

Text-Sound Composition – The Second Generation

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Text-Sound Composition remains after more than forty years one of the highlights of Swedish electroacoustic music. The name denotes an artistic phenomenon which arose in the open environment of the 1960s at Fylkingen in Stockholm as an expression of interests in multi-disciplinary art at the nexus of text, music and technology.

More than just an isolated movement, text-sound composition has continued as a viable part of the electroacoustic music heritage in Sweden. The work of the pioneering poets, composers and artists, including Öyvind Fahlström, Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Bengt Emil Johnson, Sten Hanson, Åke Hodell, Ilmar Laaban and others, has previously been richly documented both in books and on cds. Much less, however, has been written about the second (and third) generation of composers who have, in several diverging manners and means, both developed and maintained this particular home-grown and internationally recognized approach.

Beginning with a short review of the early development of text-sound composition and a discussion of several of its aspects, a brief discussion of works by Åke Parmerud, Rolf Enström, William Brunson, Anders Blomqvist and Erik Peters will follow.

1. Origins - Fylkingen

In the early 1960's Fylkingen, the Swedish society for new music and intermedia art, underwent a comprehensive transformation embracing so-called "spearhead ideology" which was notable for its commitment to "the artistic application of emerging new technologies and radical trends in music and the other arts abroad" (Pignon 1994: 384). Indeed Fylkingen, together with the Swedish Radio, had already been instrumental in introducing both *musique concrète* and *elektronische musik* at lecture-concerts in October 1952 and May 1956, respectively (Hultberg 1994: 160 and 164). And, beginning with the Fall season 1959, when Fylkingen changed venues from the Stockholm Concert House to the Moderna Museet, programs of electroacoustic music were featured on an increasingly regular basis as can be seen in the lists of concerts. (Hultberg 1994: 167ff). Likewise, during the 1960's Stockholm emerged as a major crossroads for a great diversity of aesthetic and artistic currents including those of the European avant-garde and American experimental music. Indeed the Swedish word *gränsöverskridande* - literally "boundary crossing" - became the watchword of this expansive period and aptly captures the tenor of Fylkingen's spearheading mission.

With regard to text-sound composition, in the wake of Fylkingen's aforementioned reorganization, several working groups were established to address areas of vital interest. Among them, the Language Group, of which Bengt Emil Johnson (as chairman), Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Sten Hanson, Åke Hodell and Ilmar Laaban were active members, became the crucible for this new intermedial art form (Hanson 1993: 23).

The origins of the text-sound composition label are to be found in a concert given by Fylkingen at Moderna Museet in Stockholm on 26 April 1967. Entitled *Text- och Ljudkomposition* (Text and Sound Composition), the concert featured works by Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Bengt Emil Johnson and Åke Hodell. While the first two works utilized text, the Hodell piece *Strukturer III* was comprised solely of the sounds of different firearms and artillery. Thus according to Lars-Gunnar Bodin, the concert title is purely descriptive and not a forethought for the eventual name (Interview with author, 24 March 2009).

The actual term text-sound composition was coined by Bodin and Johnson following a conference in Hilversum in the fall of 1967. Several European radio stations had convened with the intention of establishing an overarching title for experimental radio programming. The radio representatives were, however, unable to agree after many hours of deliberation. Frustrated, Bodin and Johnson then together decided to adapt the previous concert title by introducing a hyphen between the words text and sound and retaining the word composition (Interview with author, 24 March 2009).

As with most labels, text-sound composition in Sweden was an umbrella characterization for a complex confluence of diverse interests, the most common being language, music and the use of technology. Another unifying aspect was the idea of works utilizing the particular qualities of the radio media. The hyphenated "text-sound" (text-ljud) points to the linguistic dichotomy of the written and spoken word, to text and the sound of its utterance. "Composition" indicates relations both to poetry and to music. Bengt Emil Johnson in an interview in the newspaper *Falukuriren* in 1967 confirms the broad scope and intended inclusiveness of the concept: "Sound poem, text-sound composition, radiophonic poetry, and all that it is called, is definitely not a style, nor a unified 'ism', nor a movement. It is a new technique, a set of new tools, which are proving to be useful and effective to several different ends; of the communication of many different contents" (Hultberg 2005: 13). According to Lars-Gunnar Bodin, he and Johnson felt that this formulation was sufficiently general to be all-inclusive: "The term was deliberately neutral and could quite easily be stretched to include virtually everything from sound-poetry to Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge*." (Bodin, 1992: 6).

