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From combating to supporting pop music. The paradox of municipal music education in Sweden 1940 to 2000

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- Sweden was the third biggest exporter of popular music in the world at the end of the 20th century – when you count income per capita. Top ranking nations were the USA and Great Britain. Sweden has lost its high position in later years and fallen down to rank 6 or 7 among the top export nations in music. Still it is astonishing that a sparse populated country like Sweden with less than 10 million people spread over a vast and during most of the year dark and snow-covered, territory has reached this high position on the world market.

Some of you might have heard of one or other of the most successful Swedish pop music groups in the late 1990s: The Cardigans, Robyn, Ace of Base, Sahara Hotnights and the Hives. The ones I just enumerated are still touring today, others thrived for some years and then disappeared. Some of you might for instance remember a number of Swedish groups which back in the 1970s and 1980s gathered fans all over the world: ABBA, Blue Swede, Europe and Roxette.

It is not only Swedish music artists that have been successful. Over the last years the export incomes generated by Swedish composers such as Max Martin and his team of collaborators who provide music for many international artists among them Britney Spears and Madonna have been considerable.

An often quoted explanation of this success-story was launched in a governmental report published in 1999 (*Att ta sig ton – om svensk musikexport 1974–1999. Rapport till ESO –Expertgruppen för studier i offentlig ekonomi. Ds 1999:28*). The first and most prominent factor that triggered the growth of music exports in Sweden, this report says, is the development of municipal music schools. The schools are run and funded by the municipalities. They are found in almost every municipality, today most often as part of the municipal educational institutions for

art, dance and music that offer training in the fine arts to children from pre-school age up to their late teenage. In 1999, according to the report, 370 000 children were provided with training on instruments, in song, in ensemble-playing, composition and from the late 1990s also in the mixing and recording of music. The report estimated that around 30% of those who had passed through elementary schools since the 1970s had the chance to “take the first step to becoming a pop star.” (p. 151) thanks to those music schools. It is a well-known fact that many of the Swedish artists who became successful on the international pop music arena had their first musical training – and inspiration from those music schools.

- The explanation holds an interesting paradox. Municipal music schools are a phenomenon that had its origin in Sweden in the 1940s. They were set up with the aim to teach young people appreciate more valuable music (i.e. classical) than the popular music of the entertainment industry, which at this time was gaining ground. How can we explain that 50 years later those schools fostered musicians whose aspiration first and foremost was directed towards popular music? What factors can explain the move from the highly cultured music – art music – that schools supported by society promoted when music education on a large scale was introduced in the 1940s to the drilling of young people in music belonging to genres like pop, rock, hip-hop, country, techno etc. in classes given at municipal music schools today.

My purpose is to give some answers to those questions. I will use the development of music education in a medium-sized Swedish town – Växjö, – as a point of departure for some plausible explanations of how this paradox came into existence. Växjö was until recently the town where I lived and worked – I retired as a professor of musicology at the university of Växjö last year. I have recently done an all-inclusive study on how music education has been organised in this town since the 1940's and the arguments I develop rely on this research.

- Around 1940 a large debate on the "Dance-floor-misery" in Sweden flared up. Christians and conservatives attacked the public amusements available in abundance at this time, arguing that they led to moral shallowness among the youth. It was especially young people's contact with dance and popular music offered in open-air dance-floors and dance-pavilions that caused most harm and alarm.

The spark that set it all up was an official letter sent in 1938 to the Government from the bishop of Växjö, diocesan capital in one of the smallest episcopates in the south of Sweden. The letter led to the forming of a Royal committee assigned to find ways to decontaminate the unsatisfactory state of the entertainment industry. Växjö soon became an important example of how to fight against the inferior amusements that lured young people to appreciate bad music. The Church and the municipality here joined forces forming a Youth Council. Its main achievement was to start a music school in 1947.

The music school offered individual lessons to young people – 14 years or older – on piano, string instruments, wind- and brass- instruments and singing as well as classes in music theory and music history. The aim and direction of the school was to introduce the students to the world of classical music. The headmaster was hired as a part-time employee long into the 1960s and had his main employment as a church musician in one of the churches in Växjö. Most teachers were paid on an hourly basis and were either employed as professional musicians in the town's gymnasium, teacher's training college, in the churches or in the military music corps belonging to the regiment stationed in the town. Some of them, especially those teaching piano and song, were private music teachers.

During the 1950s the school managed to put up a small youth symphony orchestra and more advanced students were also admitted into the town's symphony orchestra, which was run as a voluntary association with a history from late 19th century. The members of the orchestra were either professional musicians (in the churches,

schools and military band) or apt music amateurs. Actually, one of the main supporters to the establishment of a music school in Våxjö – the military band leader – meant that the most important mission of the school was to provide the orchestra with new members.

