

Getting Primed, Scandinavian Style

A brief overview of Norwegian and Swedish folk dance

The oldest documented dances are called *bygdedans*, meaning regional, country or village dances. Though all the dances in Sweden and Norway are thought to have originated in Europe, their arrival between 1600 to 1800 has allowed time for "naturalization." The similarity or use of the terms like *polska* and *pols* does not imply that they are alike in every way. They do have elements in common, yet it is important to note that the people of each area are proud of the unique character, style, rhythm, and music associated with their dance. These dances were originally associated with the rural areas. The dances in this family are; *springar*, *gangar*, *springleik*, *springdans*, *rudl/rull*, *pols*, and *halling* in Norway, along with the *polska* and its many variants in Sweden. *Bygdedans(es)* are primarily danced to fiddle/violin or Hardanger fiddle, depending on the tradition of the area.

Gammaldans or *runddans* (translates as old dance or round dance) are what we might call the ballroom dances of Scandinavia. Some people use the term *gammaldans* while others refer to this kind of dancing as *runddans*. Included are the waltz, schottische, polka, and mazurka. Newer dances such as the tango, foxtrot, swing and others are sometimes incorporated into this category. Some people include the *hambo* and *pols* in this family of dance as they are often played and danced at *gammaldan* or *runddans* events. As with the *bygdedans*, the *gammaldans* have become "naturalized" and taken on a character of their own. These dances are associated with both the rural and urban areas. Fiddle and/or accordion based groups that may include guitar and bass usually play for these dances. The term *gammaldans* was applied to this type of dancing when writing about the dances after they had been danced for a number of years and were no longer the new fashion dances. *Runddans* describes the action of the dances. While dancing the couple progresses counter clockwise around the dance space while turning clockwise (usually).

Turdanser, *folkdanser*, and *gilledans* are choreographed figure dances. They are often the contras and squares that have migrated from the cities of Western Europe to the urban centers in Scandinavia. Usually they are danced to a fixed melody. In other words, only one melody is used for a particular dance. Earlier the primary accompaniment was fiddle. Today often accordion with fiddle, bass and perhaps guitar are the main instruments playing this dance music.

The *songdans* or song dance(s) and *sangleik/sanglek* or song games, likely an outgrowth of the Carole from Western Europe, are dances without musical accompaniment. Usually they are danced to the singing of the participants. One may find the song dances and song games in both the rural and urban communities, perhaps most commonly around a Christmas tree and in Sweden around the Maypole at midsummer.

Norwegians and Swedes categorize their dances similarly. The Norwegians divide dance into four main categories; *bygdedans*, *gammaldans* or *runddans*, *turdans* and *songdans*. The Swedes separate dance into three main categories: Song dances/*sanglek* (including song games and long dances); village dances/*bygdedans*, which include the *polskor* and *gammaldans*; and folk dances/*gilledanser* (figure dances).

The world music movement has influenced the traditional musicians. In some situations one can dance *springar*, *polska* and *runddans-gammaldans* to music where there is a fusion of modern styles with older traditions.

We use the term Scandinavian turning dance to refer primarily to the *bygdedans* and *gammaldans* variants. All of these dances incorporate turning of some sort. Dance couples usually turn clockwise while dancing and progressing counter clockwise around the dance space. Additionally, some of the *turdanser*, *folkdanser* and *gilledanser* may be considered turning dances as though they are danced to a set pattern, they may incorporate turning as a part of the dance.

Folk Music

Scandinavian folk music, like most musical traditions, evolved around the functions and ceremonies of life; working, weddings, funerals, holidays, and free time. A variety of instruments passed through including among others, flutes, cow & sheep horns, bagpipes called *säckpipa* with the fiddle being the most prominent in today's folk music milieu. Norway has the Hardanger fiddle/*hardingfele*, Sweden has the *nyckelharpa*/key fiddle, both with understrings that resonate when the upper strings are played providing a rich elaborate sound.

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There are strong vocal traditions in Norway and Sweden. One finds ballads, hymns, love songs, lullabies, and drinking songs. In the herding culture there is the practice of *kulning* using very strong, high pitched calls and wordless phrases. These were often used by women tending their cattle in the summer farms and also as a form of warning when needed.

The village music is largely 3-beat with a lot of variety in beat length. Many of the tunes written in $\frac{3}{4}$ are asymmetric. The village music contains quite a lot of "blue notes" or notes that fall between the keys of the piano.

