



*Swedish  
Soul*



HUGO ALFVÉN & HIS  
FOLK-SONG ARRANGEMENTS

Nathan Leaf

**Editor's note:** The musical examples for this article can be found on the ACDA Web site. Click on the interactive link on the *Choral Journal* page <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>.

## Introduction

The Swedish composer and conductor Hugo Alfvén (1872–1960) left an indelible mark on the musical life of Sweden. His impressive body of compositions includes five symphonies, three orchestral rhapsodies, two ballets, an oratorio, several cantatas for choir and instruments, close to seventy songs for solo voice, and one hundred original songs and folk-song arrangements for unaccompanied choir. Alfvén was one of three important Swedish composers, along with Wilhelm Peterson-Berger (1867–1942) and Wilhelm Stenhammar (1871–1927), who came to prominence at the end of the nineteenth century.

A skilled painter who early in his life contemplated a career as an artist, Alfvén's music is notable for its colorful, picturesque harmonic shadings. Much of his music is programmatic. In a radio interview late in his life, Alfvén described his fourth symphony by saying, "This, too, is program music; nearly everything I have written is. I must see it in my mind's eye."<sup>1</sup> The dramatic threads he wove into many of his compositional fabrics were particularly effective in his settings of folk tunes and in his compositions inspired by the natural beauty of his homeland. Through his skill in orchestration and his narrative use of Swedish folk music, in choral arrangements and in instrumental works, Alfvén became the embodiment of Swedish national romanticism in the first part of the twentieth century.

Alfvén's work was highly regarded in his

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native country during his lifetime, and the leading Swedish orchestras still maintain some of his compositions as part of their standard repertoire. Outside of Sweden, many orchestral musicians are familiar with, in particular, his *Midsommarvaka: Svensk Rapsodi Nr. 1* [*Midsummer Vigil: Swedish Rhapsody No. 1*], Op. 19, written in 1903. Beyond his instrumental works, though, it is his unaccompanied choral arrangements of Swedish folk songs that are considered by many to be his most enduring contribution to Swedish music. Several of these folk song settings are still performed regularly, and they are both respected for their compositional quality and beloved for the way in which they deeply evoke the spirit of their homeland. Alfvén's legacy is carried on strongly through these arrangements, which maintain a special place in the hearts and minds of Swedish choral musicians.

## Early Biography

Alfvén grew up in Stockholm, Sweden's capital and largest city.<sup>2</sup> As a child, he studied violin, and he continued to study and perform as a violinist while also studying composition and counterpoint at the music conservatory in Stockholm. In 1890, he secured a position as a second violinist in Stockholm's opera orchestra (Hovkapellet), and, during the next few years, began to emerge as both a solo violinist and a composer. His first major public success as a composer came with the premier of his second symphony in 1899. This success led to many significant compositional opportunities for Alfvén, and for the next decade, he was extremely productive. He established himself as one of the leading composers in the country, and also began to work as a conductor. In 1910, he secured the position of director of music at Uppsala University, and was selected to be the conductor of the prominent Uppsala men's choir, Orphei Drängar.

In 1904, a pivotal encounter proved to be the beginning of a career-long association that provided Alfvén with significant insight into and opportunity for performance of folk song arrangements. As he later recollected in a radio interview, he was in Leksand, a country town on the banks of the Siljan

Lake, about 150 miles northwest of Stockholm. Although he was there for a gathering not related to music, Alfvén was asked if he would direct the community choir while he was in town, and so he quickly arranged a concert in which he played some violin pieces and the choir sang a few songs. Mostly, they sang folk songs, including Alfvén's first two published arrangements. The choir also included singers from the community choir in Mora, a town on the other side of the lake. Soon afterwards, community choirs from three more area towns would join the Leksand and Mora choirs to form the Siljan Choir (Siljanskören). Alfvén was asked to serve as the permanent director for the choir, even though he did not live in the area. He traveled from Stockholm or Uppsala often rehearsing with two or three of the choirs at a time, until putting them all together for one or two dress rehearsals before a concert.<sup>3</sup>

