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THE NORWEGIAN MEDIEVAL BALLAD

700 Years Uniting Tradition and Modernity, Castles and Farmsteads, Villages and Cities

Whenever we sing a ballad, listen to a ballad, move to a ballad, or laugh, cry or become pensive over a ballad, we're connecting to a 700-year-old song tradition, a tradition that has primarily been kept alive by great singers and storytellers who have managed to keep audiences captivated with long dramatic stories, verse after verse, ballad after ballad. However, audiences, readers, collectors and publishers have also been, and remain, important notes in the music of the ballads' diverse history. The medieval ballads have threads and branches that can stretch both locally and far: from hamlet to hamlet, from a village in Telemark in the inner South Eastern mountain range of Norway to the Scottish Highlands, and possibly as far as to Portugal or over the Atlantic Ocean to the Appalachian Mountains in North America. "Hei og hå, hugjen leikar så vide" ("Hei and ho, the mind capers widely"), as is said in one of the ballad refrains (burdens), and the same can be stated of the ballads themselves: they romp so far and wide in the mind of humanity, from mouth to ear, from nation to nation, from generation to generation.

Powerful Stories Framed in Formulas and Fixed Poetic Forms

What is it that characterises a ballad? What differentiates it from other traditional and popular songs? The answer is believed to be a combination of various factors, mainly content and form. The content of the ballads indicates that they are among the oldest songs we're

The artist Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929) published the ballad and visionary poem "Draumkvedet" ("The Dream Song"), with illustrations and handwritten text in an artist's book in 1904. This picture shows the frightfully Doomsday ("Dommedag").



© From *Draumkvedet*, Foreningen for Norsk Bogkunst, 1904.

aware of, but they also have a timeless and universal quality. The stories draw us into battles between humans and trolls, love between knights and maidens, and accounts of playful men and women, and of animals both giant and minuscule. We can immerse ourselves in these stories because under the surface, they are also about falling in love, hardships, betrayal, loss, longing and eroticism. Furthermore, the ballads don't shy away from difficult topics such as jealousy, murder, suicide, incest and rape. The stories cover the immense canvases of our imagination, painted by visual language. Therefore, it is no surprise that many visual artists through the ages have been inspired by the medieval ballads.

The ballads are most often made up of two-lined or four-lined verses (stanzas), and usually have a refrain or two which can come at the end of each verse or both in the middle and at the end. Some examples are as follows:

Villemann og Magnhild (Villemann and Magnhild):

Villemann og hass møy så prud,
Hei fagreste lindilauve alle, –
der leika gulltavel i hennar bur.
Ved de rone det lyste og vinne. –

Villemann and his maid so fair,
Hey, all the leaves of the sweet linden tree, –
they played at draughts in her bower there.
With the wiles that the winning beguiled. –

Valivan:

Å Valivan hørde frå eit anna land
at der va' det ei skjønn jomfru så belevand
Valivan siglar årleg. –

Oh, Valivan heard of a distant land
where there lived a maid so exceeding fair.
Valivan sailed so early. –

Falkvor Lommansson:

Det var Torstein Davidson,
han ville til bryllaups bjode;

og der var Falkvor Lommansson,
han let sine hestar ringskoe.
Riddaren våge sitt liv for ei jomfru. –

And there was Torstein Davidson,
who bade to the day he would wed;
and there was Falkvor Lommansson,
who bade that his horses be shod.
The knight risked his life for a maiden. –

Repetition and the use of formulas are also characteristics of the ballad genre. Climaxes and important events can be repeated in multiple verses with small changes to really emphasise that this is what the listener must remember. Formulas are generally used in the same manner. Identical short and long-text formulas are repeated in multiple ballads and used as a part of the storytelling technique. Examples of this are *kåpa blå* (the coat so blue), *det raude gull* (the gold so red), and *Det var ridder NN han kom seg ridande i går, det var jomfru NN ute for honom står* (The knight so-and-so came a-riding on his mare, the maiden so-and-so stood out waiting for him there). The ballads are objective in the sense that the story is often recounted in the third person and is, generally, developed through dialogues and dramatic scenes. An important characteristic of these songs is that they exist in different variants; there are no ‘correct’ texts but many similar texts that tell the same story. Some ballads are found in only a few variants, while others have over a 100, such as *Kråkevisa* (The Tremendous Crow). Like the lyrics, the melodies exist in many variants and make use of melodic formulas. Some of the melodies are in known major and minor keys, while others have more foreign and archaic structures.