The establishment of EMS – Elektronmusikstudion – as part of the Swedish Radio in 1965 afforded the Swedish artists access to high quality technology and facilities as well as played a definitive role in the conception and production of text-sound compositions. The studio environment and the tape medium suggest and bring to the fore many expressive and structural opportunities which were hitherto difficult or impossible to achieve by speech alone or to represent on the written page. Above all, the detailed control inherent in studio work with the editing or fragmentation of the recorded text, its subsequent re-configuration via montage and eventual aural transformation via electroacoustic processing offered both both a new canvas and palette; The recording process and tape medium broke the hegemony of the page by introducing, for example, the multi-temporal, multi-layered and spatial dimensions of music.

In 1968 Fylkingen and the Swedish Broadcasting Company – represented by producer and advocate Ingrid Hjort af Ornas – collaborated to create the First International Text-Sound Festival at Moderna Museet. The festival became the de facto showcase for text-sound composition and was held annually in Stockholm between 1968-74, in London 1975-76 and in Stockholm again 1977. (Hultberg 1993: 198ff.) By the time of the festival in Toronto in 1978, The Stockholm Electronic Music Festival, which became the stage for the new generation of composers, had been launched.

2. Language Levels in Text-Sound Composition and Sound Poetry

In preparation for this article, Lars-Gunnar Bodin provided the author with his list of seven "language levels" which, in ascending order from utterance to complex texts, can be found in text-sound composition and sound poetry. (Table I) Bodin notes that all levels can occur in one and the same work.

It should be noted, however, that the use of electroacoustic processing (including traditional editing, montage, tape manipulation techniques and electronic processing) need not be limited to the "upper" levels, but does occur in all instances. Indeed, listening to the repertoire, as Hultberg notes (Hultberg 2005: 13), there is not only a tendency over the 60's and 70s to treat vocal material electronically in the studio, but also that, given the increased availability of processing apparatus, the greater the degree of treatment and the more abstractly musical the composition becomes. As we shall see, this trend clearly continues in the works of the second generation.

1	Beneath the phonetic level Screams, grunts, smacking, onomatopoeic calls and sounds, in- and exhalation sounds, animal sound imitations, "poetry in the mouth", diverse emotional vocal gestures, which imitate linguistic behavior, etc.
2	The phonetic level Phonemes, morphemes, fragments of "real" words, fragmentation of words in small parts, <i>lettrism</i> in various forms, artificial phonemes, etc.
3	Artificial language Imaginary words/imaginary language without semantic content, words and sentences, which appear to be taken from real yet unknown languages, i.e. artificial Swedish, extensive mixture of words from known languages.
4	Limited linguistic material All sorts of linguistic minimalism, compositions with very limited word material, "real" words which are combined with respect to their sounding/sonorous expressive potential.
5	Compositions based on more complex word material Complete sentence structure, abstract or concrete text with different degrees of semantic comprehensibility, everyday language, normal prose, dialectical pronunciation (accent), collage forms, lexical poems (Dufrêne), ready-mades, material with or without electroacoustic processing.
6	Complex text-sound compositions Works which are based on complex, compound texts with or without electroacoustic processing, with or without integrated sound effects – or not, and with added musical ready-mades (Fahlström, Hodell, et al.)
7	As in Level 6, but with special composed musical events

Table I

The classification scheme introduced by Cathy Lane (Lane 2006:4-7) overlaps Bodin's list of language layers vis à vis the approach to textual/spoken materials. Her listing of compositional techniques is implied to a certain degree in Bodin's levels as well.

Works in the Swedish repertoire, Lane notes, are nearly without exception scripted or "scored". One can speculate that this reflects not only the predominantly literary backgrounds of The Language Group – only Bengt Emil Johnson (also a poet) and Lars-Gunnar Bodin had musical training – but also their focus on applying the technology of the electronic music studio to their written texts.

