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The Zorn Trials and the Jante Law: On Shining Musically in the Land of Moderation

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1. Thou shalt not believe thou art something.
2. Thou shalt not believe thou art as good as we.
3. Thou shalt not believe thou art more wise than we.
4. Thou shalt not fancy thyself better than we.
5. Thou shalt not believe thou knowest more than we.
6. Thou shalt not believe thou art greater than we.
7. Thou shalt not believe thou amoutest to anything.
8. Thou shalt not laugh at us.
9. Thou shalt not believe that anyone is concerned with thee.
10. Thou shalt not believe thou canst teach us anything.

Aksel Sandemose, 1933

Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose called these commandments “the Jante Law,” so-named for his protagonist’s fictional Danish home-town in the semi-autobiographical novel A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks (orig. pub. 1933; English trans., 1936:77–78). Over the years this ironic credo of elder-dominated communal living has expanded and acquired a special resonance with respect to Swedish cultural self-image. Today in Sweden, the Jante Law occupies a place in the popular imagination as a descriptor of a specifically Scandinavian attitude, a subtly enforced culture of moderation and humility.

In the summer of 1933, the very same year of that novel’s initial publication in Norway, the Swedish Youth Ring for Rural Culture would hold the first annual juried Zorn Trials in the town of Västerås, near Stockholm. They would adopt the late painter Anders Zorn’s design for a silver badge that he had distributed to all the invited participants of a national folk musicians’ gathering in 1910. This silver badge would be revived as the highest award for folk musicians who played before a select jury of experts; other awards would include a certificate, bronze badge, and post-bronze certificate. In addition, the jury would select one or two preeminent figures in folk music Sweden to be honoured with a golden badge. The annual ceremony at which these awards were to be distributed would be known as the National Folk Musicians’ Gathering, after the 1910 event. In a creative re-parsing of this term, recipients of the gold and silver badges would be granted the right to call themselves National Folk Musicians.

2 I have used the word “Trials” as translation of the Swedish uppspelningar, a broad term that lacks an exact parallel in English. An uppspeling [lit. “up-playing”] is a performance intended for the purpose of demonstrating musical skills, subject to official judgment of some kind. Unlike an “audition,” it need not result in entry into or rejection from a musical organization. My translation is admittedly slightly misleading in that it shifts agency from the musicians to the judging panel, but I think it conveys the spirit of the Zorn institution better than a more literal one might. I also think it appropriate considering that the panel in this case is called a “jury.” I would be remiss in omitting the admission, however, that my choice of translation was influenced by a desire to draw a thematic connection between the two cultural institutions with which I am engaged (Zorn “Trials”/Jante Law).
3 The phrase “folk music Sweden” is a direct translation of the Swedish folkmusiksverige, a term frequently used by Swedish folk musicians, dancers, and enthusiasts to refer to their common subculture.
The title of “National Folk Musician” remains to this day a highly authoritative mark of a player’s skill and authenticity. It carries significant weight both within the folk music community and in Swedish society at large. Among folk musicians, however, the Trials are also the subject of some ambivalence. Occasionally the wisdom of the adjudicators is brought into question, concerning either general criteria for judgment, or decisions regarding specific well-known players. The rules governing which musical instruments are allowed are another frequent subject of debate. In general, the most common expressions of concern in one way or another revolve around the system’s intrinsic conservatism.

These sorts of misgivings may, on one level, be taken at face value. In some cases also, they may also mask anger at (or fear of) harsh judgment at the hands of the jury. Other less apparent significations may be buried in these utterances, however, connected to the Jante Law as a cultural phenomenon. We may, for instance, read challenges to the conservatism of the Trial system obliquely as resistance to the Jante Law, given their implicit critique of elder authority. Inversely, uncertainties felt by participants in the Trials may be understood as an effect of the Law itself, in its admonition against seeking recognition and personal distinction. The Law and the Trials each have this tendency to play both sides of the equation. They are linked by a common function, each playing host to the multifarious negotiations between Swedish communities and their individuals.

The Zorn Trials in Conversation
Every year the Zorn Trials and National Folk Musicians’ Gathering are held in a different location in Sweden. The events are usually hosted by local amateur folk music and folk dance organizations, often under the aegis of the region’s provincial folk musicians’ association. The twelve-member Zorn council sends its three-person secretariat to facilitate year-to-year consistency, along with three of its nine official jury members. These three adjudicators are joined by a local representative, selected in consultation with the local organizers, to create a four-person judging panel.

The entire enterprise is an amateur one, from the folk music and dance organizations that host it, to the Swedish Folk Dance Ring, which sponsors it, to the Zorn council itself. The council members all receive room and board for their services, but only the adjudicators are paid beyond this: a small honorarium nowhere near offsetting the vacation days they have to take from work to hold the week-long Trials. The local hosts will generally mobilize between fifty and a hundred volunteers to show musicians to practice rooms and jury chambers, prepare and serve refreshments, and set up peripheral concerts and dances. The only “professional” on-the-job participants are one or two agents of the Centre for Swedish Folk Music and Jazz Research, who record the Trials for posterity, and also represent the only state involvement in the events.

The archivist so charged for the first few days of the 2004 Zorn Trials at Högbo Bruk, where I first went before the jury, was an acquaintance of mine, ethnomusicologist Dan Lundberg. I was given one of the earliest time-slots, and had the opportunity to speak with Lundberg soon afterwards. He mentioned that he would also be playing for the jury in a few days. Lundberg played the same instrument as I, a six-holed duct flute called the härjedalspipa.

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4 Public expressions of doubt regarding the jury’s credentials and judgments were far more common at the heyday of the Swedish folk music revival, in the 1970s and early 1980s. As general respect for the expertise of the jury has grown over the years since, so has this sort of criticism become less common, though it has by no means disappeared.
He told me that it had never occurred to him to undergo the Trials, but that upon being witness to the panel’s expertise when he recorded the event the previous year, he had decided to try it out. I told him that I was planning to write a paper on the subject. He said: “Yeah, that’s another good excuse.”

