

Norwegian Stev Text and Tune Relationships:
Millennium-old Vocal Tradition as Accentual Poetry

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Abstract

Norwegian stev are one-stanza songs sung throughout centuries especially in the regions of Setesdal and Telemark. The tradition is now thought to connect over a millennium in an unbroken line with Old Norse poetry. Texts abound while melodies are few: 20 000 nystev use 43 melodies, and 5 000 gamalstev use 5 melodies. The main focus of a stev performer, a kvedar, is variation of text not melody. The stev stanza has four lines, with four accents per line in nystev, whereas gamalstev have a 4-3-4-3 accent-pattern (“ballad meter”). The four accents per line are grouped in two pairs of accents. Each accent pair, a “dipod” or a “two-pulse”, emphasizes two “important” words. Other aspects of the dipod are shown in analysis of: 1) metrics (poetic accents and phrasing), 2) melody (paired tonal centers), 3) duration (short-long duration after 1st and 2nd accent in the dipod). Norwegian stev as sung-recited, ”kveding”, have an irregular rhythm, yet present a predictable accent pattern. Stev can be regarded as accentual poetry with a complex meter, closer to free verse than to rigid meters. The terms “strong” and “weak” beats normally used in music and poetry do not do justice to the rhythmic force found in stev. The basic unit in stev has two strong accents, which gives a tight and clearly defined structure, yet allows performance flexibility. Flexibility may be the key to the survival of a tradition. Dipodic vocal traditions are found in early cultures such as visuoř in Old Norse poetry, as well as musicals and popular music today such as “Summertime” or “September Song”. The flexibility of expression in Norwegian stev is readily demonstrated through performance..

What are Norwegian stev?

Norwegian stev are one-stanza songs sung throughout centuries especially in Setesdal and Telemark, two southern regions in Norway. Various arguments in favor of a tradition of stev connecting over a millennium in an unbroken line with Old Norse poetry were voiced already in 1914 (Mortensson-Egnund), then in 1942 (Handagard) and 1999 (Ekgren). The theory has gained considerable momentum now in the past fifteen years (Storm-Mathisen 2002a, 2002b, 2007, and 2015).

Stev poetry on the printed page seems quite uncomplicated with its four-line stev stanza resembling much poetry of today: nystev (the "newer" type) has four accents per line (4-4-4-4), and gamalstev (the "older" stanza type) displays a 4-3-4-3 accent-pattern in its lines, the same pattern as in "ballad meter".

Behind this poetry that seems so simple at face value lies a traditional singing-reciting performance style called *kveding* that shapes stev into an oral tradition that has puzzled researchers: the musical rhythm seems free and without system. In contrast, most Western music, -- whether classical or popular, traditional or composed, stately-slow or hip-hop, -- has a steady, regularizing beat. Such a beat may be discretely underlying and accompanying or may be quite obvious (heavy metal, for example). In any case, we are accustomed to written music with a time signature, whether 4/4, 3/4, 5/8 or other direction for performance. Stev songs, however, were different: they had no regularizing beat, and no time value that could serve as constant for the foundation of a beat. Normal transcription notation with time signature was not capable of portraying the unusual, flowing, ever-changing rhythms in stev.

No rhythmic unit in the melody could serve as anchor. Thus I relied on the poetic accents in the texts to be the points of departure and centers for the rhythms and constantly adjusted note values.

Was the rhythm of stev "free rhythm"?

The transcriptions did not seem to clarify the secrets of stev rhythm. Why could traditional *kvedarar* (reciter-singers) perform these stev so easily at any time? Recordings of the same stev, with as many as thirty years between recording times, disclosed occasional intuited consistencies but in the midst of the wealth of rhythmic freedoms these were indefinable.

Although previously the thought was that stev performance was rhythmically free, my research shows that this is not the case: there is a definite structure -- a tight structure that nevertheless allows the performer considerable flexibility and individualistic freedom within the style.

