

Boel Lindberg  
Lecture at UCSB April 24th 1998

## How Swedish music turned modern around 1950. Using Bourdieu's concepts 'field and 'capital' to analyze changing cultural patterns.

### Abstract

Musical modernism made a breakthrough in Sweden in the early 1950s. It was the result of efforts made by a group of young composers, musicians, critics, and music scholars in Stockholm. In less than a decade members of the group managed to get positions in the musical life of the capital from which they promoted the new musical style associated with the Darmstadt School. Gradually they won key positions at the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), the Academy of Music, the board of the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra and as critics in the most influential daily papers.

In this new cultural climate composers, directors critics etc. more at home with older styles had to accept that their music was out of date or adjust to the new taste now in vogue. Quite a few composers born around 1900 were marginalized. John Fernström (1897–1961), a provincial composer from the South of Sweden, had managed to get a strong position in the musical life of Stockholm from 1943. His luck lasted until 1953 when both the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra and SBC stopped performing his music.

The reviews of Fernström's music in the Stockholm daily papers between 1943 and 1953 are valuable sources for studying the mechanisms behind the change in musical taste and cultural patterns that took place during those years. In trying to understand the process, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'cultural field' and 'cultural capital' proved to be useful methodological tools.

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Musical modernism made a break-through in Sweden around 1950 like it did in most other Western-European countries. A conventional way of describing this process could be a version like the following:

Several young Swedish composers went to the influential summer-courses at Darmstadt where composers such as Olivier Messiaen, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, and Pierre Boulez, presented puzzling new music and revolutionary thoughts about music. Back in Sweden, and its capital Stockholm where most of them came from, those young composers quickly produced music in the new style. They were lucky to find several possibilities to have their music performed, critics who appreciated it,

politicians and governmental officials interested to support new cultural forms, and a small but influential audience which quite willingly accepted the new musical language. In mid 1950s the new style was definitely established and propagated both by the leading Symphony Orchestra in Stockholm and by the Swedish Broadcast Corporation (the only radio station at this time in Sweden). One result of this change in taste was that somewhat older composers - say those born 1885–1915 – were considered old-fashioned and new works by them were not put up at concert programs, as often as they had before 1950. Quite a few of them were in fact marginalized and some of them even stopped composing music. Others tried to adjust to the new winds that now blew.

How could this change in taste take place so quickly and profoundly? In this lecture I intend to show some of the mechanisms behind changing cultural patterns like the one just described. I will demonstrate it with the help of the trajectory of one of those composers who got marginalized, during the process of modernization. I will also bring in a theoretical dimension into my analysis by referring to concepts developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

The composer is John Fernström (1897–1961) whose career as a musician and composer stands at the centre of my dissertation (the full title of which appears on the handout you hopefully have in your hands). He was born in China in 1897 as the son of a Swedish missionary. When he was 9 years old he was sent home to Sweden to attend school. Very early he decided to become a musician. At the age of 15 he entered a small music conservatory in the South of Sweden. He was trained as a violinist and got his first job when he was 18 in a professional orchestra in Helsingborg, a moderate sized town in southern Sweden. He stayed with the orchestra from 1916 to 1939. During that period he gave up his dreams of becoming a solo violinist. Instead he started to study composition with a lesser-known composer (Peder Gram) in Copenhagen (Helsingborg lies very close to Denmark and its capital Copenhagen). By mid 1930s Fernström had composed several symphonies, concertos for various instruments (violin, alto violin, bassoon, clarinet and flute), chamber music, choral music, songs and even started writing an opera. Most of the music he composed during his years in Helsingborg was also performed in the town. At a local level he was

definitely a success. He was not the only composer in the town - at least two other musicians who lived there also composed music although they were not as prolific as he was. But they all knew each other and often met to discuss music. In the 1920s they formed an informal group together with some young artists also interested in music. This local avant-garde arranged exhibitions and concerts and the existence of it could in many ways explain why Fernström became a composer.

In 1939 Fernström left Helsingborg and during the following ten years he tried to make a living as a composer and free-lance conductor with still the south of Sweden as his main working field. He first lived in Malmö where commissions to compose music for various festivities within the worker's movements became one important source of income. In 1943 he moved to Lund, a small town with a university (the one I belong to) also situated in the South. It had a vivid local musical life. In 1948 he became the municipal music director of the town, a position that he held until his death in 1961.

