Anachronistic Memories:  
Kulning in a Modern Setting

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Abstract

From the need to call the livestock back to the farm from the mountain pastures, as well as the need to communicate with neighbouring fäbod (summer grazing pastures) kilometres away, ancient Swedish farmers developed the singing style of kulning. With my piece "Anachronistic Memories", I will bring this ancient practice into the contemporary musical setting utilising composition styles performed by two vocalists, and a variety of modern instruments. With this performance, I aim to teach concertgoers more about a relatively unknown style of singing as well as some old Norse culture and history as it pertains to this style.
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Introduction

Hundreds of years ago, singing was an integral part of Scandinavian farming. While the men were often away from home with travel, politics, or viking,¹ many women stayed at home, tending to the fäbod.² These positions would be highly sought after due to the freedom it granted the young girls and women who lived on the fäbod for the summer. These positions, however, were also very labour intensive; their job would be to look after their animals, since animals were often a person’s most valuable possession, as well as to process animal produce, such as milk and cheese.³ While working on these pastures, women needed a way to call livestock back from the mountains where they would graze, as well as communicate with their neighbours who could be many kilometres away. Out of these needs came kulning, a high pitched, haunting style of singing that could echo through the valleys to both the livestock, as well as neighbouring fäbod.

Fäbod

During the summer months, when not traveling to distant people or lands, the Norse would spend their time on the farms. The jobs were typically split based on sex, with the men and sons tending to the crops while the women and daughters tended to the livestock, though no mother with a child below the age of five would be allowed to work. These pastures were the women would look after the animals were called the fäbod. Positions on the fäbod were highly

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¹ To travel or participate in an adventure (William Short, What does the word Viking mean?, http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/text/word_viking.htm)
² Summer grazing pasture with small buildings for people, pets, dairy products, and animal feed (Rosenberg, Susanne. "Kulning – an ornamentation of the surrounding emptiness: about the unique Scandinavian herding calls." Voice and Speech Review 8, no. 1 (2014): 100-05)
³ Rosenberg, Susanne. "Kulning – an ornamentation of the surrounding emptiness: about the unique Scandinavian herding calls."
sought after, since it allowed for freedom and independence from husbands, fathers, and cultural expectations due to the fäbod being isolated, with only one household per pasture.

These positions were not all fun and freedom, however. Workdays were long and labour intensive. Since they would be on these pastures during the summer in Northern Europe, the days could have up to 16 hours of sunlight, which meant 16-hour work days. On top of the labour, there was also the responsibility of having to take care of some of the family’s most valuable possessions. Since animal produce was used for a variety of products (anywhere from food to ice skates), animals were considered a sort of legal tender. In Susanne Rosenberg’s article “Kulning – an ornamentation of the surrounding emptiness: about the unique Scandinavian herding calls”, she makes the analogy, “an animal was the money in the bank, and the butter the interest on that money.”

Beside caring for the livestock, women also took care of processing produce, such as milk, butter, and cheese, as well as household activities such as making whisks, brooms, and clothes.

**Kulning: Uses, Technique, and Theory**

*Kulning* was an ancient style of singing used by women living on the fäbod for, primarily, herding livestock. These songs would echo throughout the mountains and valleys to reach where the livestock was feeding to call them back. In addition to herding, *Kulning* could be used for scaring off predators, as well as communication with neighbouring fäbod. Since these songs were sung on the fäbod by women, the style evolved to use the strengths and limitations of the female voice.

Since each person’s voice is unique, there were no hard rules for *kulning*, especially considering this was not a formal style of singing. The total range a typical song would use was

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4 Rosenberg, Susanne. "Kulning – an ornamentation of the surrounding emptiness: about the unique Scandinavian herding calls."
about a 5th, though could sometime use more or less. The range of the notes, or the “kulning range”, would be from about 800 to 1300 Hz, or G5 to D6, sometimes up to 1400Hz (F6), but rarely below 600Hz (D5). Mixed into the high, melismatic lines were shorter calls and phrases in other parts of the voice. This means that this style uses the whole voice and the total range can reach from 150Hz (E3) to the F6.