When I had the chance to interview Lundberg at the following summer’s Trials in the city of Kalmar, I asked him to tell me what he had meant:

**Kaminsky:** You said “yeah, that’s another good excuse.”

**Lundberg:** Yes, exactly. I recognized myself in that. [laugh] I mean, there’s a doubleness there. That it’s actually really cool to get to play for the jury. And what if you became a National Folk Musician, what an honour that would be. So there’s no getting around that, of course you want the jury to say “hooray, holy crap you’re good. We’re giving you your silver badge right now.” On the other hand you have that, at least for me, there are other advantages to the Zorn badge. Partly that I thought it would be exciting to test the situation, get a sense of what it was, and then that can be my excuse. That I’d like to try it and see how it is and how it feels. I can also say, honestly, that it would be pretty good for me in my career role if I became a National Folk Musician. Because it would grant more authority; it would be more for real, that the head of the Centre would be a National Folk Musician…. I think a lot of people do that. Just like I’ve done, to say on the one hand “yeah, it’s not so important.” [laugh] “I happened to be in Kalmar anyway,” or whatever. [laugh] On the other hand, it is important. So I said it jokingly, I hope you understood that. (interview, 2 July 2005)

Indeed, the experience of doubleness Lundberg describes is not uncommon to musicians who play for the jury, to judge from casual discussions surrounding the event. To give one example, during the Kalmar Zorn Trials I spent some time with a cohort of four students from the nearby Malmö Academy of Music. Esbjörn Wettermark was a clarinetist I had met the previous year at Högbo Bruk, where he had earned a bronze badge. At Kalmar he gained the silver. The other three were fiddlers and first-timers before the jury. Emil Kunze and Olof Göthlin were awarded bronze badges, while Eva Thestrup went without an award. As we were leaving the Gathering that culminated the week’s events, I mentioned to the four of them that the back of my bronze badge said “The Youth Ring,” although the sponsoring institution had reverted to its original name, “The Folk Dance Ring,” in January of 2005.
Kaminsky: The back of my badge says “The Youth Ring.”
Wettermark: They printed five hundred of the old certificates by mistake.  
Kaminsky: But the badge, not the certificate. No wait, it’s the certificate too. It doesn’t matter, they spelled my name wrong anyway.
Göthlin: “I” instead of “y”?
Kaminsky: Yeah.
Kunze: Yeah, they got a lot of stuff wrong on the certificates. Olof’s says “June second.”
Göthlin: You could just change the “i” to a “y.”
Kaminsky: And the “gott” to “gött.”
Wettermark: Make sure to use one of those circumflexes.
Göthlin: If you have some white-out at home you could just change where it says “bronze” to “silver.”
Thestrup: You could spray-paint the badge silver, too.
Kaminsky: You know, gold spray-paint is just as cheap.
Göthlin: Hey Emil, where’s your badge?
Kunze: I left it behind. I mean, I only spent about two thousand crowns trying to get it.
[30/31]
Thestrup: It doesn’t matter anyway—you lost it to Olof on that bet that we had eaten in the same restaurant two nights in a row. (conversation, 2 July 2005; quoted with permission)

Doubtless some of the irreverence of the conversation was intensified by a certain discomfort at this group of friends being placed so differently in the Trials. Wettermark was visibly proud of his silver badge, and rightfully so—he had improved dramatically in his playing from one year to the next. Thestrup, herself a brilliant musician, was equally upset at being snubbed by the jury. Their banter was, among other things, a vehicle by which each might mute their emotional state for the benefit of the other. At the same time, the attitude manifested here was not at all

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8 In reading a draft of this paper, Wettermark noted that his statement about misprinted certificates was based upon an unconfirmed rumour that he and Emil had both heard.
9 My suggested change would transform the standard Swedish word for “good” into a related, yet sadly untranslatable regional slang term.
10 The word can be spelled both ways (gött or gött). The character ô is not used in standard Swedish, but is often utilized in the transcription of older regional dialects, and occasionally operates to signify “folkness” in the naming of folk music groups and albums, e.g., Ransäterspôjker’a, Höl i Vägga.
11 Two thousand crowns at that time would have been just over USD 250. The registration fee was seven hundred crowns; the remainder of Emil’s calculated expense was probably in food and travel.
12 I reconstructed this conversation (which took place in Swedish) from field notes taken later that night, and submitted it to the participants for approval and fact-checking about nine and a half months after that. The fact that Kunze kept asking me afterwards if I had a hidden microphone may be a testament to: a) the capacity of my short-term memory to withstand the scrutiny of his long-term memory; b) my ability to reconstruct dialogue realistically; c) my general aura of shiftiness; or d) some combination of these factors.
13 Other functions might include disempowering the ranking system as arbitrary, covertly navigating personal ambivalences regarding participation in the Trial system, and desanctifying a self-sanctified institution; as well as a number of the standard functions of ironic banter generally acknowledged in the literature—maintaining rapport, expressing identity, entertainment, etc. (see, e.g., Barbe 1995:33–37; Norrick 1993; Tannen 1984:130–43).
unusual. Its magnification due to the particular circumstances merely grants an especially citable example of a common trend. Much of the casual language among Zorn Trial participants reflects this discomfort at the event’s inevitable generation of an explicit hierarchy, and specifically the anxiety that participation might represent a desire to distinguish oneself as superior to others.\footnote{Slavoj Žižek has noted that people frequently use critical or ironic language to psychologically distance themselves from (and thus enable) their own complicity with institutions they find problematic. It is, he suggests, the very nature of ideology (1997:18–20).}

The language of participants in the regional Zorn Trials for Värmland province, held a few weeks later in the town of Säffle, paints a slightly different picture. Regional Trials have been held a handful of times since their inception in the 1980s, usually on the initiative of a provincial folk musicians’ organization in the interest of motivating local young players. These events are smaller in scale, with a three-person panel made up of two regular adjudicators and a local representative. The registration fee is lowered considerably, and the highest award attainable is the bronze badge.

A group of players—three older men, a woman in her mid-twenties, and myself—stood outside the school in Säffle where the one-day regional Trials had been held. As we waited for the results to be posted, the three older men dominated the conversation:

\begin{quote}
A: Is everyone who played for the jury from Värmland?
B: I drove from Örebro.
A: That’s a long way to come.
B: It would have been a lot farther to Kalmar. [31/32]
C: It’s also a lot less pretentious here. I mean, nobody here thinks they’re going for the silver.
A: I actually got pretty nervous. I think it was the old Jante Law—“who do you think you are, playing for the jury?”
C: That never even occurred to me. I think I’m too old for the Jante Law to apply.
\end{quote}

(conversation, 15 July 2005)

The differences between this conversation and those previously mentioned exemplify a qualitative distinction in attitudes prevalent at the regional as opposed to national events. At the national Trials, Dan Lundberg joked about “being in Kalmar anyway,” and Emil Kunze about leaving behind a badge he had invested two thousand crowns in attaining. These remarks bespeak a discomfort at the direct evidence of that personal desire to be rewarded by the jury, manifested as distance travelled, expenses incurred, and in the physical reward itself. On the other hand, both expenses and travel were significantly reduced for participants in the regional Trials, as was the stigma of hubris attached to thinking oneself worthy of the silver badge. The culture of self-conscious ironizing that characterized Kalmar (and Högbo Bruk, the year before) was thus all but absent in the Säffle Trials. Accordingly, the irreverent attitude toward the institution implicit in many conversations at the national Trials was diminished considerably in Säffle as well.

