

Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien

Band: 19 (1991)

Artikel: Geijer's På nyårsdagen : The Text in the Music : The Music in the Text : toward a theory of text/music relationships

Autor: Swanson, Alan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858297>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

life of other levels of society. Inadvertently, the playwright thereby helped preserve the viability of ancient folk traditions even after Norway's rural culture was replaced by industrialization and the development of an urban lifestyle. If readers and theater-goers today have access to the mental norms and social values encoded in Norway's folklore, it is in no small measure due to Henrik Ibsen who integrated these traditions into the world of his drama.

ALAN SWANSON, CAMBRIDGE/MASS.

Geijer's *På nyårsdagen*
The Text in the Music: The Music in the Text.
Toward a theory of text/music relationships

There have been many attempts, especially in our day, to offer a means of adequately describing text and music as entities which simultaneously inform one another. Much of that which has appeared, both theoretical and practical, has been of little use when it has not been completely meaningless. I need only point to any newspaper review of any song recital to be able to demonstrate that fact. My own experience has shown me the weaknesses in the technical terminology which even the most experienced critic has at his disposal. It is chiefly my own confrontation with the problem of putting words and music together which has sharpened my understanding of what a song is and heightened my awareness of what happens in such a context. I begin, therefore, with a practical need for a meaningful and useable critical vocabulary.

The problem, as I understand it, is that it is difficult to speak of the simultaneous action of words and music beyond the obvious. We can, for example, easily understand if the words and music go together, that is, if the musical and verbal accents and phrases fit one another. There is no point in attempting to sing Geijer's «*På nyårsdagen*» to the tune of «*Tonerna*.» If we are prepared to use a more emotional language, we can eventually touch upon the question of whether or not the text and the music suit one another, but that «suit» is problematic.

There are both historical and rhetorical questions involved in an attempt to understand what happens in a song. The historical questions are clear and, if not especially popular nowadays, nonetheless relevant to our purpose. (Lars Lönnroth's *Den dubbla scenen* [1978] is a good example of such an enquiry.) Less clear, on the other hand, are the rhetorical questions in such an analysis.

For many years, perhaps always, music has been understood, above all by musicians, as a temporal and, therefore, a syntactic art, heavily dependent upon the physical experience of time. Time determines a great deal of what happens during a performance. I suggest that certain observations drawn from information theory can help us understand this temporal effect as it works in both the text and the music.

We take it for granted that an artist can begin a piece anywhere. To simplify the matter, we can say that a composer must begin his song with a single note. It is obvious that this note has almost no meaning. That is to say, acoustically, we can say that it has a value – 440 Hz – but that value we assign it as the tone we call A² is completely artificial. In fact, depending upon a number of time, space, and historical factors, the correct modern representation might be B² or C³. More important is that the sound itself also has a limited musical meaning. We can almost go so far as to say that it acquires meaning only when another note is added to it, either simultaneously or immediately afterwards. Since we are here speaking about a melody, such a note must come afterwards. However, as soon as the next note appears, another effect comes into play. We have begun to establish a syntax within which the first note is now placed, a structure which will perhaps not be completely understood until several other notes are added and the larger rhetorical gesture is made clear. All this is obvious, I believe. As with all rhetoric, there are certain conventions which must be observed – the octave, for instance, must always be pure, while others are more flexible – the function of a leading-tone, for example.

Crudely put, information theory asserts that «learning» takes place at that point when series, sequences, or patterns are broken: «information» occurs at that moment when a pattern is subverted and our attention is thereby caught. Experience shows that this is likely and possibly even true.

We can transfer a similar analysis to language. An author may begin a text anywhere and, within certain syntactic axioms, any word at all may follow. Similarly, one sentence may be followed by any other within a larger rhetorical framework, and so on to higher rhetorical levels. Please notice, I am not speaking here of the manner in which James Joyce, for instance, played with words but, rather, of the play possible within a traditional frame (though I think it is possible to argue that even *Finnegan's Wake* can, perhaps must, also be set into such a frame). I wish to underscore here the temporal in my material. I take as fundamental that the joining of text to music presupposes an effect reached by temporal structures. Please notice, too, that a secondary effect is possible, even necessary, within this point of view: we can call it the «reflexive» effect. If an artist creates and shatters an endless series of endlessly variable sequences, the temporal effect implies that there will come a moment when, through memory and reflection, we can look back over the rhetoric and discover the thread connecting the whole, which we can call the understanding or appreciation of the appropriateness of the choices made by the artist at every turn. Accordingly, I wish to assert that this understanding is a considerable part of the enjoy-

ment or the pleasure we experience in art. I assert absolutely that pleasure in a work of art is an experience as intellectual as it is emotional.

