

## **Popular music and affective socialisation**

### **Fernando, politics and musical meaning**

Apart from the fact that it would be rather pathetic for an academic at least as old as Abba's members to attack one of the music industry's most popular and accomplished acts of all time, it would also be destructive and hypocritical. Hanging up the question of cultural/political responsibility on one song by one group would actually be far worse than trying to personalise events in Chile in the form of an unconvincing you-and-me relationship. This is because the question of the musical-ideological meaning and possible effects of *Fernando* is a matter of socialisation patterns i.e. patterns of how groups of individuals relate to their social surroundings.<sup>17</sup>

In this perspective, music may be seen as a symbolic system communicating non-verbal patterns of socialisation (e.g. how to *feel*, what emotional behaviour to use). These patterns *always* occur in conjunction with non-musical symbolic systems (words, pictures, actions, etc.) together with which they are communicated in specific social, historical and cultural contexts. There is in this way interaction between the symbolic (including musical) representation of socially objective relationships individual-society and the socially objective relationships themselves. Since society is in a state of constant dynamic change, none of these objective relationships is permanent. There will be dislocation and incongruity at points in history when the objective relationships change but the cultural tradition inside which the symbolic meanings are produced do not. As we have seen, *Fernando* was produced at such a point in the cultural history of Europe, now connected (in a specific way not to be elaborated here) by the media to more global events. On the other hand, the cultural production system in which *Fernando* was created stayed conservatively at an earlier stage in our history (the romantic age of the bourgeois individual and the virtual restriction of musically expressible interhuman relations to the pseudo-intimacy of the 'me-and-you-in-love' format). There was definite incongruity between this historical-cultural tradition of popular music production, with its concomitant norms implicitly delimiting legitimate areas for musical expression, and the real contemporary experiences and feelings of the vast majority of citizens in industrialised Europe: the Vietnam war and the terror in Chile were, after all, everyday events on Swedish TV for a while.<sup>18</sup> In this way, *Fernando* not only *lagged* behind the times, it also *dragged* time back to an earlier stage in our cultural history. This does *not* mean that 'me-and-you' relationships are less relevant than before: it just means that the affective framework of popular music production must be expanded if it does not wish to lose all credibility in the long run.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, affective credibility is difficult to achieve in a situation where private enterprise in the commercial music business is bound by the laws of its own understanding of the word 'freedom' to compete for the favour of a 'market'. Such a men-

17. 'Socialisation' as translation of Habermas's *Sozialisierung*, not of Marx's *Vergesellschaftung*, i.e. the individual's process of learning social skills, not the increasing social and global character of production.

18. There was really not much intrusion of the unmasked face of imperialism into the European living room via TV before napalm-burnt Vietnamese children and street executions in Saigon were shown a few years earlier: so mass vicarious experiences of horror and the resultant mass feelings of disgust, anger, sympathy and solidarity was from the European viewpoint an extremely *recent* phenomenon. Of course, this process was later reversed with military censorship of Malvinas (Falklands) and Gulf War reports.

19. ANC galas, benefit records, the *Sun City* project and similar pop music productions of the middle and late eighties showed some evidence of this need. See note 6-14, p.119.

tality means that producers of popular music feel all too frequently obliged, by force of their own concept of 'freedom' and will to succeed financially, to produce music that meets the least line of resistance and produces most 'love at first listening'. This leads in turn, especially in small markets like Sweden, to an avoidance of sounds and words liable to polarise a potential mass audience<sup>20</sup> and to the selection of music and lyrics which tally well with the non-verbal (implicit) ideologies, attitudes, norms of behaviour, taboos and social structure of their cultural market. At the time of *Fernando*, those attitudes and norms could, at an affective level for the Swedes, be summed up in one word: *lagom*, a concept which might be of some use in the discussion of mainstream popular culture in other industrialised nations too.

### 'Lagom'

*Lagom* is perhaps the most interesting and insidious word in the Swedish language. My dictionary<sup>21</sup> gives the following English renderings: 'just right' (i.e. not too little, not too much), 'enough', 'right', 'in moderation', 'moderately', 'fitting', 'appropriate' and 'suitable'. In other words, *lagom* measures quantity and evaluates quality. It is a much employed and popular word expressing the *positive* quality of something which is *not extreme*. It is a word which encodes *implicit* consensus as to what is 'just right' or 'fitting' *as though* such consensus were the statement of an objectively quantifiable truth.<sup>22</sup>

Although the *lagom* mentality dominates much of Swedish behaviour,<sup>23</sup> this is hardly the time or place to enter into a detailed historical discussion of that nation's culture. However, at a more general level, it should be stated that the old elitist trick, often used in North Atlantic nations, of making humility, shyness, moderation, reticence, taciturnity and obedience into *publicly* propagated virtues (chiefly for the lower classes of course), plays a very important part in Sweden's own Lutheran heritage. The most succinct expression of such 'lie-low', self-denial and self-censorship terror was coined by Danish novelist Carl-Axel Sandemose in his novel *Jantelagen* (= The Law of Jante), whose first (and great) commandment runs

'Thou shalt not believe thou art someone'.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, the corollary to this notion is that privileged groups in society then receive education, learn how to talk, write, express themselves, give orders, etc. They are socialised to believe that they *are* someone while 'others' *are not*. The quasi-proletarianisation of many of the middle couches in post-war years, the subsequent process of *apparent* 'de-authoritisation' in public institutions and, most importantly, the development of the trade union movement proved to many 'ordinary people' that this socialised status quo could be questioned and challenged. However, since centuries-old cultural traditions do not disappear over a generational night, the *lagom* mentality and The Law of Jante law still flourish. The historical remnants of this cultural heritage survive mainly at a non-verbal level, in the gestures, behavioural norms and *music* of the majority of the population. While the intellectual elite may

20. In this context, Adorno's concept of 'standardisation' (*Nivellierung*) is of considerable use (see Middleton, 1990: 34-63).

21. *Svensk-engelsk ordbok*. Stockholm: Nordstedts, 1964.

22. This belief in the absolute value of *lagom* goes so far that most Swedes cannot understand how *lagom* can be regarded as an extreme position on a bipolar scale running from extremely *lagom* (mega-moderate) to extremely extreme.

23. A telling example: not long before Abba rose to fame, the Swedish conservative party changed its name from *Högerpartiet* (= party of the right (wing)) to *Moderaterna* (= the 'moderates') in order to boost their election odds.

24. The original Danish runs 'Du ska ikke tro du er noen'.