In the middle of the 1960s the town decided to put more money into the music school. All organizational ties to the church and the Youth Council were since long cut off. A fulltime headmaster of the school was now hired. He combined this position with the task to function as a municipal music leader and in this was included that he was the director of the symphony orchestra. He was also expected to support the musical life in the town and he fulfilled this by organizing concerts with programs mostly within the classical repertoire and creating an organisation for chamber music concerts. As the leader of the music school he continued a policy of accepting still younger children as students, a development that had started in the 1950s when the school abandoned the age of 14 as the lowest age for entrance. A number of music teachers were from now on hired as permanent staff in the school. The recruitment of them was facilitated by the investments in higher education of musicians and music pedagogues that the state put through in the 1970s. Well educated music teachers trained for jobs in the municipal music schools began their search for work positions in this decade.

The societal investments in the music education sector can be seen as part of the new cultural policy that the Socialdemocrats - Sweden's dominating political party after the World War II– were on its way to implement. An important goal of this cultural policy was to compensate and counteract the dominance of commercial actors in the entertainment industry or, using the words of the government bill that signalled the new cultural policy in 1974, “to reduce or prevent the negative effects of the market economy”. This formulation was changed to “prevent the negative effects of commercialism” in the revised cultural policy bill that the Socialdemocrats carried through in 1996.

The cultural policy that the Socialdemocrats decidedly fought for from the late 1960s had a strong impact on the investments in culture and education that the municipalities made from this time on and for some 30 years. The expansion of the voluntary municipal music schools was part of this policy. It was not until the economic crisis in the 1990s that the expansion came to a halt. From then on there has been a considerable decrease in the amount of money that goes to municipal voluntary music education.

Also, from the early 1980s, there has been a considerable change in how the municipal music schools teach music as well as what kind of music that is accepted as pedagogically suitable. I will return to this fact in a moment after a detour in which I describe two other forms of music education that went on in the this city along with the municipal music school. I will argue that this private music education together with the changed direction of music training in the municipal music schools gives a better explanation of the Swedish successes in exporting popular music.

- Back in 1947, when the music school of Växjö was established with funding from the church and the municipality, there already existed a private music school in the city. This school had started in 1946 and was run by a company – Hagström’s music – that was on its way to become one of Sweden’s most successful enterprises in the music trade. Hagström’s music concentrated on the manufacture and import of music instruments that were demanded in the entertainment industry and by music amateurs. The manufacturing comprised at first only accordions but right after the war the company also started to make guitars. The growth in the manufacturing of those instruments ran parallel with the building up of a sales organization with music shops in the bigger towns. In 1946 six Swedish towns had a Hagström music shop, ten years later they had established themselves in 48 towns and urban districts. The shops sold instruments manufactured by Hagström’s and imported instruments of all kinds. They also repaired music instruments and equipment used by dance

bands. Touring dance-bands could count on that a Hagström shop anywhere close to the dance-halls that had engaged them could fix any problems with their instruments fairly quickly.

The offering of music education was above all seen as a sales means. The idea to start the schools has been attributed to a new sales director hired around 1939. He came from the type-writer company Remington and brought with him the concept of group tuition combined with the possibility to hire the type-writer on which you learnt to write and later, after the course to buy it on very favourable instalment conditions. In Hagström's classes you hired the accordion, guitar, drums etc and got a very good hire-purchase contract. Hagström's in Växjö early became the managing department of the company's music school due to the fact that the school's chief pedagogue was the music shop's manager. He put together teaching material that the company published. His shop in Växjö also became the shop where every new shop manager had to spend time in order to learn how to organise music classes in the area that the shop was responsible for.

Hagström's music classes, usually run over 10 weeks and with several stages to pass through became very popular all over the country, in the towns as well as in villages in the country side. Instruments that were taught were accordion, guitar (mainly chord-playing in contrast to the classical style that the music conservatories fostered), percussion instruments, keyboard, wind instruments like clarinet and saxophone and brass instruments such as trumpet and trombone. The music pieces that were put in front of the students were all taken from the popular repertoire, they were dances and hit-tunes that most of them already had heard many times on radio, on records and in the dance-halls. The teachers were as a rule apt musicians who played in dance-bands. Many teachers on the wind and brass instruments were musicians in military bands.

Hagström's music school continued with courses all over the country well into the 1980s. Many problems arose in the company at the end of the 1970s. Hard

competition from Japanese guitar producers, a change in the popular music scene from being guitar based to becoming more synthesizer based as well as a sudden and unforeseen halt of the dance orchestra's popularity in the early eighties led to the collapse of Hagström's in 1983. With it the Hagsröm's music school also disappeared.