Moreover, the early text-sound works seldom employ material gathered from so-called everyday sources or that of archival material as in Åke Hodell's *Mr. Smith in Rhodesia*. The latter appears to be limited to the concept of that particular work and is not typical of Hodell's oeuvre. The former can perhaps be explained both by the cumbersome nature of the expensive recording equipment which was permanently located in the studio (i.e. not portable) and, as Bodin suggested in a personal interview, that the aesthetic approach of the composer/poets was to "compose with words", to structure the text by employing unorthodox, experimental methods. (Interview with author: 24 March 2009)

Lastly, in trying to capture the complexity of text-sound composition, another important facet is the nature of the presentation – live or via fixed media, including radio. As Lane points out, prior to recording technology, all sound poetry was performance-based. (Lane 2006: 4) Live performance can, of course, be pre-scripted, improvised or a combination of both. And, as anyone who has worked recording studios is aware, the process of recording, whether scripted or not, is a performance and thus rife with variations, improvisations and mistakes. However, once the composer has chosen a specific take for a fixed media piece, these alternative versions are discarded, often never to be heard again. While live performance, with or without pre-recorded material, was common during the first wave of text-sound composition, the works of the second wave are all composed for fixed media.

3. The Second (and Third) Generations - Text

Seven different aspects of text-sound composition are presented in Table II. While the list is far from exhaustive, it will nevertheless serve as a point of departure to exemplify the different approaches to text, music and technology employed by the five second (and third) generation composers.

Composer	Author	Grammar	Wordplay	Form	Processing	Music	Bodin Class
Parmerud	Ella Hillbäck	Normal	No	Follows□text	Heavy	Text / Song	6
	Göran Sonnevi	Poetic□					
Enström	Elsa Grave	Normal Poetic□	No	Follows□text	Medium-Heavy	Yes: EAM	7
Brunson	Composer	Normal Prose Dialog	Yes	Flexible	Medium	Yes: EAM	6/7
Blomqvist	Bengt Emil Johnson	Normal Poetic□	Yes	Follows□text	Main: No Fragment: Yes	Yes: EAM	7
Peters	Stefan Lakatos	Normal Prose Dialog	Yes	Re-arranged	Light-Medium	Yes: EAM	7

Table II

Regarding the state of text-sound composition Bengt Emil Johnson wrote in 1992:

"Nowadays hardly any works are created that fall under the heading text-sound composition. Many of the ideas and techniques from this period have been further developed within the wide embrace of electro-acoustic music. Hybrids of different kinds crop up all over the place in the dense jungle of post-modernism." (Johnson 1992: 20).

While it is true that none of the selected composers consider themselves exclusively as text-sound practitioners, they did at the time of their compositions relate artistically to the Swedish body of work from the 1960's and 1970's. In this sense, the tradition has been kept alive, though not as a main occupation but rather as a viable reference.

Indeed, the overriding sense of the selected works is that of electroacoustic music which employs many text-sound techniques. Looking to the rightmost column in Table II, here I have placed all of the chosen works in Bodin's classes 6 and 7, i.e. those which introduce more complex compositional and musical aspects. Considering the sophistication of the texts, their use of complete sentences, degrees of semantic content, use of dialect, etc. the range could extend to class 5. However, given the heavy emphasis on musical structuring, I have chosen to "upgrade" the works to classes 6 and 7. One may thus consider class 5 as an entry level for the second generation composers; the base level at which the works were conceived, regardless of their eventual use of more basic levels such as classes 1 and 2 in the actual realization of the works.

In one defining sense, however, Johnson's statement regarding the creation of text-sound composition is supported by the Author column in Table II. All of the original text-sound composers wrote their own texts and the formulation of the text comprised the initial kernel of the work. Here, with the exception of the present author, none of the second generation composers have written their own texts, choosing instead those of established writers. By selecting a text written by another author certain artistic and ethical issues arise regarding the degree to which the composer may rework the original text.

Rolf Enström (1951-) was approached by the Swedish Radio with an already fully-scripted project with text by the Swedish poet Elsa Grave (1918-2003) and after a time suggested using the apocalyptic poem *Slutförbannelser* (Final Curses) instead. He then worked closely with Grave in the studio recording her impassioned reading. Interestingly, Enström relates that Elsa Grave's strong dialectal accent was somewhat of a groundbreaking event in Swedish text-sound. (Interview with author: 29 March 2009)

Likewise, Erik Peters (1970-), belonging to the third generation, and Stefan Lakatos collaborated in the studio to sculpt the various characteristic voices. Erik Peters related that Lakatos' text was not fully developed, but was comprised of a variety of fragments from which the Lakatos' reading was developed improvisationally. (Interview with author: 5 May 2009) Below is an excerpt from the program note:

"[...] While recording he [Lakatos] [...] read in various intonations, emotional states, dialects etcetera. The stereotyped roles of a priest, a radio announcer, a drunkard and a doomsday prophet were also improvised.