**The Zorn Trials in folk music Sweden**

The ambivalence with which the National Folk Musician title is invested also goes beyond these events, to pervade folk music Sweden more generally. On the one hand, the explicit ranking legitimates aspiring folk musicians in a world where authenticity is both a central concern and a scarce commodity, due to a three-generation gap between the industrialization that rendered
Swedish peasant music functionally obsolete and the revival that has given Swedish folk music its present face. For this reason, I would argue, nearly all of the most prominent players have at some point in their careers gone through that step of attaining the silver badge, in turn reinforcing the legitimacy of the title.

On the other hand, the overtness of the ranking flies in the face not only of a broader Jante Law, but also its specific manifestation in the folk music subculture’s communal aspect. Fiddler Håkan Bengtsson explains:

I think that these really good players, they should mix with normal folk musicians, because, we were just talking about this the other day that people who become National Folk Musicians … they stop playing, they never go to folk music gatherings if they don’t have anything [scheduled], they stand on stage and play and talk about their music, but they don’t mix with ordinary folk musicians. And I think there’s a lack in that, then you miss something social, because there are also a lot of positive values in social playing.

(interview, 25 June 2002)

The communal ideal Bengtsson espouses was a central ideological tenet of the Swedish folk music revival, and has had powerful staying force within the subculture in the years since. It also transcends that specific sphere as one among several elements constituting “leisure time,” which opposes a hierarchical “work time” to form a defining binarism of modern Swedish existence (Löfgren 1987:13-41). Consequently, Bengtsson’s critique has a place within a broader and weightier context.

The strongest internal challenge to Sweden’s powerful cultural sense of egalitarianism is the strict hierarchy of the Swedish workplace and professional world. This challenge is intensified by a deference to expertise (especially that of panels and committees), fetishization of school grades and professional credentials (in Swedish the word is the same for both), and respect for the judgment of others. The resulting sense of social order and structure is critical to the famously thorough and pragmatic Swedish work ethic, as well as its concomitant coldness and alienation (see, e.g., Austin 1969:20–29). This dehumanizing chill finds its logical antithesis in home, nature, freedom, summer, the wife and the mother, anything that can be conceived in opposition to the world of work. These are the elements in post-industrial Swedish society that were generally understood to make men (and later, women) whole (Löfgren 1987:68). In Sweden, if profession is the source of identity, then its negation is the source of humanity.

Folk music has traditionally been inextricably bound to that complementary, whole-making half of Swedish existence. Orvar Löfgren has shown how, over the course of Swedish industrialization, the emerging bourgeoisie transformed nature from peasant work-space to quintessential bourgeois (and eventually working-class) leisure-space (1987:43–75). Rural

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16 My logic here is not quite so circular as it may seem: National Folk Musician status does not guarantee prominence, nor is it always a necessary prerequisite for it, as my later discussion of fiddler Mats Berglund will illustrate. Thanks to Kiri Miller for suggesting that I should probably point this out, and for all her other help with this article.
17 These issues are all treated at length in Paul Britten Austin’s On Being Swedish (1969:12–52).
Sweden was to be preserved in the broader Swedish imagination as a pre-industrial chronotope.\textsuperscript{18} The modern function of rural Swedish “folk music” as soundtrack to that never-land is exemplified in the persistent exclusion of urban and socialist work-songs from its inventory. Moreover, despite the fact that many pre-industrial village musicians had subsisted wholly or partially on their musical talents, as of the early twentieth century enthusiasts were beginning to reimagine folk music as an essentially non-professional activity. Its polarization against the work arena was only intensified by the folk revival of the seventies, which in Sweden as elsewhere manifested as one element of a broader rebellion against the establishment.\textsuperscript{19} The Swedish revival attached itself to that [33/34] panoply of elements defined in complementary opposition to the oppressive professional system – nature, summer, the rural, amateurism, informality, joy, and of course the egalitarianism extolled by Bengtsson in the quotation above. Consider, then, the challenges to that anti-system when the Zorn jury, a serious and stone-faced panel of experts, convenes in the middle of the summer to confer hierarchically ordered credentials upon folk musicians. That Bengtsson should attribute to the silver badge an alienating force should come as little surprise.

When Anders Zorn organized the first of several events meant to serve as rescue operations for folk music heritage, he made that initial 1906 event a contest, perhaps inspired by an earlier Norwegian model, perhaps by sporting events of the time.\textsuperscript{20} Other competitions followed in the years to come, but they were quickly surpassed—and eventually replaced—by the more egalitarian gatherings (Ramsten 1994:285, Roempke 1980:269).\textsuperscript{21} The competitive \textit{kappleik} system that still today dominates the Norwegian scene has few analogues in present-day Sweden.\textsuperscript{22} A few tune composition contests have flowered in recent years, some of which involve both composition and performance. Only one pure playing competition, however, The \textit{Nyckelharpa} World Championships, comes close to approaching the seriousness of the Zorn Trials.\textsuperscript{23} The two other annual playing contests with which I am familiar both bear the exaggerated markers of leisure-sphere informality. The Student Folk Music Team World

\textsuperscript{18} The chronotope, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, is a place that signifies a certain time or kind of time, “the primary means for materializing time in space” (Bakhtin 1981:250). The use of the rural as signifier for the pre-industrial is of course not limited to Swedish contexts (cf., e.g., McKay 1994).

\textsuperscript{19} For a discussion of the Swedish folk music revival as part of the broader counter-culture movement, see, e.g., Roth (1985:177–85).

\textsuperscript{20} For a more detailed discussion of that initial contest, its broader context, and its possible models, see Ramsten and Ternhag (2006:78–82), Ivarsdotter-Johnson and Ramsten (1992:242), and Roempke (1980:266).

\textsuperscript{21} Gatherings differ from festivals primarily in that they have fewer (or no) paid acts, and instead emphasize social playing and dance. As such they are typically less expensive to attend than festivals, and often free for musicians. Folk music festivals are a much newer phenomenon in Sweden, going back only to the mid-1980s, when they seem to have been based primarily on the rock festival model. In recent years, Swedish folk music festivals and gatherings have come to influence one another a great deal, and in a number of cases the defining lines between them have become fairly blurry.

\textsuperscript{22} Norwegian \textit{kappleikar} are similar to Swedish folk music gatherings, differing primarily in that events centre around a playing competition. These competitions have been discussed at length by Chris Goertzen (1997; 1998).