The melodies were built on short, four to five second phrases based on herding calls. These phrases would then be improvised upon to add variation to the rhythm, tonality, melody, and length of pauses between the phrases. Since kulning is built on these phrases rather than on a pulse or time signature, there is a completely free rhythmic structure. The song itself would have had no clearly defined end, since a singer would be singing until livestock had returned or they got a reply from neighbouring fäbod, depending on what they are using the singing for. The lyrics were also improvised, based more on sound than language. Some common sounds used in kulning would include:\textsuperscript{5}

- hà [haw], hu [hoo], hö [hur], ho [hoe], hy [hy:], hi [hee],
- tjä [tche], ti [tee], du [doo], di [dee], då [daw],
- dy [dy:], du-a [doo-a], de-a [day-a]

as well as diphthongs, such as:

- däu, dauw, duej [dway], dey

The style of singing uses a clear tone without vibrato. Each phrase has a definite attack and end, denoted through the use of glottal stops. In the case of the end of phrases, the glottal stop adds a small “tail” to the note, making the note the strongest just as it is ending. This is the

\textsuperscript{5} Rosenberg, Susanne. "Kulning – an ornamentation of the surrounding emptiness: about the unique Scandinavian herding calls."
opposite of many other singing styles where the attack is the strongest part of the note. The beginning of phrases also uses anticipatory notes called *upphämtningar*, which is a pick up note somewhere around the starting pitch and then sliding up to the initial note.

For the technical aspects of *kulning*, the singing uses a sub-glottal pressure of almost always over 40cm H₂O. For comparison, normal talking occurs at 5cm H₂O, Normal singing is in the range of 5-20cm H₂O, and a forte on a wind instrument can reach up to 150cm H₂O.⁶ The larynx is raised in conjunction with frequency, which is, again, the opposite of classical singing, which focuses on lowering and maintaining the larynx. Since this singing needs to travel vast distances, the sound strength is extremely high; almost always above 105db and can be as loud as 125db at 30cm, though it depends on the person and pitch. Once again, for comparison, an ordinary conversation is about 50db, a pneumatic drill at 3m is 90db, a dramatic soprano singing as loud as possible can be about 100db at 30cm when singing at 1000Hz (B5), and a jet plane is around 105db.

*Anachronistic Memories*

To try and meld traditional *kulning* with contemporary instrumentation and compositional styles required sacrificing some aspects of *kulning*. Some of these sacrifices included the improvisation of the melody, rhythm, and length of pauses between phrases. Since I had two singers singing to each other and then with each other, improvisation would make the duets extremely difficult. I did keep the improvisation of the lyrics, however, as that would not have as much of an impact on simultaneous singing, as well as allowing me to keep some of the

⁶ Rosenberg, Susanne. "Kulning – an ornamentation of the surrounding emptiness: about the unique Scandinavian herding calls."
improvisatory nature of the piece. After the initial back and forth between the singers, the instruments come in with the melody and imitates the calling between the singers.

The main theme that is established in the introduction of the piece is returned to by the singers repeatedly throughout the piece to remind the audience of the roots of this piece and what it is based on. As the theme is returned to, some changes start to appear, showing how the *kulning* is evolving with the piece to become more modern, but still staying mostly rooted in its origins. In the last section of the piece, however, a more hopeful melody emerges, and a single singer *kulns* a heavily modified version of the original melody. The singer then repeats this while a second singer performs a duet with the euphonium with a completely different melody. After hearing this, the original singer abandons the original theme and takes over for the euphonium in a *kulning* duet that is no longer in the earie and haunting style associated with *kulning*. The original theme is not lost, however, as the euphonium takes it on after the singer takes over for the euphonium in the duet, showing that, even though we have moved on past our roots to something completely different, we still have not forgotten what came before us.
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