From the more than two hours of reading, I have chosen the sections that I found most interesting. With the aid of these I have tried to shape a dramatic form, wherein the various states of emotion and the varying intensity of the recitation constitute the source material of the composition. The original text [...] [does not thus appear] in its entirety or in its right sequence."
(Peters 2009)

More traditionally, Åke Parmerud (1953-) och Anders Blomqvist (1956-) each selected texts themselves. In *Närheter* (Proximities) (1978), Parmerud was able to exercise substantial artistic freedom in his treatment of the texts by poets Ella Hillbäck (1915-1979) and Göran Sonnevi (1939-). In *Löpa Varg* (Run Wolf) (1995). Anders Blomqvist pays homage to Bengt Emil Johnson using seven texts from diverse volumes of Johnson's published poetry.

On the other hand, writing one's own text frees the composer/author from all difficulties of ownership and artistic intent. With regard to my own works *Inside Pandora's Box* (1991) and *Creature Comforts* (1998), the process of writing, recording and composition thus overlaps to various degrees. In the program commentary for *Inside Pandora's Box*, I have written the following:

"The script embraces a full range of subjects including false commercials, TV series, jokes, etc. Sports and specific news have been omitted. The script may be viewed as a collection of shards excavated from the TV medium. Not unlike a media archaeologist, I have tried to re-construct a meaningful continuity although in a humorous and deliberately entertaining manner."
(Brunson 2004: 4)

Naturally, as author of the text, I had full editorial license to cut, change, rearrange and re-record the text at any stage in the production. Particularity in the former, where most of the voices/characters are mine, I enjoyed the total control of a director coaxing a performance from an actor, albeit myself. In the latter, where solo and speaking choral parts from about ten different sources were compiled, I could not redo any of the source material once recorded, but had to choose and edit the best available alternatives, not unlike the other composers. By comparison, the various character roles found in my pieces and that of Erik Peters differ from the other works in question in that the narrative point of view is continually in flux from episode to episode whereas the reading/performance found Enström and Blomqvist represent a single poetic voice. Lastly, although Parmerud also works with a variety of voices, he has in many instances transformed the vocal material into musical textures via electronic processing.

Returning to Table II, while some license regarding word order has been taken by all of the composers, the grammatic structure of the texts has, by and large, been preserved. In the case of the more abstract poetic texts, such as Grave and Johnson, this is essential in order to maintain semantic meaning. Otherwise, the practice of repetition and re-ordering of single words and phrases falls within the ordinary procedure of music composition.

Wordplay is a particularly salient aspect in the texts of Johnson and Lakatos where the authors construct unlikely, new words and striking combinations of ordinary words. Humor plays a significant role in my own work and is expressed more directly in scripted prose and dialog, but also in reference to extra-musical situations from everyday life and the

media. Unfortunately in terms of this article, all of the works discussed – with the exception of mine which is in English – have been realized in Swedish. (See References for information on Swedish original texts.) Naturally, this prevents non-Swedish speakers from appreciating the language content and its significant nuances fully. In contrast, despite relatively good knowledge of English in Sweden and elsewhere, a good number of specific references made to American media culture often understandably slip past even an attentive audience. Incidentally, many of the text-sound compositions made during the Sixties and Seventies were recorded in both Swedish and English so as to encourage greater distribution.

4. The Second (and Third) Generations - Music and processing

As noted previously by both Hultberg and Johnson, the later works discussed here display greater focus on electroacoustic music than text-sound composition. In this section, I will briefly highlight some prominent features of each work.

4.1 *Närheter* (1978) or *Proximities* by Åke Parmerud is an early work for which he won the first of twelve awards at the Bourges competition. While displaying many of the characteristics that will become well-known trademarks of Parmerud's music, one also hears a strong influence from works such as *Clouds* (1976) and *For Jon* (1977) by Lars-Gunnar Bodin particularly with regard to the electronic processing. Employing an experimental vocoder at The Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Parmerud derives the greater part of the musical sounds from the spoken text material. Ironically, since much of the text is heavily processed through a vocoder, the level of comprehensibility of the spoken material, while retaining its vocal profile, is reduced to a musical texture. Parmerud also uses sung choral material which is sometimes used as is and, in other instances, is processed thus creating a link to the vocoder processed speech. Some of the text is presented relatively unaltered in the foreground mainly with the poetic text and with fragments of text in various permutations and combinations. The work was produced using a 16-track tape recorder which invited extensive overlaying of materials.