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Håkonshallen (The King Håkon's Hall) in Bergen was constructed between 1247 and 1261 as the royal residence and celebration hall during Håkon Håkonsson's reign in Norway, and we presume that ballads were sung amongst royalties and nobilities from far and near during feasts.

The Court, Nobility and Old Book Publications

We don't know exactly when the first ballads were sung in Norway, but the ballad about Falkvor Lommansson cannot have been made very long after the actual event that it describes, a bride kidnapping that happened in 1288. The Scandinavian ballads share common characteristics with French poetic forms from the 12th century, and several researchers have been of the opinion that the ballads came to the Nordic region from France. Travelling troubadours and singers in the marketplace would have taken the songs with them to Denmark via Germany and from there to the rest of the Nordic region. However, the similarities between the Scandinavian ballads and the British ones are far greater than their similarities with the German ones. The current prevailing theory is that the ballads came to Norway via England and Scotland. Norway was the leading cultural nation in the Nordic region at the time, and anything new and modern in Europe found its way here. The court in the coastal city of Bergen was an important meeting place for nobility, and they took the cultural influences home with them. The ballads in the Nordic countries have so many similarities that we can consider them to be part of a common Nordic genre that is termed *Scandinavian Medieval Ballads*.

The medieval ballads have primarily been carried over from generation to generation in an oral tradition, from mouth to ear. The stories were sung and passed on from mother to daughter, father to son, and where travellers and immigrants went, they followed. The stories' structure was remembered, some aspects were forgotten, and new parts were added. Sometimes, melodies accompanied them. However, more often than not, a story received a new melody – either a melody that was already being used for another text with the same rhythm or a new melody created by the singer.

However, the ballads did not only live in oral traditions. At the beginning of the 16th century, a new interest in history broke out among the nobility and the wealthy in Europe. The Danish historian Anders Sørensen Vedel gathered old folk songs and, in 1591, he published a collection of 100 old folk songs, the majority of which we today call ballads. Around a century later in 1695, the priest Peder Syv republished the book and added a further 100 ballads. Peder Syv's book was called *Tohundreviseboka* (The Book of 200 Songs) or *Kjempeviseboka* (The Heroic Song Book), and it was printed and widely distributed in both simple and lavish editions throughout Denmark, Norway and the Faroe Islands. It was extremely popular, and we often find lyrics copied from this book in handwritten manuscripts from the 18th and 19th centuries. This written tradition facilitated the entry of several Danish expressions into Norwegian ballads.

19th and 20th Century Collections

In Norway, the activity of collecting medieval ballads and other folk songs began slowly, around the turn of the 19th century. However, a more systematic collection began from the 1840s onwards. Together with folk tales and myths, the oldest types of folk songs, such as the ballads, became important symbols for an imagined Golden Age in the Middle Ages and, thus, also a key cultural expression in the building of the Norwegian nation. Important collectors of folk lyrics and melodies in the initial period included Jørgen Moe, Olea Crøger, Magnus Brostrup Landstad, Ludvig Mathias Lindeman and Sophus Bugge. Towards the end of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, Moltke Moe, Catharinus Elling, Rikard Berge, Knut Liestøl and Ole Mørk Sandvik played important roles in this work. The introduction of Edison's phonograph resulted in a great revolution, as it became possible to record not only the song but even the style of singing.

The collectors had a constant feeling of entering the field at the last minute, and Landstad describes it as “saving an old family heirloom from a burning house”. Moreover, in order to save this family heirloom, they travelled from village to village by boat, by cart, by horse and on foot. The aforementioned Telemark was a key location for many collectors. The ballad tradition remained strong there, and enthusiasts such as the priest's daughter Olea Crøger, who herself was born in Heddal, knew the great singers and were able to lead the way and open the doors for more collectors. It wasn't easy to find those that knew these songs. Ludvig Mathias Lindeman recounts that when he was in Gudbrandsdalen in 1864, he walked around a village in vain for nine hours, looking for singers. Many of those who possessed a large repertoire of ballads lived in difficult conditions and were poor, smallholders, or possibly owned a little bit of land. However, people from the intellectual bourgeoisie could also sing ballads, and the roll-call of participating figures is diverse with respect to life stories, milieus and geographical affiliations.

