

# Traditions, archives and change

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This is one of the most common ways in which an oral tradition may die; not when writing is introduced, but when published song texts are spread among singers. But our singer does not necessarily blossom forth as a literary poet. He usually becomes [...] nothing at all. (Lord 1967, p. 130)

Building archives of traditional music and dance has always been an activity felt to be of a certain urgency: If we do not document the tradition *now*, it will be lost forever (see e.g. Ledang, 1975). Yet as we all know, documentation is not enough to keep a tradition alive, and worse, as the above citation from Albert Lord indicates, the very activity aimed at preservation may actually be downright harmful instead. In this article, I will discuss some aspects of the role of documentation and archives in the contemporary scene of folk and traditional music and dance in the Nordic countries, concentrating on music.

The Lord citation above belongs to a situation very different from the contemporary situation in the Nordic countries; nevertheless it can serve as a starting point for a discussion of the role of archives as part of today's folk music and dance movements in these countries: Lord addresses the always problematic question of how the introduction of new technologies and practices affects both cultural content, the roles of the actors in the affected culture and, therefore, also our possible perceptions of the phenomenon of 'tradition'. In the context of the citation above, he is concerned with the transition from composing texts orally to a mere reproduction of printed texts, drawing on the examples of both Homer and a (then) contemporary Yugoslav epic singer Avdo Međedovic. The time span between Homer and Međedovic is a good indication of the generality of the kind of problems Lord discusses, and it is thus no surprise that the themes are as relevant today as when his book was published only 50 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Jahandrie (1999) for an overview of the oral/literate research literature.

Today, among people interested in, performing, listening to, or even making a living of traditional music and dance, questions of effects of media and technologies are often coupled with questions of what is right and what is wrong; what are permissible uses of the traditional uses, and, not least, the question of *who* should be in control of what is permissible.<sup>2</sup> As I see it, an important part of the controversies centre on different perceptions of the very concept of tradition, and I will, therefore, also discuss this concept in some detail. My theme is to draw attention to different positions and discuss some of the assumptions underlying the issues, namely how the traditions are working; what kind(s) of information, skill(s) and value(s) are transmitted in different media and different kinds of activities, with a special focus on the role of archives and the element of variation in the performance of traditional material.

## Archives and information

Archives of traditional music and dance exists in several places in the Nordic countries, in various sizes and levels of ambitions, and with various kinds of material. They are all relevant sources for traditional performers, and the material they contain may be used in many ways, both as background for research that, in turn, becomes part of the curriculum for the students, and directly as input to the repertoire of the performers. Like the tradition itself, also the techniques, media, ideology and praxis of documentation and archives have changed substantially since the beginning of folk music and dance as a concept and phenomenon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the changes, two are very obvious:

1. The shift from written documentation of field notes, texts and music notation to recording media of sound and picture.
2. From being a place for hidden treasures that are difficult to access, and sometimes guarded by the archivists, the pressure is on for a development towards a totally free access of all kinds of material on the internet.

Both these changes have some important effects that are relevant in our context. We may study relevant processes at different stages:

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<sup>2</sup> Controversies of this kind were quite obvious in the discussions around the recent merger of the *Landslaget for spelemenn* and *Norsk folkemusikk og danselag*, and also the theme for a seminar in Vasa, Finland ('Rädda spelmanstraditionen') where such questions were put into a Nordic perspective.

1. The process of *creating* the material that is going to be put into the archives.
2. The processes 'inside' the archive – the *ordering, classification and storing*.
3. The processes of *using* the material found in an archive, including *how to find* and *how to use*.

### Creating archival material

The process of creating the material that goes into the archives has been discussed in several connections.<sup>3</sup> All collection is based on some assumptions of what is important to collect, and all research on folk traditions is based on some assumptions of what is valuable and important. These assumptions were not necessarily shared by the performers from whom the material was collected, but nevertheless, the ideas and values of the collectors and researchers have been very important – and still are – in the development of the tradition. Questions of intonation and tonality are, for example, still important issues in the contemporary discussions of (aesthetic) value in traditional music (Kvifte, 2012).