\textsuperscript{23} The choice of the name “\textit{Nyckelharpa} World Championships” does however suggest a certain self-irony among its creators that finds no counterpart within the Zorn council. The name brings into focus both the lack of broad popular interest (compared to the sporting events in implicit comparison) and the built-in parochiality of a contest restricted to a specifically Swedish instrument and repertoire.
Championships are generally recognized as an excuse to get a country’s worth of college-age folk musicians to mingle under a single roof, its rules and mission statement deliberately informal. Näck of the Year pits male fiddlers against one another for the honour of representing the malevolent musical water-sprite traditionally reputed to have given the best players their powers, the requisite costume being a fiddle, a bow, and several metric tons of cold, cold water about the testicles. As such, these last two events are exceptional not only in their uniqueness as contests, but also in the lengths to which they go to mitigate the formalizing effects of competition. [34/35]

The Zorn Trials are thus highly atypical of folk music Sweden. The primary public social venues for Swedish folk music today are local and regional gatherings (since the 1910s), folk music “teams” or informal unlimited-membership playing groups (since the 1940s) and folk music and dance clubs (since the late 1970s). Formality and hierarchy are anathema to these contexts. In the larger summer gatherings that function as iconic markers of post-revival folk music Sweden, system and structure are almost ritualistically stripped away over the course of events. The night-time abandonment of the day’s pre-scheduled order is foreshadowed by the posting of the dance players’ sign-up sheet: The earliest times may already be filled by contracted acts, but these are generally followed by a list of empty half-hour slots, to be claimed spontaneously by any would-be musician with tune in heart and pen in hand. By the wee morning hours even this vestige of scheduling is abandoned, and musicians come up and play on the spur of the moment, in ever-shifting groups. Often by this time any sound system has been dismantled, forcing the players to the centre of the floor to be heard. The boundaries are further blurred as dancers are caajoled into playing to relieve players who want to dance, and musicians are unceremoniously snagged by malcontented wallflowers. Frequently, the festivities end with a final group “long dance” in waltz time, usually a well-known tune to which everyone can sing along. For perhaps the first time in up to twelve hours, the gender politics of couple dancing are suspended, everyone moves together in a chain, and everyone makes the music.24

Sometimes, after the dance has at long last been surrendered to fatigue, the remaining participants, carried by a sixth or seventh wind, will engage in a final stripping away of all markers of difference, and shed their clothing for an early morning swim. For Swedes, skinny dipping is classic summer behaviour—though perhaps, as Paul Britten Austin has suggested, more symbolic than habitual (1969:103–104). Its iconicity may be attached to the unsurpassable physical closeness with nature it entails, as well as its wilful disregard for societal rules, concealments, and inequities. Classically, also, one does not generally swim naked among strangers. In Swedish film and literature, the moment the woman jumps nude into a secluded lake and invites the man to join her, beyond being an implicitly sexual one, also operates to remove the alienating boundaries raised between them by society.25 That time of the folk music gathering thus gains added meaning as a formalized shedding of formalities, when evening strangers become morning friends.

By contrast, the formal atmosphere of the Zorn Trials goes far beyond the unwritten rule requiring participants to wear clothing. The Trials are the occasional object of criticism for

24 One particular clique of fiddlers and dancers, regulars at these events, will sometimes avoid the dance space until after this point, when the floor has been completely abandoned. At that point in time they will take over, the musicians challenging the dancers to see who can keep going the longest.

25 Austin’s own discussion of the skinny dipping trope relates more to a specific cultural value placed on purification (1969:103). The argument is placed, however, within a broader discussion of nature as a kind of antidote to society in Swedish cultural life.
manufacturing a stiff and artificial situation for musicians, and so testing a limited range of their abilities. The capacity to harmonize tightly [35/36] with other players, to engage in give-and-take with dancers, to recall any of a thousand tunes in a playing session—all are highly valued as essential folk musician’s skills, and none are tested by the jury. (Such was the outcry at one point that the Zorn council adjusted its statutes to allow musicians to bring dancers along, though few have taken advantage of the opportunity, and none have been advantaged by it.26) These arguments are also in some sense a variation on Bengtsson’s complaint that the jury individualizes a communal music. This isolating force is of course counter-exemplified by the Student Folk Music Team and Näck of the Year competitions, the first of which involves large groups of musicians playing for a hall full of dancers, and the second of which in its uniform so forcefully evokes the folk music gathering’s quintessentially egalitarian moment.

An even more commonly stated concern many folk musicians have had with the Zorn Trial system regards its intrinsic conservatism, and by uncomfortable implication, their own. The generally leftist revival of the seventies and eighties bore a conflicted relationship with the pre-existing folk music institutions it had appropriated, many of which bore the unmistakable marks of national romanticism. The Youth Ring was especially suspect in this regard, its official periodical having infamously professed admiration for German folk-pride throughout the 1930s. Sociomusicologist Jan Ling has published widely on this issue, and brought little comfort with his insistence on pointing out continuities between the romanticizing rhetoric of folk music in the 1930s and 1970s.27 In the present-day post-revival subculture this sort of language thus tends to be either conspicuously absent or self-consciously ironized. However, it does remain a noticeable presence in spheres with pre-revival roots, the Folk Dance Ring and National Folk Musicians’ Gathering among them.

For instance, the speeches given by members of the Zorn council at the National Gathering are typical of a classically Swedish mode of oratory, a sort of formal eulogizing meant to intensify the pomp and circumstance of festive occasions.28 Boel Henckel, of the Zorn secretariat, offers the annual retelling of Anders Zorn’s preservationist epiphany:

Anders Zorn was an artist, lived in Dalarna, with music all around him. Then he made himself a career and went to America, and for many years had a fruitful period of painting there; in any case it was fruitful financially. Then he came home and noticed that something had happened in Dalarna that concerned him very much. It had gone silent. At first he could not quite figure out what it was, what he was missing, but then he realized that it was the music that had gone silent. He had lived with music all around; the music was alive when he left, and there were folk musicians everywhere. But now there were very few who played so you could hear it. Modern [36/37] times had begun to catch up here at the turn of the last century. And he became concerned; he was an insightful man in many ways, and he realized that if we don’t do something we’ll lose a very important part of our culture and our heritage. He called for a folk musicians’ meeting on the Gesunda mountain

26 This according to the jury’s longest-standing member Gert Ohlsson, who was a member when the statute was changed to allow dancers in the 1980s (interview, 16 July 2005).
27 The most famous and influential of these arguments came in the form of an attack on Bo i Ransätt Isaksson’s popular text Folkmusiken i Sverige (1979) in the article “Folkmusik—en brygd” (Ling 1979:33).
28 For a discussion of Swedish formal festivity (högtidlighet) and its associated oratory, see, e.g., Austin (1969:78–81).
in 1906 to let our pastoral music be heard again, so that it might stand as a reminder of what a fantastic heritage there was to care for. He continued with such meetings, and in 1910 Sweden’s best folk musicians were called from the whole country to participate in a National Folk Musicians’ Gathering.

