ekenäs, near the Finnish capital Helsinki, and very near the sea. An engineer by trade, when he turned to writing, all of his output seems to have been inspired by life in the southern Finnish archipelago and the ever-present life-giver, and life-taker, the sea, which would have dominated life in the community throughout history. In Nordqvist's setting of *Till havs* we might hear an attempt to bring some of those tangible, concrete aspects of that sea to the fore.

In Jussi Björling's case, the recurrence of this song was to some extent also seen as an expression of his own close connection with the water, his free time by preference spent in or near the Stockholm archipelago. This kind of mapping of everyday activity onto the ephemeral artistic expressions has a tendency to be more prevalent when landscapes are involved. But landscape can neither be concretely captured, nor easily explained, it can only be interpreted and recreated. So here we stumble on what we might call our inherent ambivalence to our relationship with landscapes: are we *in* them – walking through them, building on them, excavating them, preserving them, living from them – or are we looking *at* them – describing them, painting them, photographing them, re-imagining them? In Reuter's engagement with the sea we might detect a duality of these two approaches: both trying to describe it and interacting closely with it, being both near it and yet separate from it. Many of the landscape songs encompass the same duality, but, as I will attempt to demonstrate here, the engagement with the landscape in these songs goes beyond this strict dichotomy to explore more complex relationships.



Poetic landscapes

One specific reason for the flourishing of Swedish art song in the late nineteenth century was the production of a particularly great quantity of (new) domestic poetry from the 1890s and onwards. In previous decades, Danish and Norwegian, as well as German texts had dominated in Swedish song production. But with the development that Swedish literature underwent in the last decade of the century, more poetry worth capturing and interpreting in song also inspired the development of the *romanser*.

The relationship with nature these songs express and explore starts therefore with the poetry, while the poetry itself reveals and engages with particular approaches, ideologies and traditions prevalent in the surrounding culture. Swedish landscape songs are not just, or to some extent at all, *about* the

landscape itself. We could perhaps suggest that they are 'poeticising' the landscape, part romanticising it to create mood and part exploiting it for metaphors. But I think we still miss several layers and a myriad of nuances if we simplify our understanding thus. For late nineteenth-century Sweden, the 'landscape' – the territory and its resources – was what stood between the country's existence and its extinction, between its potential inability to feed its inhabitants and its prosperity. The landscape is therefore tinged with a dependency: a need to coexist, to glorify protectively with one hand, while exploiting it with the other. This is a development beyond regarding nature as something aesthetic or mythical (or both), this is a relationship to the landscape which is highly complex in its seeming straightforwardness: regarding it as the life source for both practical and poetic survival, or taming it and overcoming it while praising it as of the uttermost and unsurpassed beauty.

This conflict is perhaps not directly played out in the landscape songs or texts but it informs the attitude to the landscape, and sets it apart from cultures with a lesser dependency on the landscape to serve both practical and poetic functions. You might of course argue that we are *all* descended from agrarians, so we are all somewhere intuitively wired to understand the conditions of living off the landscape and living with the changing seasons. And understanding the aesthetic, poetic and metaphorical use nature can be put to is a highly communal, not to say universal, trait. While this is undoubtedly true, a universal concept can still be practised in individual versions. Much as all cheeses are not cheddars. Both how you put the various ingredients together, where you draw them from and which parts you use, as well as how you consume them (or for that matter label them), creates individual results and individual practises.

Sweden today still has a tendency to think of itself as particularly closely connected with nature, and with a deeper need for that connection. It is mostly unclear, or at least un-reflected upon, wherein this connection lies and quite what it means. But the awareness of a perceived connection might also perpetuate it. Thus competitions of the Swedes' favourite word might crown 'summer field' or 'evening sky' the winners, the 'Nordic' style of design might favour clean lines, naturalness, wood and light, and while taking the shoes off indoors in winter and outdoors in summer goes right back to muddy farming and careful husbandry with scarce resources, it is today still a marker both of a demarcation of the separation of nature and civilisation (the outdoor-indoor divide), and an ongoing desire to continually re-establish the connection between them by physical activity (bare feet in fresh grass, outdoor eating in summer).

It is also true – gloriously so – that nature imposes its own conditions on us. A northern climate simply necessitates different practicalities than a southern one, and if you spent several months a year gazing at a sunless, ink-black sky – spectacular though it can be – you too would probably worship the summer when it comes, and make the best possible use of it while it lasts. Particularly if that sun now never seems to set, and makes up for its previous absence by keeping you company even when you are trying to sleep.

