Selvvalgt prøveforelesning for dr. philos. Graden UiO 5.10.01:

Comparing two cases of popular music history: What has Landskappleiken to do with Nashville?

Before defending a thesis that is based on ethnography and probably in constant danger of getting stuck in the particularities of a local musician and his music ("Steckenbleiben im Partikulären" as one of my opponents has called it in his work on the methodology of music history), I welcome you to 45 minutes of sweeping generalizations and wild speculations about the ways of music history. What I am going to tell you is not based on first hand research but on the most readily available sources about music of the American South, namely the writings of Bill C. Malone and Charles K. Wolfe, and about Norwegian traditional music, especially in the new edition of Norges Musikkhistorie (Norway`s music history).

Videos Garth Brooks, Knut Hamre: Tjønnbergen

You will ask what is the point of comparing two genres of music that seem so different. One is based on songs with a simple form and a very basic harmonic structure. These are performed by a singer who is backed by a group of musicians who play a number of instruments from different time periods, from the fiddle to the synthesizer. The other genre is based on instrumental tunes in a less straightforward form, played solo on one specific instrument, the hardanger fiddle.

The first example is from a commercially issued videotape called "This is Garth Brooks". It shows a performance in a huge concert hall with lighting and a public address system, in front of a large audience that sings along, hollers and screams. The other example is from a documentation video made by the folk music and dance center in Trondheim. We saw master fiddle player Knut Hamre perform in the top class of the national folk music competition (*landskappleiken*) in Rauland 1994. This contest was held in a riding hall using one microphone in front of a seated audience of about 1500 people who did not make a sound while the musician played. I was there and it did not look much different from this:

Picture fiddle competition

As you may be able to read in the corner, this picture was taken in Kentucky in 1926.

What the two musical genres have in common today is that they are the most visible forms of traditionally based rural music in their respective homelands. If you ask Americans what country music is you are likely to get answers like *Nashville* or even

Garth Brooks. If you ask Norwegians what folk music is, many will answer Hardanger Fiddle and some will refer to *kappleik*.

When we teach our students the history of Norwegian traditional music, we tell them a simple story that sounds very convincing: First the traditional fiddle music was the only music used in the Norwegian countryside. People danced to the fiddle and appreciated its music. Then it was threatened by the pietistic religious revivals and the accordion. Then fiddle player Knut Dahle wrote to Edvard Grieg who became a judge at fiddle competitions. Then it had turned into art.

Contrasting this narrative with what is being told about another form of traditional music, one that turned into *pop* instead of *art*, might help to ask more questions about what really happened in Norway and why.

In the first part of this lecture I will show that Country Music and Norwegian Folk Music have a lot in common when it comes to their roots and early history. I will illustrate this by playing a number of sound examples from both the US (exclusively commercially issued recordings!) and Norway (mainly from our archive here at the university). Then I want to point out when and how they started to develop in the direction of what we have just seen. Finally I want to look at the role music history writing may have played in this process in Norway.

So let us start in the beginning or at least in the late 1700s:

The roots of country music lie in the rural south of the United States, from Virginia in the east to east Texas in the west. Until the civil war people lived in relative independence, the rhythm of their lives was ruled by the agricultural cycle. They lived close to the land they cultivated and were isolated by great distances and rugged terrain. They remained sheltered from the growth of the cities and the new waves of immigration that arrived in the northern states. The dominating culture was British and Celtic, even if other ethnic groups contributed to the way of life in the South which Bill Malone characterizes as sharing similar architecture, religion, food and speech patterns.

One common feature of this culture was the use of the fiddle as an instrument of entertainment. The tunes one played for dancing came from English country dances: reels, hornpipes and some jigs. But the waltz and other modern European dances also become popular around this time.

The fiddler played for dancing in private homes and at gatherings like market places. Country dances continued to be the most important social diversion until the 1930s. Fiddlers were often placed in the doorway so that you could play for dancers in two rooms.

