

Reviews

BOOK

Kristin Jonzon is a well-known researcher in traditional singing. Recently, she has been awarded a three-year research grant for the project “Tonality beyond Frequencies”. She is Co-Managing Editor of the *Journal Analytical Approaches to World Music*.

At first glance, this work leaves me with two striking impressions: first, the author’s excellent writing style and her sense of deep, balanced judgment; and second, a firm background in a research tradition, that of Northern Europe, which is based both on long-term ethnographies and in-depth musical analysis. The search for “meaning behind the music” (p. 38) is always intertwined with a down-to-earth insistence on “observable phenomena” (p. 3).

The claim of Jonzon’s thesis is not a small one. It is the foundation of a new multi-modal model of tonality that goes beyond traditional concepts of scale, in the context of unaccompanied traditional solo singing in Scotland, Sweden, Poland, and Norway. Her experience as a singer in her Swedish family tradition and as an active member of international singing communities, as well as her broad interdisciplinary background as an academic scholar, are two powerful preconditions for this endeavor.

The thesis consists of three main parts, divided into two or three chapters. The sections are well arranged. Preliminary conclusions and numerous cross-references keep the reader clearly oriented throughout the 249 pages. In Part I (“The Empirical, Theoretical, and Methodological Setting”), Jonzon presents the innovative capacity of her approach:

Firstly the descriptive approach that does not presuppose any stipulated intonation pattern. Secondly the attention to intonation as something which emerges throughout a performance. And finally a focus on the phrase instead of the tone. (P. 12).

Among her key terms, I find particularly innovative the idea of “the singer’s two acoustic rooms” (p. 15), referring to the different perceptions of hearing one’s own voice during performance and that of whoever’s voice, recorded or live from the outside. Jonzon draws a distinction between “source singers” (p. 16), known from archives or fieldwork, as an (admittedly somewhat unspecific) alternative to the term “tradition bearers” with its normative implications. Likewise, “tonality” (p. 17) is used “descriptively rather than normatively”, as “a pattern of relations between frequencies which can be perceived, produced, and used to create ‘musical processes’, irrespective of what the patterns look like” (ibid.). The concept of tradition is explained later in the text. In line with theoretical folkloristics (Henry Glassie), Jonzon understands tradition as a dynamic process and a “constant, ongoing selection of material by contemporary singers” (pp. 117–118). A pronounced skepti-

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cism against “the thought of one tradition” (p. 27) leads to Jonzon’s central argument against “the idea of a general tonality which includes all instruments and performances, which is manifested in an abstract scale” (ibid.). “Traditional singing” is understood as a “playground to explore musical, embodied, and social opportunities for human actions, rather than a given aesthetic ‘suit’ in which to dress a selection of music” (p. 18). Jonzon’s concept of the singer’s “aesthetic playground” goes far beyond traditional studies in individual melodic variation.

Jonzon positions her thesis “within the Scandinavian interdisciplinary research which is built on the consolidation of combining musical analysis, in my case quantitative studies of musical parameters, against an interpretative backdrop of ethnological perspectives” (p. 19). Some of the most well-known names Jonzon frequently refers to are Ingrid Åkesson, Margareta Jersild, Mats Johansson, Tellef Kvifte, Reidar Sevåg, and Johan Westman. Not by chance, many of them are known as performing ethnomusicologists. While the emic perspective is always there, the author undertakes the not easy task to harmonize it with comparative research: “a descriptive model which is based on the actual singer’s experiences enables neutral comparisons across time and space” (p. 21).

The main research questions (pp. 25–26) refer to how intonation correlates “with the production of speech sounds”, “with song type, song text, and thereby communication, and storytelling”, “with certain tone places” (s. b.), and “with musical form structure”. Outlining the theoretical foundation of the thesis, Jonzon draws on “synthesis of ethnography and sound analysis” (p. 36), as articulated in the project [Analytical Approaches to World Music](#), which represents one of the most powerful directions in contemporary ethnomusicology. She also refers to John Blacking’s opposition to the socio-cultural system and the universal biological system. Blacking was obviously not too interested in the biological foundations of human musicality and in human sociobiology. The opposition of a biological substructure and cultural substructure is more developed in Comparative-systematic musicology ([Graf 1967](#)).

Crucial for Jonzon’s emic approach is the idea that “embodiment starts with the sounds themselves and represents a source of tacit knowledge which is ‘first-order’, while conceptualisations are ‘second-order’” (p. 38). It is precisely this close attention to embodied performance which allows the author to approach issues of gender not from the fashionable constructivist perspective and less in the context of social roles but primarily based on “how the physiology of each gender produces different sounds” (p. 40, see also pp. 138–145). This is, again, about *observable phenomena*.

