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Folk Song Lab: Deconstructing the Folk Song as a Tool for Improvisation

In my artistic research, "*Kurbits-ReBoot, Swedish traditional singing in new artistic contexts*" (Rosenberg, 2013), I experimented with developing artistic methods and concepts relating to variation and improvisation from the perspective of the folk singer as a creative performer (performer-composer), and the song as an imaginary entity that only exists in the interpretation of a singer. This implies that a song is viewed as a container for ideas, a framework, a starting point for creating something - *the song* - every time you sing - a musical work being created by the singer, rather than a musical work in the sense of a composition that is interpreted by a singer.

My inspiration for this idea came from my own experiences being part of an oral tradition in folk singing and learning by ear from singers "in the moment", but also from testimony from collectors and performers about the art of folk singing, such as that about the English ballad singer Mrs Brown: "*What was it she had carried in her memory? Not a text, but a ballad: a entity soluble in the mind, to be concretely realized at will in words and music.*" (Bronson, 1969) This concept, that the song only takes a concrete form through the act of singing, and is realized in its interpreted form only, could be just as relevant for today's traditional singers as it was for Mrs Brown, since it points to the possibility of empowering the performative momentum and performative power of the folk singer as an interpreter of 'here and now', creating presence. But this concept also gives rise to the interesting question of how to use this idea of "the song" as a "framework" for a musical performance in our present time, where everything can be recorded, logged, saved, and listened to again and again, and where increasingly fewer and fewer things really happen in the "now".

In my work I have experimented with using parameters from the concept of "Flow" (Csikszentmihaly, 1990), and the ideas of using the dynamic between orality and literacy (Ong, 1982), in order to address this complex issue. In Folk Song Lab I have experimented with using the language of Folk Song by deconstructing, and with an artistic investigation into the perspective of Folk Song as a framework for musical expression in the moment.

This is a presentation of an on-going project called Folk Song Lab, which addresses different approaches or methods for this deconstruction, and moreover a reflection of my findings. The idea is to present the findings, the methods, and the results with recordings and images from the experimental sessions, as well as with the sessions themselves. I myself am both part of the setting and participating in this experiment, as well as the reflecting part.

Implementation

The project Folk Song Lab began with a session where four singers started with a long improvisation session together, in order to find the implicit boundaries of our way of singing, singing style, variation, and improvisation, creating both music and text within the tradition.

In traditional folk songs, one central quality is the concept of presence. In our time this quality is a rarity: we tend to think that we can always go back and listen to a song again, or record it, and fewer and fewer things are creatively part of the present time. This also has the effect that there is a more firm way of looking at the concept of the song as something more definite - a product. The relation between producer and consumer is also much more defined in our time. One other parameter in the folk song is the interactive part - it matters if you participate in the singing.

In traditional folk singing the song is to be viewed as a frame for expressions rather than something defined. But today the song is often something fixed, a product. Is it possible then to find ways to have a view on singing a song, and the concept of a song, as described above?

Folk Song Lab is about exploring how we can use the traditional folk singing language in the spontaneous music making of today. Can we find pedagogic approaches addressing how to express yourself today within the language of the traditional Folk Song? Could it be possible to work with this? To make room from concentrated time, space, and place to practice expressing yourself with this language? In this project, I have been working with theories from Walter Ong (Ong, 1982) and Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman, 2013), as well as the concept of Flow (Csikszentmihaly, 1990), on how you learn and how you can use your intuitive mind when singing, improvising, and creating new things.

Methods

From my thesis I have developed further on a style of making music together without using oral or written instructions to such a great degree. I am trying to minimize the influence that this would have on the process by talking too much, or by using another media (such as written text). In my thesis I experimented with the learning process in one of my projects, e.g. Kurbits-Koral- The Spirit of the Music:

The learning process of the songs did proceed without using written music."... "We sat round a table or in a circle of chairs and I just started to sing a melody and the other just "fell into it"... " I have never before in such a complete manner used this method for teaching such complex music, and to such extent avoided the verbal instructions in the teaching process, to elude to separate the music into smaller phrases"... "and to as far as possible avoid to represent the music and lyric in any other form than by it self. It was a very interesting experiment, and it showed to be much more easy than I would imagine. The premises were off course quite good since the majority of the participants were experienced oral musicians, and it diminished dramatically the distance between performance and rehearsal, we created music at all time." (Rosenberg, 2013)

From these experiences I developed methods of how to, with minimal oral instruction, focus on making music from the very start, and to not separate the pedagogic approach from the artistic approach. They are the same.

From this background, I have developed different methods upon which I have based the project Folk Song Lab. Primarily, to use the performance situation as a base, not thinking about this as anything other than to promote the feeling of making music on the spot, and in this respect using improvisation as a foundation for this. Since it made me interested in how several people can interact in this process, it has been a project that is dependent on group interaction - with at least four people at the same time, but up to ten persons singing together - and also interactive and collaborative works between different artistic fields, improvised and collective, from storyboard, tonal framework, and singing styles, creating both music and text within the concept of "the song", as described above.

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