All of this will sound familiar to those who know Norwegian traditional music. Norwegian folk music is largely identified with the inner valleys and some of the fjords of southern Norway, where people also seem to have remained isolated from the cities. Music connected to agriculture was used here as well as in the American South. Let's listen to cattle calls. As I told you I will not play field recordings from the US but examples of how rural music was sold on records:

Petra Ligård: Kulokk; Eddy Arnold: lonesome cattle call

Dance music on the fiddle was the main entertainment in rural Norway as well. The older layer of Norwegian couple dances, the *Springar* and *gangar* had the position of the American country dances, and waltzes, schottisches, polkas and mazurkas were moving in slowly.

The old song repertoire came from the same sources in the European past in both countries. When Cecil Sharp was invited to collect songs in the southern Appalachians from 1916 to 1918 he found medieval English ballads in a living tradition, just like Landstad and other collectors had found similar versions in Norway. Here is an example of versions of Child 278: The famer's curst wife:

Kari Dale: "Kjerringa satt seg på purkaren grå"; Billy and Belle Reed: "The old lady and the devil"

These similarities are certainly not exclusive for the traditional music of the American south and central Norway and I do not claim any direct relationship other than that people in both areas had similar conditions of living and a strong heritage from continental Europe and/or the British Isles.

Then what happens?

Both rural Norway and the rural American South are exposed to the growing influence of the cities, to a monetary economy and industrialization. The conditions of living become much harder for the farmers, and in the end this leads to immigration. Norwegians sail to the US in the end of the 19th century and southerners move west in the depression years.

The rural south becomes increasingly exposed to city culture as people move there and come back and as urban entertainment comes to them. There are the medicine shows trying to sell all kinds of dubious remedies, there are vaudeville shows which travel about in tents but present the same entertainment as in the city theatres. There are circuses, riding shows and starting in the 1830s there are the minstrel shows.

In this period, if not earlier, the fiddle stops being an exclusive solo instrument. The banjo often joins in, and the guitar soon follows after.

Uncle Dave Macon, born 1870, led one of the early hillbilly stringbands, which often featured fiddle and banjo versions of minstrel songs.

Uncle Dave Macon: I'm going away in the morn

The medicine shows also hired local musicians and gave them an opportunity to make money playing music. But playing traditional tunes alone was not enough there. They had to work as stand up comedians too. "Rural skits" became a part of the performance of many string bands and comedy has remained an important element of Nashville showbiz until much later.

At the same time City composers imitated folk styles. Stephen Foster created the romantic image of the old south in popular American culture. He and other northerners wrote songs that became popular in the rural south. These are still being sung today, but now they are known as country songs and are forgotten elsewhere.

Black musicians were a part of everyday life and took part in the development of southern music. They played a role in spreading the banjo and later guitar playing styles. (Bill Monroe's first guitar teacher was a man with the fine German name Arnold Schultz, and he is of course the gentleman on the left)

Picture of Arnold Schultz

As many African Americans also played the fiddle, black music also worked its way into the fiddle repertoire. Fiddlers started to play rags, stomps and blues.

Salt lake city blues, Sam and Kirk McGhee, New York 1927

The majority of rural musicians were still farmer boys who played for dances on the weekend. Some played in the medicine shows, some for political rallies, and some competed in the fiddle contests that seem to be a lot older in the US than in Norway. Few made a living from playing music, but both amateurs and professionals seem to gladly have incorporated the new impulses. Folklorists would find solo singers who sang British ballads and fiddlers who played hornpipes like they were played in Ireland for several decades to come, and there would of course be the American Folk

Revival and an old time music scene, but the mainstream of southern rural music had moved on.

In Norway musicians reacted differently to similar impulses, but they also were exposed to different impulses. The popularity of the round dances forced fiddlers to learn a new repertoire. Some learned directly from city musicians, others from traveling forerunners among the rural musicians themselves.

