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NORWEGIAN COUPLE DANCES FROM EAST TO WEST

Poland features in the names of a number of Norwegian traditional dances: the *pols*, *polsk*, *polskdans*, *polsdans* and *pols*, the *polka* and the *masurka*. While the latter two terms refer to round dances which arrived in the Norwegian countryside in the nineteenth century,¹ the first four names refer to older couple dances spread in the east and north of the country and closely related to the Swedish *polska*.

In 2003, a book on the Polish dances in Scandinavia and Poland was published after a conference at the Swedish Song Archive.² Authors from Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Poland wrote about the triple-metre couple dances from various perspectives. At least in Norway, Ewa Dahlig-Turek's article on the Polish, descending, rhythms has been the most influential among musicians and teachers. She presents a theory about how Polish music may have influenced music in Scandinavia.

In the following, I will give a description of some of the folk dances and melodies we find in the Norwegian folk tradition today and present works by several writers that have been issued since the publication of the above-mentioned book or which have not been translated.

The older couple dances with names referring to Poland share many features with the *springar*, *springdans* and *springleik* dances in the south

¹ The term 'round dances' is based on a characteristic feature: a complete turn of the couple in the time of one measure of the music. Jan-Petter Blom ('Springar, Pols and Polska Dances of the Scandinavian Peninsula', in Märta Ramsten (ed.), *The Polish Dance in Scandinavia and Poland* (Stockholm, 2003)) calls this 'whirling'.

² Ramsten (ed.), *The Polish Dance*.

and west. *Springe* means to run and distinguishes these dances from the slower walking dances, mostly called *gangar*.³ The walking dances are assumed to be the oldest Norwegian couple dances. They are in use only in some provinces in the south-west, but are known to have been more widespread.

The triple-time dances can be classified by a number of features. Some include a fast turn, others do not. Some are more improvisatory, others follow fixed sequences of figures. In some the partners never let go of each other, and others include dancing apart, *lausdans*. Rhythmic patterns are based on accents, but also on relative beat lengths. In some regions, the melodies follow a pattern of long-medium-short beats, while in others they use a short-long-medium pattern.

Regional varieties of folk music genres are often called musical ‘dialects’. As in language, it is important that one can hear where a performer comes from. This is even more important in dances, as they are by nature shared by a community. Today, there are a handful of distinguishable regional dance styles that everybody in the folk music community knows about, even if they cannot dance all of them.

People most often divide the Norwegian folk music and dance repertoire according to the fiddle instrument played: the Hardanger fiddle in the west and south and the standard fiddle or violin in the east and north. But the picture is more complicated. Different borders can be drawn according to which dances are practised (walking, running and solo dances), which dance figures are used and how many times the dancers’ bodies move up and down in a measure of the music.

Most interesting in the context of a possible Polish influence, however, are the rhythmic patterns. Dahlig-Turek describes how it became customary to derive a ‘proportion’ in triple metre from melodies in an even metre. The ‘Polish way’ of doing this was to build a ‘descending rhythm’, where the first beat in a bar consisted of shorter note values than the later beats. She finds this in many Swedish polska melodies, and it has a parallel in one of the asymmetrical rhythm patterns of the running dances, most prominently used in Valdres and Gudbrandsdalen. Here

³ I translate the verb ‘springe’ here as running, while Bjørn Aksdal (‘Polish Dance with Walking and Jumping Dance’, in Ramsten (ed.), *The Polish Dance*, pp. 53–76) uses ‘jumping’. Important is the quicker movement compared to the walking dances.

the first beat in each bar is accented and shortened, so the note values become shorter.⁴

The running dances on the west coast really do resemble a running movement. Each step in the dance has the same weight, and the dancers' torsos move up and down once on every single beat of the music. The dancers can combine step patterns that can be of one, two and three beats in length, and this again does not even require the music to follow a triple metre. Consequently, we find not only tunes in 3/4, but also tunes with extra beats (in the south-west) and tunes that could also be danced as walking dances in mostly a duple metre (in Jølster and Nordfjord). In the areas of the normal fiddle, we can find similar phenomena in Drevja, in northern Norway.

