

Messiah and the cultural canon

Episode 9: “The hit maker from Rättvik”

Messiah Hallberg

Last autumn saw the release of the Cultural canon. Ten of the works are musical pieces. Today my friend, I'm really looking forward to this. Folk music.

Mattias Lundberg

Shall we go to Bingsjö?

Messiah Hallberg

Maybe.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

It sounds like there's dancing going on somewhere, doesn't it?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, one can imagine that.

Messiah Hallberg

In a barn, perhaps. What was this?

Mattias Lundberg

This was the Gärdeby song.

Messiah Hallberg

The Gärdeby song?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes. Or the Gärdeby march, as it's also called. That was Hjort Anders Olsson.

Messiah Hallberg

Hjort Anders?

Messiah Hallberg

Yes. Is there a hyphen between 'Hjort' and 'Anders'? Is it 'Gjort'?

Mattias Lundberg

It's usually written as 'Hjort', hyphen, Anders. That's Hjortgården, where he came from. In the middle of Sweden, people are often named after the homestead they come from.

Messiah Hallberg

And so they put the name of the estate before the names?

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly. So one of the fiddlers whose songs Hjort Anders played was Pekkös Pär – after the 'Pekkös' farm in Bingsjö.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

That's a lot of names.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, it is.

Mattias Lundberg

I know the song, but I've never heard of Hjort Anders.

Mattias Lundberg

It is perhaps the best-known folk tune, or certainly one of the best-known from the early days. And Anders has, quite clearly, played a major part in making it famous. It is also quite clear that there was a very similar tune before him, which several others had played. Yet he is formally credited as the composer, as the creator of the piece.

Messiah Hallberg

How could you tell that if it was already a known song?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, there was a radio executive – you could call him a talent scout and producer – named Matts Arnberg, who arranged for Anders to have a number of songs written for him so that he could get his career off the ground. I think he wanted to help him a bit with his family problems, financial difficulties and alcoholism.

Messiah Hallberg

Did Hjort Anders have that?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes. So it was a bit like some of Elvis's songwriters actually credited Elvis himself as the inspiration behind why they realised this was a bit of a pension scheme. But he got by reasonably well anyway.

[Music]

Mattias Lundberg

Eventually, this becomes – at the start, it's a bit more of a solo act. You could say that the folk musicians play in the villages for dancing. But then there can be several of them. This became a popular movement during the 20th century with folk music groups where 50 people or more gathered at the Bingsjö festival in this village, Bingsjö, back then. So hundreds of people played together.

[Large fiddler group playing]

Messiah Hallberg

Is that where this first appeared?

Mattias Lundberg

Hjort Anders is, of course, hugely important to this whole movement. He was a performer who gave concerts, played at events and took part in competitions. People were very keen on competitions in the early 20th century, and he won these kinds of folk music competitions.

Messiah Hallberg

What did you do? Was there some type of 'Idol' jury?

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly. A jury that might have included people like Nils Andersson, who was a collector at the Folk Music Commission, and Hugo Alfvén was part of the jury as a composer with popular interests.

Messiah Hallberg

And they assessed the quality?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly.

Messiah Hallberg

And that's when he won.

Mattias Lundberg

In an early competition, Hjort Anders won in 1907, 1908, or thereabouts. It was this sort of thing that gradually led to the circulation of the image of him as the quintessential Dalecarlian folk musician. But back home in Bingsjö, there were many others. He had left Bingsjö.

Messiah Hallberg

Where is Bingsjö?

Mattias Lundberg

It's about 40 kilometres east of Rättvik.

Messiah Hallberg

It's right in the middle of Dalarna, isn't it?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, it is. But he had moved away from there and had travelled a great deal. That's what's interesting about him: he was both a... When we think of passing on traditions, we often think of it happening from one generation to the next. And there were farms like that – Pekkosgården in Bingsjö, with Pekkös Pär, Pekkös Gustav and Pekkös Helmer.

Messiah Hallberg

I think 'Hjort' is better.

Mattias Lundberg

Than 'Pekkös'?

Messiah Hallberg

I wouldn't have wanted 'Pekkös'.

