

Systerpolskor efter Timas Hans

What makes these two Swedish polska tunes "sisters"?

Systerpolska 1 efter Timas Hans

Ore

Efter Pål Olle & Nils Agermark 5/2005

Printed by Karen Myers

Tunes from Ore (Sonet Folk Series #13) Sonet 014 253-2

The musical score is written in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a common time signature. The melody is primarily eighth and sixteenth notes. Chords are indicated above the staff: Gm, Eb, Bb, Cm, and D7. The second staff starts at measure 5 and includes first and second endings. The third staff starts at measure 10 and includes a repeat sign at the beginning. The fourth staff starts at measure 15 and also includes first and second endings. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

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Illustration 1: When these polska tunes are named as "sisters", the numbering varies according to the source.

Systerpolska 2 efter Timas Hans

Both are from a recording "Tunes from Ore" by Pål Olle and Nils Agenmark, #13 in the Folk Series from Sonet Grammofofon, available from Digelius Music (<http://www.digelius.com/>) or CDRoots (<http://www.cdroots.com/>), among others.

These two tunes are from the great tradition of Timas Hans from Ore, Dalarna. Like all traditional tunes, they exist in numerous variants, of which the written music and recorded music referenced here are but snapshots. I have added some skeletal chords to give a flavor of the harmonic structure, but many other harmonies are possible.

There are many polska tunes in the repertoire that come from Timas Hans, but these two in particular are often referred to as "sisters". They are not called sisters because they are derived from a common source, as one might expect, but because fiddlers playing them find them similar in certain ways. In particular, it is easy to get them confused, mostly by cycling back to the wrong A part after playing through the tune once. As a fiddler who has been caught in this trap many times I wanted to better understand why this happens.

To begin with, let's look at the differences between these tunes. Systerpolska 1 is built very notably from two-bar phrases and is rather lyrical while Systerpolska 2 is mostly made of single-bar phrases and is rather more conventional. The harmonic structures, as indicated by the suggested chords, are not very similar (given that they are both in the same key). It's clear that these tunes did not come from any common ancestor and, on the face of it, shouldn't be any more easily confused than any other tunes in the same key from the same tradition. So what's the source of the problem?

Certainly they are in the same key (G minor) and the first 4 notes of the A part are the same. Many have observed that the ending of the B part is also the same both melodically and harmonically. This is the foundation of the similarity.

The image displays four musical staves in G minor, 3/4 time. The top staff shows the first two bars of Systerpolska 1 (A part) and the last two bars of its B part. The bottom staff shows the first two bars of Systerpolska 2 (A part) and the last two bars of its B part. Red dots are placed above the notes G, A, B, and A in the first two bars of both tunes, highlighting their identical starting melody. Chord symbols (Gm, E♭, D7) are written above the staves to indicate the harmonic structure.

Illustration 2: The red notes mark the identical melody at the start and end of the two tunes.

There is more going on, however, than these obvious correspondences. I find these two tunes unequal in their ability to attract the unwary fiddler, and believe that the start of Systerpolska 2, the simpler and more conventional tune, is "stickier" than its sibling.

Extrapolating from my own musical psychology, I find the metaphor of a "target" useful. When the A part begins, I aim at the ending of the first phrase, and that goal shapes the notes I try to remember and produce in the moment. If I am playing Systerpolska 1, I must first remember that this is a two-bar phrase, so the ending is some distance away. This takes an effort, since the single-bar phrasing of Systerpolska 2 is simpler and just as familiar.

And then the tune itself springs a trap. Notice the dramatic high G that highlights the ending of the B part for Systerpolska 1. It comes again at the end of the first phrase of the A part. But Systerpolska 2 also places a prominent high G at the end of its first phrase in the A part, and that comes sooner. So if my attention wavers for a moment when ending Systerpolska 1, the echo of the last bit of drama in the B part derails me to the other tune.

Systerpolska 1: End (B part)

Phrase 1

Phrase 1

Phrase 2

Systerpolska 1: Start (A part)

Systerpolska 2: Start (A part)

Illustration 3: The dramatic G that begins the ending of Systerpolska 1 is echoed differently at the start of both tunes.

If Systerpolska 2 didn't exist, then playing Systerpolska 1 would present no difficulty. But since they share an ecosystem in the Ore repertoire, the simpler tune lurks constantly in the shadows, camouflaged and ready to pounce.