Towards Our Time

The popularity of medieval ballads ebbs and flows. However, just when everything seemed to be at its bleakest, determined helpers have stepped in and brought the ballads back again. The collectors documented on paper and wax cylinders the folk songs that the singers knew. At the beginning of the 20th century, author and cultural worker Hulda Garborg gave them a new function by choreographing dances to them. *Landskappleiken* is a well-established Norwegian folk music event and, since 1888, traditional performers in music

and dance have gathered to compete. The vocal part of folk music was first included in 1958 and, throughout these years, the medieval ballads have been one of the high status genres. The Norwegian national broadcaster (NRK) played ballads on the radio. Over the 1960s and 1970s, collector and radio presenter Rolf Myklebust produced a series of LPs featuring medieval ballads sung by traditional singers.

Around 1970, something happened that would be very significant for the ballad's wider survival. Two of the most prominent performers of the vocal tradition, Agnes Buen Garnås and Dagne Groven Myhren, began to hold classes in traditional song at Club 7 in Oslo, a popular rendezvous for the radical counter-culture that hosted activities involving theatre, poetry, jazz and folk songs. This development would prove to be momentous for many of the participants, and some of them, such as Kirsten Bråten Berg and Eli Storbekken, are now among our best-known ballad singers. Courses were then held in additional locations and a new generation of traditional singers emerged.

Enduring and Living

When the National Library of Norway (NB) wanted to celebrate the publication of a scholarly edition of the ballads in autumn 2016, it held a grand celebratory public concert featuring the Norwegian Radio Orchestra in NRK's large studio, conducted by Christian Eggen. The singers – Kirsten Bråten Berg, Kim Rysstad, Gunnhild Sundli and Mari Midtli – represented a variety of expressions. The musical arrangements were created by contemporary composers, and a completely new melody was composed to one of the ballads.

The traditional medieval ballad meeting contemporary music also carried a lot of weight at the official opening of the European Year of Cultural Heritage in Norway in 2018. One of the acts was Mathilde Grooss Viddal's *Friensemble*, featuring traditional singer Unni Boksasp and French-Syrian flautist Naïssam Jalal as soloists. It was not only the meeting of the old and the new that was important but also the ballads' international aspect. Lyrics and melodies from Norway, Iceland, Poland and France were brought together, and Viddal's composition of the various themes spanned, played with and challenged Boksasp's old-fashioned style of singing. The ballads shone as an old but still timeless national imprint in a great international cultural flow throughout both the present and the past.

Tradition has often been framed as the opposite of modernity. However, tradition is no short-lived old mayfly: rather, the essence of tradition is to find

its own place in generation after generation, century after century. With the structure, content and narrative style of the medieval ballads comes durability and an appeal that gives each and every person the possibility to add bits of their own life, thoughts and feelings into a ballad narrative as well as a distinctive and beautiful melody. The ballad is in the past, present and future. At the time of writing, composer and performer Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer is working on a commission for the 30th anniversary of *Telemarkfestivalen*, an international folk music festival. The work is dedicated to Agnes Buen Garnås, who is considered as Norway's most prominent traditional singer. Meyer was inspired by Garnås' version of *Haugebonden* (The Underground Farmer; a kind of gnome), a ballad about a farmer meeting Haugebonden one magical Christmas Eve. Haugebonden complains that the noise from the farm workers has disturbed him, while the farmer argues that Haugebonden has been using his boat without payment. Eventually, they come to an agreement, and the farmer receives fine presents. Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer asks questions about what is old and what is new: is her abstract, modern sound older than the ballad? Additionally, she also examines the ballad from an ecological perspective: something is at stake, as what happens if we don't enter into a dialogue with and listen to nature and what was here before us. In *Haugebonden*, this is represented by the dialogue between the two different users of the earth (the farmers).

The medieval ballad has a character that is simultaneously international, national, local and personal, and it has the power to survive in people's hearts and minds for centuries. You can listen to Agnes Buen Garnås' solo performance of *Haugebonden* on Spotify or other music platforms. All performers mentioned here, and many more, have produced several LPs and CDs of ballads and other folk songs. An introduction to the publications of the ballads can be found in the award-winning CD box set *Norsk Ballader. 30 ballader om drap og elskov, skjemt og lengsel blant riddere, jomfruer, kjemper og dyr* (Norwegian Ballads: 30 Ballads about Murders and Love, Jests and Longing, among Knights, Virgins, Giants and Animals) (Norsk visearkiv/Grappa, 2009). If you wish to read more about the ballads, Velle Espeland's ... *all for his maiden fair* is available here:

www.bokselskap.no/boker/fagartiklarogtittelregister/espeland2