There are areas where an even, but strictly 3/4 metre is played, but still the dances can be classified according to where they accent the rhythm. For example, the *springar* in Hallingdal does not really have an uneven beat, but one of its beats is clearly accented. This puts it in the same category as the *springar* in Valdres, the *springleik* in Gudbrandsdalen and most Polish dances from the north-east, the one from Røros being the best known.

Further south, we meet the other type, which seldom is even, but which is described as having an up-beat, often played as a triplet, and an accented, long, one. The best known of these dances is the *springar* in Telemark. There are other related *springars* in neighbouring areas: to the north in Numedal and to the south-west in Agder. Lately, increasing attention has been paid to Polish dances further south in the area where the violin is played. The collector Ludvig Matias Lindeman (1812–87) noted a dance in Åmot in Østerdalen with a shorter third beat, and the Swedish collector Einar Øvergaard notated melodies he found around 1900 in 2½/8.⁵

This pattern with smaller note values on the third beat in the bar has been called 'German'.⁶ These two patterns are then used to describe the

⁴ Ewa Dahlig-Turek, 'On the History of the Polska', in Ramsten (ed.), *The Polish Dance*, pp. 11–26.

⁵ Ramsten, *Einar Øvergaards Folkemusikksamling* [Einar Øvergaard's collection of folk tunes] (Stockholm, 1982). Sverre Halbakken has written on this topic and claims, among other things, that this rhythmic pattern was much more widespread in the east than hitherto believed. Sverre Halbakken, *Trinn og toner* [Steps and tunes] (Oslo, 2011).

⁶ Dahlig-Turek refers to Valentin Hausmann, who was the first to distinguish between the Polish and the German way of using *proportio* to transform a piece in duple metre into one in triple metre, in 1602. Dahlig-Turek, 'On the History of the Polska', p. 17.



Plate 1. *Kongelåtten*, Olav Gurvin (ed.) *Norwegian Folk Music*, Series 1: *Harding Fiddle Music*, vol. iv (Oslo, 1963), p. 121

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KONGELÅTTEN
The Royal Slått

etter Sevat Sataöen, Ål, Hallingdal (G) after Sevat Sataöen, Ål, Hallingdal (G)

Felestille Tuning Uderstrenger Sympathetic strings

Fyrste gangen

Fine

two types of dances that I have discussed: the short-long-long pattern is assumed to have turned into the asymmetrical rhythmic pattern with (or without) a short note value.

The possible Polish influence has been traced to the rule of Sigismund Vasa in the late sixteenth century. It is believed to have been most influential in higher strata of society and to have later spread to the strata of workers in Røros and its ‘circumference’.⁷

The Polish impulse is not easy to trace. In her study of the supposedly oldest *pols* tunes from Røros, Eva Hov looks at Polish manuscripts in order to find possible ‘ancestors’ of the melodies played in Røros. Today, *pols* melodies almost exclusively follow an 8+8 bar form, but Hov finds

⁷ Dahlig-Turek refers to Retzelius-Valerius, who in a treatise from 1698 calls the older way of doing the *proportio* ‘proportio plebeiorum’ (ibid., p. 20). The term ‘circumference’ was used for the communities adjacent to Røros, all of which traded extensively with that mining town.

that this is hardly present in the Polish sources.⁸ Hov concludes that the irregular forms associated with the fiddle music in the west of Norway must also have been present in the east before the regular form became popular in the eighteenth century.

This would reduce the Polish impulse to the descending rhythm pattern. But it has another dimension: that the *proportio* was derived from another dance in duple metre could have had an impact on the folk tradition, too. As Dahlig-Turek (and Tobias Norlind before her) has shown, many manuscripts from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries included pairings of a solemn, processional dance and the livelier *proportio* in triple time.