I must emphasize here that this is not the only way to speak of text and music. Neither does it represent a completely developed method in itself. There are legitimate acoustical questions (certain vowels, for example, are more difficult to sing at certain pitches than others). There are legitimate historical questions (the function of a song as private gesture, for example, or the technical deficiencies of the composer, and so forth). There are legitimate questions of expression (a good singer, for example, can often surmount problematic compositional moments). My intention here is to open yet another area of discussion in this complicated subject. At the same time, I must acknowledge that I begin to doubt that we shall ever find *one* general theory which can say something interesting about a thing so personal as how one understands and experiences a song. This is perhaps the legitimate function of subjective descriptions of art. We are speaking, in any event, of aesthetics.

Such considerations are relevant for a discussion of Romanticism because it was just during this period that the art-song flourished, one might even say, was invented in the form we speak of it today.

In our context here, it is especially interesting that the only longer description of Erik Gustaf Geijer as a composer by a contemporary, Adolf Fredrik Lindblad's «Erik Gustaf Geijer såsom tonsättare» (Erik Gustaf Geijer as a composer),¹ remarks especially upon the intimate connection between words and music in Geijer's work. Lindblad, himself an unjustly overlooked symphonist and song composer, knew Geijer and his music well, and described them thus,

i Geijers music [var] hela Geijer med, liksom music var med i all Geijers auktorliga verksamhet Ingen saks särskildighet behärskar honom längre än dess sammanhang med något annat varar Med ett ord, det är sökandet efter alla delars uppgång i det hela²

(All of Geijer was in Geijer's music, just as music was in everything he wrote The peculiarity of one thing holds him no longer than its connection with something else lasts In a word, it is the search for the relationship of the part to the whole.)

This view of the integration of words and music is, of course, not unique to Geijer or the Romantics, though they were especially interested in the problem.

From Lindblad, we also have the only description known to me of Geijer's method of composition. Fortunately enough, it concerns «På nyårsdagen.»

Orden till sina sånger fick Geijer vanligtvis till skänks af tillfälliga anledningar. Något för ögonblick rådande tryck tvang honom till pianot, der en melodi först uppfanns och sedan harmoniserades; sedermera överlämnades åt poesin att närmare bestämma dess betydelse.³

¹ LINDBLAD (1875: 1xii-lxxi).

² LINDBLAD (1875: lxvii).

³ LINDBLAD (1875: 1xix).

(Geijer usually got the words to his songs by accidental circumstances. Some currently powerful impression drove him to the piano where first a tune was found and then harmonized; [the tune] was later turned over to poetry to determine more closely its meaning.)

Note carefully the last phrase – [the tune] «was turned over to poetry to determine more closely its meaning.» At first sight, this looks like Antonio Salieri's famous «*Prima la musica, poi le parole*» (First the music, then the words), but it is clear that Geijer, if we can believe Lindblad, did not see things the same way as Mozart's rival. Geijer did not mean that the words exist to fill the empty space in a score but, rather, that they give meaning to the music. Let us test this with Geijer's own song and see if we can understand it better by means of the theory I have articulated.

«*På nyårsdagen*» first appeared in *Gammalet och nytt. Sångar för Piano-Forte* (1838), and looks as printed on the following page.

One notices several things as one «listens» to this text. The first text-line, for example, is laden with powerful words and is, besides, syntactically incomplete; the verb demands that we continue on to the subject in the next line. (I ask you especially to notice the relationship between vowel length and accent in this first line, particularly in words such as *ensam* and *bräcklig*.) In the second text-line, on the other hand, there are few colorful words and many long vowels (considerations of space do not allow consideration of the interesting question of vowel-placement). The two parts of the sentence complement one another. Even without the help of punctuation, our ears tell us that we must take these two lines as one. The syntactical inversion with which they began must be closed in our ears. The text forces us forward. No-one who knows Swedish can stop after *vågar* without consciously abandoning all pretense of meaning as a product of traditional prosodic structures. But we can also question what happens rhetorically in these two lines.

