

Messiah and the cultural canon

Episode 8: “A Dalecarlian dream from Skagen”

Messiah Hallberg

It felt like it took ages, but it finally arrived. The Cultural Canon. Ten of the works are musical pieces. You were involved in selecting them, weren't you?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, that's right.

Messiah Hallberg

Great, because I've got a few questions straight away. What are these pieces? Why were they chosen? What do they sound like? And who's behind them? I thought we'd take a closer look at Hugo Alfvén's '*Midsommarvaka*'. Let's have a listen.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

Joyful.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, it is. Idyllic. Yes. And this, then, is what's known as a Swedish rhapsody.

Messiah Hallberg

A rhapsody? What does that mean?

Mattias Lundberg

A rhapsody is the most free-form structure imaginable. You could compare it to, say, a symphony. At this time, there were unwritten rules about how to begin with a theme, followed by a second theme, and so on. But a rhapsody is a bit like a series of tableaux unfolding one after the other. If this were a symphony, then

perhaps this opening motif would have been expected to return in some other form. But once it's over, it's over. Then there's a transition, and then another melody comes in. So you could say it's a potpourri.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

Was Hugo Alfvén trying to capture some kind of midsummer feeling?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, this has everything you might expect from a midsummer celebration. Young and old alike, together out on the dance floor. There are fights – you can't do without a few of those. There's plenty of humour, and there's also plenty of eroticism. You might not associate that with it.

Messiah Hallberg

No, and to be completely honest, they still are; perhaps we have different ideas about what's erotic.

Mattias Lundberg

But there are actually erotic undertones to the idea of two people sneaking off into the woods. However, at one point we comment that he has added a third person, and with a voice at that.

Messiah Hallberg

What does the third person do?

Mattias Lundberg

When they sneak around. Yes, that's where you start to wonder. A threesome. Or is it another woman sneaking up on them? Or what is it? But it's interesting that they take the view that, in orchestral music – without lyrics – you can make people sit and listen. But what is it? Why? What is she doing there? They've added a new part there.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

I'm not very excited right now, but you can view it in different ways.

Mattias Lundberg

You have to get into it. You have to be at the dance venue first.

Messiah Hallberg

That may well be the case. But it was created as such a scene.

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly. There's humor. Old people trying to dance, but they're too old and drunk, so they get booed off the stage anyway. You can hear that in the music. In one bit, for example, it comes through in the brass section. And it's a bit cracked like this. So there are these old people trying to dance this dance. And then they lose their rhythm. You can hear those melodies, that they take a wrong step. And then the whole orchestra laughs, you might say. So that it stood out. It's like scenes, you might say, during Midsummer.

[Music]

Mattias Lundberg

This is from 1903. He got the idea for this about ten years earlier. When he attended a folk festival in Roslagen, he was very young. That's what he's trying to depict in some way.

Mattias Lundberg

He then wrote down a few melodies himself that he heard, which someone sang for him there. The fact that it came about right around 1900 has to do with a new interest in folk culture and the countryside. People felt that cities were unpleasant places to live, with pollution and noise, and people became jaded by it compared to the strength one gets from the fresh forest air.

Mattias Lundberg

And ideas like those were certainly around.

Messiah Hallberg

But all ten of these pieces of music included in the canon are, of course, Swedish. Yet this feels perhaps particularly Swedish in a very tangible way when it comes to the culture.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly. And the reception this has received – the widespread acclaim and just how popular the work has been, having been performed all over the world. So, in a way, it was a foregone conclusion that it should be included. Many people would have been upset if it hadn't been.

Messiah Hallberg

Do you think people would have been standing outside your office protesting if it hadn't been included?

Mattias Lundberg

With placards and all that.

Messiah Hallberg

How surprised they would have been!

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, but you could say it's a much-loved piece. And it's easy to misunderstand it today. You think, 'How old-fashioned, folk music'. But everything in it was new. And what he does here is also new; he takes a number of these folk melodies. And then he uses an enormous amount of technical skill – that's what's called counterpoint. And polyphony, meaning that the parts move independently of one another.