In this context, it is not especially surprising that the three discs of Swedish song Ann-Sofie von Otter has so far brought out are called *Wings in the Night*, *Watercolour*, and most recently, *A Summer's Day: Swedish Romantic Songs*. The cycle of the day, the natural life, the landscape and the seasons are not just continuously present in the artistic and philosophical endeavour that art, poetry and music are engaged with, but are also essential tools for exploring and understanding ourselves, our lives, and others.

Landscape and experience

The poetry that developed and flourished in Sweden around the 1890s gave composers access to texts of greater depth and perspective than before, written in more refined forms. The nature-lyricism became more concrete, with more connections between outer symbols and inner emotions, and with an emphasis on the *experience* gained in the landscape. This experience could be personal, general or historical, and it could affect mood, actions or the place itself. It relates to the idea that we need to see landscape(s) not as 'an object to be seen or a text to be read, but a process by which social and subjective identities are formed'. Thinking of landscapes as part of various processes is helpful as it enables us to step out of the 'inside-or-outside' categorisation, and brings to the focus an interaction between nature, us, and our narratives around the landscape. And it is through linking the 'experience' with the 'narrative' that we can understand the relationship between landscape and the Swedish landscape songs.

One kind of 'experience' might be a historical one - referring to connections with traditions and traditional interactions with the landscape. 'Flickan knyter i Johannennatten' by Johan Ludvig Runeberg (set by several composers), for example, refers to Midsummer's Eve and describes traditional - superstitious - rituals of flower-picking young girls would perform to try and read their future during this magical night. Another kind of 'historical' experience might include recounting labouring on the land, or more commonly, the deserved relaxation with dance, music and drink afterwards, the musical language in the settings of such texts helping to evoke the imagined activity.

In the historical experience we could also include those that engage with folklore and mythological traditions, virtually all of which are bound up with, and exist in, nature. Swedish folklore contains not only trolls, but a plenitude of various creatures that live in hollows, under trees, in streams. Or appear on misty clearings in dusky summer nights - dancing enticingly and dangerously. A very good example of how local beliefs and behaviour are evoked and explored to create new interpretations is Wilhelm Peterson-Berger's setting of Gustaf Fröding's poem *Titania*. Fröding (1860-1911) is one of the poets whose work is recurrently set, possibly not least because of his incredibly rhythmical and melodic poetry. Light, fresh and full of word play, it seems to be driven by its own inherent rhythms and an 'almost orchestral sound-world'. Fröding studied both German and English poetry closely, and also worked extensively on translations of works by Byron, Burns, Shelley, Poe and others. In his translations, he seems to strive to keep the original tone as well as the meaning, but at the same time find poetic and rhythmical equivalents in the new language. At times his translations can be regarded as more akin to 'reinterpretations' than transcriptions. The same fate that has befallen Shakespeare's Titania here. Fröding transfers her to a Swedish forest where she becomes an 'älva' or a 'skogsrå' (a kind of wood nymph), dancing at midnight or at dawn - tantalising, fascinating and frightening. The text describes a sound 'as if from small violins' which is heard finding its way through hazel and birch, a dark forest, and a moon shining on the fields. But look, who is dancing there? It is, it is, it is - Titania!

It is Fröding's inherent 'sound-world' that Peterson-Berger explores in his setting, using a simple vocal line which allows the narrative lyrics to drive it forward, and employing a supporting accompaniment which colours the lightness and dances with the voice, faster and faster, to the discovery of Titania's 'wind-light, moon-silvery' midsummer night ball. But Peterson-Berger also removes Titania one step further into a local setting by letting his piano accompaniment in the opening passages imitate a fiddle with open fifths and end-ornament resembling the style of rustic dances. Fröding's re-localised Titania has made a Swedish peasant version of her: an ancient mythical spirit which is part of an ongoing local engagement with nature and the landscape as a culturally significant and collectively derived place. Peterson-Berger's setting further emphasises its

local relevance through its aurally created landscape and the rustic 'violin' accompaniment. In a further twist to the re-narration, Peterson-Berger's linking of Titania and the violin gives her yet one more connection with nature: the violin is in Swedish folk-lore also closely linked with the figure of 'Näcken' – a sprite who appears (naked, no less) in streams, sitting on rocks and playing his violin to lure folks in with him. Titania is by now firmly transferred away from any Shakespearian forest and into the deep forests of the Värmland region, and the song reimagines not only her character in a different forest clearing, but also our connection with the narratives around the Swedish landscape.



Fairies of the meadow, Nils Blommer, c1850

Another kind of experience of a landscape might be spiritual or emotional. A summer's day might bring joy of the moment and bright hopes for the future, a winter's day would be dead and cold. Winter is, however, almost never contemplated in Swedish songs. It may very occasionally occur as a contrast, but virtually never in its own right. Winter, it seems, is too opposing a force for everything that Swedish poetry holds dear – rejuvenation, softness, light, the feel of the landscape – and it is therefore avoided. There is no poetry in winter, only survival, and it is almost entirely absent in the oeuvre.