Traces of a similar practice have been found in eastern Norway, as there seem to have been traditions of pairing a walking dance with a running dance or Polish dance – at least in the context of the wedding ceremony.⁹ Sverre Halbakken has used this evidence to construct a hypothesis that what he calls the ‘old Polish dance’ must always have consisted of these two elements, and that the proportion must have been in the German style.¹⁰

When I call this article ‘from east to west’, I follow the idea of a cultural impulse that has influenced something that was already there. But what do we really know about this older music and the German principle? When and how did it arrive in Norway? And how did it spread in the lower strata of society?

While Halbakken is a prolific author outside academia, I will now present the views of three authors of academic theses who also deal with the subject and whose works were not available when the book on the Polish dance in Scandinavia and Poland was published. These not only discuss the Polish impulse, but also attempt to say something about the early dance music in all of southern Norway.

⁸ Eva Hov, ‘Når gammellekan set dansaran på prøve’ [When the old tunes put the dancers to the test], Hovedfag thesis, Department of Music, University of Trondheim, 1994.

⁹ Olav Sæta, ‘Tune Genres and Designations’, in Sæta (ed.), *The Fiddle Tunes Volumes: The ‘Normal’ Fiddle*, vol. iv: *Hedmark* (Oslo, 1997).

¹⁰ Halbakken, *Trinn og toner*. Halbakken takes this further and claims that this also must be the origin of the halling, the acrobatic solo dance. Instead of relating its name to the Halling valley further west, he considers it to derive from *halv-ling* (= half-one), meaning one half of the original Polish dance. While scholars agree on the first part of the hypothesis that the coupling of walking and running dances was common, the halling idea has not been supported by other authors.

For his dissertation work, Per Åsmund Omholt undertook the huge task of coding hundreds of tune melodies into a database. Then he used that material to quantitatively test a number of hypotheses that were based on qualitative analysis.¹¹ His aim was to identify musical traits that could be associated with certain time periods.

An example of an indicator that cannot be used to determine age is the occurrence of many triplets in tunes in 3/4. Omholt agrees that these could have been introduced when the minuet became popular, but he argues that once learned with one repertoire they can easily be implemented in other tunes, both older and newer.

Omholt's findings mostly corroborate older theories. Like others before him, he describes a basic difference between two areas in Norway. In the south-west, he finds the following traits:

- The *gangar* is a major part of the fiddle music repertoire, in addition to the *springar*.
- Tunes are largely constructed of short motifs, the *gangar* even more so than the *springar*.
- Ambiguous forms and chain motifs are widespread.
- Melodies are mostly played on the three top strings of the instrument.
- Motifs are transposed by both octaves and fifths.
- Melodic downward movement is prevalent.
- Major tonality is used, and fiddle players do not classify tunes by their key at all.

In the north-east, these traits are prominent:

- *Springars* / Polish dances dominate the repertoire; walking dances are very few.
- The tunes have mostly a regular 8+8 bar form without any ambiguity. Some walking dances are built from smaller motifs.
- Melodies are mostly played on the top string.
- Transposing is rare as a part of the melodic structure, but octaves are used in duet playing.
- Downward melodic movement is less pronounced and upward movement occurs.

¹¹ Per Åsmund Omholt, 'Regional og typologisk variasjon i norsk slåttemusikk: en kvantitativ tilnærming med et historisk perspektiv' [Regional and typological variations in Norwegian dance tunes: a quantitative approach from a historical perspective], PhD thesis, University of Bergen; <https://teora.hit.no/handle/2282/958> (accessed 4 February 2016).

- Minor tonality occurs, if not throughout whole tunes. Players do use the key to describe tunes.¹²

Omholt agrees with dance researchers that the music in the southwest must be the oldest. Like Hov, he assumes that the irregular forms must be older than the 8+8 bar forms of the Polish dances in the east. He finds the walking dances in 3/8 to be almost entirely built after the older principle. These tunes are also found in a smaller geographical area than the walking dances built from semiquavers (most often notated in 2/4, or in 2–3/4, as the melodic motifs do not have to be of a particular length) and most likely constitute the oldest part of the fiddle repertoire.