The introductory Lord citation may give the false impression that Lord attributed relatively little significance to the introduction of writing in a tradition, compared to the effects of patterns of distribution of traditional material. However he, as well as his followers in that specific research tradition, definitely saw the medium of transmission as of great importance (see e.g. McLuhan, 1964; Olson, 1994; Jahandarie, 1999; Ong, 1982). The shift from oral to written transmission has been a topic of much attention through many years, and certainly the change from written to 'live' documentation in the form of audio, visual and audiovisual recordings has had profound consequences, because such documentation includes and even highlights information that is not possible to capture in writing.

Nevertheless, regardless what material and what aspects of the relevant material that was in focus, the very process of documentation is about *fixation* in some form, in a written form (text, dance and musical notation, Laban notation), in visual form of drawings and photos, and, later, also sound recordings, film and video. This very process of making a performance *permanent* in some form also has consequences, regardless of the medium used for documentation.

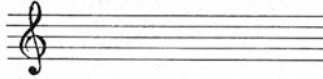
### Cataloguing and classification

One important process affecting material once inside the archives, is cataloguing and classification. The rationale for cataloguing and classification is very much that of *retrieval*, of how to find material in a large collection. A facsimile of a card

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Havåg (1997) for a thorough discussion and numerous references.

from the old card catalogue at Norsk folkemusikksamling<sup>4</sup> (fig. 1) shows first of all that the *basic archival unit* here is a single tune: each tune on a recording has a separate catalogue card with specific kinds of information. The rationale for this is not only that this information 'is there, in the material', but that one regards just this information as the most important; that there are some significant regularities connected to just this information, like 'coming from a certain place' (with *Bygland* on the card for example) implies certain properties in the material, as do the name of the performer, and also the type of melody and instrument used (*IGB* on the card indicates *Gangar* played on a hardanger fiddle for example). Other kinds of information might of course be equally relevant, depending on the interest of the person that wants to use the archival material, for example, was the recording made during a dance party, on a stage, in the home of the musician or in a studio?

However, the many thousand catalogue cards will necessarily indicate what should be regarded as important information to new collectors, and, thereby also imply procedures for collecting. For instance, given the focus on single melodies, it may not seem important to record longer sequences like whole concerts or whole dance evenings as a continuous events; it might even be better to record one tune at a time in a controlled setting to ensure that each tune is recorded correctly, allowing time for recording relevant information for each tune.

6	L-29268 IGB-1672 AB-Bygland-307 Vidar Lande Filleveren	
Same mel.:	Hardingfele Td- 1872	
Variantar:	OPPTAK: 1976. Bygland, v/Vidar Lande.	
	Felestemming: Laus bas. Gl. Byglandsform.	
	Se oppl. L-29131.	

*Pre-computer catalogue card from Norsk folkemusikksamling.*

<sup>4</sup> Norwegian Collection of Folk Music, at the time of writing at the University of Oslo, now at the National Library.

Thus, without claiming a *causal* relationship, it could be argued that such an archival practice is better suited to the concert musician performing tunes as works of art, more than it is for the dance musician producing danceable grooves in a sequence aimed at keeping people on the dance-floor happy for as long as the party lasts.

In the archives, I have found lots of information about the tunes my fiddle teacher played and how they sounded. Yet I cannot find much information about how he put tunes together for a longer dance event. Nor can I find much information about how tangos, swing and twist tunes in the sixties were typically mixed during a dance evening with polkas, waltzes and reinlenders – and whether there was an occasional springar – because such events were rarely recorded, and the tune types not always considered worth documenting.