In *Skogen sover* (The forest sleeps) by Ernest Thiel and set by Hugo Alfvén, it is instead summer, and the soft stillness of a June night is evoked in the gentle ripples in the piano, over which a long-lined, shimmering vocal line emerges. In small harmonic shifts it describes the faint ray of sun which lingers in the night sky – the 'day keeping watch in the night'. In minute shades of increased animation it considers the silence after 'her gay laughs', as she has now fallen asleep. Mute the narrator sit by her side, while love keeps watch over its treasure in the June night. The repeated phrases of 'love keeps watch', and the melisma on 'June' betray the song's aching heart: 'she' is no longer the night but someone else, and nothing is more precious in that moment than to sit by her in this soft, gentle, light night, while she sleeps.

Alfvén as a composer is particularly sensitive to the Swedish landscape, and often takes it as a starting point for artistic exploration. His most often played piece in Britain is his *Swedish Rhapsody*, or *Midsummer Night's Wake* to translate its original title, in which he fuses and develops a range of folk tunes to evoke the gaiety, festivity and sensuality celebrated during the longest, lightest summer nights of the year. In contrast to this very outward expression, *Skogen sover* is turned inward, toward exquisitely carved stillness, contemplation and wonder. The gentleness of the June evenings in this northern land infuses the tender harmonic shifts, and the stillness of the night is paralleled in the way the voice seems to float above the accompaniment, almost high enough to be out of reach or touch – capturing one single perfect moment with extraordinary tenderness.

A slightly more complex use of both the narrative and seasonal experience of landscape can be found in Bo Bergman's poem and Wilhelm Stenhammar's setting of *Jungfru Blond och Jungfru Brunett* (Maiden Blond and Maiden Brunett). The use of 'maiden' in the title already places the text in an older, rustic tradition, as does their clothing (long skirts), their countenance (pigtails swinging) and their activity (an impromptu outdoor dance). The air is 'autumn clear' and light, light, light – light as the maidens' dancing joy in the late summer sunshine. But across the yellowing field the universe is cold, and trees and hedges stand naked. Why, asks the song, are you dancing, when stars are falling and night is approaching? This scares the girls, and they run back home as the last rays of sun set, now frightened of the wind whining and laughing as it stealthily chases them home. They manage to get there, but outside the darkness, 'like a troll', promises to catch them next time.

The narrative drive, the mood changes and the seasonal references are well captured in Stenhammar's setting. The consistent 2/4 is made into a swinging, dance-like passage in the opening, which gives way to static, waiting chords and a slow, melancholic vocal line describing the surrounding and approaching coldness (with a falling star even picked out in the piano). The threatening mood is built up gradually and with increasing volume until both the maidens and the music stop in terror. When they continue, the laughing wind and pursuing darkness is expressed in the accompaniment which chases the girls until they reach the home fire and mother. The final section is subdued as well as unsettled and uncertain under the apparent safety of home: the threat of the darkness and the future in which the mother cannot keep them safe present to the end.

This expressive setting successfully engages with the text's reference to the landscape as both real – as a narrative space and a place in time – and metaphorical – the changing conditions of the seasons, and the anthropomorphised natural elements. The main theme of the song is reminiscent of the use of the landscape in a short story by Nobel Prize winning author Pär Lagerkvist. In 'Far och jag' (Father and I), a son and his father, who works at the railway, walk across fields and through a forest for a Sunday outing and a brief visit to relatives. On the way out nature is singing at them: it teams, hops, breathes, smells, chatters – in short, it is an expansive bodily and sensual immersion. On the way home however, the sun disappears, the shadows crowd in, and everything is silent. Then out of nowhere comes a train, unscheduled and with a driver the boy's father does not recognise. This scares the boy, and from then on he realises that he is alone, and that nothing can be trusted. The parallel with Stenhammar's song as a kind of coming-of-age ritual, or a more general comment on change and uncertainty as life evolves, might not in itself be uncommon, but these texts also highlight a very specific narrative use of the landscape. Here it is not merely part of a staging or a back-drop, but a character in its own right: one which might take part in, and ultimately affect the outcome of, the story.

Pär Lagerkvist is also the author of the poem in my final song example. *Det är vackrast när det skymmer* (It is most beautiful at dusk) is a poem which very gently explores the infinity of existence, and our limited space within it.

