

“Midsummer Spin”

Noah Fishman, for The Princeton Traveler

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*Adapted from my Senior Thesis, “Lyssna: A String Quartet in Five Movements, with Notes from a Traveler.”*

It’s late June, and in the evening sun, Ovanmyra Bystuga glows the color of lingonberry jam. Tall white letters spell out the name of the community hall, harmonizing with the building’s handsome white trim and red log siding. I hitchhiked here from the center of Rättvik with my new friend Hanna. The ride took us through dense birch and conifer forest: Perhaps we went east towards Boda, or maybe we went westward, closer to Bingsjö. I haven’t yet been in Sweden long enough to get my bearings.

This dance is a part of the Musik vid Siljan program of events, but it appears to reflect a more typical community function. The musicians for the night are the Boda Spelmanslag, a group of amateur fiddlers from Boda. Hanna guides me through the beginner’s dance steps without music, and has graciously assumed the role as leader. Tonight we’re learning *polska*, the Swedish flavor of a traditional Scandinavian dance. I’m steeling myself, taking note of my position on the dance floor. Looking at our instructors, the movement seems like an easy two-step. I just rock forward from the heel of the right foot to the ball of the left, step my right foot forward, then repeat in reverse. Should be no problem.

Then the fiddlers begin to play, and my problems begin. I see people’s right feet twist around their left, with their left ankle corkscrewing upward and adding length to every third step. Mysteriously, other dancers’ feet seem to disappear when they spin, then reappear on the other side when they stop. It’s a complicated micro-variation of the polska movement, idiosyncratic to Boda, and I can’t figure any of it out. The music stretches with each corkscrew, slowing down momentarily. If a metronome tried to join in, it wouldn’t last three beats.

Evidently, neither can I. Impossibly, I’m hitting people with my back and elbows as I stumble over Hanna’s feet. Hanna directs me as I falter: “You have to shoot your foot between my legs when I step forward to turn.” Somehow I’m constantly ending up ahead of her, even though she’s leading. The gap between her shoes opens and closes and I’m spinning with the wrong foot forward agin.

The musicians have been playing for under a minute and I think I’ve succeeded in tripping over everyone else in the intro class. I’m trying to lock in the right pattern at the right time, listening for musical cues and for the loping swishing of the other dancers’ feet. But with every step I feel myself slipping behind, and Hanna continuously stops me, re-centers my feet, and tries to start again. We haven’t even incorporated the bewildering turning motion yet. The other dancers are turning clockwise with their partners, opposing the larger counterclockwise flow of couples around the dance floor. They resemble pairs of gears twisting around one another. Everyone looks calm, relaxed, and at times even bored, though from my frustrated position their ease looks

more like stoicism. Their feet slide smoothly beneath them. It's a sea of gliding heads and shoulders, undulating like a shallow bay in the summer breeze. Eventually, the hall begins to get too crowded for an amateur like me, and I hastily thank Hanna and take my leave. Locals who look as though they've been dancing for sixty years begin to push their way onto the churning dance floor.

From afar, the polska looks simple and unhurried, though the movement definitely requires concentration, even to observe. Foreheads shine with sweat despite the understated and repetitive steps. Away from the dance floor, children working in a cafe stand hand snacks through a wall. Tunnbröd (flatbread) with butter, kaka med vaniljsås (yellow cake with vanilla sauce), roasted coffee and black currant juice are the fare, and I sample everything. The building is at least twenty degrees hotter than the quiet evening air outside. It's 9pm, and the sun is still streaming through the windows of the stout red community dance hall.

Last May, so I'd heard, was the coldest May Sweden had in 250 years, and the ensuing midsummer had been uncharacteristically rainy. Since I've arrived, however, the sun has been shining around the clock. Every person I've seen, musician, dancer, or otherwise, is smiling and moving slowly. Even twilight lasts many hours. The sun takes its time, perched contentedly on the horizon.