(field recording, 2 July 2005; quoted with permission)

For obvious reasons, Boel does not address certain problems generally recognized by post-revival insiders concerning turn-of-the-century folk music revivers: their xenophobia, obsession with purity, and elitist judgments regarding the modern musical tastes of the urban working class. It is perhaps discomfort with this sort of lacuna in the ceremonial representation of that period that prompts Esbjörn Wettermark to fantasize about casually referring to Anders Zorn as an “objectifier of women” upon realizing that his silver badge will afford him the opportunity to speak on stage (dinner conversation, 1 July 2005).

The conservatism of the Zorn Trials may thus be a primary reason for the casual irreverence with which many of its participants tend to treat it, alongside its creation of explicit hierarchies and violation of work/leisure boundaries. Conservatism, like hierarchy, can be a powerful generator of embarrassed ambivalence. Just as most participants truly want to place well in spite of egalitarianism, so do they participate in a musical genre whose cultural currency lies entirely in its association with a romanticized past, in some measure contradicting any progressive values they might possess.

The Zorn Trials and the Jante Law

Advocates of Swedish folk music tend to ascribe great value to the notion of a “living tradition,” marked by tensions between fidelity to the past and the music’s potential to thrive and change. While “innovators” and “traditionalists” will disagree on a great many things, therefore, many also recognize that their ideological battle is a perpetual necessity in the maintenance of a folk music that is simultaneously alive and traditional. Some may even be relieved to have an opposition to struggle against, thus saving the headache of having to fight it out internally.

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29 Henckel has noted that she was forced to abridge this story rather severely due to time constraints at the event, and that it loses a good deal of nuance as a result (e-mail, 29 May 2007).
30 The general recognition of this problem may be credited largely to academic writings on the subject, given the tight feedback loop between folk music scholars and practitioners in the revival and post-revival eras (see discussions in: Ling et al. 1980; Ronström and Ternhag 1994; Roth 1985). It may be worth noting here, in Zorn’s defence, that he actually purchased a diatonic button accordion around the time of these contests, though of course no accordionists were invited to participate (Ramsten and Ternhag 2006:27). At the time, that foreign mechanized instrument was generally seen by other bourgeois folk music enthusiasts as the very scourge of the Swedish traditions; nearly three quarters of a century would pass before the Zorn council’s acceptance of it as a legitimate instrument, suitable for judgment in the Trials.
31 The alert and math-conscious reader may note that this conversation actually preceded Boel’s speech by a day. Esbjörn did, however, hear Boel give a similar speech the year before at Högbo Bruk, and would have known what to expect of the upcoming ceremonies.
32 This sort of anxiety has been treated by Julie Ellison in her writings on liberal guilt, which she argues involves a sense of complicity with conservative power structures: “Guilt is no longer the motive for support of those more radical than himself, as it was construed to be in the sixties or early seventies, when liberal guilt was mocked as a fund-raising opportunity for radical groups. Rather it is the mark of the apostate liberal who has cast his vote with conservatives” (Ellison 1996:344).
a practitioner for a definition of Swedish folk music, and you will likely witness that uncomfortable inner battle play out in the response).

The debates that regard the Trials are typically heated, and almost always involve a struggle against the conservatism of the jury. Yet tellingly, the one argument that never becomes more than tepid in its passions regards the question of whether the Folk Dance Ring should abandon their ownership of the system to a more progressive organization. Editorials occasionally call for this change, yet few people seem to take the notion seriously. The Zorn council is the anchor, the benchmark of authenticity, the avatar of that traditional end of “living tradition.”

No one is more aware of this than the adjudicators themselves. They are by no means strict preservationists in the sense that they wish all players to reproduce older styles—I and others have been told in evaluatory conversations with the jury to find a more personal expression in the music. Yet they do tend to recognize their assigned role as the conservative end of a necessary polarity, as adjudicator Christina Frohm remarks:

> We also say that it’s good that there’s a debate about this. Otherwise this phenomenon will die. People need to write editorials, get upset, and so forth. As Gert Ohlsson always says, “there needs to be ferment around the Zorn badge, to make things interesting.” And that’s definitely the case. (interview, 30 June 2005)

An understanding may thus develop between the debating parties, stemming from their mutual recognition of common participation in a symbiotic relationship. Ulrika Gunnarsson, who has campaigned to have the Zorn council recognize vocable singing as a traditional instrument, notes:

> So you can go back and forth. How conservative should you be, and how living should the jury and the whole Zorn council be, and I actually think, I’ve noticed this when I’ve talked to them, that they want something to happen with it. It shouldn’t stand still. They always have to be reconsidering their decisions, so that things happen, otherwise it just stagnates. As one jury member expressed herself today, “there aren’t nearly enough knife threats nowadays.” (interview, 2 July 2005)

The standards according to which participants are judged may be marked by the necessarily conservative position of the jury, but this does not mean that they have gone unchanged over the years. Two developments in particular may be tied to the folk music revival and its aftermath. First of all, standards of quality have [38/39] risen considerably over the past few decades. This shift may be credited largely to a boom in talented young players, many of whom have benefited from the post-revival inclusion of folk music at every level of the Swedish music education system. A good number of these younger players were also children of the revival who, unlike their parents, grew up with the music from an early age.

The second development, which in some sense runs contrary to the first, has been a de-emphasis on technical prowess in favour of stylistic authenticity. The youth and skill of younger generations may be a driving factor here as well, given the potential challenge they pose to the status of older tradition bearers. We might also understand this phenomenon as a function of the broader rejection of art music norms within the folk music revival (see, e.g., Kaminsky 2005:281–285). Another explanation may be the steady commercial release of field recordings.
over the two decades leading up to the revival, for the first time replacing transcriptions as primary source material.

Whatever the reason, the change in the Zorn Trials has been well-acknowledged by its scholars. Märta Ramsten has published on her experiences during the revival recording the Trials for the Centre for Swedish Folk Music and Jazz Research. She noted the rise of a new, intentionally archaic playing style among younger fiddlers who went before the jury during that time. Fiddles moved down from neck to chest level. Bow hands crept above the frog. These changes facilitated sonorous, multi-string play and precluded any attempts at virtuosity or even shifting of positions, in stark contrast to the more violinistic norms of the previous generation (Ramsten 1985:67).