Ensam is a powerful word to begin with, not only because of its intellectual meanings but also owing to its two accents. It possesses, as well, sufficient syntactic ambiguity to force us forward in the sentence because it can be followed by several classes of words and is, therefore, open. By delaying the expected verb with a prepositional phrase, and loading that phrase with two unexpected and colorful words, *bräcklig* and *farkost*, Geijer creates a tension between our expectations and the reality of what we experience in the music. Now the verb must come and it must have its subject, which, according to the syntactical rules within which this poem operates, ought to come next. Those who know these rules know also that, strictly speaking, this need not be so – we could properly insert certain adverbs or adverbials – but to further expand this frame, already weighted by *bräcklig*, would be perhaps too much and Geijer lets the sentence resolve into a cliché.

The next two text-lines are not as demanding the previous ones. With its exact rhyme and its position after the subject, *lågar* reinforces our sense of closure in the third line. Like the third, the fourth line is also hermetic, but we are unpre-

PÅ NYÅRSDAGEN.

Sostenuto.

SÅNG.

PIANO.

pared for its choice of subject. We simply do not expect that a «grave» will *brusa* (roar), much less that it will do so *hemskt* (terribly). I call your attention, as well, to the difficult consonant cluster at the end of *hemskt*.

Everyone who knows the text of this poem as it appears in Geijer's collected works knows that there are only two more lines, just as everyone who knows the song knows that there are three more. The effect of the repetition of the fifth

text-line is, I should think, obvious – it underscores the poet's, the singer's, will to push on, though we may wonder about that *ödes bud* (the call of destiny). By its syntactical peculiarity and its syntactical prominence in the repetition, we are drawn to the word *framåt* (forward). Even without the music, we feel that these two repeated lines must be expressed differently, that they must be distinguished in some way.

These last two (three) lines do not merely rhyme with each other and, thereby, create a sense of closure, they are also of uneven length, something that Geijer attempted to correct in the printed text with an exclamation point and a dash after *framåt*, which indicates some sort of pause, as the rhetoric demands: *Framåt – så är hans ödes bud* (Forward! – thus does his destiny call).

It is immediately obvious when one hears the song that there are several problematic moments in it, not least in the first two lines, which are brutally broken when put together with the music. The music demands absolutely that they be divided and the verb be thereby separated from its subject. If we remember Lindblad's comment, we can assert that this is a sign that the music probably came before the words. It also reflects certain of Geijer's weaknesses as a composer, but that is a secondary question.

Musically, we can see that the song is constructed of three groups of 4+4 measures. A slight resemblance to chorale-form (or *Barform*) is reinforced by the tune in the first two groups which, with two exceptions, remains completely in the home key. So firmly is Geijer bound to this 4+4 pattern that he cannot abandon it when he comes to his last strophe. (Try taking away the two measures with the repeated fifth text-line, for example.) This is a rhetorical problem, and I shall return to it.

In the song's first section, there are two moments which ought to be remarked upon. The first comes in the third measure and consists in that little, decorative, Mozartean acciacatura on the word *farkost*. It leads us to expect a trill or some kind of ornament on *vågar*, with the result that we experience a temporary close, exactly what one does not want, what the words will not allow, at this moment. This unfortunate effect is reinforced by a false cadence in the music, further suggesting closure. The second, and more interesting moment, is the brief movement to a related minor tonality on the word *honom*, in measure eleven, before we come comfortably back to the home key.

We may rightly wish to ask, at this point, how the text «determines» the meaning of the music, but here I have no ready conclusion. We observe that when words are put to this tune, there is not much attempt to «paint» them in sounds. Colorful words, such as *vågar*, *lågar*, *brusar hemskt*, and *grav*, words such as *bräcklig farkost*, or *stjärnvalvet* are left untouched by the music, which in its babbling ostinato in the accompaniment and its powerful grip on the home key appears as if it sought its center rather in *det vida hav*. Except, of course, that the evidence suggests that Geijer worked in the opposite direction. Is it not, then, *det vida hav* which «determines» for us the meaning in this music? Most who speak of the relation of text to music consider the music as a commentary upon

the text. In this instance, we must raise question of whether or not the text here distorts the music.

We can approach this question through the last two text-lines. It is not only that the fifth text-line is repeated, its musical gesture is different from that which has preceeded it. Its syllabic values move in a way that undermines an important word – *så* – which means that the singer must make what he can of it. Furthermore, the phrase is technically the first part of a sequence which is moving toward the D-sharp, the leading tone in this key, which means that this is a note which is driving toward the tonic, the E in this key. This is a movement which resolves itself only in the song's last measure. The repetition of a text-line is appropriate to a sequence – it would be pointless to demand that the text be lightly varied as is the music. Here, it is the variation in the music which gives the words variety.