If one imagines a horizontal line representing a rhythm continuum between the opposite poles of STEADY RHYTHM and FREE RHYTHM, stev, when sung, are nearer the FREE RHYTHM end. Surprisingly, the system and its logic as reflected in the musical rhythm are found not by studying the music but by observing the kind of poetry and its rules.

What kind of poetry do stev lyrics have? Syllabic, accentual-syllabic, or accentual?

Before speaking about the type of poetry found in Norwegian stev, let us first become familiar with different types of poetry by hearing three examples: 1) French poetry (which is "SYLLABIC" poetry), 2) a limerick ("ACCENTUAL-SYLLABIC"), and 3) Old English ("ACCENTUAL"). In the first example you hear that in French poetry, the syllables in the language ripple and flow along evenly, [demonstration, softly, languidly, "di-di-di-di"] resulting in regularity in number (and time) of syllables per poetic line. In example 2), a limerick, the accentual-syllabic poetry achieves its regularity by the same number of accents per poetic line

combined with a regular number of unaccented syllables. These can alternate, for example, accented, unaccented, "da-di, da-di, da-di, da-di", or as in the limerick, "di, da-di-di, da-di-di, da-di-di, da" and so forth. In example 3), Old English, regularity is established by having groups of the same number of accents. There are two accents (also called strong stresses), whereas the number of unaccented syllables is unimportant and can vary. Then there is a "pause" and another two accents.

Example 1 is from a song by Bizet, set to the poem "Pastorale" by J.F. Regnard. Each syllable trips along lightly and easily (demonstrated):

Example 1)
 Un jour de printemps,
 Tout le long d'un verger
 Colin va chantant,
 Pour ses maux soulager:
 Ma bergère, ma bergère,
 tra la la la

Example 2 is a popular limerick found in tradition with slight variations. Although *Wikipedia* points out that the poem is often falsely attributed to humorist Ogden Nash, it was written in 1910 by American poet Dixon Lanier Merritt, 1879-1972

Example 2) ["/" represents an accent and "u" is an unaccented syllable]
 u / u u / u u / u u
 A wonderful bird is the Pelican.
 His beak can hold more than his belican.
 He can hold in his beak
 Enough food for a week!
 But I'll be darned if I know how the helican.

The third example, in Old English, is from a song known as "Cædmon's Hymn".

Underlining indicates the stressed syllables, the poetic accents. Bold-type marks alliteration, that is, the same consonant sound at the beginning of one or both stressed words within the two-

accent line and connecting it with the next phrase with its two-accent pair. (When vowels alliterate, any vowel may alliterate with any other.)

Example 3)

Nu sculon herigean [pause or "caesura"] heofonrices Weard
 (Now we must praise heaven-kingdom's Guardian)

Meotodes meaht and his modgepane,
 (the Creator's might and his mindplans)

The Venerable Bede (ca. 673-735 AD) tells about this poem that was "composed sometime between 658 and 680". This introduction to the poem, its text with translation are covered in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2000 [1962], pp. 23-26). Although the story goes that Cædmon sang the words, the melody has not survived.

The Old English poetry as exemplified in the "Hymn of Caedmon" has lines of two accents or strong stresses (underlined), then a pause (called a caesura, "cut", or "break"), followed by two more accents. The poetic (or "metric") accent in Old English poetry occurs on the first syllable of the word, which also has the word accent (also called "lexical" accent). This is "accentual verse", "organized by count of stresses" [accents], "not by count of syllables", [s.v. "Accentual verse" in *PEPP* 2012, p. 4).

Norwegian stev have the two-accent pattern, as in Old English poetry, called a "dipod" (two feet), or "two-pulse"

My research shows that Norwegian stev when performed (sung) have this two-accent pattern (Ekgren 1975, ..., film 2008 [1976]). Just as in the Old English style, the poetic accent in a stev is also a word accent, and on the first syllable of rural Norwegian words. The four accents (in each of the four nystev lines and in the 1st and 3rd lines of gamalstev) are grouped in two pairs of accents. Each accent pair, a "dipod" ["two feet"], or a "two-pulse", emphasizes two

“important” words. (Gamalstev's three accent lines (2nd and 4th lines), consist of one lone accent and a dipod, or the reverse, dipod and accent.)