- Hagström's music school cooperated from the 1950s and on with several of the associations connected to the popular adult education movement. These associations have played an important role in shaping the modern society that Sweden became in the last century. They had originally close affinities to one or other of the broad popular national movements that originated in the 19th century such as the Labour movement, the Temperance movement and the Free Church movement but later in the 20th century also the political parties as well as the interest organisations for – among others – the rural population or the salaried employees started their own adult education associations. Music courses early became popular in those associations and when in 1947 it also became possible to get government subsidies for the kind of practical education that music classes meant this part of the popular adult education increased considerably. Hagström's system of group tuition led by a skilled but not necessarily professional musician went very well together with the study circle form which was the prevailing educational model in the adult education movement.

My study of the music education scene in Växjö shows that the cooperation here was considerable and meant much to the young people who mainly were interested in popular music– which in the 1950s meant jazz, and from the 1960s pop and rock. Study circles in guitar, keyboard, brass instruments and percussion gave young people – teenagers were as a rule considered adult by the education associations– elementary tuition to play an instrument. In the study circles it was easy to find like-minded and the forming of bands among young people (mostly young males) was

encouraged. For a long time the regulations for governmental subsidies allowed that a spontaneously formed group could apply to an adult education association to be considered as a study circle and thus receive financial support that could help to cover costs for the rent of a place to meet and play and for hiring instruments. From the 1980s the adult education associations seem to have taken a more active part in this process. They have now for more than 20 years provided well equipped ensemble studios for pop/rock groups that formally meet as study circles when they rehearse. Many associations also offer courses in mixing and composing of pop music and have built up studios with advanced recording equipment where those courses are given.

Official statistics assembled for the popular adult education gives clear figures that music education have long dominated the courses offered by the associations. In a list of the ten most popular subject for study circles in 2007, improvisational music (pop, rock jazz etc) holds the top position. Next to it song and music making in groups is found followed by choral singing.

Clearly – and this has been argued by representatives for the adult education association – is the accumulated output of music study circles in Sweden since at least the 1970s an important explanation to the success that Swedish music has had on the international scene since in the last 20 years.

- Back to the municipal music school in Växjö and its transformation from the late 1970s and on from a school where popular music seldom was taught and usually combated by the teachers to a school that today has a very positive approach to popular genres. In 1976 the city's municipal music leader was released from being the headmaster of the municipal music school. A quite young and well-educated music teacher replaced him. He turned out to be a good organizer of music education and he was unprejudiced in matters that concerned musical taste. With him popular music was accepted in the municipal music school. The number of

students that chose the voluntary education of the music school had stagnated for some years. This changed rapidly along with the new orientation of what music that was taught in the music school and the cooperation with the compulsory music education in the elementary schools and gymnasium that now was introduced. I will make this short by concluding that by the end of the 1990s when this headmaster retired the municipal school had more students than ever. And now training in popular music genres, not the least in the form of playing in small ensembles/pop groups as soon as the students had come over the beginner's level was a dominant and natural part of the school's educational programme.

The change that took place during the twenty years that passed under the new headmaster can be explained as being the result of

- an unprejudiced view of musical taste and a pedagogical approach to music education that meant respect for the taste of music that the children who joined the music school brought with them. This was part of the more tolerant and multi-cultural society that Sweden developed into during the last quarter of the 20th century.

- a good supply of music teachers with an all-round music training acquired at one of the seven higher schools for education of music teachers that now had been established. This was one result of the cultural policy that the Socialdemocrats carried through during this period. There were only two institutions for education of music teachers in the 1960s.

- a strong concern from the music teachers' side to keep their jobs. If the school lost students because they were not allowed to practice the music they cared for, the music teacher's had to look for other jobs. There were not that many other secure jobs available for music teachers.

- Conclusion

- my aim has been to explain the paradox that the voluntary municipal music schools that were established during the 1940s all over Sweden in order to prevent the spread of the popular music of the entertainment industry, 50 years later were highlighted as being the institutions that could explain Sweden's great successes as exporter of popular music.
- the municipal music schools have indeed changed direction during those 50 years from schools in which art music/classical music of "high class" was the main focus to schools in which training in popular music genres is generously provided.
- one explanation to the change that has taken place is that forces within the schools, especially the teacher's care for secure jobs, has made them more ready and willing to accept the music that the students are best acquainted with in their daily practice.
- the educational institutions that foster music teachers have increased during the period from two higher schools to seven. This expansion is due to the new cultural policy that the Socialdemocrats carried through from the 1970s and on. The increase in the education of music teachers meant that new groups of students from the middleclass and the working class entered the higher music education institutions. Their knowledge of other kinds of music than the classical art music explains some of the willingness of music teachers in municipal music schools to accept that popular music is taught there.
- the municipal music schools have not been the only institutions to offer education in music to young people. During the period 1946–1983 there was also a strong private entrepreneur – Hagström's music school – that educated many generations of young people in popular music genres.

– Hagström's cooperated often with the adult educational associations that offer music study circles. Music circles, especially in pop and rock, has increased constantly in their offering of education since the 1980s. They have invested great sums of money in the building of appropriate rehearsing premises for rock/pop bands and studios where classes in composition, mixing and recording of music can take place.