As our ears lead us through the song, do we sense it is complete as it stands or is something missing? If there is a sense that the song is incomplete in some way, this is due to the «sixteen measure phenomenon,» which appears often in much popular music. That is to say that there is a certain habit (if nothing more) of organizing songs in even groups of sixteen measures each. We can see that Geijer has done so with his first section (text-lines 1–4) and that leads us to expect a similar grouping in the remaining part, as a balance. But he does not do this, even though he repeats a line of his text. By betraying our expectations in that line, he forces us to increase our attention and, thereby, creates «learning.» At the same time, we look back over what we have experienced. The repetition of this whole second section would strike us more as a musical than a verbal gesture and lead us to expect a musical ending, one which delivers the expected sixteen measures. Instead, the relatively abrupt ending forces us back upon the text. Musically, Geijer further draws our attention to the last word by making it the only one in the whole song without the gurgling rhythmic ostinato.

There are other points we might mention, especially in the last four measures, particularly Geijer's remarkably prominent handling there of *och* and his inability to lead us rhythmically up to the important word, *Gud*, thereby forcing the singer himself to do so. If Lindblad is right, this is surely owing to Geijer's compositional technique, but then we must ask Lindblad what he means when he says that Geijer let the text «determine» the content of the music. Between the lines, we can see that Lindblad is really describing a technique where the poet/composer is working with two modes of expression at the same time and walking a fine line between them.

We have now arrived at a stumbling block in our manner of dealing with this poem and this text/musical problem. We have technically explained several points in the interplay between text and music – we have seen a number of happy conjunctions as well as noticed a few rhetorical lapses and have yet to come to any «complete» explanation or interpretation of the work of art itself. It is surely unjust to demand too much of a simple piece, but since this one sits at the center of the Swedish song repertory, it is uncommonly close to us today. The problem

is that we have yet to come to an æsthetic explanation of the song, that is, an understanding of *how* it affects us. It is clear that we could all be Romantics and say that such understanding belongs to the mystery of art, but that would be unsatisfactory, just as the song ends in an unsatisfactory way. It just might be that in its very lumpiness, in its lack of closure, in that we call naïveté, it most succeeds. But that would be very Romantic to assert!

AULI VIIKARI, HELSINGFORS

Ideal och verklighet i finsk prosodi

I

I sitt förord till *Kanteletar* (1840)¹ beskrev Elias Lönnrot den finska lyrikens situation på ett träffande sätt. Den «fordna sången», finsk folkdikt på kalevalametern, höll på att tyna bort. Den «nyare sången», folkvisor på germanska versmått, var däremot mycket populär men gick inte att jämföra med den «fordna sången» i fråga om estetiska kvaliteter. Den tredje arten, «de bildades sånger», överträffade båda med sin formella variation. Men jämfört med utländsk lyrik var den dock klart underlägsen.²

I detta läge uppstod debatten om det finska diktpråkets metriska grundvalar. Lönnrots tre «sångarter» representerar olika metriska system. Vilken av de metriska principer som fanns på den tidens metriska repertoar skulle vara bäst lämpad för «de bildades sånger», alltså framtidens finska lyrik? Den «fordna sången» lydde kalevalameterns regler, som iakttar stavelsernas såväl kvantitet som accent. Den nyare folkvisan representerade det dynamiska systemet, grundad på stavelsernas prominens.³ För den skriftliga lyriken, den litterära lyriken, uppstod olika möjligheter: man kunde välja mellan kalevalametern, antika versmått (som representerar det durationella eller kvantitativa metriska systemet, med stavelsernas längd som distinkтив faktor) eller det germanska (dynamiska) verssystemets olika versmått, som vid sidan av folkvisan existerade sedan gammalt och förekom också i den skriftliga lyriken (t.ex. psalmlyriken).

¹ *Kanteletar* är nationaleposet *Kalevalas* lyriska motstycke: en massiv antologi av finsk lyrisk folkdikt.

² LÖNNROT (1847: 95–102).

³ Jag hänvisar här till John Lotz' metriska typologi (LOTZ 1960) samt Pentti Leinos studier i finsk metrik (LEINO 1979 och 1982).