Messiah Hallberg

Polyphony, you say?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, it's not just a melody with chords or accompaniment; there are many of them. The melodies play off one another. You could call it a bit of a canon. So when a counterpoint comes in, if you listen carefully, you can hear them responding to one another.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

What about Hugo Alven, then?

Mattias Lundberg

Mm.

Messiah Hallberg

Is he someone to keep an eye on? Who is he?

Mattias Lundberg

You should have heard the name, or should and should... But you've probably heard the name, as he's a much-talked-about composer. Hundreds of thousands of people have sung these songs, such as '*Tjuv och tjuv, det ska du heta*', and '*Uti vår hage*'. So many have heard Alfvén's choral arrangements, many have heard '*Midsommarvaka*' without perhaps realising it. You may also have heard the name Hugo Alfvén. All that remains is to make the connection between this and what's to come.

Messiah Hallberg

That's why we're here today.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly.

Messiah Hallberg

Who was he? What sort of life did he lead? Was he well-liked? Did he socialise with others?

Mattias Lundberg

He was, after all, a major artist throughout the Nordic region. It was a circle where everyone moved in the same circles. That's Carl Larson and Anders Zorn. He wrote this whilst staying with Sören and Marie Kröyer, who were painters in Skagen.

Messiah Hallberg

Was he inside there?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, he was living with them precisely because he'd got to know them. You could say he'd started an affair with Marie Kröyer. And Sören Kröyer didn't really want to part ways with them. So arrangements were made for Alfvén to live there and so on. And he repaid that by later marrying her. She'd had to leave him, of course, and became Alfvén's wife.

Messiah Hallberg

So that was the plan the husband had – the spurned husband – but it didn't work out well?

Mattias Lundberg

No, not really.

Messiah Hallberg

It's not good. You can take that with you now, a hundred years on.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, that's the takeaway from this. We're not trying to patch it up.

Messiah Hallberg

By inviting the lover... [laughter]

Mattias Lundberg

But he was, too... It's typical that he wrote this down in Skagen. The idea stems from that early work in Roslagen ten years earlier. But it's still set in Skagen. It's a very different environment with the light and

the flat landscape, and the hills are a bit more like this. This piece premiered in 1903 or 1904 and became a huge work, played everywhere, a standard piece, performed all over the world. And because Alfvén lived so long, 50 years after this work was written, he was involved in conducting it and recording it. So he got to follow this through to the point where, thanks to technological advances, you could suddenly hear it on the radio, on record, at home. And he used to, when the folk musicians had played at Midsummer whilst he was living there in the vicinity of Leksand towards the end, he used to quietly bring the evening to a close by putting on this grammophone record. It was his contribution to folk music.

Messiah Hallberg

His own music?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly.

Messiah Hallberg

It's not always that nice.

Mattias Lundberg

That's not very humble.

Messiah Hallberg

But it's great in the evening.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly. But he's had a very, very big genetic advantage, you could say.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

When we were doing our research for it, I said to myself, 'It's the Muppets!'

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, yes, exactly. In one of these.

Messiah Hallberg

I'd never have thought of that.

Mattias Lundberg

But it does show no other Swedish composers have been cited in The Muppets. No. In these *Manna Manna* tracks, the point is that this drummer has these little outbursts where he interrupts everyone else and stops the music. And in one of them, he started singing. And another slightly odd example is Deep Purple, the rock band, on their 'Made in Japan' live album. But it shows just how widespread the influence of this seems to be. And this one, especially the first theme. And you could say it's a sign of canonisation when people forget that there's an author. You perceive this as being... And the most famous melody hasn't exactly been borrowed.

Messiah Hallberg

And back then, where did the original melody come from? What was it?

Mattias Lundberg

He had come across them in the form of written records. As I've said, folk musicians and singers spread these melodies far and wide, and so many people – not just composers, but musicologists and ethnologists – were keen to write them down and, eventually, record them.

Messiah Hallberg

Did he appreciate the praise?

Mattias Lundberg

He probably wouldn't have minded being called the national composer. He was born at the right time, was the right sort of person, and managed his career despite constant financial difficulties and various adulteries. But that's part of the story.