But back to Fernström's career as a composer. In early 1943 Fernström had a debut in Stockholm with his *Concertino for flute, women's choir, and small orchestra*, op 52, completed at about this time. The work is inspired by a poem with the title New Moon by the Swedish-American poet Carl Sandburg. It is a poem about Indians riding bareback in the night. A ring of silver foxes is surrounding the new moon. Actually, you are not supposed to hear the text, it is sung rather weak by a women's choir in the background. I will give you a short excerpt from the work taken in the beginning after a solo played by the flute.

[Example no 1]

The concert was very well received both by the public and the critics. A performance of his *Songs of the Sea for coloratura and strings*, op 62 a few months later also in Stockholm reaffirmed his earlier success and led to Fernström's music coming into great demand. His real breakthrough in Stockholm came in January 1944 with the performance of his *Symphony no. 6*, op 40 from 1938/39.

Subsequent to this much of his music now could be heard on Swedish radio. During the following years up until 1953 most of the premier performances of his new orchestral works took place in Stockholm: three symphonies (no's 10, 11 and 12), his

concertos for bassoon and for violin (violin concerto no 2), an *Ostinato for string orchestra* and a concert performance of parts of his opera *Achnaton*. On radio there were also several premiers of chamber music by him during the late 1940s.

To get you an idea of how his music sounded when he was at the top of his career I will play a passage from the beginning of the slow second movement of his *String quartet No. 6* composed in 1947 and also premiered that year.

[Example no. 2]

Approximately ten daily newspapers in general reviewed the performances of Fernström's music in Stockholm. – Yes, at that time there were 10–12 daily newspapers based in Stockholm. The critics at first received his music very well and it piqued curiosity. It was looked upon as a fresh southern wind with qualities that set it apart from that of other Swedish composers of the same generation. Many influential critics were clearly impressed by Fernström's craftsmanship and his imaginative instrumental artistry. To other critics the lack of sentimentality in his music and the clever use of contrapuntal techniques were qualities that were appreciated. From about 1947, however, some of the critics started to find flaws in his music. Negative opinions that were raised included that it was not enough coherent, that it was merely lavish surface, that it lacked content and seriousness. Others found his music old-fashioned and too appealing to popular taste. Not all of the critics, however, were as negative as this; quite a few continued to consider his new compositions as highly valuable, as reviews show especially of the premier performance of his *Symphony No 12* in 1952 and his *Second violin concerto* in 1953. In those compositions Fernström showed that he was open for the new stylistic currents in music that he had picked up through radio and a visit to the ISCM festival in Brussels in 1950. Thus, in both compositions he uses a twelve-tone row as melodic material but does not go as far as to serialism.

The premier of Fernström's second violin concerto became the last performance for a long time of music by him in Stockholm. No works by him were put on the program of the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra until the end of the 1970s, and on the Swedish Radio his music from this time on appeared very seldom. Apparently he did no longer belong to the circle of composers that formed the Swedish Parnassus.

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Why did this happen? How can we explain the rise and fall of Fernström and which more fundamental processes of how musical tastes change can we infer from this history of an individual composer? In my research on Fernström's career I read many hundreds of reviews of his music. I discovered that there was a shift not only in the appreciation of his music but also in what kind of criteria critics used. One important way to chart changes in the musical climate in a musical culture is to understand how the criteria that critics use change over time.

The changes in the evaluative criteria used by reviewers, which became evident from 1946, can be related to the new constellations that by that time began to emerge in Stockholm's musical life. A new generation of composers evolved as a group during these years and soon became known as Måndagsgruppen [the Monday Group], as they met at the home of Karl-Birger Blomdahl on Mondays. Blomdahl came to be seen as the group's unofficial leader. The group included musicians, composers, music scholars and music journalists. From 1947, many important and influential positions in the Swedish and Stockholm musical world started to fall into the hands of members of the group. By 1953, several of them were established in positions from which they could direct and influence considerable portions of Swedish musical life.