Omholt distinguishes between traits of music and dance that are likely to originate from different historical layers and the meetings between these and traits that he calls ‘dialects’, meaning that they could have originated locally without special impulses from outside.

Plate 2. *Springar*, Reidar Sevag nad Olav Sæta (ed.) *Norwegian Folk Music*, Series 2: *Slåtter for the Normal Fiddle*, vol. iii (Oslo, 1997), p. 101

5c
Samuel Bergset, Stryn, hf.

Springar

When looking at the *gamalt* tunes of Nordfjord and Jølster, he sees a clear difference from the other running dance tunes in the area. *Gamalt*

¹² Ibid., p. 258.



means old, so the oral tradition leaves no doubt that these tunes are considered older, but the forms of the few documented tunes in this genre cover everything from the older chain motif form to modern eight-bar periods. The other criteria he has found to identify older layers also do not fit all the *gamalt* tunes conclusively. Therefore, he hesitates to call the *gamalt* genre older as a whole. It could also be a local development. However, and this is interesting in terms of a possible connection to the Polish dances further east, he admits the possibility that at least some *gamalt* tunes could initially have been walking tunes. And that would resemble a very similar process to the *proportio* in the manuscripts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³ On the other hand, Omholt argues against any relationship between the old walking dances of the west and the duple-metre tunes from the manuscripts, as he thinks them too different to have any historic-genetic connection.¹⁴

Omholt does not find material in the Norwegian repertoire that would corroborate Dahlig-Turek's findings in the Swedish polskas either. Even if the theory of the Polish versus the German pattern seems to make sense with regard to the different asymmetrical rhythm patterns, he has difficulty finding concrete examples of the Polish *proportio* in the Norwegian repertoire.¹⁵ Diminishing note values do not appear consistently. The only repertoire that has many triplets on the first beat of the bar he finds in Hordaland, as far away from the Swedish border as one can get. Omholt calls this a new and innovative element that certain influential players may have incorporated into older tunes as well as newer ones.¹⁶

The repertoire in his material is also not divided by the placement of cadential formulas. The same tunes can appear in both Polish and German forms. The running dance in Valdres is very similar to the one in upper Gudbrandsdalen, just one mountain crossing further north. Both use the Polish-type accent and a short one, but the tune repertoire is not

¹³ Ibid., p. 261 ff.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 292.

¹⁵ Omholt makes it clear that his method only works with significant numbers of tunes. It may well be possible to find examples for the descending pattern, but statistically there is no such type of tune. This is in stark contrast to handwritten manuscripts from the eighteenth century, where this type is strongly represented. See Hans Olav Gorset, 'Handwritten Norwegian Music Books: Documentation and Inspiration', herein.

¹⁶ Omholt, 'Regional og typologisk variasjon', p. 278.

shared. Tunes in Valdres have their relatives in the south, where they are played in the German way.¹⁷

Summarising the results of his analysis, Omholt presents a hypothesis about the historical development that mainly follows what earlier authors have proposed, but with certain modifications. He thinks the Polish proportion was more important in the higher strata of society, while the German pattern was already established in the lower strata. The different regional styles then evolved out of different meetings of styles when the Polish style spread to the west and the lower strata of rural society (he also gives examples).

Omholt cannot really say much about what was already established in the west when the Polish influence appeared. He assumes it to have come from a German-speaking area, but can only guess when it did so and where exactly it originated. At the end of his thesis, he gives one example, where he found the melody of a well-known walking dance from Setesdal in the south in a tune book from the Danish island of Amager, where Dutchmen had settled in the first half of the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, his analysis apparatus does not allow such singular findings to be processed, however striking they may be.