In the center of the analysis are 75 recorded performances of the well-known singer Dansar Edvard Jonsson (1893–1976). In terms of methodology Jonzon combines fieldwork, software measurements (Melodyne) and the singers’ experience. She empirically starts from “intonation as it is measured” (p. 52), then linking it to its tone place category: “which is fundamentally different since it implies a far more descriptive, and less normative approach” (ibid.). She argues that (except octave corrections of the software) “nothing has to be adjusted to fit an abstract idea” (p. 53), as “everything that is sung ‘is right’” (ibid.). But, with all skepticism against normative judgements by outsiders, does that mean that traditional singers never make mistakes? At least, Jonzon later concedes that “the risk of losing control can occur”

(p. 56). One important observation is “the fact that people learn songs from each other proves the existence of a structure” (p. 51). Jonzon identifies “the phrase as a formula” (p. 57), i.e. as the underlying pattern. Following Anne Murstad’s and Anne Danielsen’s concept of “repeating revision” (p. 58), Jonzon emphasizes recreation rather than copying.

Of particular interest for the foreign reader is Jonzon’s critical examination of early 19th-century national romanticist research, particularly with regard to the concept of a Northern scale. Following Kvifte, she lucidly points to the contradictions arising from the idea that a certain type of music can “both be a realization of some natural order, and at the same time specifically Northern” (p. 63). The same contradiction is discussed in Matthew Gelbart’s [The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”. Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner \(2007\)](#), which can safely be called the best intellectual history of folk music research ever written. Notably the chapters “The Invention of Folk Modality, 1775–1840” (pp. 111–152) and “From Pastoral to Picturesque: Nature, Art, and Genre in the Later Eighteenth Century” (pp. 40–79) with their particular focus on Scotland and Germany could reveal the European roots of the both inspiring and misleading ideas on what traditional music is based on. In the context of early criticism of older modal theories (p. 145) one can also mention British musicologist Richard Terry (1864–1938, see [Morgens-tern 2021](#)).

One cornerstone in Jonzon’s argumentation is the different tonal reference in unaccompanied solo singing where unlike in instrumental or vocal-instrumental performance “the unaccompanied singer’s only intonation reference is self-produced, through singing and room reverberation, and further gradual changes along with the melody and speech sounds” (p. 14). However, James Cowdery’s fieldwork with the Sean-nós singer Joe Heaney (Seosamh Ó hÉanaí) has shown that one kind of “self-produced intonation reference” (p. 67) can be surprisingly stable: It is the *nea*, a “mental drone” ([Cowdery 1990](#), p. 39) “I base myself on that note, and I can’t go wrong when that note is still there. It’s very hard to pitch wrong if you do that way” (Heaney, cit. after: [Cowdery 1990](#), p. 38). It would be interesting to know whether this phenomenon of the Sean-nós- singer’s inner acoustic room has any parallel beyond Ireland.

The discussion of participant observation and the bodily experiences of the singing researcher (pp. 85–87) is illuminating. Maybe a stronger reference to [John Bailey \(2001\)](#) and a consideration of [Simon McKerrell \(2022\)](#) rather than Mantle Hood could have contributed to current debates on performative ethnomusicology.

In Part II, Jonzon presents her fieldwork with contemporary performers, presenting her main contributors from Scotland, Sweden, Poland and Norway. This is a fascinating document of both a vivid and a sensitive dialogue between performers sharing sometimes similar, sometimes different bodily experiences, strategies and aesthetics.

Part III analyses intonation patterns in recordings of Edvard Jonsson from different time and in different contexts. It turns out that, among other considerations, software analysis show that the “aim of defining the end of one tone and the beginning of the next revealed shortcomings in the tone as a discrete category” (p. 153). This is only one reason for the focus on the

phrase, as “tones failed as contrastive etic units due to their inherent subjectivity” (p. 158). As Jonzon concludes after a detailed examination of intonation patterns:

the analysis indicate a great tolerance for ‘sameness’, on a local micro level for each interval, as well as for the global level. The work with song visualisations has over time opened my eyes to that the movements within one particular phrase, or tone, mimic the movements in the song, almost in a fractal pattern. (P. 197).

Another conclusion is that “successive intervals produced by the human body, in a communicative context, are more prominent than tone places” (p. 202). But does that mean that it is “unlikely that singers in an unspecified past could control successive pitch shifts smaller than a fifth of a semitone” (p. 217)? This issue should be discussed from a broader disciplinary and geographical perspective.

Indicative for the thesis and its theoretical background is what is discussed less or not at all. Jonzon elegantly ignores any possibility of using the five-line staff notation – which makes perfect sense from her analytical perspective. This, however, does not mean that (synoptic) staff notation cannot be advisable in other comparative contexts. Interestingly, Jonzon does not consider much what can be called the performer-centered paradigm ([Morgenstern 2018](#), pp. 17–18). One reason may be that its paradigmatic significance is so deeply inscribed in the DNA of Nordic ethnomusicology (Tellef Kvifte and Hans-Hinrich Thedens) that it is just considered state of the art.

Jonzon’s evidence-based criticism of pre-defined scales is very much in line with [Rytis Ambrazevičius](#)’ discussion of “pseudo-Greek modes” (2006). I am sure this could be a fruitful discussion for the future. Not less promising debates may evolve from studies published after her thesis, such as fundamental studies on speech and singing by [Patrick Savage \(2026\)](#) or the VocalNotes project ([Proutskova et. al. 2024](#)). Already now, Kristin Jonzon’s dissertation is a milestone in cross-cultural musical analysis and in music anthropology. It deserves a broad reception far beyond ethnomusicology of the Nordic countries. ■