The reviews of Fernström's music reflect how new evaluative criteria were impacted by the discussions which took place within the Monday Group, as critics from around 1950 either gradually accepted or clearly rejected the new criteria. Eclecticism, over-flirtatiousness with the public and especially remnants of late-Romanticism awoke strong comments from critics. Since Fernström did not really belong to the Stockholm musical life, this change of musical taste stands out more clearly in the reviews of his music than it does in reviews of the music of other composers in his generation that more permanently belonged to the Stockholm musical life. The reviews of their premiers often are much more tinted with antagonistic arguments or uncritical admiration due to the fact they were participants in the intrigues of the Stockholm musical life.

Fernström's fate as well as the change in musical taste that can be traced on-going in the reviews of his music can be understood and explained with the help of theories and methodological tools developed by Pierre Bourdieu.

Since Pierre Bourdieu might be a scholar that you have not met in your work I will give a short presentation of him and some of his basic concepts that I have used as theoretical and methodological tools. He is professor of Sociology at the Collège de France in Paris and has since the early 1960s carried out a great number of empirical grounded research projects in many different fields within sociology. Among those his research on educational systems and culture as well as his methodological works have evoked great response outside France. He has especially gained important recognition in the sociology of culture and in cultural studies. On the handout that you hopefully hold in your hands I have listed some of the more important books by him in the field of cultural studies.

Bourdieu's theoretical concepts have a solid basis in his empirical work, research projects where data have been collected by the means of interviews and questionnaires carried out by him and numerous research assistants. Within the cultural area he thus has made thorough studies of the literary world and authors, critics, publishers and others who belong to that world. Other areas include painting, photography, and fashion designers. He has never directly studied musical life but questions about musical taste play an important role in his book *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

With the help of the two concepts both often referred to by Bourdieu, I will try to give a quick overview of some of his key theoretical stands. The concepts are: *field* (or more exactly *field of social competition*) and *symbolic capital* (and more specifically here one form of this namely *cultural capital*).

*A field of social competition* is a system of relations between positions held by specialized agents and institutions that all compete about something that is at the core of their activities. In the literary field, for instance there are authors, critics, editors, literary scholars, publishers, magazine editors, and institutions like libraries, cultural departments at newspapers, radio stations, TV-stations, literary associations and academies, literature departments at universities etc. The most important question

that ties together all those people and institutions is 'What is good literature?' This is the key question in the competition. In order to handle combats about this question different forms of formal and informal institutions of consecration are established. Such institutions are for instance a list like "Critics choice of the month" or committees put together to choose prize-winners like for instance the committee for the Pulitzer Prize. Further, one kind of institution for consecration is professional organizations that take in new members on the recommendations of one or usually several members. In Sweden the composers' guild acts in that way. Through its admittance procedure it tries to uphold a certain standard in compositional knowledge. Another important institution for consecration within the musical field is of course the board and program committee of professional orchestras. That a new work is scheduled on the program of the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra is for instance an important recognition for a Swedish composer.

*Capital* means to Bourdieu as to most of us something that is valuable, an asset, and a resource. It has two different forms: one is the *economic form* that is the everyday connotation of the word. But, according to Bourdieu, we also recognize assets that work on a symbolic level. He thus uses the concept *symbolic capital* to explain how certain people and institutions, exams and titles, artworks and scholarly works are imbued with worth, value, prestige and quality.

*Symbolic capital* has several different forms. One of those is *cultural capital*. Bourdieu sees exams from well-known schools, knowledge of art, classical music and belles-lettres, the ability to speak and read several languages as well as pleasant manners in speech and behaviour as cultural capital. Cultural capital appears in three different shapes: we find it as *institutionalized cultural capital* which means exams, titles, decorations, prizes and medals; as *objectified cultural capital* that is as artworks, libraries (both private and institutional), antiquities etc. Finally, it also appears as *embodied cultural capital that is as a person's refinement* good manners; judgement of taste, ability to chose among and enjoy different musical works, paintings, etc. The embodied cultural capital is an important part of our *habitus*, another key concept that Bourdieu often uses. Since I do not need it to underpin my arguments in this lecture, I

will leave it. If you want to find out more about it there are several references to it in the literature I have listed on the handout.

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Bourdieu's concepts *field of social competition* and *cultural capital* proved very useful when I wanted to understand why my composer – John Fernström – so easily was marginalised. I also helped me to discern the process that led to the establishment of musical modernism in Sweden after the Second World War.