Eilev Groven Myhren deals with the connections between Europe and the west of Norway during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁸ Starting with European history, he looks at possible sources for the music in both eastern and western Norway during the Renaissance, in order to find connections between those times and the documented traditions from the mid nineteenth century. Along with music manuscripts from Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and France, he uses Arbeau's *Orchésographie* from 1588 as a source about dance. His main candidate for a dance that could have inspired the *springars* is the galliard, the first real independent couple dance. The galliard always followed a stately pavane

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 286. See also Tellef Kvitte's comparison of bowing patterns in Hardanger fiddle tunes from Polish and German influenced areas, in Kvitte, 'Strøkfigurer – en Side av Bueteknikken i den Norske Hardingfele- og Felemusikken' [Bowing patterns: an aspect of bowing technique in Norwegian Hardanger fiddle and standard fiddle playing], *Sumlen*, 1992, pp. 19–32.

¹⁸ Eilev Groven Myhren, *Fons et Origo: arven fra europeisk renessanse i norsk folkemusikk og -dans: en studie i opprinnelsen til den norske springaren og polsen belyst ved renessansens tredelte danseformer* [*Fons et Origo. The heritage of the European Renaissance in Norwegian folk music and dance: a study of the origins of the Norwegian springar and pols dances illuminated by the triple-time dances of the Renaissance*] (Oslo, 2000).

in a duple rhythm. Groven Myhren's examples for similar pairings are not from eastern Norway, like Halbakken's, but from the Hardanger fiddle areas Telemark and Krødsherad.

He describes the cultural contacts between Italy and France before 1530, using several sources on performance practice and the early history of the violin. It is this Italian and French culture that was introduced to Poland by King Sigismund the Old's Milanese wife, Bona Sforza, after 1518. Groven Myhren believes that the pavane – galliard pairing that the French introduced was the origin of the Polish *proportio*.

His main interest, however, is what happened in western Norway. He describes how the Italian and French influence also spread to Scotland and England. Queen Elizabeth danced galliards every day before breakfast. After the galliard came the volta, which is documented in Germany from 1590. Michael Prätorius published several melodies in 1612. Groven Myhren believes that the whirling motif in the Norwegian dance is older than both the Polish dance in eastern Norway and the later round dances, with which it usually has been associated. He also finds other elements of Norwegian *bygdedans* in dance descriptions of the volta.¹⁹

After the end of the Hansa period, Norway opened up to trade with England, Scotland and the Netherlands, while the German influence dwindled, and at the end of the sixteenth century many English musicians and comedians found work at the Danish court and in Germany.²⁰ Groven Myhren therefore argues that the impulses that came to western Norway were not German either, but British and Dutch. At that time, there was no political unit called 'Germany', and in the eastern part of the German-speaking area French-Italian Renaissance culture still prevailed.²¹

He places the Polish influence in the first half of the seventeenth century. When Sigismund had to give up the Swedish throne, in 1598, there was a military campaign in Sweden, and Polish soldiers were in the country for quite a while.²² If there was a direct Polish influence on the Swedish couple dance, Groven Myhren believes it to have come during Gustav Adolf's reign, before Sweden joined in the Thirty Years' War.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

²¹ Ibid., p. 119.

²² Ibid., p. 104.

During the reign of his daughter Kristina (1644–54), the *polska* is mentioned for the first time. At that time, there were numerous Frenchmen at the Swedish court, and the galliard and volta had already been introduced into Norway.²³

When arguing against direct influence from Poland and Germany and for Italy, France and the British Isles instead, Groven Myhren relies mostly on political history and the description of dances. He states that the melodic material in manuscripts from these countries does not match any tunes in the living Norwegian tradition, but he sees similarities in the phrasing of the galliards and the springars.²⁴

Groven Myhren sees the walking dances as based on Renaissance dances as well, unrelated to the chain dances of mediaeval times. Omholt compared his melodic material with the most comprehensive source on medieval instrumental music, Timothy McGee's *Medieval Instrumental Dances*,²⁵ and does not get the impression of any direct connection to the small motif form of the western springar. He rather sees these melodies with their open and closed phrase endings as pointing towards the regular two-part form.²⁶

