

## 'Memories that remain': a different approach to analysing ABBA's 'Our Last Summer'

Thank you for the introduction. It is an honour to represent the Department of Music at this inaugural Doctoral School conference and to discuss work that led up to and is feeding into my current PhD research on ABBA fandom.

In 1980, the Swedish group ABBA released the album, *Super Trouper*. The song I focus on today – 'Our Last Summer' – was never released as a single; it merely featured as a track from this album. Despite this, it managed to make it onto the 1993 compilation CD *More ABBA Gold*, suggesting it became popular amongst ABBA fans and listeners. I posit that this is because the song carries a lot of nostalgic meaning and content that is palpable and can resonate easily with the listener, working well with the overall nostalgic appeal of ABBA and other 1970s bands.

After playing the track and explaining the term 'nostalgia', I will do a brief basic analysis of some features of this song. I will then compare my analysis with findings from a questionnaire I designed about 'Our Last Summer' that I disseminated in spring 2012, for an assessed essay I was writing at the time, and which is now integrated into my PhD research on ABBA fandom. It was and remains my strong belief that musical analysis must be coherent to and representative of the average musical listener; otherwise, musical analysis risks telling us more about the analyser than the music being analysed – a problem that has been pointed out by various people working on music, including music sociologist Tia DeNora, popular music scholar Chris Kennett, and the musicologist Nicholas Cook. I will then use the questionnaire findings to propose that ethnography be strongly considered as a complementary aid to musical analysis amongst music academics. (I acknowledge this is not always possible, depending on what is being analysed. For example, many musicologists work on historical composers and listening publics.)

Due to time constraints, I will focus on three key elements of the song in particular which are analytically interesting. Let me now play the song. You should all have handouts of the lyrics to aid your listening.

Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as rooted in the past, stating that it is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy... At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams".<sup>1</sup> Taking this definition into account, I will examine in particular the ways in which these specific musical ideas connect to create a song that is full of nostalgia for the listener.

The vocal melodic line sung by Anni-Frid "Frida" Lyngstad ('the redhead'), has a minimalistic range. Frida was an accomplished vocalist with a solo career prior to ABBA.<sup>2</sup> So why the small vocal range, with notes repeated several times in immediate or quick succession? Why the largely monosyllabic, rhythmically similar word setting when Frida could clearly manage long sustained notes or sweeping melodic gestures? Perhaps it is to create the effect of a human voice telling a story. When speaking, one does often not deviate hugely from one's natural vocal pitch, except at the end of phrases and sentences. Syllables are not usually prolonged except for exclamations; thus there is a steady rhythmic pattern to speech. The overall effect created in 'Our Last Summer's' vocal line is that of natural speech and storytelling, which fits with the idea of nostalgia. This practice of using minimal notes when telling – and especially introducing – a story is a common and well-known musical trope.

The "memories that remain" for the protagonist are largely happy ones. Yet halfway through the second verse, the narrative and music take a sudden solemn tone. Without wanting to get into technical terms of musical theory and structure, an air of uncertainty is created in the musical harmonic structure by the scrunchy chords over a repeated bass note that accompany the vocal. Just as the lyrics betray a sense of not knowing what lies ahead, so too do the chords, creating an air of suspense where we cannot be sure where we might end up harmonically. It is only when they "took the chance, like [they] were dancing [their] last dance" and the bass note moves, that we regain our harmonic bearings. Here again, the music contributes to the sense of nostalgia by showing that not everything was idealistic and wonderful but that all was well in the end.