The aesthetic program of the Monday-group was closely modelled on the new European musical avant-garde that had developed after the Second World War. It can be looked upon as a manifestation of the stylistic ideals of a new generation that needed to stick out against the pervading taste patterns in order to get a place in cultural life. This young generation happened to be very vital and competent and its informal leader Karl-Birger Blomdahl was a person with a charisma almost as strong as that of Pierre Boulez who at about the same time managed to get a dominating position in French musical life. The circle that Blomdahl formed, that is the Monday Group, contained musicians, composers, musicologists, music theorists and critics; all of whom were equipped with appropriate cultural capital that they could invest in the musical life of Stockholm and in the Swedish musical life as well. This arena I see as the Swedish national musical field in the sense that Bourdieu uses the concept. It was a field of competition where the agents and institutions were fighting about what good music sounded like. Members of the Monday Group gradually from about 1947 managed to win positions in various important institutions for consecration. They became critics at the most important newspapers, they became chair and secretary at a small but influential society for performance of new music in Stockholm, they became members of the board of the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra, they reached high positions at the music department within the Swedish Radio, they suddenly sat in the committee at the Royal Academy of Music that awarded state financed stipends and so on. And maybe, most important, the members of the group who were composers got many opportunities to have their music heard. Karl Birger Blomdahl's *Symphony No. 3, Facets*, composed in 1950 had a highly praised premier performance



in Stockholm in the early 1950s and has since then been regarded as one of the real masterpieces of Swedish modernism.

[Example 3: from Blomdahl *Symphony no 3, Facets*]

One reason that the members of the Monday Group succeeded in winning those influential positions was that they all owned cultural capital that in the cultural climate after the Second World War was considered valuable. This cultural capital consisted of higher education – several of the composers had college-education, which until then had not been very usual among Swedish composers. Most of them also had a solid upper-middle class background. They had further studied music at the Royal Swedish Academy. Several of them had had opportunities to study music abroad (in Basel, Paris and in Darmstadt) and quite a few of them were good writers. Also many of them had close contacts with poets, authors and painters who belonged to modernist circles within those arts. Contacts that in the post-war cultural climate helped much to get recognition from the "right circles".

The success of the Monday Group can also be explained by the need after the war to establish new criteria for judgements of taste that could be used more effectively than the existing taste system to distinguish between different social layers in society. The musical modernism that Karl-Birger Blomdahl and his followers propagated was a style or musical belief system that strongly reacted against the hitherto in Sweden prevailing aesthetic forms of romanticism and classicism. They rejected tonality with its implications for harmony, melody and form, and instead saw atonality and especially serialism as the only logical way forward. They also strongly advocated a more scientific way to compose and stressed the importance of education and pedagogical measures to foster both a new generation of composers and the public. The interwar compositional styles like neoclassicism and modified romanticism in which popular/folk music traits had been integrated was exposed to extensive polemical writings by members of the group.

Bourdieu discusses and demonstrates in his book *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* how the establishment of a hierarchy between an analytical

and abstract way of conceiving art on the one hand and an emotional and physical way of experiencing art on the other hand always is present when a dominating class tries to set up norms to evaluate artistic expressions. In Sweden, as elsewhere in Western Europe, there seems to have been a strong need after the great war to stake out the frontier between the systems of taste of dominated and dominant classes. The rejection of the Monday Group of the prevailing popular romantic style in music with its appeal to sentiments can in this perspective be analysed as means to establish new systems of taste that more effectively than the existing could be used as socially distinguishing.

To conclude, my explanation of why Fernström so easily fell out in the process of the establishment of musical modernism. First, he did not really belong to the musical field of Stockholm, which at the same time functioned as the Swedish national musical field. His position within the field was more that of a guest protected and helped by a few influential agents. One of those was composer Ture Rangström who had first proposed that Fernström's flute concertino should be played in Stockholm. Rangström died already in 1947. Another patron was the composer Kurt Atterberg. After the war he was accused of having had too close contacts with German Nazi cultural life and protection by him soon became embarrassing to Fernström although he quite early took a stand against the Nazis. The most important loss of a valuable patron was, however, the change of the chief conductor at the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra in 1953. Carl Garaguly had been the chief conductor here since 1941 and he was one of the strongest supporters that Fernström had in Stockholm. In 1953 his contract was not renewed, a measure that most probably some of the modernists had a great part in. Instead the German conductor Hans Schmitt-Isserstedt was hired.