Elizabeth Gaver has approached form in old *slåtter*, especially *gangar slåtter*, in an entirely different way.²⁷ Her objective is an artistic one: to find ways to construct melodies of a type that might have been played on early bowed instruments in the Nordic countries. While there are several sources for older melodic material in manuscripts, vocal music and the living playing traditions of instruments older than the violin (flutes, bark trumpets, horns and the *langeleik* zither) that could be used as building blocks for such melodies, she looks at the formal construction and performance practice of Hardanger fiddle tunes. Gaver discusses the *Estampitta* in McGee's collection and analyses one example titled 'Ghaetta'. She concludes that many possible variants are probably hidden within this one notated version.²⁸ She finds principles for such variations outside

²³ Ibid., p. 48.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 60 ff.

²⁵ Timothy McGee, *Medieval Instrumental Dances* (Bloomington, 1989).

²⁶ Omholt, 'Regional og typologisk variasjon', p. 259.

²⁷ Elizabeth Sympton Gaver, 'The (Re)construction of Music for Bowed Stringed Instruments in Norway in the Middle Ages', Hovedoppgave in musicology, University of Oslo, 2007 <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/27124> (accessed 4 February 2016).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 83.

writings about music, in a treatise on rhetoric and poetry by Geoffrey de Vinsauf from c.1200. Geoffrey describes the techniques a poet may use to achieve different aims, and Gaver finds corresponding techniques for constructing and performing *gangar slåtter* in the playing of Salve Austenå (b. 1927), from Tovdal, in eastern Agder, in the centre of the area Omholt considers to have conserved some of the oldest fiddle music. Like Geoffrey's suggestions for presenting poetry, and quite unlike any transcription of a performance of a *slått*, the performer can use a number of techniques to shape his performance, and through time to shape the tune as a whole:

Just as Geoffrey considers his subject material and evolves as a poet while he develops new forms, a *spelemann* can vary his performances and evolve as a musician with added experiences. Both Geoffrey's discourse, in poetry or prose, and the *spelemann's* *slått* can be seen as embodiments of a process rather than fixed works.²⁹

A fiddle player can easily know several forms of a tune and may be able to recall each of them at will. A player might 'forget' one form for a while and remember it later, and sometimes he might even put together elements from different forms to produce a new one.³⁰ Such variation is considerably easier with the short motifs of the older *gangar* tunes, so a possible connection to mediaeval practices and repertoire should not easily be ruled out.

All of this research poses more new questions than it presents answers. But it may lead the way to productive new methods. Omholt has promised to make his large database available for others to use. It will be possible to code more melodies in order to expand it, and it will make many more comparisons possible, more than Omholt himself thought of when he started his project.

Groven Myhren's framework of political and cultural history demands more analysis of manuscripts and more detailed studies of the dances involved in order to flesh out his ideas. It is especially interesting to imagine how these new fashions were adapted in towns and in the countryside. The dances he writes about were cultivated at European courts,

²⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁰ Hans-Hinrich Thedens, *Undersuch den ganzen Mann, so wie er vor Dir steht*, 2 vols (Oslo, 2001), p. 206 ff.

while Norway in those times was ruled from Copenhagen and there was no Norwegian nobility.

As mentioned, the Polish / German model makes sense in many ways, but how did the regional folk dances develop into these patterns when we cannot find the original *proportio* in recent material? Both Groven Myhren and Omholt have made attempts at explaining how the new impulses have shaped different regional styles, but there still is little conclusive evidence. And so far there is no accepted explanation of the asymmetrical rhythms either.

And finally, what was there before the Renaissance? Groven Myhren writes that both couple dances and stringed instruments were new imports that took the place of the ballad, both sung and danced. But several authors have stressed that the Hardanger fiddle might have had mediæval ancestors in Norway. Do the techniques Gaver describes have older roots? If so, on what instruments were they used?