I adapted the term "dipod" for this two-accent phrase, after reading Stewart's discussion of the dipod (Stewart 1925) and before I knew that the Norwegian Idar Handagard had applied the term "dipod" not only to the two-accent phrase, but specifically to stev (Handagard 1942 and 1944). He even uses it to apply to more than stev, by using it for all Norwegian vocal folk music that employs the two-accent pattern in what he calls the "Old Norse fashion" [*norrøn hått*] (Handagard 1942) meaning with use of alliteration (same consonant, creating "initial rhyme" at the beginning of words, such as the "r" in "**R**o, **r**o til **R**abbeskjær" and linking dipods together. (If vowels alliterate, all vowels can rhyme mutually).

The stev "caesura", between dipods in a poetic line, may be sung

Instead of a pause of silence between dipods, as in reciting a poem or Old English lines, the traditional singer may continue with the melody and intuitively take extra time by resting on the second accent and its tonal pitch, holding it out as long as the individual deems suitable for the stev text and its melody. This "connecting-span" (my term) interlude between stev dipods provides the singer also with an opportunity to add time to tones sung as upbeat to the following dipod.

What separates one stev dipod (the two-accent pattern) from the next dipod?

Just as in Old English poetry, we may say that a "caesura" separates one stev dipod with another. In the Old English poetry, it may be described as a pause, a break or a "cut". How does one hear that two accents belong in a pair when we hear a traditional singer performing a stev? Some element must separate the one pair from the next, for instance either 1) silence (as in recited poetry) or some sort of 2) musical pitch signal or pattern, or 3) time. By counting film

frames, I found that more TIME was taken after the second accent than after the first. Thus we can hear for example, [demonstrating] that no matter how short or long the time is after the first accent, more time is taken after the second accent. My material showed few exceptions, only 3 out of a total of 150 dipods, in filmed performance of the newer type of stev, nystev (Ekgren 2008 [1976]).

A common question is, why the tradition is the way it is? Is there any logic behind such an irregular rhythm? My interpretation is that the dipod (the two-accent pattern) is the core of a phrase that is semi-independent. In some stev, the dipod can be a whole clause or even a whole sentence, as in this stev excerpt [demonstrated by singing, first in translation]:

I picked flowers, and took them home
 "Eg pluk-ka blo-ma, å bar dei heim"
 (from Sandvik 1952, nystev #40, sung by Ingebjørg Rike).

Taking time between dipods, allows the singer and the listener to reflect over the words. It is the meaning in the stev that is to be communicated. The singer, or *kvedar* (-ar, singular; -arar, plural) shapes the melody in his or her own individual style tonally, with ornaments (Ekgren 2002), and timewise, nevertheless, it is the text that the listener is awaiting.

Text to tune relationship: preponderance of texts in relation to number of special stev melodies.

Focus on the text, not the melody, can explain also that texts abound while melodies are few: over 20000 nystev use 43 melodies, and 5000 gamalstev use 5 melodies (Austad 1985). The main focus of a stev performer, a *kvedar*, is variation of text not melody.

Rhythmic irregularity that can be intuited by listening kvedarar (traditional folksingers) and foot-tapped – together

Not only can listening kvedarar intuit and foot-tap the irregular rhythms of stev, but they can do so together with the solo kvedar (singer). How is this possible? Many of us here at the Singing Network Symposium are or have been singers and performers. We experience that there are intentional cues. Then there are also cues that are so subtle that we do not know how we perceive or intuit them, but they help us when performing together, and when there is no conductor or steady beat. In stev, the singers are familiar with the melodies, and also easily able to cope with the irregular rhythms, flexible and changing as they are. Singing-reciting (kveding) stev is an activity that the singers can take part in daily, whether at home, in a barn, out in the fields, or at a festive party.