Historically the folk musician played solo. There is a rich tradition of traveling musicians in Scandinavia. These musicians played for special events, composed tunes for events and generally brought their music to people. Today there are groups/*lags* that play together. In Sweden the fiddlers would play alone or with another fiddler. The music stands alone and must also provide a steady beat for the dancers. Many good second parts called *stämma* in Swedish were created when two melody instruments played together. The *stämma* can shadow the melody or can be a counter melody, provide chording like accompaniment, or play the melody in another octave, called "*grovt och grannt*" meaning rough and shiny. The art of playing accompaniment on a melody instrument seems to many Swedes to be particularly Swedish in tradition. It is not clear that Norwegians apply these techniques to their village music.

When playing for *gammaldans* including waltz, polka, schottische and mazurka, the musicians also have characteristic ways of playing the music that are representative of their local roots and traditions. One hears more instruments playing for this kind of folk music. Fiddle, bass, accordion and guitar are common.

Norwegian & Swedish musicians play the music of the area where they come from or live. They may also play *gammaldans* or other forms of music. The music is influenced by the trends and styles of the time.

The more involved in a tradition one becomes, the more richness and variety one finds in the music.

The role and status in Scandinavia today of the dances that we, in the USA, dance

Scandinavian dances are primarily social dances, including *springar* and *polska*. As in the USA, the folk dance population is small and ebbs and flows with various elements of life and society. In the 1970s more people danced than today, but some communities have seen a slight increase recently in the number of younger people joining the milieu. The status of *springar* and *polska* dancing in Norway and Sweden is similar to the situation here in that, there are people who have no interest in folk dance of any kind, and those of us who love it.

In Norway students and professionals who have come to the urban centers of Oslo, Bergen or Trondheim for work or study often join a club or group of people who are from their home area. In Oslo, people from Telemark for example, meet for dance and music usually once a week during the school year. A *springar* course is offered during the autumn and winter months and it may continue into the spring. They may meet for social occasions as well. One can also find groups of people who enjoy dancing Swedish *polskas*, Swing, Latin dance, Square dance, and international non-partner folk dances.

The role of *polska* dancing in Sweden is very much the same as it is here in the USA. There are people who enjoy the dance and music and pursue it. Dance clubs often meet at local community centers and are advertised along with the other activities of the center in local newspapers. For the most part, the groups are membership groups, though membership is open to the public. Some people take great pleasure participating in the dances of their local area or region while others enjoy learning dances from all of Sweden and Norway too. Some enjoy doing 'free movements' like dance we might find in a pub or bar, to folk music, especially to the fusion style of music. Swing dance is called *bugg* in Sweden and it along with Latin, Square, and international folk dance can be danced in various places.

Social dances and occasions

One might find dancing at most any social occasion where people gather. Classes and groups tend to meet during the school year and festivals tend to be during the summer. Additionally, one can see dancing at various tourist sites such as at the folk museums. When those already involved in the folk dance community marry, they frequently have folk dancing at their wedding, where the traditional dance replaces the first waltz.

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Springar, gangar, pols, rull, and springleik are danced socially at a variety of events including club or group parties, folk music/dance pubs, private parties, weddings, local festivals, special market days, in classes and workshops. Historically the local *bygdedans* would be found at events within a region. When visitors from another area were there, they might join in the local dance or dance their own dance. Today one might find the same, or their might also be *gammaldans* and or other dance forms at the event. Local, regional and national competitions provide opportunities for people to dance *bygdedans* as a part of the competition and in the evenings for fun. There are special competitions for *gammaldans* too. Various sources refer to mid-summer, Jonsok, and Olsok, or St. Olaf's day as times of dancing.

In Sweden one can find *polska* dancing at dance classes, groups or clubs, workshops, parties, weddings, local festivals, and competitions. The situation is very much like in Norway where the *polska* of a particular area was *the* dance of the area until it was either supplanted or shared the dance floor with something new. References indicate Midsummer Eve or the eve of St. John the Baptist, Christmas & New Year, Michaelmas, 29th September and throughout the summer as times one can find dancing. Some areas, such as Boda in Dalarna have regular dances at their *bygdegard*, or folk meeting place throughout the year.

Festivals and contests

For both Norway and Sweden, those in the milieu love some or all of the various events, including festivals, competitions and parties. Some people are involved in all aspects, and others select the events that suit their interests. Some people may be critical of one venue, but not others. There are people who prefer to dance socially only while others like the element of preparation and developing their expertise for the competitions and or performances.

A cultural value, called *Janteloven* or the *Jante* law had it origins in a book by Danish writer Aksel Sandemose and has had a strong influence on the Nordic people. The Jante law is a belief that no person is better than another. Janteloven appears to have affected the worldview of the Nordic peoples. In a contest in Norway there is not necessarily one first, second or third place winner, there are usually several. One must follow specific criteria and achieve a level of expertise to rank in first, second or third place categories. In Sweden, some contests do have a first, second and third prizes while others, like the *polskemerkeuppdansningen*/"medal testing" are pass-fail. The primary purpose of the contests in Norway and Sweden is to stimulate interest and energy to participate in the *bygdedans*, village or regional (turning), and other folk dances and to keep the dances alive!