Sociomusicologist Jan Ling, who served as an adjudicator during the 1970s, has since remarked that the jury was also undergoing a self-conscious shift:

When someone like Sven Kjellström comes in and sits on the Zorn jury, the criteria for judging get to be a lot about playing clean, and technique. We reacted against that during the seventies, when we tried to encourage alternate intonations, which meant that sometimes we really screwed up. But it could be more complicated than that too. For example, we made a fiddler into a National Folk Musician who many people within folk music circles considered tone deaf. Some folk musicians were about to kill us after, that’s how mad they were. But now it seems like his playing style has become accepted, so maybe we were right in some sense. (interview, 23 May 2002; editorial changes by Jan Ling, 20 June 2005)

Today this sort of story seems a common trope among members of the jury. Three of the four adjudicators I have interviewed—Gert Ohlsson, Kjell Leidhammar, and Jan Ling—relate the example of the older musician, steeped in tradition but with shaky fingers perhaps, who nevertheless demonstrates a genuineness worthy of the silver badge. This figure is typically contrasted with the cocky, younger player (sometimes a professional orchestral violinist) who dazzles with virtuosity buts lacks a certain substance, and is surprised to be snubbed. Here is Jan Ling’s version: [39/40]

At the same time a famous, young fiddler came up for the first time. He was dressed in folk costume, pretty like the day, and played quick and fast and virtuosic. Everyone thought he would get the badge immediately, I mean he just stepped on the gas. But we didn’t consider his playing mature and he didn’t get anything, which meant people yelled at us and doubted us even more. But we thought the young fiddler was on the road to a virtuosity where the substance was lost, and everything was on the technical end. Eventually he became one of Sweden’s most celebrated fiddlers, who realized that we meant well and wanted him in the “tradition.” (interview, 23 May 2002; editorial changes by Jan Ling, 20 June 2005)

Eva Thestrup, of the previously-mentioned Malmö Academy foursome, is perhaps the most recent recipient of this treatment. Eva is a skilled classical violinist who had been playing Swedish folk music for less than a year when she came to Kalmar. She reports a reaction from the jury that suggests she conformed to this established archetype, for whom the denial of any

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33 The fourth adjudicator I interviewed, Christina Frohm, did not discuss the criteria according which the jury makes evaluations at all.
award is to be read as an object lesson. “More bread and less cream” was their advice to Eva. Her models should be field recordings of old tradition bearers, rather than the top professional fiddlers of today. She should, for now, stop playing the more intricately ornamented tunes from Dalarna, in favour of simpler fare from southern Sweden, to better get at the essence of the music.34

“Thou shalt not fancy thyself better than we.” Just as the adjudicators flout the Jante Law by encouraging participants to excel, so are they, ironically, its strict enforcers. The admonishment here, just as in Jante, is to respect one’s elders and their way of going about things. Only the wayward child proposes alternate solutions, better and newer ways. To present such a face is only to exacerbate the suspicious attributes one exhibits in the simple act of playing for the jury: the self-importance of believing yourself worthy of recognition, and the inauthenticity of needing to prove yourself authentic.

So powerful is the Jante Law in this respect that even the silver badge, while certainly conferring the status of master, at best can only confirm that of elder. For the bestowal of elderhood, I would argue, the golden badge is reserved; and that this highest award cannot be sought is anything but incidental. The ideal tradition bearer does not seek recognition, from the Zorn jury or even from the public. Thus, when the gold is rewarded, it frequently goes to lesser-known musicians, as Gert Ohlsson notes:

You don’t have to be known. You have to be an “especially distinguished master folk musician.” You don’t have to be a good self-promoter. We like to grant exposure; it’s fun to be able to give the gold to someone who is fairly unknown but very, very good. So they get the spotlight. Although even if you’re known you have a chance to get the gold, so it’s not like that. But we try to look at it soberly. So that we don’t allow ourselves to be seduced by famous players. (interview, 16 July 2005) [40/41]

When O’Tôrgs Kaisa Abrahamsson received the golden badge at Högbo Bruk in 2004, here is how she opened her remarks:

It feels completely fantastic, it’s unbelievable, I don’t know how they’ve figured this out, these gentlemen and the lady over here. It feels amazing. It was Agne who called me in February, and I thought it was some old friend who was calling me and having me on, of course. “Wait, I have to find a chair and sit down, I’m all weak in the knees.” And then of course it’s a secret, so I’ve gone and sucked on this caramel for around four months, so you can understand it’s hard to make it last, but now I’m finally here, and this is the finest recognition a Swedish folk musician can get; it feels fantastic. I’ll be very careful with this badge now, I won’t do what Jon-Erik Öst did with his when he got it—he attached it to a line and used it as a fishing lure. [audience laughter] Since I’m not really much of a fisherman it’ll go on my folk costume instead. Yeah, I can’t say any more other than that I’m overjoyed. Thank you, everyone. (field recording, 19 June 2004; quoted with permission)

34 In 2005 Thestrup played tunes from the village of Bingsjö in eastern Dalarna. She received her certificate in 2006 for tunes from the town of Rättvik, also in Dalarna, a few kilometres down the road from Bingsjö.
Her thanks are humble without being dismissive, and a remarkable balancing act in that respect. Safely nestled as a joke and projected onto a past recipient lies a hint of ambivalence regarding the award, reminiscent of the Malmö foursome’s self-ironizing comments about leaving badges behind and losing them in bets. One may read the joke as a manifestation of minor discomfort at being distinguished in a community where egalitarianism is valued so highly, or as a nod to the unself-conscious tradition-bearer, or both. In any case, it reveals something of the challenge of receiving highest honours for practicing an art in which such a premium is placed on humility.

A few weeks after the Högbo Bruk Trials, I was engaged in a conversation with some of the younger local fiddlers, who had been present at the events, but had not played for the jury. One of them asked another why he had decided not to seek the badge. He replied by expressing some personal confusion as to what purpose such an item might be put, and then repeating—with some admiration—O’Törgs Kaisa Abrahamsson’s words about Jon-Erik Öst. Öst’s gesture of using the badge as a fishing lure, for that moment at least, had granted him more cachet than the receipt of the award itself.

One pre-eminent musician whose name I have heard younger players praise on multiple occasions in discussions about the Zorn Trials is fiddler Mats Berglund. Berglund’s playing style for tunes from Western Värmland is so standard-setting that Emil Kunze, in relaying how he had been told by the jury that he needed to develop a more personal style, noted that he had spent the last four years trying not to sound like him. The admiration people have expressed for Mats Berglund in the context of the Zorn Trials regards his being one of a very few high-profile Swedish fiddlers never to have played for the jury.

On the surface, Mats Berglund’s elevation functions as a rejection of the Folk Dance Ring and their National Folk Musicians’ Trials on the part of a post-[41/42]revival subculture trying to define itself against these vestiges of its pre-revival past. And yet, those who have venerated Mats Berglund for not being a National Folk Musician have conferred status upon him in a manner not entirely dissimilar from the Zorn jury’s reservation of the golden badge for those who do not seek it. The irony reveals something of the ideological continuity between pre- and post-revival spheres. The symbolic value of skinny-dipping at a folk music gathering and Anders Zorn’s nudes of peasant girls in natural surroundings is essentially the same. Zorn’s attempts to save folk music in the face of industrialization are not too distant from the efforts of modern enthusiasts to reveal its beauties to an indifferent mass culture.