Mattias Lundberg

You don't get to choose.

Messiah Hallberg

No, I understand that. Bad luck.

Mattias Lundberg

He may not have been much of a figure back home in the village, but when he left Dalarna and met these people, he brought them together because he felt he was carrying on the ancient Bingsjö tradition.

Messiah Hallberg

No prophet is accepted in his own hometown.

Mattias Lundberg

No, I suppose you could say that. One of these that are now part of the cultural canon is - according to Hjort Anders - after 'Pekkos Pär', who lived in Bingsjö. So, of course, it was very appealing to them that they could go back a hundred years in time. Back then, people thought that because these melodies had three

Messiah Hallberg

They were passed on between generations, and then Hjort Anders performed them the way they sounded back then.

Mattias Lundberg

So when people say that a tune is based on someone, it's always hard to know what does that mean? That I've learnt it myself? Or that I've got it from someone who said it was based on 'Pekkos Pär'?

Messiah Hallberg

Or am I just trying to capture a feeling?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly. Yes, yes, exactly.

Messiah Hallberg

It's hard to pin down, really. Influenced by 'Pekkos Pär'.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly. Freely after... But 'Hjort Anders' and his brother used to play on homemade violins as children, as he has described. And they used to pretend they were 'Pekkos Pär'. So they were clear role models.

Messiah Hallberg

Like people were pretending to be Elvis or The Beatles.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, yes, exactly. So he was a legend, so to speak.

Messiah Hallberg

How lovely, isn't it?

Mattias Lundberg

Yeah, that's right.

[Music]

Mattias Lundberg

There are others who have played with him who say he wasn't like those other old bands who guarded their songs. He wanted people to play his songs, his way and all that.

Messiah Hallberg

He wanted to spread the word far and wide. One wonders how the fame surrounding his music or talent spread. Was it down to him, or was it people who heard about him? You must come here.

Mattias Lundberg

It was partly because he became so important to those collectors that they wrote down his songs and published them in this big publication, '*Svenska låtar*', which is organised parish by parish. That's when he became a key figure. People saw him as a custodian of the Bingsjö tradition. They had some rather distinctive tunes and a particular strumming technique. He encouraged them, saying that the purest, best songs were, of course, those of the Finnish mark in Bingsjö. Down in the villages of Rättvik and so on, that's not quite right. And it became a cycle where they said, 'Tell us more about what it was like to play back home.' It created a real sense of, and there were all sorts of perceptions that 'Hjort Anders' worked magic.

Messiah Hallberg

But he couldn't really, could he?

Mattias Lundberg

No, there's one person who says he said: 'Do you believe in magic? Tomorrow, when we play with them, I'll show you that a string will snap for him.' And then it did just that. This other man has described it; he's studied it closely.

Messiah Hallberg

A spell.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, so it's clearly a blend of genuine playing tradition, the joy of playing, musicality and an original personality. A very receptive, academic bourgeoisie that wants to make something of all this.

Messiah Hallberg

What about magic?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, that's the third factor.

Messiah Hallberg

But where can you hear this these days? It feels like Kalle Moraeus is always on tour.

Mattias Lundberg

There is, of course, something called the '*Zorn badge*', which means you're a national folk musician. To perform for it. It's the same format as those folk music competitions that were organised back in the early 1900s. Even now, you perform for a jury and they assess whether you can be awarded the silver badge. And then you can be recognised as a national folk musician. Perhaps you've heard that term before.

Messiah Hallberg

Yes, but so this is still today? You can sort of get a 'like' for it.

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly, you have to sign up and then play there and then, and that's important too. Because what Anders and Frizzell did was talk about the songs, their history, where they came from. And this one is part of the Twelfth Day march, the other story about when he went to play on Twelfth Day. I think that's still part of being able to... You can't just play the songs very well; you have to know where they come from.

Messiah Hallberg

It's just like everyone else – Håkan Hellström at Ullevi – making up some story.

Mattias Lundberg

They want to create a narrative around the songs.

Messiah Hallberg

It's not just the songs, but the whole story behind how they came about.

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly, that's how they say this one is modelled on 'Pekkos Pär'. It lends it a great deal of authority.

