

Abstract

Syskonen Svensson, Sångerna och livet. En folklig repertoar i 1900-talets Göteborg
(The Svensson Family, Songs and Life – a popular repertoire in Gothenburg during the
twentieth century. Written in Swedish with an English summary)

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Etnologiska föreningen i Västsverige & Göteborgs Stadsmuseum, 2002.

This thesis examines singing and vocal repertoire of five siblings, mainly three sisters, and its uses and meanings in everyday life. The Svensson family is from Majorna, a working class district in Gothenburg. They were born between 1912 – 1923 and belong to a generation that grew up just as new types of mass media and popular culture were emerging, in a time when folklorists were often of the belief that the era of traditional singing was coming to an end. The thesis adapts a life historical approach and focuses on the sisters own modes of speech and what meanings they assign to various parts of the repertoire. Theoretical tools and methods are assembled from studies of folklore, performance, music ethnology, orality and literacy, genres, intertextuality and life story. Material is mainly gleaned from qualitative interviews and participant observation.

Throughout the text is shown how different genres appear in various life situations and social contexts – lullabies, tragic love songs from chap books, jocular ballads, schlager from popular music, allsång (a kind of community singing), own poems and birthday songs. The repertoire brings elements of a bygone era in to a modern, industrialised society. At the same time, the siblings and their generation have experienced a century of profound changes. Their repertoire has been expanded over time, reshaped and used in new ways that separate it from that of earlier generations. Oral and written traditions are intertwined; songs undergo transformations, as old references are woven into new relations of intertextuality. This vocal tradition can be described as a well-trodden musical way, extending into the future with origins in a deep past; it appears as a tangle of threads connecting different traditions, texts and contexts. Striking is how often the songs seem to speak to, and bear an association with women. Several genres are not represented in earlier research, or in the archives. Parts of the repertoire and women's everyday singing can be described as a hidden history of the 20th century.

The sisters have acquired the repertoire in various ways during different periods – they have inherited, collected, reproduced, created and recreated different parts of the repertoire, all with different meanings. The ability to sing offers many perspectives on life, through the worlds of music, poetry, narrative and common and individual memory. Throughout their lives the sisters have used song and poetry as a kind of aesthetic expression in everyday life, a creative act with many possible meanings and uses. Singing appears as a way of claiming space in life, to understand and tie life together, to remember and chronologising and by transforming life in poetry and song widening the world.

Keywords: everyday singing, folk song, singers, songs, repertoire, folklore, performance, orality and literacy, tradition, life story, aesthetics, creativity and competence.

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ISBN 91-85838-60-8 /ISSN 0283-0930, ISSN 1404-9546