At dusk, all the love of heaven gathers in a dimmed light,
over the earth, over all its houses.
Everything is tenderness, everything caressed,
The Lord himself reduces distant shores.
Everything is near, everything is far,
everything given us as a loan.
Everything is mine, and everything will be taken away from me,
Soon everything will be taken away from me
– the trees, the clouds, the ground on which I walk.

Alone, leaving no trace, I shall go. [Author's translation]

Here is the landscape as the basis for all our existence, but also for all our emotional spirituality. 'Dusk' is one of those words Swedes are apparently very fond of, and its gentle light bathes this most difficult of subject matters in a tender warmth. We are here both completely at one with the landscape, impossible to divide from, yet separate as we must walk on while it stays. Gunnar de Frumerie's setting achieves and enhances this sense of both infinity and closeness, of vast conundrums made hand-sized and resting in our palms. Its simple, steadfast rhythmic patterns both secure us and allow suggestions of perpetuated repetitions, and although its downward-leading phrases in the vocal line echo the melancholy of 'dusk', they often land on the tonic and thereby imbue the sense of reaching safe anchorage or a home-coming rather than any kind of sadness or loss. And while the song harmonically explores both the intense beauty of life as well as the inescapable losses, recognising their emotional power and potential to hurt, it never lets either of these take over. The musical interpretation of the poem remains earthbound, and landscape here is our safest and most true core and the essence of our gravity: the place from whence we came and to which we return.

Soul and Landscape

The landscape connections in these songs are then both concrete and ethereal, both of events, places and narratives, as well as of moods, atmospheres and philosophical metaphors. The songs listen to the wind, and sit still in moonlight. They walk along shores, and run through fields. They challenge fears in the forest, and contemplate distance and movement beside the sea. They phrase and rephrase the beauty of spring, evening, trees, and they deposit memories in the stones, the soil and the stars. They turn with the seasons, and they grow with the days' cycles. For these songs, landscape is everything: the source of life, and the condition of living.

'Scandinavian art songs are a unique expression of the cultures of Sweden, Norway and Denmark', write the publishers of Anna Hersey's guide to singing Scandinavian song. 'Common themes found in art and literature', they suggest, 'include a love of nature, feelings of longing and melancholy, the contrast between light and dark, the extremes of the northern climate, and lively folk traditions'. While such generic statements threaten to simplify these relationships to the point of unhelpfulness, they speak also of a preoccupation so permeating it is impossible to miss. A recent CD of Swedish song by soprano Miah Persson bears the title *Soul and Landscape*, named after one of the songs on the disc by Gösta Nystroem, and Persson's CD also has as its cover a painting by Richard Bergh, 'Nordic Summer Evening' (1899-1900). It features a turn-of-the-century man and woman on a balcony overlooking a lake. The far shore is covered in trees, trees also grow near the veranda. The man and woman highlight the boundary between indoors and outdoors, the separation but also the connection between them and the landscape. Both their inclusion and their stance – they gaze passively at the scene rather than interacting with it – are typical traits which represent the constantly negotiated relationship between us and the landscape, and point to the questions we asked at the beginning of how we think of or relate to 'landscape'. Landscape here is poetically beautiful but set slightly apart, near us, yet still ungraspable. The painting also appears on the cover of the recently published *Romanser: 25 Swedish Songs*, which aims to promote Swedish songs outside Sweden, thus illustrating further its frequent (possibly too frequent) use for expressing generally perceived core ideas around the Swedes and their landscape. Gently shimmering lights, still waters, dark firs, and people perpetually exploring their own relationship with this tangible, sensual and ever-present landscape: here are your Swedish landscape songs.



Explore further:

CMC concert on 15 November: 'Landscape and music: Focus on Swedish song'

Also look out for further recitals later in the year in connection with a SWEA scholarship project – more information via CMC mailing list.

Study/sing:

Roland-Silverstein, K. (ed.), *Romanser: 25 Swedish songs with guide to Swedish lyric diction* (Stockholm: GehrmansMusikförlag, 2013).

Svenska romanser (Stockholm: Gehrmans Musikförlag, 2014). A selection of 116 songs, in Swedish only. A great selection and resource. Both can easily be ordered at www.gehrmans.se.

Hersey, Anna, *Scandinavian Song: A guide to Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish repertoire and diction* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

Listen:

Wings in the Night. Ann-Sofie von Otter and Bengt Forsberg. Deutsche Grammophon, 1996.

Soul and Landscape. Miah Persson and Roger Vignoles. Hyperion, 2001.

Wilhelm Stenhammar: Songs. Peter Mattei and Bengt-Åke Lundin. BIS, 1994.

Till havs. Jussi Björling. SCD 1100, released 1999 (various recording dates).