### Accessing material

The use of the material depends both on the archival medium – whether it is written documentation or a recording – as well as on the actual accessibility of the material. Both factors are important. The recording technology enables, for instance a much more detailed copying of music by performers, especially when it comes to details in intonation and rhythm. The factor of accessibility is more elusive. Going from a situation when access to material depended on the expertise of specialised archivists, tedious copying of tapes and catalogue cards, to direct access on the internet to large quantities of information, obviously necessarily has consequences, although it may not be obvious what these are. On the one hand, the service of specialist archivists will help the user to also formulate better what to search for, as well as give the user directions regarding what is considered proper use of the material. Searching on internet may provide as much – or more – material than a visit to an archive will, but it may be more difficult to know what one actually retrieves, what kind of material it is, under what circumstances it is collected, and the kinds of cultural contexts one should know in order to evaluate the material properly.

### The concept of tradition

Before discussing in more detail possible effects of different uses of archival material, we should have a closer look at the concept that is at the centre of the discussion of the contemporary situation, the concept of 'tradition'. What kinds of material, processes/transmission counts as tradition? When does a performer have the 'right' to see him or herself as part of a tradition?

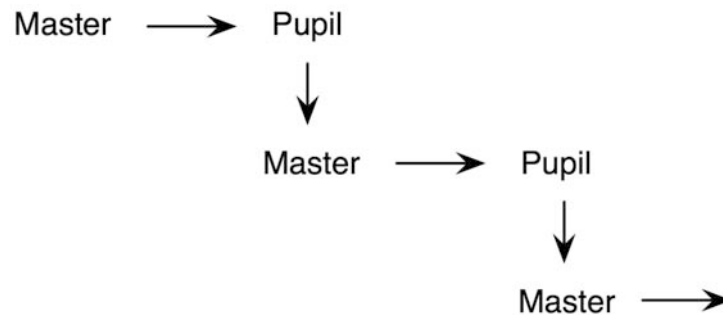
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Such questions are part of ongoing negotiations, discussions, debates and dialogues among actors in the field of traditional music and dance, and to understand different positions in this matter, it may be instructive to discuss what the relevant dimensions of 'tradition' are and the possible 'content' of a tradition. Nyíri (1992) gives the following definition:

We will designate, then, by the term "tradition" any such practice, custom, etc., which is accepted as authoritative, requires conscious adherence, the history of which extends over at least three generations, and which is known by its adherents to have that history... (Nyíri, 1992, p. 73)

There are several important aspects of this definition. The first is that it is something that is accepted as *authoritative*, as something that is right, and that should be followed. This is perhaps one of the most obvious aspects of the contemporary usage of 'tradition': much energy is spent over what is 'right' and 'permissible' within the tradition.

A further aspect is that three generations have to be involved; 'generations' should be understood here as stages of transmission, and not necessarily literally as generations of people.



*The process of tradition (modified from Rolf, 1991).*

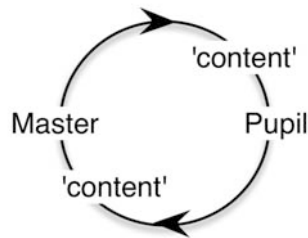
As seen in figure 2, more focus is on the people involved than on the processes that connect them. To focus on the transmission process instead, one could see it as in figure 3, where the arrows indicate interaction between a master and a pupil:



*The process of tradition highlighting the transmission process.<sup>5</sup>*

In this case, we could focus on two transmission processes rather than on three generations.

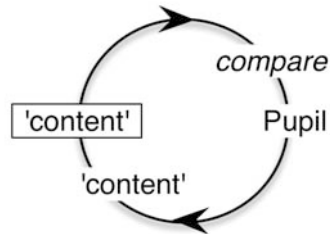
The illustration above does not explicitly include what the master and pupil interact *about*. As indicated in figure 4, there is always some kind of content central in the relevant interaction, like a tune, a story, a song or a technique, to mention some possibilities. Learning from a master is an iterative process with some corrective element somewhere. One factor attributing to effective learning is that the ‘cycle time’ in the loop is not too long, so that the pupil gets feedback soon, and that many cycles are possible.



*Learning from a master is an iterative process.*

With the introduction of archival material and recordings, a common loop is whereby the pupil becomes his/her own corrective element and no master needs to be present. A typical situation when learning tunes from a recording will then resemble that depicted in figure 5, where the pupil listen to a recording, tries to play what is heard, listen again to compare and so on:

<sup>5</sup> Figures 3–5 are the author’s own.