Messiah Hallberg

Yes, I've never heard Håkan Hellström say that.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

But how do you think it's stood the test of time? Maybe if you think Midsummer Eve in the countryside, but it's just... Is it something you put on yourself at home?

Mattias Lundberg

You could put it this way: if you're not involved in this sort of thing – I play folk music myself. I don't do that either, but I'm very interested in it. But I don't play it myself; I can't call myself a folk musician, so to

speak. But then perhaps people associate it with Dalarna or Hälsingland. But first of all, it's important to remember that it comes from all over Sweden. There are tunes from Gotland, Bohuslän, Skåne and so on.

Messiah Hallberg

They sound a bit like this, too.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, they do sound different. But it's been wonderful, perhaps particularly in Bingsjö and certain parts of Hälsingland. But there are examples from all over the country. That's one thing. And the other is that there are a great, great many people in the cities today who play. Great, great folk musicians who lead groups, run courses and teach. You can study folk music at the music academies. So this is a hundred-year history, so to speak, from those earliest recordings right up to today. It has become institutionalised, with loads of folk dance organisations, the Zorn badge, the publications of '*Svenska låtar*', and a huge range of courses. Internationally, some people find the Zorn badge a bit odd. What do you mean, a competition? Folk music has to be played spontaneously. They think it's a bit Swedish that just because there's a jury, someone says you're a 'rikspeleman' – it's not an accreditation.

Messiah Hallberg

You'd think that as soon as you get it, you'd head straight to the musician's website.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly. Well, yes, but that's just how it is. And those who've researched this and those who explain why they want to do it – well, many of them say 'It doesn't matter much to me', but it was actually very good if you want to get gigs.

Messiah Hallberg

Yes, but that's exactly what I was thinking. If you want to book something for the midsummer festivities.

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly, it's a bit like the insurance isn't valid if you do the electrical installation yourself. Perhaps in the context of folk music, you want an accredited folk musician.

[Speaker]

We were in Stockholm. There was someone there talking about old memories. Bror Hjorth was there, too. And he spoke of the musicians in Dalarna, and that there was a fiddlers' gathering there. And then they went and greeted one another, and then there were all sorts of shenanigans. They didn't know what they were doing. Some came two days early for the gathering and some came one day early. And yet some came too late. But 'Hjort Anders', they said, was such a strong player.

Messiah Hallberg

But he's not just featured on this track; there are two other tracks included in the collection as well.

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly, it's like a small selection designed to encourage anyone who's interested to explore other fiddlers.

Messiah Hallberg

The big hits.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly. There are three, you could say. One is this really broad '*Gärdebylåten*', of which there are hundreds of versions in all sorts of styles.

Messiah Hallberg

I've heard that a lot.

Mattias Lundberg

And then there's this tradition carried on from Bingsjö. And then there's a kind of original creation that people were also keen to explore. What made him stand out? How did he play? What was his playing style like? If you listen to the music, but when they play today, it sounds quite different in rhythm and intonation compared to these old recordings.

Messiah Hallberg

But do you mean that if you were to hear this today, it has been modernised.

Mattias Lundberg

I think more in terms of playing techniques, phrasing and so on.

Messiah Hallberg

But don't you have to be quite an expert to hear that?

Mattias Lundberg

I believe certain things... It's a matter of tradition, after all. As I said, tradition doesn't mean freezing, but rather carrying on.

Messiah Hallberg

I reckon even I, an untrained folk musician, would be able to hear this? Well, they've done it now.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, I think so.

[Music]

Mattias Lundberg

In a way, you could say it has evolved from an extremely local interest into a national one, and now perhaps even a global one, attracting huge numbers of people, learning these songs, that aren't originally from Sweden and make them into their own.

Messiah Hallberg

But listening to this today – something that started out as a very local phenomenon – one could say that it has now become almost a national phenomenon in Sweden.

Mattias Lundberg

And international.

Messiah Hallberg

Yes, but a picture of Sweden.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, that's right. It definitely has.

Messiah Hallberg

Interesting.

Messiah Hallberg

Yes, indeed.

[Music]