Accordingly, the ease with which I have mapped hierarchy onto the Trials and egalitarianism onto the revival relates less to an actual ideological difference between pre- and post-revival worlds, and more to the common tendency to turn that internal egalitarianism-vs.-hierarchy contradiction into a manageable external conflict. The question of which of the two poles is externalized onto the opposing camp may even be shown to be largely arbitrary. For example, where the Zorn Trials exemplify a situation in which post-revivalists tend to project the hierarchical impulse onto the pre-revival sphere, the opposite is the case when it comes to the treatment of professional folk musicians. The folk music revival, while valuing amateurism, also created an audience and a niche for professional players, and established Swedish folk music as a conservatory art. As with the Zorn Trials, the resulting challenge to the egalitarian ideal have caused some inner tensions in the post-revival sphere. The difference is that when that tension is

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35 It might be worth noting here that Jon-Erik Öst himself was neither unknown nor unself-conscious, but rather one of the most prominent and entrepreneurial Swedish fiddlers of his time.
externalized onto pre-revivalists, it is they (exemplified by the Folk Dance Ring) who come to stand for insistence on amateurism and, by implication, equality.\footnote{One primary example is the Swedish Folk Music and Dance Association (Riksföreningen för Folkmusik och Dans), founded in 1981 as an alternative to the more conservative National Organization for Swedish Folk Musicians (Sveriges Spelmäns Riksförbund). While the older organization is intended to serve amateur Swedish players, the newer one has an expanded purview, also covering professional folk musicians as well as non-Swedish folk music.}

That the Jante Law plays such a multi-faceted role in the Zorn Trials rests primarily on its capacity to play both sides of this irresolvable contradiction between hierarchy and egalitarianism. The same Law dissuades individuals from seeking individual distinction and encourages them to respect the social strata of elderhood. In so doing, it brings the entire Trial process of conferring rank into question, at the same time as it shapes the very rules for how such rank is determined. This dual capacity of the Jante Law may also explain its broader popularity as a cultural self-descriptor, given the fundamental conflict between equality and hierarchy in Swedish society on a general level.

The Jante Law has also developed in the modern Swedish popular imagination as something quite distinct from Sandemose’s original conception. One commonly noted difference is that Sandemose did not posit the Law as a specifically Scandinavian mindset—while his protagonist may have learned its rules growing up in his small Danish hometown, he sees it reproduced again and again in his international travels. Even more striking, though less frequently commented-upon, is that the Jante Law for Sandemose is entirely a negative force, capable of producing only slaves, scorpions, and murderers (Sandemose 1936:79). As generally imagined today, this Law is a more complex creature, with both positive and negative aspects, in proportions conditional upon the context within which it is invoked.

The reconceptualized Jante Law is perhaps best exemplified in a more recent literary incarnation, within the pages of Mikael Niemi’s science fiction magic-realist semi-novel \textit{Svålhålet}. Here Niemi introduces a down-on-his-luck German Jewish physicist by the name of Emanuel Creutzer, who in the course of researching Murphy’s Law discovers that the universe is filled with tiny insidious particles, attracted to self-confidence and bent on sabotage. This discovery follows a series of extreme reversals of fortune in Emanuel’s life, one agent of which—his wife’s divorce lawyer—becomes the particles’ namesake. Naturally, the successful study threatens to renew Emanuel’s shattered self-confidence, and so he must find a way to guard against the impending return of these vindictive little “Kurts.” Emanuel invents a daily prayer of self-abasement, which he uses with some success, until one day he discovers a far more effective mantra in a novel by Aksel Sandemose. He appends the Jante Law to his thesis, which he never submits to any institution, instead simply posting it to his homepage under a pseudonym. The revelation spreads like wildfire:

\begin{quote}
The Jante Law was posted in every lab, in every department, it was distributed to every first year student, it was chanted in unison by thousands of engineers before every shuttle launch at Cape Canaveral. Shuttle launches in particular had been one of the Kurts’ absolute favourite targets. Hoards of supercilious technicians who stood there gawking, and countless little screws that could loosen, fuel cells that could leak, circuits that could jam, condensers that could catch fire at the most critical moment.

At CERN they started letting the young and ambitious researchers go out for coffee while the accelerator was in use. Remaining were the older, somewhat lethargic gentlemen and
ladies, competent but with a healthy lack of prestige, grey of contour but sharp of thought. They only did what they had to, the Kurts immediately lost interest, and suddenly the experiments began to succeed beyond all expectations. (Niemi 2004:76-77)

Niemi’s reading of the Jante Law is less savage and more ironic than Sandemose’s original, and in this sense is closer to its general conception among present-day Swedes. The Law’s naturalization in the form of tiny particles makes it, if not directly benevolent, less petty at least. The Kurts attack young and cocky scientists while leaving their older and more jaded counterparts alone, thus retaining Sandemose’s elder-oriented hierarchy without making the elders its perpetrators. The Law becomes both gentler and fairer.

Most insightful here in terms of the way the Jante Law actually manifests in Swedish society is Niemi’s re-imagination of the ironic role played by humility. No longer a yoke forced upon society by its elders, it becomes a strategic resource, and a path to success. Emanuel invokes the Jante Law as its own negation, raising himself by knowing exactly how much to lower himself. This kind of tactical application of humbleness is key to the navigation of Swedish hierarchical systems. The strategy is counter-exemplified by the archetypal classical-violinist-before-the-Zorn-jury, but may in fact prove useful to the Trials’ wilier participants.

The Zorn Trials and Cultural Pride

The cultural value placed upon humility also does a good deal to explain Sweden’s typically inverted logic of nationalism, according to which the nation’s moral superiority is fundamentally a product of its citizens’ anti-nationalist sensibilities (see, e.g., Lofgren 1993:27–32). Conversely, the Swedes’ conflicted relationship with humility—exemplified in the irony with which the Jante Law is generally invoked—also expresses itself in this context as a common lamentoing of a lack of national pride and sense of culture. As such, Swedes have a tendency to both envy and lampoon the naiveté, for instance, of American fourth-of-July-style patriotism. The fact that Niemi makes his discoverer of a fundamentally Scandinavian key to life German (where almost all of Svålhålet’s other human characters are Nordic) may be a subtle nod to this inverted nationalism, in its expression of Swedish values as both universally applicable and blankly non-distinctive.

Swedish anti-nationalist sentiment has some of its roots in the abandonment of an early twentieth-century racist self-image made less palatable in the aftermath of World War II, especially given the nation’s previous long-standing cultural, political, and economic ties to Germany. Overt and unambiguous patriotism has been further marginalized since that time by its concomitant general abandonment to the racist far right, who have less reason to consider historical connections to the Nazis as cause for embarrassment. To the broader Swedish public, then, national pride is a sense often fraught with uncertainty.