*Learning from recording. 'Content' in square to indicate unchanging content.*

In this case, the 'content' in the square will be the *same* for each iteration, and the variability possible in a master's example content as shown in figure 4 is not present. What kind of effect could we expect from this? First of all, that learning *variations* will be much harder in the second situation, as there will be no examples of variation in the content practiced. On the other hand, that should allow for a much better rendition of *details*, as the details are the same for all iterations of the loop. In addition, when using recorded material, technology for getting a closer look at the details (i.e. by slowing down recordings) is available. So, paradoxically, the absence of a live master may make it possible for the pupil to learn to perform a more exact copy of the master's versions than if the master is present.

These are idealised versions of only part of the learning process. In the first 'traditional' case, the pupil will also work on his or her own to a large extent – the time actually spent with a master may be very little compared to the time spent practicing alone. Indeed in the second case, the pupil will probably spend some time with *another* master than the one on the recording.

### Process or content?

What components are included in the concept of tradition? One view will concentrate on the transmitted *content*, with little or no weight attached to *how* the transmission took place; as long as the content looks or sounds right, the actual process of transmission is of no interest. However, many, including Rolf, will insist on a wider view:



Såvitt jag kan se, måste traditionsbegreppet fixeras både med avseende på process, innehåll och kontinuitet samtidigt. (Rolf 1991, p. 140)  
 [As far as I can see, the concept of tradition must determine the process, the content and continuity all at once. (My translation)]

People arguing for such a view will frequently support this by claiming that it is not possible to transmit the content properly without some continuity in live processes: it is for instance said to be impossible to get the right ‘feel’ of rhythm and tonality if you do not practice the music together with a live teacher. A still stronger version of this viewpoint is that the direct contact is necessary, *regardless* of whether it is in principle possible to learn a traditional expression perfectly in all aspects without direct contact with living people practicing the tradition. It is only through direct contact that the cultural continuity is preserved, implying that not only the expression, but also the *understanding* of the expression is carried further. Another possible implication of Rolf’s view is that even the *transmission process itself*, is important, not only as the way the content happens to be taught to the next generation, but as a tradition in itself. The tradition of a certain way of teaching is as valuable as the content that happens to be transmitted through that teaching process.

Much of the controversies mentioned initially are related to different opinions of the relative importance of process, content, and continuity. ‘Insiders’ typically insist on a view similar to Rolf’s; ‘outsiders’ may be more inclined to see the transmission of content as sufficient to characterise their activity as ‘traditional’. The underlying question is: What kind(s) of continuity is (or are) necessary for something to be called ‘tradition’? Obviously, archives are best at continuity by content rather than by process.

### Archives and art

It may be difficult to separate content from process, as the kind of processes the music is seen as part of may influence the kind of perspective we apply to the content, and, therefore, the kind of criteria we use to evaluate the content. One example is the two different perspectives of ‘works of art’ and ‘dance music’. It is obvious that with the national romanticist ideology, there was a marked attention paid to performed tunes and songs as examples of works of art.<sup>6</sup> Not only examples of performances were collected, but also works of art.

<sup>6</sup> Many passages in the literature of both the early and not-so-early collectors testify to this. For example, “... og selv synes jeg jo at bl. a. springleikene er så tindrende klare at jeg i et øyeblikk kan la kunstverket oppstå for meg som den gang hin spillemann utførte det” (Sandvik 1948:70). [and I think that

On the other hand, when I, for example, play for dance, I am concerned about whether I manage to produce dance grooves with the help of tunes. The value of tunes in this connection is predominantly their potential to produce a good dance rhythm, and, possibly, their potential for variation that helps me to keep playing tunes long enough without it becoming boring or tedious. Generally, if attention is focused on the performance situation, the ‘work of art’-perspective may not be the most important. If I sing a ballad or song, the reaction from the audience will be important to me, and to some extent shape my further performance. Their reactions may be as much a result of my performance as it is a result of the qualities of the ‘work of art’ that I happen to perform. In any case, I do not have time during the performance to reflect on that possible distinction. The qualities of the tune that interest me may not be those of the possible eternal qualities of the work of art as much as the qualities I can use to communicate with my audience. These two kinds of qualities *may* of course coincide, but they don’t *have* to. So we may ask: Do the archives – their material and use – work in the direction of performance qualities or ‘work of art’-qualities? Parallel to this distinction is also different views on the phenomenon of variation.

