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Chronological Layers in a Song Repertoire

Velle Espeland

In this paper I will be examining a repertoire of songs as though I were an archaeologist, attempting to identify various layers in the musical material. These layers are not necessarily identified by the singer as different categories of songs; nor do they comprise what a student of folklore would call specific types of songs, although some of the layers may be dominated by certain genres. The layers I am referring to are chronological, the deepest of which is made up of the songs learned by the singer in the first years of his or her life. This does not mean that these songs themselves are the oldest, but that they have been part of the singer's repertoire for the longest time.

I met Serina Malmei in 1972 when I was doing fieldwork in Rogaland, in the southwestern part of Norway. She was 74 years old and had been a widow for more than 30 years. Nonetheless she had a good voice and could sing for hours. She is still alive, and when I visited her this past January, she was even able to sing some of her old songs. I have recorded no less than 109 songs sung by her. This is not, of course, her entire repertoire, but it is the major part of it, the songs she liked best and sang most frequently. When I began establishing the chronology of this repertoire, I encountered a number of problems. Serina Malmei had no difficulty recalling where, when and from whom she had learned some of the songs, and she could even remember when she had obtained the complete text and begun to sing the song. However, her recollection of most of the repertoire was much vaguer. When I asked her when she had learned a particular song, she often replied, "I've always known it." Nevertheless, it was often possible to date many of these songs as well. When I asked her if she could remember who had sung a particular song and on what occasion, she was generally able to be more specific. By linking the song with other singers and occasions, we were able to place it in a particular chronological layer.

In the rural community where Serina Malmei lived, road construction had been going on for the entire first half of this century. A local chronology developed, based on the construction of various stretches of road. The chronology of personal experiences and local events was established by linking them to stages in the construction work. This chronology also proved useful in terms of dating song repertoire, as the construction workers had had a definite influence on the community. They represented a breath of fresh air from the outside and introduced many new songs to the community. The construction workers also brought the first gramophones to the area.

The oldest, and archaeologically speaking, deepest layer of Serina Malmei's repertoire comprised songs she had learned at home as a child. Most of these songs were taught her by her parents, but some came from older siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Another very early, easily identifiable layer comprised the songs she had learned at school. These songs, which were typical of the kind included in school songbooks of the period, tended to be more literary, didactic and national. Both of these layers of songs date back to the period prior to 1912.

The next layer, which accounted for the greater share of her repertoire, was learned when she was a teenager, up to her marriage at the age of twenty in 1918. The transition from her teenage years,

when she had a large circle of friends and acquaintances, to a more isolated life as an adult, married woman and mother, is very marked. Although it is possible to identify different layers of songs in the long period between 1918 and 1972, these layers are not so clearly distinguishable as the previous ones.

I would now like to examine each of these various layers separately. The chronological layer comprising most songs (about 35 per cent of her repertoire) spans the six years between the ages of 14 and 20. A distinctive feature is the dominance of the epic song, the theme of which is generally love, often with a tragic ending. This is hardly surprising, as young people in this age group are generally preoccupied by love and their relationship with the opposite sex. This is perhaps even more true of young women than young men. The songs were used as entertainment and as a form of socializing. When young people gathered in the evenings, they often sang together. Contact with peers is extremely important in this phase of life, and most of the songs during this period were learned from friends of the same age. Thus, it is a matter of a synchronous tradition or transfer within a specific group of young people. As this is a group that makes frequent use of song, there is a high incidence of such transfer. It goes without saying that songs quickly lose their novelty in such a situation, and there is a constant need for new songs. Contact with people outside the local community is therefore an important source of new songs. The construction workers, who were generally fairly young, represented such a source. I was often told, for instance, that she had learned a particular song "from construction workers in Gloppedalen", or that it had been sung "by workers on the Austrumsdal road". Some of her repertoire came from broadsides, although there were few broadsides to be found in this rural area. There was not much of a market for this kind of publication, as the community was a bit too small and the farms too far apart.

Serina's repertoire also reflects the influence of the gramophone. The influence of the radio, on the other hand, plays no role in this layer of repertoire. First of all, the radio came on the scene much later, and secondly, it is extremely difficult to learn songs from the radio, as each song is sung only once. In this sense, the gramophone is a much better means of dissemination.