Song lyrics were distributed on cheap prints and reached people all over the country. When Ludvig Matias Lindeman started to collect folk songs in the middle of the century he found that people sung all kinds of songs, most of which weren't of interest for him. Soon after the accordion–or rather melodeon–arrives and challenges the fiddle as the prominent instrument for dancing waltzes. In many areas fiddlers continue to play solo, but duos of fiddle and melodeon seem to be quite common.

But the musicians must also have witnessed art music, like concerts by violin virtuosos. A number of hardanger fiddle players started to play concerts. They played the older dance tunes, but they also composed new music that was inspired by music from the romantic period and what some people today call "light classics". Titles for these new pieces are all inspired by national romanticism and refer to the Norwegian nature.

Torkjell Haugerud: Huldrejenta

Players like Haugerud were by that time well educated [check with Storesund] and had adapted the national and cultural ideas of the post romantic era. Some read and corresponded with writers, published books and newsletters themselves and some even became politicians. They sought the acceptance of the cultural elite of the country.

Their old tunes worked as symbols for the national struggle that was to culminate in the separation from Sweden in 1905. So for some time the fiddlers joined forces with the new movements that sought to educate and modernize the countryside in a free national spirit. Fiddle music was no cheap entertainment but served a cause. Performing "rural skits" was unthinkable for these fiddle players.

In the US such idealism was not in the foreground. Record companies realized that the white people in the South might buy records of their own music, just like black Americans had bought the so called "race records". The Texas fiddler Eck Robertson

recorded for Victor, and a little later Fiddlin' John Carson from Georgia recorded for Okeh.

Carson's first record sold well, mainly because of his rural singing style that the record executives found "pluperfect awful". Suddenly the music was called "old-time" or "hillbilly" and was quickly becoming a commodity. People like Carson could build a career playing, singing and entertaining people.

Photo Fiddlin John and Moonshine Kate

Five years later the genre has produced real stars whose records have sold in impressive numbers. Stringbands like the Skillet Lickers, balladeers like Vernon Dalhart, singing cowboys like Carl T. Spraque, harmony groups like the Carter family, blues-inspired songsters like Jimmy Rodgers and even white gospel quartetts. But–as we have heard–variants of British ballads were also recorded, as were love songs, camp meeting songs, hymns from shape-note hymnals and pop and sentimental songs, songs of social commentary and event songs.

And then there was the radio. By 1930 there were 600 radio stations in the US, and many southern stations scheduled "barn dances" every week. Companies bought radio time and recruited rural performers. By 1928 listening to the Grand Ole Opry from Nashville every Saturday had become a kind of a devotional service for the people in the south.

There was also considerable success outside hillbilly country. The biggest radio show featuring country artists in 1930 was not the Opry in Nashville but "National Barn Dance" broadcasting from Chicago, where many people from Kentucky lived and worked. It featured more singing and less fiddling than the southern shows. Fan letters showed that many artists had a following in the North that included many different ethnic groups.

Hillbilly music was a success. It was diverse and eclectic and encompassed everything from traditional fiddle tunes and ballads to modern Tin Pan Alley songs with Hawaiian guitar and bluesy singing. Its stars made cowboy movies in Hollywood and appealed to the tastes of many in the nation. Since then it has changed many times and moved back and forth between the wish to go pop and the need to "keep it country".

But what happened in Norway in this period?

The Norwegian fiddlers seem to have taken the opposite direction. When gramophone records appear in Norway, Hardanger fiddle players were among the first to be recorded. But their discs featured mostly traditional tunes, much like the one we heard Knut Hamre play in the video. The only other records with rural tunes were recorded not by fiddlers, but by accordion virtuosos here in the capital.

Religious and popular songs that were used in the countryside–the repertoire the collectors did not care about–were recorded by professional singers and actors in the city, never by rural singers.

By that time the fiddle players felt that the educational movements did not appreciate them as musicians and that it largely ignored the traditional tunes and dances.

So they organized in fiddle players' clubs and backed away from the new and modern. The accordion and all modern music became their enemies. While their American contemporaries mixed their traditional music with many new influences, the Norwegian fiddlers aimed for a purification of style.