In the context of folk music Sweden and the Zorn Trials, as I have already hinted, this uncertainty takes on a central role. Concepts of folk culture and music played a defining part in the construction of Swedish national identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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37 One manifestation of this generalizability principle is some Swedish scholars’ tendency toward ambiguity with regard to the geographic scope of their discussions, and a related free oscillation between the Swedish, the Nordic, the European, Western, and global in the range of examples they cite.

38 For a number of discussions on the long historical relationship between Sweden and Germany in the musical realm, see Andersson and Geisler (2006; especially, pp. 31, 47–86).

39 This issue is treated in depth in Ling (1980).
the anti-nationalist post-war era, members of pre-war institutions like the Folk Dance Ring may thus be regarded as cultural and political conservatives by revivalists and post-revivalists. The impulse on the part of these younger generations to distance themselves from older ones can only be intensified by their awareness that folk culture enthusiasts of any stripe may be seen as reactionary by the Swedish public at large.

I have argued elsewhere that revivalists reacted to the dilemma of their problematic roots in part by abandoning the rhetoric of the national in favour of that of the [44/45] regional (2005:58). Here they actually built upon a century-old tradition in Swedish folklorism of seeing the nation’s twenty-five provinces as distinct cultural entities. Since that language of regionalism goes back to the nineteenth century, the revival-era shift is a subtle one. The difference is that the province now functions less as a contributor to a broader national folk culture mosaic, and more as the locus for a smaller-scale and stateless “nationalism” in its own right.

As a product of the 1930s, the Zorn Trials maintain a regionalist focus that reflects that older national mosaic paradigm. Which is to say, participants in the Trials can effectively only attain the title of “National Folk Musician” by dedicating themselves to a specific local tradition. Like the rules governing which instruments are legitimated as “traditional” by the jury, this law is naturalized as a function of its unwrittenness. A musician can register to play on any instrument, at the risk of being denied a time before the jury on the grounds of its being non-traditional. Likewise, she can theoretically play any tunes she likes once in front of the jury, but will (common knowledge has it) never be recognized with a silver badge if she attempts a multi-province potpourri.

This regionalist restriction may be read in a few different ways. The difficulty of mastering more than one local dialect seems improbable as a solitary explanation, given the growing number of conservatory-trained folk musicians with expert command of multiple styles. While the difficulty of judging a player’s capabilities within a given regional style based on one tune as opposed to three may be a factor, my sense is that this unofficial rule can also be read as a manifestation of the Jante Law on a number of levels. First, legitimate tradition bearers are generally understood to have and have held their own local styles, so that regional specificity in modern players may be enforced as a form of authenticity and respect for the ways of the elders. Second, the idea that one has mastered the music of multiple provinces may be seen as a form of hubris. Third, the particular form of humility enforced via the insistence on provincial specificity may also generate some degree of protection against the spectre of pan-nationalist pride. Individual and national humilities are thus aligned in a simple, unwritten rule.

Pride in Swedish identity is a road beset by obstacles. Pre-historic Scandinavian symbols and culture have been the proprietary fetishes of the international white power movement, and thus uneasily invoked as national icons. In fact, any object successfully saturated with Swedishness as unambiguously rooted ethnicity runs the risk of association with white pride.

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40 The process by which Swedish national identity was constructed in the nineteenth century as a puzzle-piece map of culturally distinct provinces has been addressed in detail by Kerstin Arcadius in her historical study of county museums (1997).

41 Sweden’s general lack of nationalist sentiment compared to its neighbor countries goes back centuries (see, e.g., Löfgren 1993:22–80, Rehnberg 1980). However, its folklore enthusiasts are a self-selecting group, and have historically tended to be more nationalistic than the populace at large. It is in within this group (reading 1970s revivalists as a subcategory) that we see a revival-era shift away from nation-centred rhetoric.
given the iconicity of the Nordic in the construction of Aryan racial identity. Classically Swedish items thus tend to either be infused with some level of ambivalence (runic tablets and Viking paraphernalia, the flag) or lack a significant emotional charge for many Swedes living in Sweden (meatballs and lingonberry jam, the Dala horse). The remaining markers of Swedishness typically invoked in the construction of national identity have been of the kind I have mentioned already in this article: personal closeness with nature, humbleness and practicality, the egalitarian ideal, and so forth. Here again the problem becomes a lack of uniqueness—the critical reader may note that none of the “typically Swedish” phenomena I have listed are, in fact, particularly distinguishing. The application of tactical humility in the negotiation of hierarchy, strict divisions between work and free time, the use of formal speeches to magnify pomp and circumstance, skinny-dipping as a way of communing with nature and establishing group intimacy—these things, while certainly defining aspects of Swedish culture, are none of them unique to it.

Nor is the Jante Law a distinctively Scandinavian principle, even according to its author. American Quakers, to give one example, refer to a similar phenomenon within their communities as “eldering.” The dilemma of egalitarian ideals and hierarchical realities, which I have argued to be a fundamental problem to which the Jante Law provides some answer, is likewise a familiar one internationally, especially in the United States. Another popular mediator of this dilemma—the appeal to meritocracy—is too shared by both Americans and Swedes. In the United States it may manifest as the American Dream, in Sweden as the hyper-significance of grades, qualifications, and position, and hence the format of the Zorn Trials—not a contest, but a test for credentials.

The Zorn Trials also stand in stark contrast to this long list of non-distinctive Swedishisms, however, as a force for the preservation of a truly unique body of music. The conservatism of the endeavour and the emotional power of the music make the project an uneasy one; yet in the face of these difficulties its proponents have nevertheless managed to sustain the system uninterrupted for the better part of a century. Difficult debates surround the Trials, but have never managed to challenge their existence, and may in fact only have served to strengthen them. The events are a lightning rod, a necessary focal point for negotiating the fundamental contradictions that characterize Swedish folk music, with its equal parts reactionary nationalism, revolutionary Marxism, and anarchic populism.

In this sense it may be best to ascribe the staying power of the Zorn Trials to factors not dissimilar from those that have sustained the Jante Law as a Swedish cultural principle for so long. Where the Jante Law functions as a nexus point at which hierarchy and egalitarianism can coexist, so the Zorn Trials represent a meeting-place, not only for those particular two competing impulses, but for all the contradictory elements of Swedish folk music. The local and provincial play host to the national. The old and shaky fiddler challenges the steady, trained, and practiced player. Tradition is negotiated and renegotiated. And in a country that has by and large learned to turn a blind eye to its pre-industrial heritage, implicitly contradicting the veracity of the very term “folk music,” for one week a year players can come together in the hopes of gaining the right to call themselves by the one folk musicians’ title that their nation’s populace will recognize.

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42 Thanks to Monteze Snyder for this insight.


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Sammanfattning

Zornmärkesuppspelningarna och Jantelagen: Om att glänsa musikaliskt i landet lagom