The guitar solo comes unexpectedly and seems somewhat out of place. What is the meaning of it? Why its inclusion and what does it signify? The clue may lie in the final line of the final verse: "yet you're the hero of my dreams". 'Our Last Summer' had been written in the mid-Seventies,<sup>3</sup> an era known for its flamboyant, intricate and virtuoso guitar playing by the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Brian May and Eric Clapton. The abilities of these talented performers undoubtedly left a legacy. Their influence did not escape even ABBA: Benny and Björn paid tribute to

<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Perseus Books, 2001), p.viii, p.xv

<sup>2</sup> Carl Magnus Palm, 'The ABBA Story', on <http://www.abbaomnibus.net/> accessed 18/4/12

<sup>3</sup> Carl Magnus Palm, *ABBA: The Complete Guide to Their Music*, p.61

such artists with the guitar solo at the end of the 1977 track 'Eagle'.<sup>4</sup> Maybe 'Our Last Summer' was another nod towards the notion of hero, often linked with virtuosic guitar playing and macho sexual posturing.

This reading is supported by the cinematography of 'Our Last Summer' in the hit movie, *Mamma Mia!* The song is prefaced by Harry Bright explaining the circumstances in which he met and romanced Donna, the lead character Sophie's mother. Bright tells Sophie, "your mother knew quite a rebel".<sup>5</sup> (This claim is supported by the roguish appearance Bright sports when Donna first claps eyes on him again after twenty years of silence. Bright's current appearance fades into her memory of a rock superstar.) As the song proceeds, each of Sophie's three potential fathers spend time with her, reminiscing over the past and showing photographs which depict their younger 1970s<sup>6</sup> rock star-esque selves – a clear depiction of nostalgia.

I interpret 'Our Last Summer' as a song ridden with nostalgia in many of its musical features, including the ones just discussed. As my own interpretation, it is of course valid. Yet are the features I have talked about universally understood as such? Or do they even correspond to the meanings a given group of people found in this song? In 2012, I attempted to answer this using the aforementioned questionnaire (which is on the second page of your handout). To depict a breadth of ages, musical abilities and ethnicities, I asked around 30 family members and friends, as well as users of the British website, [www.thestudentroom.co.uk](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk), to listen to 'Our Last Summer' and answer my questions. The idea in asking mostly-known people was to represent at least a fraction of the wider, diverse and complex public and to be able to better control this representation.

I presumed a reasonable amount of people to be familiar with the song, due to the aforementioned *Mamma Mia!* scene. I expected the word "nostalgic" to come up a lot (without too much prompting in my questions). Other than that, I was open to whatever people may want to tell me. I must stress that this was merely a small-scale attempt at demonstrating the value of ethnography as an analytical methodological approach, rather than a more full and rigorous study of audience response.

By inviting other people's responses to the song, I explore how an ethnographic approach illuminates the analytical understanding of 'Our Last Summer' in a way that traditional music analyses –relying on analysis of structure - often never do. Indeed, Tia DeNora pointed out in her seminal text *Music in Everyday Life*,<sup>7</sup> that [a]t the level of the listening experience, for example, music seems imbued with affect while, at the level of analysis, it seems perpetually capable of eluding attempts to specify just what kind of meaning music holds and just how it will affect its hearers.<sup>8</sup>

This shows the discrepancies between one's listening experience, and the formal musical analysis of it. Ethnography is also far simpler to understand than Philip Tagg's interesting but somewhat complicated analyses of popular music. Tagg puts forward his own suggestion of how to tackle popular musical analysis in a way that is appropriate to the style; what remains unclear with Tagg is whether what he hears - and the way he organises and understands what he hears – is experienced by anyone else. This is the crux of my overall argument – is the meaning, structure or relationships uncovered by the analyst actually experienced by anyone but them? The work of the ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino,<sup>9</sup> which is a musical application of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, clearly shows that musical meaning is not fixed but is indexical and associative, depending on the differing lives and backgrounds of different listeners. Therefore what Tagg hears and decodes in the music, may go unnoticed by others and vice versa.