When the fiddlers' clubs united in their own national organization in 1923, Arne Bjørndal stated that one "must keep the heritage of the tunes as pure as possible and debate every change with one's conscience". And this is basically why the tune we heard Knut Hamre play has stayed like it was 100 years ago and why Hamre does not play any other music I know of. (not even when he records with new age musician Steve Tibbets [wrong! He also plays Swedish Polskas on the violin!])

This conservatism that potentially freezes the music has been criticized many times. However, what I find most interesting about this and my reason for comparing this music with hillbilly music, is the attitude it shows towards the audience.

The fiddle players came to define what *was* and what *was not* folk music for a long time, and they excluded most music that was actively being used in the countryside.

Folk song did not become an element of the competitions before the war. Some singers were featured when the folk music radio program started in 1931, but what they sang there was hardly what they sang at home.

By the 1930s folk music seems to have lost all of its appeal as a national symbol. The competitions drew crowds of locals whose interest became more and more nostalgic. People in the capital were enraged about having to listen to a folk music show on the one available radio channel and threw stones at the house of the program host Eivind

Groven. I have not studied why they did, but Groven argued that it was important that people could hear original folk music recordings of high quality to learn to understand the music. In the US radio stations hired hillbilly musicians in order to sell the products of their sponsors. In Norway the program was not set up because it was popular but to educate people.

The argumentation of the fiddle players became more and more stubborn: If the audience does not like the music, it is because it does not understand it. It is complex music. You have to either have grown up with it or be extremely musical. This is something you can still hear today. The fiddle players' newsletters and other publications regularly cite "internationally renown musicians" from other genres who state how wonderful this music is and, of course, how complex.

Show Book "Hardingfela"

In addition to that, the supposedly especially "difficult" and "special" features of the music are put on a pedestal. What is different becomes genuine just for the sake of being different. Sometimes real Norwegian folk music seems to be played only on hardanger fiddle, the dances have only asymmetric rhythms and all the melodies are in a "natural folk tune scale" with floating intervals and the sacred blue notes.

Of course it is not, but even if it was, I do not think it would be impossible to grasp for listeners. If you listen to what record companies put out on gramophone records for the commercial hillbilly market in the 1920s, you may reconsider what is difficult to understand or not.

Listen to Buell Kazee sing "East Virginia".

And there are plenty of Appalachian tunes in irregular forms too. In my opinion many forms of older and newer Norwegian rural music could have had a wider appeal. I claim there is NOTHING in the musical material that would make commercialization in Norway impossible. That nothing of the like happened is because people chose not to try.

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My final remarks concern the writing of music history in town and country. When I read *Norges Musikkhistorie* I cannot help but get the impression that we folk music scholars have supported the image of a large gap between the city and the

countryside. The chapters written by folk music scholars (at least the one in volume 2) signalize distance and state the difficulty of bridging the cultural gap. They have to explain folk music structures to the reader before they can undertake anything else. This music is *supposed* to be difficult!

The chapters written by traditional musicologists on the other hand show a benevolent interest for folk music and document the presence of rural music in the capital.

After reading country music history I cannot help but wonder if there really was so little popular music accessible in the Norwegian countryside. I think there is reason to look again. My superficial presentation here cannot do anything but encourage research that takes into account the exchange between town and country and that is not paralyzed by the national romantic paradigm of a completely independently developing traditional music.

Lately there have been some studies that point in this direction. Ingar Ranheim has documented the relationship between traditional musicians and the educational movements in the countryside, Asbjørn Storesund has presented interesting evidence about the influence of city customers in the development of hardanger fiddle making, and the project trying to shed light on the early history of the hardanger fiddle has produced data on different hardanger fiddle makers in Bergen and Hardanger.

And NO, I do not regret that we do not have a Norwegian Garth Brooks, but I do think that traditional tunes still would exist if fewer bridges had been burned.

Hans-Hinrich Thedens