We can also see and understand how Fernström's cultural capital was too small to help him hold a position in the field. As you hopefully remember from my brief presentation of him his formal training was short and quite weak. He never went to college, he was not trained as a violinist at the only musical school that counted at this time in Sweden, that is the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm. His family background was lower middle class – as a matter of fact, his parents never really approved of his choice to become a violinist and withdraw all financial support when

he refused to become an organist. He was further more of an autodidact as a composer although technically quite knowledgeable and advanced, and could not count many other composers in his generation as his friends. And perhaps most important in this context – he was a provincial composer who rather late in life was discovered by the national musical field. The time he experienced fame there was too short to consolidate a permanent place in the national codex of musical works.

In my introduction to this lecture I used words and expressions like: that young composers after the war were lucky to find several possibilities to have their music performed, that they quickly found critics who appreciated their music and governmental officials interested in supporting new cultural forms. They also met an audience that willingly accepted the new modern musical language that they launched. Hopefully I have managed to nuance this picture. With the help of the fate of a knowledgeable and imaginative but provincial composer and the theoretical concepts taken from Pierre Bourdieu I have demonstrated that a strive for influence and power among members of a new strong generation of composers, music critics and music theorists plus the demands to establish new evaluative criteria for music in order to keep up and renew social distinctions between classes, better describe and explain what took place when Swedish music turned modern in the 1950s.

## Handout for lecture April 24th, 1998:

Boel Lindberg, PhD D. Lund University, Sweden

How Swedish music turned modern around 1950. Using Bourdieu's concepts 'field' and 'capital' to analyse changing cultural patterns.

### References:

#### Books

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#### Music:

Blomdahl, Karl-Birger (1916–1968), excerpts from *Symphony No.3, Facets* (1950). BIS CD-611: Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Leif Segerstam, conductor.

Fernström, John (1897–1961): excerpts from *Concertino for flute, women's choir, and small orchestra*, op 52, (1942). Not available on record.

——— Excerpts from *Symphony no. 6, op 40*, (1938/39). BIS CD-903: Malmö Symphony Orchestra, Cecilia Rydinger Alin, conductor.

Lindberg, Boel, *Mellan provins och parnass. John Fernström i svenskt musikliv* [Between Province and Parnassus. John Fernström in Swedish Musical Life] Lund: Arkiv förlag, 1997.

#### Abstract

John Fernström (1897-1961) composed over 200 pieces in the genres of symphonic music, chamber music and vocal music for mixed choirs, male choirs and solo vocals accompanied by piano. He lived most of his life in the province of Scania, first working in Helsingborg from 1916-1939 as a violinist in Nordvästra Skånes Orkesterförening [the Northwest Scanian Orchestra], hereafter he moved to Malmö and worked as a

freelance conductor and composer until 1943. In 1943 he moved to Lund, becoming the municipal music director in 1948. He held this position until his death.

The dissertation focuses primarily on Fernström's career as a composer. The aim is to understand the factors in his life and the context in which he worked which had an impact on this career. The methodological point of departure is Pierre Bourdieu's research on various cultural environments and traditions. Bourdieu's concept of *fields* (fields of social competition), *cultural capital* and *habitus* are used to explain Fernström's career in three different contexts: in the musical world of Helsingborg from 1916-39 (Part I with the title "Power and Music"); in the male choir movement from approximately 1928-55 (Part II "In the World of Male Choirs"); and in the Stockholm concert world from 1943-53 (Part III "Guest Performance on Mount Parnassus"). A sample of his music connected to those phases of his life is also analysed.

Fernström's career proves to be a useful prism through which characteristics of Swedish musical life during the first half of the 1900s become apparent. Using Fernström, it is possible to see the conditions, which were attached to the smaller and limited autonomous music fields, which emerged in some of the provincial areas during this period. It also becomes easier to understand the tensions between provincial and national culture. His career can also be used to discuss the concepts of cultural capital and habitus and their applicability as explanatory concepts in analysing the success of actors in a competitive cultural field.