4.2 *Slutförbannelser* (1981) or *Final Curses* by Rolf Enström, which has been called a music-dramatic work, evokes a desolate, apocalyptic landscape. Spanning nearly thirty-five minutes, nearly half of the work is pure electroacoustic music, including a thirteen minute epilog comprised of sweeping waves of additive synthesis spectra. The dramatic opening with high crotales and a dark pedal tones is followed by varied settings of Elsa Grave's text. Following the introduction, in the first section, through processing with filters and pre-echo, Grave's highly characteristic voice and accent become noise-like and disembodied, fragmentary and spectre-like. Many of the accompanying electronic and concrete sounds are similarly noisy and contribute to the smoky gray, fog-like sense of the mix. Speed variations and short delays play an important role in profiling the voice throughout the piece. Enström relates a particularly advanced use of delay in which Grave fills the 24-track recorder in a soft and expressive voice with near identical re-takes of the same text, but without hearing the previous versions; spread across the stereo field, the effect is both massive, deep and velvet-like. (Interview with the author, 29 March 2009)

4.3 *Inside Pandora's Box* (1991) and *Creature Comforts* (1998) by the author are companion pieces.

“Formally, *Inside Pandora's Box* is an attempt to apply film/video editing concepts to the structure of music. Various scenarios are “set” complete with music, dialog and effects. These are woven together in a continuous associative stream to create a pseudo-media reality. The music and the text comprise a double network of meaning; text and music mutually qualify and nuance each other.” (Brunson 2004: 4)

Creature Comforts is also a text-driven work, but the text is more cohesive than its predecessor, which is much more fragmentary. The musical layers of both works are heavily influenced by popular musical idioms. The synthesized sounds in *Inside Pandora's Box*, however, are based exclusively on a scale comprised of the natural overtone series. A good deal of samples were also made from mouth sounds, including kisses and tongue clicks.

4.4 *Löpa Varg* (1995) or *Run Wolf* by Anders Blomqvist is comprised of three layers including the main text, phonetic extensions of text fragments and a synthesized layer of musical textures. The principal text – seven poems by Bengt Emil Johnson – is presented in sequence; the reading is almost neutral and mixed in mono so as to maintain its primacy. Connection between the main text and the synthesized background textures is mediated by phonetic extracts such as “s” and “r” which enhance and decorate the main text with sonic filigree. Through a masterful use of delay and reverb, the small sampled events inject energy creating anticipation and excitement in the delicate flow of the music. In one poem which features the consonant “s”, the speech is extensively time-stretched to emphasize the “s” sound, while the same text is overlaid at normal speed nearly canonically. The seven sections are often linked by the Swedish word “återblick” – literally flashback or reflection – that signals a new start or renewal.

4.5 *Allt som ligger under snön är gratis* (1999) or *All that lies under the snow is for free* by Erik Peters fits comfortably within the text-sound tradition. He not only derives “background” textures from vocal materials but also creates sonic settings for “scenes” implied by the texts. There are appropriately three separate snow storms over which the speaker shouts; in the final blizzard he is blown away. In one section Peters processes the voice by applying partial tracking techniques to create singing speech; the section commences solely with the processed speech and gradually cross-fades to the unprocessed original. Later, when a drunkard character slurps coffee, Peters takes great pains to realistically set the sonic stage with sounds of a café environment and the clinking of a coffee cup; he labored to adjust the timing of the speech with the presumed movements of the character taking up the cup, drinking and putting it back down on the saucer. (Interview with the author, 5 May 2009) Lastly, Peters makes both explicit and implicit references to the

original text-sound composers using characteristic aesthetic approaches, techniques and textures which are spread throughout the piece; these are evident to those familiar with the Swedish text-sound repertoire.

5. Conclusion

Bengt Emil Johnson was correct in 1967 to declare that text-sound was "not a style, nor a unified 'ism', nor a movement." (Hultberg 2005: 13) Likewise, his aforementioned observation with regard to the drift from text-sound to electroacoustic music also rings true. But, far from declaring text-sound as passé, the works of the composers from the second and third generations testify to the inclusiveness and strength of the text-sound concept as an artistic alternative. And, as a teacher, I notice a palpable renewal of interest among the coming generation.

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