The oral tradition plays a much less prominent role in the songs of the last and longest phase of her life. Songbooks, texts from newspapers and magazines and technical media had now become the most important sources of new material. This is not only because of the growing importance of such media in recent decades, but also, and equally important, because her social network was much smaller than during her teenage years and song was no longer an integral part of social gatherings. Thus, only a minority of the songs in Serina's repertoire were songs she learned as an adult. This tendency seems even more peculiar given that one would naturally expect her to recall songs she had learned more recently more easily than those learned several decades ago. Part of the repertoire will have been forgotten after a time. For example, in 1972 the people of Norway were faced with the choice of whether or not to join the EC. Public opinion in Serina Malmei's area, which is an agricultural district, was clearly opposed to Norwegian membership. Serina had learned a couple of anti-EC songs, which she sang for me then. I am certain that these songs have now been completely forgotten, despite the fact that the political situation today - with the Norwegian people facing the same choice - gives them a new relevance.

I would like to go back to the oldest layer of songs, those she learned at home as a child, the layer where we find what might be called the family tradition. This layer is made up of several very different types of songs. First of all, we can distinguish between adult songs and children's songs. Children's songs can also be divided into two categories. The first of these is genuine children's songs, which are what children sing and learn from one another when playing among themselves. The second is what we might call parents' songs, that is songs which parents or other adults sing for young children. The lullabye belongs to the second category. It is worth noting that Serina Malmei

learned lullabies and other parents' songs as a child. The children for whom lullabies are sung are generally so young that they themselves do not learn the songs. Serina, however, is one of the oldest of many siblings. Her youngest brother is 18 years younger than herself. She learned this part of her repertoire when her mother sang for her younger siblings and when she herself later had to use these songs to coax them to sleep.

The following incident shows how lullabies were passed down this way. I visited one of Serina's neighbours, an older woman who was also a good singer. However, I was surprised to learn that she had such a small repertoire of lullabies, despite the fact that she had many children. Serina's explanation for this was that her neighbour had been the youngest child, and that lullabies were no longer sung in her home once she herself was out of the cradle. Thus, she never had an opportunity to learn these songs herself.

Parents' songs encompass not only lullabies, but also songs sung in connection with play or to encourage children to engage in various activities and songs designed purely to entertain young children.

Parents' songs are thus songs one learns as a child. While these songs are of little interest to teenagers, they are reactivated when the singer becomes an adult and has his or her own children. This is why the singer remembers these songs better than genuine children's songs, i.e. those which children learn from one another. There is no period in life when children's songs are fully reactivated.

In addition to children's songs, this deepest layer also includes songs that are not directed specifically at children. These are songs which the adults in the house enjoyed and sang in various situations, and which were picked up by the children. The oldest songs in Serina Malmei's repertoire belong to this category. They include not only old epic songs which have surely been passed down for many generations, but also broadside ballads that belonged to her parents' or grandparents' teenage repertoire. The oldest songs also include a number of religious songs, i.e. long, epic songs based on themes taken from the Bible, the melodies of which are reminiscent of very old folk songs.

Serina's favourite song, or signature song if we can use such a term, also belongs to this category. "Maristien" is an epic love ballad with a tragic ending. It has 54 stanzas, takes about an hour to sing, and was Serina's special song. None of her children or grandchildren could be bothered to learn such a challenging song, which probably came from Serina's mother's teenage repertoire.

If we look at Serina's repertoire as a whole, the songs she learned as a teenager (from 1912 to 1918) make up the largest group. These were also the songs she preferred to sing in her old age. However, this part of her repertoire includes few old songs as they were new when Serina and her friends began to sing them. The transfer of these songs had been intense, but synchronous within a group that was extremely homogeneous in terms of age.

When I was in the Rogaland area collecting songs, I visited not only Serina, but other people as well. I made a survey of the repertoire of people of different ages, and was able to identify corresponding repertoire in several successive generations of teenagers. It appears that there was practically no overlap between the repertoire of singers who were teenagers in the 1930s and that of Serina, who was finished with her teens before 1920. Thus, the entire repertoire had been replaced in the space of 12 years.

Diachronous tradition is necessary if songs are to survive and become a part of a cultural tradition. They must be passed down from generation to generation. This process generally takes place in the home, where songs are transmitted from parents or grandparents to children. This gives the tradition its stability and an opportunity to live on and take root. This is the way in which songs become "folk songs".