



Four Swedish Dissertations in Music Theory

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KEYWORDS: Musicology in Sweden, Mozart, Algorithmic composing, Ingvar Lidholm, twelve-tone music, Bo Nilsson, serialism, Debussy, tonality, confusion.

[1] There is a lot of interesting musicological work going on in Sweden. The program of the conference “Musicology Today,” arranged by the Swedish Society for Musicology in June 1999 in Falun, gives a fairly good picture of the distribution of interests. There are several presentations of historical, sociological and ethnomusicological research; there are papers about rock music, the Swedish “troubadour tradition,” pedagogical problems, gender and music, postmodernism, chorale singing, and so on, but only one single presentation that concerns music theory. The subject has a well established tradition of being treated as “narrow” and of marginal interest by the universities. Before 1995 there were only two or three PhD dissertations where music theory was the main concern. Since 1995 there has however been on the average one each year. From the viewpoint of the MTO reader I think it is of greater interest to take a closer look at four of the dissertations than to present a congress report. I was a committee member at the presentations of Berggren’s and Tillman’s dissertations and external reader at Derkert’s.

Ulf Berggren: *Ars Combinatoria, Algorithmic Construction of Sonata Movements by Means of Building Blocks Derived from W. A. Mozart’s Piano Sonatas.*
Uppsala University 1995.

The dissertation is written in English.

[2] “This dissertation is about automatic musical construction. Its objective is to try to define musical elements, building blocks, and structural principles by which these can be combined to create musical movements in classical style by means of a completely automatic process. The study focuses on conventional aspects of classical music, rather than on mastery. This is motivated by reference to 18th-century music theory, which deals with ‘mechanical’ means of composition, some of them being a musical *ars combinatoria*.” Berggren derives a set of rules from a number of Mozart sonatas as seen through traditional music theory. He claims that his model covers “both high and low structural levels,” but seldom reaches below the surface. As a result his “Mozart program” generates a string of plausible building blocks in a sonata-like sequence, without the kind of overarching lines and connections that are so obvious in the real thing. However a lot of the interaction between the building blocks are nicely replicated. To write a computer program that generates “whole sonata movements . . . being

reasonably compatible with the classical style” is no mean feat. At least it clarifies the limitations of traditional music theory. If Berggren could rewrite the program in such a way that other researchers could easily test different sets of rules the results might well be revolutionary.

Joakim Tillman: *Ingvar Lidholm och tolvtonstekniken. Analytiska och historiska perspektiv på Ingvar Lidholms musik från 1950-talet.*

Stockholms universitet 1995.

(Tillman: Ingvar Lidholm and the twelve-tone method)

The dissertation is written in Swedish, but has an extensive summary in English.

[3] This is an excellent piece of work. Tillman draws a detailed map of the stylistic landscape in Sweden during the fifties while remaining firmly anchored in Lidholm’s use of twelve-tone methods. The main part of the book consists of a very thorough series of analytical studies of both the compositions that immediately preceded the twelve-tone works and these works themselves. Different aspects are studied through several works: Lidholm’s series, “chords” Tonality etc. The first time I read the book I was a bit disappointed that Tillman accepted the “orthodox twelve-tone rules” as an analytical point of reference. Schoenberg himself stressed that the twelve-tone method was a compositional method, not an analytical one. The creators of the “orthodox” method (Eimert, Jelinek, Krenek, Rufer, etc.) didn’t seem to understand that there is any difference between the two aspects. Tillman, however, does. He uses the “orthodox” rules as a kind of ruler to measure Lidholm’s degree of acceptance of the twelve-tone concept. It works very well. Lidholm’s serial techniques are put in further perspective by tables showing each series characterized by its set type content. The analytical results are perceptively fused with a historical and stylistic discussion.

Gunnar Valkare: *Det Audiografiska Fältet Om musikens förhållande till skriften och den unge Bo Nilsson’s strategier.*
Musikhögskolan i Göteborg 1997.

(Vakare: The Audiographic Field)

The dissertation is written in Swedish. It has however an English summary.

[4] The starting point of Valkare’s text is the paradox he sensed around Bo Nilsson’s music. The last third of the book is a very convincing demonstration that Nilsson’s music is auditively, nonserially composed, but clothed in all the trappings of post-war serialism: mathematical formulas (mostly corrupted), scientific jargon (mostly pseudo-) and extremely avant garde-looking scores (with dynamic levels expressed as numbers and so on). Valkare shows that the most likely explanation behind the paradox is Nilsson’s intuitive grasp of the fact that the value judgement at the time would be primarily dependent upon the notated music and the avant garde paraphernalia and not on the sound. At the same time there was a repressed longing for the emotional, auditive side of music. He simply provided both. According to Valkare, Nilsson used a series of romantic, jazz-inspired or impressionistic chords (picked out at a piano) as main points distributed over a piece. Between these points each voice is constructed according to a “chromatical semiautomatic tone choice method”. That the music is non-serially and auditively composed is probably true. The stylistic roots of the chords also seem correctly identified. But the “semiautomatic” part of the explanation is unconvincing. If Valkare’s methods (checking off tones against a chromatic scale) were used on for example the melodic lines in Berg’s *Wozzek*, you would get about the same result as with Nilsson. If the “tone choice method” depended upon the auditively chosen chords, we wouldn’t know. Valkare’s method erases the tracks. While groups of tones are of central interest to his analysis, he never refers to set theory. Even a hastily prepared set-type map of a few Nilsson pieces will show that the chords do indeed have strong connections to the “melodic” web. Far from being “semiautomatic” the tone choice method seems just as auditive as for the chords. This strongly supports Valkare’s main argument. Why did he use the blunt “scale checking” method? – It seems like “semiautomatic” analysis to me. How could such a paradoxical situation as the enthusiastic reception of Nilsson’s music emerge? Valkare’s primary answer is to point at the separation that occurred in the early modernism between notated and sounding music. In order to trace the cultural steps even further back, Valkare loses himself in an anthropological fog, strangely ethnocentric and wordy.

Jacob Derkert: *Tonalitet och harmonisk artikulation i Claude Debussys verk Om reception, harmonikteori och analys*.
Stockholms universitet 1998.

(Derkert: Tonality and harmonic articulation in the works of Claude Debussy)
In Swedish. English summary.

[5] The first six chapters of Derkert's text are impressively ambitious. He seems ready to include everything: The concept of tonality, tonality versus atonality, methods to deduce roots of chords, Rameau's and Riemann's theories of harmony and tonal functions, the rise of Debussy analysis in Germany during the Twenties. He is extremely thorough at that point—it seems that every German dissertation about Debussy is scrutinized. He does not however find much that is useful. Instead he turns to a few French and American texts, only to find them just as unsuited for his purpose. This forces Derkert to build a formal system of tonality. After forty pages he seems to forget his own system and turns to fifth progressions and then to comparisons of pitch content. These at least generate massive tables. Still, Derkert does not seem content and turns to set theory. The basics are explained in detail and at length. The theory is finally used on two much-analysed preludes by Debussy. The book is a decisive step backwards from the results of Richard S. Parks.

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