It cannot be stressed enough that this foot-tapping that can occur together with a soloist's stev-kveding, is completely independent of whether or not the soloist foot-taps. Neither soloist nor listeners are consciously aware of foot-tapping. As said, I found that the rhythm is not based on a steady beat, such as a dance beat, but upon word accents of significant words. The rhythm in the melodies follows the dipodic poetic accents (accent-pair) in the lyrics: text and tune fit together like hand in glove.

How can we outsiders experience this "dipod" and its irregular rhythm?

Let us try singing "Summertime", without any sense of steady beat, and with taking lots of time, especially after the second accent in each dipod (pair of two accents). Like this [demonstrating, singing and using hand to mark poetic accents (underlined) which are also word accents]:

Summer-time and the liv-in' is ea-sy.
(Gerschwin, *Porgy and Bess*)

When traditional singers, kvedarar, foot-tap the poetic accents, it is only accented syllables, and never syllables that would be unaccented in daily speech. Let's try singing and foot-tapping (only the accents). Take your time, [singing and foot-tapping together on accents]

Summer-time [take lots of time on the upbeat words:] "and", "the" liv-in' is ea-sy.

Did you hear your foot-tapping echoing the dipod accents in the words of
 " Summer-time",
 then, the extended time on "and", and "the" (and no foot-tapping until the next dipod)
 " liv-in' is ea-sy".

It takes practice to enjoy squandering lots of time and breath after the word "-time" in "summertime", and also on one or both of the upbeat words: "and" and "the" to delay and hold the listener in suspense until the next foot-tapped dipod ("livin' is easy"). Nevertheless, such "unimportant" words such as connectives (and) and articles (the) are never foot-tapped -- even if they are held out quite long. The singers would also not foot-tap "unaccented syllables", that is, syllables that in normal speech are not stressed, such as "-mer" in "sum-mer" or the last syllable in "ea-sy". "-sy".

To interpret what the traditional singers do, they emphasise words that are important in the texts, and only the syllable in the word that is significant for the meaning.

Phrases are created in stev, and also in songs such as "Summertime". As mentioned, a whole clause or sentence can appear in the dipod. In the study of metrics (meter of poetry), one can also call this use of phrases "meaning rhyme", "sense rhyme" and analyse them as semantic, syntactic, grammatical phrases, or various combinations). Such analysis and a number of terms, such as "sense-units", instead of "feet" provide a helpful way to examine stev. Thinking in terms of phrases as one creates a stev seems closer to reality for the singers than thinking in terms of syllables or accents. This subject is worthy of a whole paper in itself. (See the discussion and

sources in Ekgren 2011c, "The Two-pulse 'Dipod' in Norwegian *Stev*, When Sung", The Phenomenon of Singing

Symposium. journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/singing/article/viewFile/983/849. Last visited Dec. 15, 2015.

With your experience of singing-reciting "Summertime", rather than belting it out to a steady beat, you may be able to transfer the leisurely stev-rhythm and foot-tapping over to a nystev such as this one. Follow along with the melody and let the foot-tapping feel natural [demonstrating singing the melody and moving a hand or foot-tapping with the accents]:

Å kor eg kjeme - hell kor eg vankar
 så gjeng du alli - or mine tankar

Å kor eg reiser - og kor eg fer
 og i tankan' ser eg deg - mot meg lær.

Now that you have experienced how to sing stev, you can let the rhythm follow you as you read other articles available. I include a number of articles and books in the Reference List that may not have been referred to directly in this article, but which may be easily available in hard copy in certain countries and/or easily available on the internet.

In a recently published book, *Text and Tune. On the Association of Music and Lyrics in Sung Verse*, the editors point out that "While one culture may lack instrumental music, vocal music seems to be universal", (Proto et al. 2015, p. 9).

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