In Norway there is a community of people who travel to the various dance-music *kappleik(s)* (meaning competitions and festivals). Some events offer dance courses. Dance parties follow in the evenings. Often the fiddlers will gather outside, in someone's hotel room, camping car or tent and others will come and listen or dance.

Some dance-music festivals are part of an historical market week such as Kongsbergmarken and Rørosmartnan in February. Others are part of world music events including Førde and Telemark Festivals in July. Dance and music events are scheduled near holidays such as at Easter time, Constitution day May 17th, midsummer, or just for the purpose of music and dance sharing as during the Folk Music Week in Ål in Hallingdal, Norway in the spring.

A number of music and dance festivals occur in Sweden during the summer months. Several of the most well known occur at Ranseter, Värmland in June, Musik vid Siljan, Falun, and Rättviksdansen Folklore Festival in July. Each year the first weekend in August people might participate in a dance course, dance parties and also "dance up" for a medal. The location varies from year to year. There are a number of contests for musicians.

Festivals may be music focused, dance focused or combine both. They may be international in scope or local for a specific cultural area.

Pockets of enthusiasm for these dances outside of Scandinavia

In 1992, 25 communities around the USA offered Scandinavian dancing either for classes and/or dance parties. I believe that a few more communities have joined their ranks. The above number does not include the membership groups such as Sons of Norway, Norwegian or Swedish American groups, or performing groups, etc.

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Some Norwegians enjoy dancing polska and other Swedish dances and some Swedes dance Norwegian dances including various *springar* traditions.

One can also find Norwegian and or Swedish dance in Denmark, Estonia, The Netherlands, France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Canada, USA, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia. A movement in Sweden is in the works to try to bring Swedish dancing to China.

Costumes

What we call folk costume today, is a representation or sample of everyday and festive clothing, usually of a previous time period. Most often, the 'costume' is a window into the aesthetics of both today and years past. That we can find folk dress today is largely a result of the National Romantic period that came at the end of the 19th century and also the revival of interest in folk music and dance of the 1970s.

Clothing was practical and made of available materials. Wool from sheep, animal skin and linen were the earliest fabrics. Later imported fabrics were introduced. Some of what we consider decorative today was originally purely functional, such as the buckles on many Scandinavian dance shoes and the cufflinks closing shirts at the wrist. The jewelry at the neck was also functional. Today it may be functional or purely decorative, depending on the costume and where or how it is used.

Articles of clothing were added to the everyday dress for special occasions, such as going to church, holidays and feast days, christenings or baptisms, confirmations, weddings or to special functions. Some areas had/have summer weight and winter weight clothing. Others used more or less layers depending on the season.

Folk dress changes over time. Fashions influenced the dress and were incorporated when they fit into the finances and aesthetics. During several time periods purchased or imported fabrics such as silk were prohibited. Today one sees silk in various forms on a number of the costumes in Norway and Sweden. How much or little silk on the clothing may reflect a regional aesthetic or value as well as persistence of the earlier prohibitions.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century use of 'old fashioned' folk clothing was giving way to modern fashions. The Romantic revival and nationalistic movements spawned interest in the older ways of dressing. In the areas where traditional dress was no longer used, folk dress or costumes were re-constructed, re-created or created. Much was based on the historical clothing, but in places where people felt that didn't fit with their aesthetics, new clothes were designed to represent an area. Quite strict rules exist as to what and how the clothing was to be constructed. The folk outfits are used today for festive occasions, including weddings, Christenings, funerals, and especially with the folk music and dances.

In Norway this newly fashionable folk clothing is called a *bunad*, today the term may also indicate it was reconstructed. Some areas had folk clothing in use. Often that clothing was referred to as *folkedrakt*. In Sweden the folk clothing or costume is called *folkdräkt*.

It is important to note that there is a tremendous amount of tradition and pride symbolized in the folk clothing. Use symbolizes a sign of care and responsibility for the cultural heritage and functions as a part of one's identity.

Some Dance Holds used in Swedish and Norwegian Dance

Polska Hold: A closed position hold used for many Swedish dances and some dances in Norway. There are variations of the hold. Some of the variations are regional and others relate more to preference and comfort. It is a dynamic hold where both the man and the woman are responsible for holding onto one another keeping the couple together.

Man's R hand on woman's upper back, usually holding her L scapula. Man's L arm is bent into a R angle and his L hand hooks onto the woman's upper R arm usually from below.