### Archives and variation

Variation has been observed and described by, so to say, all collectors and scholars concerned with traditional culture.<sup>7</sup> Initially, variation on ‘versions’ primarily, like melodic and formal variations; later much attention has also been given to possible variations in intonation and rhythmic ‘feel’. A few have also tried to describe the limits or rules of variation. Yet it should be noticed that no one has successfully described such rules in a way that can account for not only observed variation, but also for all *permissible* variation within the style in question<sup>8</sup>.

One possible view is that to the extent a performance of a tune/dance is identical to a previous performance, it is not traditional. According to this view, variation is not a haphazard, random phenomenon, caused by human imperfection, but a constitutive, necessary trait of traditional culture. While observing traditional elements, variation serves the purpose of allowing for individual expression and creativity.

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the *springleikene* are so crystal clear that I in a moment can let the work of art appear to me just like the day the fiddler played it.”] (My translation.).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Elling (1922) and Gaukstad (1973) for two very different perspectives on variants and variations.

<sup>8</sup> Including two rather ambitious attempts such as Johansson (2010) and Kvifte (1994).

In the archives, performances are fixed in writing or recordings and as such do not say much about variation, at least not explicitly. On the other hand, archives *may* contain several versions of a given tune/song, even by the same source, and therefore give more information about variation than a single live performance might. However the very fixity of performances places the emphasis on performances as 'objects' in the sense of being definable, constant entities that we can consult time after time. The constancy of recordings also paves the way for canonisation of selected pieces as the 'right' or 'best' ones. The very fact that something was found valuable enough to be included in an archive is already one step in that direction, and may be amplified by CD collections with specially selected highlights from the archive. To the extent that recordings of single performances are regarded as authoritative, they contribute to uniformity. In principle, the *process* of which the performance is a result could have been documented to a certain extent, but as this is almost never done, it is highly probable that use of archival material works in the direction of less variability, unless special effort is taken.

In this perspective, the introduction of the internet is not a radical change, as it basically enables access to more material for more people, further removed from the personnel of the archives; not to mention from the initial recording situation and transmission processes.

Also, the view on the very concept of 'tradition' is probably influenced, in the direction of a focus on content at the expense of process. Archives are full of content from days gone by; the processes in which they take part are contemporary and quite different from those that much of the archival material once was a result of. Those processes deserve closer study today, to broaden our understanding of how tradition works and changes.

Besides the obvious process of performers using archival material as basis for their own performances, either as inspiration or as close copies, there is also the possibility of combining direct transmission with archival material, so that a master can give a pupil direct access to the sound of the master's own performances. In this way, the pupil attains a closer relationship to the generation his/her master learned from, and a better understanding of their style. However sometimes this can also have the effect that the master gradually becomes invisible in the pupil's presentations and performances: The older the source one can give for one's performances the better, and, when given the choice between citing a living 60-year old master or a long dead legendary performer, the live master typically loses, and, in Lord's words, 'becomes nothing at all'.

## Concluding remarks

Preserving variation in the tradition is to a large extent a question of the transmission of processes rather than of products. As is argued here, archives tip the scales in the direction of products rather than processes for several reasons, partly because of the more or less pronounced heritage from the national romantic view of art where products in the form of works of art are more important than the creative process, and partly because variational processes are not very well documented in the archives.

This is not to say that such information is entirely absent from the archives. Some documentation of alternative performances of a tune with the same performer exists, and it can also be argued that some variational techniques can be documented by studying variations within single performances, as Omholt (2012) argues. Nevertheless, if one places special value on variation in performances, archival material will require special analysis to recover information of such processes.

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