A summarised analysis of my questionnaire data is found in the two tables on pages 3 and 4 of your handout. The findings show that most of the participants were unfamiliar with 'Our Last Summer', contrary to my expectations; on the other hand, those who *were* familiar with the song mostly knew it as a song from either the musical or the film *Mamma Mia!* To my surprise, more people described the lyrics as "sad" than "happy"; this is in opposition to the music, which more people described as "happy" than "sad". Whilst only one person related the lyrics to their own "last summer", several people mentioned holiday romances, first loves or childhood memories, thus implying nostalgia. Four people used the actual word "nostalgia" or "nostalgic" to describe the lyrics without

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB1Om-L\\_O2Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB1Om-L_O2Q) accessed 10/4/12, 4.59-end. Note that this is not the official music video for 'Eagle', as the official one is shorter and cuts out the guitar solo at the end.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0lCdOVRKR4> accessed 18/4/12

<sup>6</sup> The musical *Mamma Mia!* was first performed in 1999 and Sophie is 20 years old

<sup>7</sup> Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

<sup>8</sup> Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, p.21

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

heavy prompting from me; yet only one person described the music as nostalgic. (This was in stark contrast to my own music nostalgia-heavy analysis.)

Quite a few respondents related 'Our Last Summer' to other songs, many of which were not ABBA songs. These non-ABBA songs ranged from the 'Care Bears' theme tune, to songs by the Beatles! (The ABBA numbers mentioned were 'One of Us', 'Chiquitita', 'Super Trouper', 'Thank You For the Music', 'Knowing Me, Knowing You', and 'The Winner Takes It All'.) The most common word used to describe 'Our Last Summer' (when asked to sum up the song in three words), was "sad", followed by "nostalgic", "happy" and "romantic". Some respondents stated the song was both "sad" and "happy", whilst three people called the song "melancholic".

The guitar solo seemed to baffle many people. Only 2 people suggested the notion of a rock star and only one person thought the guitar solo conveyed a sense of masculinity. The most common word used to describe the solo was, however, "nostalgic". An interesting suggestion that occurred twice from different people was that the guitar solo was mimicking crying.

It would seem my focus on the nostalgic aspects of the music of 'Our Last Summer' were not totally in vain but at the same time were misplaced. The results demonstrate that nostalgia is more identifiable in the lyrics than the music, and that sadness – or a mixture of sadness and happiness – would have been a more suited focus for an analytic reading. I had taken the nostalgia of the lyrics for granted because it seemed self-evident to me, but clearly this merits a more detailed study; equally, it would have been interesting to deconstruct the song according to sad and happy gestures in terms of musical, as well as lyrical, features. A more widespread and larger questionnaire would have to be undertaken to further prove the results of my survey, and ultimately far deeper and more extensive ethnographic work. However, even at this preliminary stage, the initial findings reject many of the features that were key to my own analysis of the song.

What these discrepancies between my own analysis and that of the people I approached show, is that the ethnographic approach is an extremely valuable undertaking to make analysis a sharp tool of cultural analysis and critique, rather than isolated, potentially highly subjective readings. Ethnomusicology – the study of music *in* culture and music *as* culture<sup>10</sup> - has long employed the ethnographic method for understanding musical affect, emotion and impact; indeed, this is the only way analysis of musical styles, sounds and meanings is done in ethnomusicology. Equally, in other scholarly fields, Janice Radway's book *Reading the Romance*, which studied a group of female romance novel readers, and Purnima Mankekar's work on Indian television viewers, showed that texts are never 'just' texts, but are 'read', 'received' and 'appropriated' in multifarious ways. Despite knowing the problems with musical analysis and realising that it is not the most representative methodology possible, musicology has largely shied away from such approaches, which is a shame, though this is admittedly partly to do with the degree to which musicology studies dead composers and works.

To conclude, as the musicologist Joseph Kerman said, "I do not actually think we need to get out of analysis, then, only out from under".<sup>11</sup> Ethnography could be one of the best means of reflecting audiences, readers, viewers and listeners and getting "out from under" some of the problems that traditional musical analysis has encountered. Ethnography has been key to my own PhD work of understanding various facets of ABBA fandom and how people connect and engage with the music, and I hope this small case study has illuminated the benefits of this methodology. Thanks for listening!

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<sup>10</sup> According to Alan Merriam

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Kerman, 'How We Got Into Analysis, and How to Get Out', reprinted in Joseph Kerman, *Write All These Down: Essays on Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994) p.30