

Polska efter Näktergal Erik Ersson

A Swedish polska – worn down, with great economy of material, distilled to its essentials.

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Säter, Södra Dalarna

Efter Olle Wallman 4/1995

Printed by Karen Myers

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Illustration 1: Learned at a workshop in 1995 from Olle Wallman.

The recording is of a slightly different version performed by Brodd Leif Andersson and Staffan Eriksson, from their Låtar från södra Dalarna (<http://www.staffan.pp.se/Pages/Musiksidor.html>) recording.

This polska is from Säter, in Södra Dalarna. Like many tunes from that district, it gives an impression of great age with its limited range (mostly within one octave) and its repeated melodic material. Like all traditional tunes, it exists in numerous variants, of which the written music and recorded music referenced here are but two snapshots.

The tune is in G minor, with a variable 7th note in the scale, depending on direction (e.g., measures 6 vs 7), like a melodic minor. It has a very basic and regular structure, with the 2-bar phrases that are so typical of this genre, derived ultimately from Baroque practice.

Let's look at the phrases. There are 16 bars in both the A and B parts, indicated by the repeats. There are two primary 2-bar phrases (one of which appears in two different descending scale versions), and two modifications of those phrases to provide endings for the parts. Reducing it to the 8-bar version only (a full A part and a full B part), it looks like this. (The crosshatches indicate the measures with the scale variation, and the lighter shades reflect the variant of each phrase adapted to serve as an ending.)

A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8
B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8

Illustration 2: In the variant on the attached recording, B7 is identical to B3 and would be colored the same.

The phrase structure reminds me of a Fair Isle knitting pattern where figure and ground alternate.

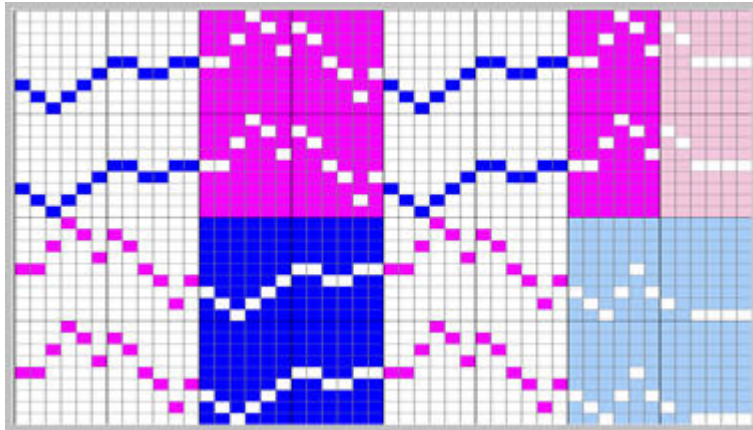


Illustration 3: The full tune, with repeats. The units are 8th notes, and the variant 7th note of the scale is ignored.

The double squares mark the quarter notes, most of which are on D (see below). The low F# at the end of the B-part has been skipped to allow the tonic note (G) to be the bottom of each row.

So, the static view of this tune shows us a tightly interwoven and alternating repetitive pattern. But we experience music psychologically through time rather than all at once. There are other tunes which have repetitive phrases - what makes this particular structure so tight and trance-like?

To begin with, the glue between each of the 2-bar phrases is unusually tight, since they follow upon each other in the same sequence in both the A and B parts, making it easy to lose track of which part you're playing. Once you start a phrase and enter the loop, it's not easy to decide when to stop.

In addition, the cadence note is repeated internally - the "D" (5th note of the G minor scale) appears as the final note not only at the end of the A part, but also at the end of the first (blue) 2-bar phrase whenever it occurs, which is every 2 measures. You can see this in illustration 3, where the prominence of the cadence note is visible as the persistent horizontal level that the tune clusters around. This has the effect of reducing the sense of "grounding" that a return to the tonic note (G) would bring. The only significant occurrence of the tonic is at the end of the B part, which is about as minimal as possible.

Finally, the A and B endings echo each other rhythmically and mirror each other melodically, in a very characteristic way. The effect is of taking a tightly twisting rope and tying it down into an endless knot.