Woman's L arm over M's R arm. Her L hand may rest on his shoulder, his upper arm or his scapula. Woman's R arm makes a R angle and comes from below up and over man's L to hook onto his upper L arm. Woman's R elbow is in contact with man's forearm. Note: no arms or hands cross the midline/spine. All hands/arms hold the nearest side of partner.

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When holding upper arms, usually the hold is below the deltoid muscle and above the biceps and triceps. Gordon Tracie used to say we were designed for this hold as this is a perfect space for us to hook onto one another.

We hook onto one another keeping our thumbs with the rest of our fingers to avoid leaving thumbprints or make undesirable lasting fingerprint impressions (bruises).

You need to pull somewhat on your partner to secure the hold. This is best done when you lower your center of gravity a little for stability and balance.

You dance slightly to the L of your partner allowing your R feet to step forward and between your partners' feet. Inside R knees or thighs may touch to help you adjust your relationship to your dance partner, dance with your R ft stepping between your partners' and keep it from being stepped on.

Equilateral Position: A closed position where the man and woman each hold one another the same way. R arms come under your partners L arm. R hands hold partners scapula/upper back. L arms come over partners R arm and rest on partners shoulder. Maintain full arm contact to secure your hold and balance. Your arms should be rounded and allow you to come as close as possible while maintaining your own independent balance.

You dance slightly to the L of your partner allowing your R feet to step forward and between your partners' feet. Inside R knees or thighs may touch to help you adjust your relationship to your dance partner, dance with your R ft stepping between your partners' and keep it from being stepped on.

You need to pull somewhat on your partner to secure the hold. This is best done when you lower your center of gravity a little for stability and balance.

Shoulder/Shoulder-blade: A closed position where the M holds the W's upper back or scapula and the woman places her arms and hands above the M's. Her hands may be on the top of his shoulders or around the M's uppermost part of his arm and hold just below the top of the shoulder of her partner. Use rounded full arm contact. This helps with balance.

Ballroom Position is a closed position used in international folk dancing and other dance forms, but varies a bit in form and style in Scandinavian dancing. The man holds the woman's upper back/scapula with his R hand. The woman's L may hold the man's upper R arm or reach further around to his upper back or be placed on his shoulder. Use full arm contact between man's R and woman's L arms. Man's L hand holds woman's R hand from above with both man & woman's palms face down toward the ground. The arms may be fully extended or bent somewhat.

In some dances man's L and woman's R hands may clasp one another palm to palm and the arms may be bent.

Some suggestions for more comfortable, fun & pleasurable Scandinavian dancing

1. Keep your torso vertical and solid or stable. Do not move any part while dancing unless required to do so for the specific dance.
2. Keep your knees bent and flexible for stability, balance and to cushion the movements making them more fluid and flowing in style.
3. Both the man and the woman hold one another.
4. In dance holds use full arm contact when possible.
5. Pivot (turn) whenever you can during and between turning steps.
6. Turning is usually done over the soles or balls of your feet.
7. Take your whole body with you.
8. Take your partner with you.
9. Take the smallest step you can and still accomplish the step pattern.
10. Keep your weight a little forward and over the front part of your foot. You will be better prepared to move and respond to the music and movements.
11. Keep your head vertical and centered.
12. Look at something on your partner with your eyes, not the dance space around you.
13. Use your peripheral vision to see where you are in the dance space and in relation to other dancers.

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14. Breathe while dancing.
15. Carry yourself, do not lean or hang on your partner.
16. Step fwd in the dance direction on your R when turning CW.
17. Be sure to allow your partner to step between your legs with his or her R foot during CW turning.

The list above was extracted from “Scandinavian Dance Basics” and is available from the vendors.

Some viewpoints and caveats

Dance descriptions are in Black and White, while life and dancing are in many shades of color. The various descriptions are in B&W. We will move through the descriptions and dances in color using the details to guide us through the dance not hold us to a spot. Turning dances move continuously through time and space with fluidity and are thought of as both fun and uplifting.

There is more than one way to write a description. Hopefully you will note that with each description the dance and cultural picture becomes clearer, richer and more understandable.

In Sweden, dance directions are given to men and women. It is implied that the men lead and the women decode the lead and apply/follow the message as soon as possible.

When writing descriptions for the Scandinavian dance community, we use a somewhat different approach. There is a preference for not being absolute, very detail oriented, or exacting. It is thought to take the life out of the dance to do so. The dances have life and character and style. They reflect the cultural area, music, musicians and dancers. The dances are alive and vary within cultural parameters each time they are danced. Each person brings them self to the dance and offers something from their heart and soul.

It is from my heart and soul that I share this information. I hope that you too will find joy and excitement in the dances as I have and will seek opportunities to learn more and dance more.

Presented by Roo Lester