As Alfvén worked with the people in the choir, he became enamored with, as he would later describe it, the choir's "private affinity with the Swedish folk songs...above all the melancholy" and its "fine ear for the language's purity, style, and nobility."<sup>4</sup> The significant effect that the singing of these rural choristers would have on him is foreshadowed in an account of Alfvén's first trip to Leksand. It was the summer of 1898, and Alfvén was taking lessons at his violin teacher's summer home. While on a bicycle trip to Leksand, one of his companions took particular notice of how deeply moved Alfvén was by some of the singing that he had, by chance, heard from the local church choir.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the cosmopolitan composer Alfvén must have found something compelling in the voices from the country towns around Lake Siljan – he continued to direct the Siljan Choir for more than fifty years.

## Alfvén and Folk Songs

Alfvén's 1904 encounter with the choir in Leksand wasn't his first acquaintance with folk music. He had opportunities to encounter authentic vocal and instrumental folk music throughout his career, and he became particularly known for his skill at incorporating these tunes into his compositions. At the same time, choral folk song



arrangements were already an established tradition in Sweden well before Alfvén and were frequently sung by choirs such as the ones Alfvén directed. So, the mere fact that he arranged folk songs is not particularly notable. He wasn't blazing a new musicological path with this work. In fact, what he termed his "research" for many of the folk song arrangements consisted mostly of using folk melodies from previously assembled collections or from choral arrangements that were already known,<sup>6</sup> and the impetus for his work was not so much musicological interest as it was the need to earn extra income through sales of the arrangements or the occasional desire for his choirs to have something new to sing written by their director.

What does make Alfvén's work with folk songs notable is the high quality of the result. Due to the combination of his own personal aesthetic and advanced compositional skill, his familiarity with the melodies, and his inherent sense of drama, Alfvén's settings stand above those of other Swedish composers and arrangers. Their vocal lines

lie well for the voices so that many choirs are able to perform them, and they are, simply put, beautiful. Alfvén was able to express in many of his arrangements deep emotions—including joy, and also longing, wistfulness, and melancholy—in a way that resonates deeply with his fellow Swedes. These characteristics, which are some of the same characteristics that Alfvén found so captivating about the Siljan Choir, are at the core of his choral music and are one of the reasons his folk song arrangements are still considered valuable. Further, the high compositional quality has enabled them to remain musically fresh still today. As musicologist Gunnar Ternhag says, they have a quality that makes them more durable than other folk songs arrangements; singers will not tire of them.<sup>7</sup>

Altogether, Alfvén's eighty-one unaccompanied arrangements include settings of fifty-two different songs, twenty-nine of which are arranged for both mixed choir and male choir, fifteen for only mixed choir, and eight for only male choir (Table 1). As a body of works, Alfvén's folk song arrangements have compositional features that are distinctive

of his personal style, and of the romanticism that defined his writing. With this in mind, it is interesting to consider Alfvén's own thoughts regarding his settings. In an interview late in his life he says:

When I begin with a song, the melodic perspective is what I consider first. From that, it gives out its own harmony, which, accordingly, is the song's own inner-living sound and not something forced by me. From that comes also the feeling for the voice's character and the role of the text.<sup>8</sup>

In another interview, the painter Alfvén sums up his approach to the arrangements by saying:

I try to find the harmony that grows out of the melody's own perspective...to handle [the melodies] like a flower, where I, with the help of the harmony, try to depict the landscape where the flower has grown up.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1** Alfvén's Unaccompanied Folk-Song Arrangements Listed by Year of Composition.

Title	Year	Forces
Herr Peders sjöresa	1904	mixed choir
Och hör du unga Dora	1904(?)	mixed choir
Skön Anna	1908(?)	mixed choir
Oxbergsmarschen *	1910	mixed or men's choir
Dalvisa * # ^ ‡	1910	mixed or men's choir
Gammal brännvinslåt från Mora	1913(?)	mixed or men's choir
Mandom mod och morske män #	1916(?)	men's choir
Min födelsedag	1920	mixed choir
Vallvisa från Älvdalen	1923	mixed choir/sop. solo
Uti vår hage * #	1923	mixed or men's choir
Prövningen (Fem sånger, #3)	1925(?)	men's choir
Värmlandsvisan (Fem sånger, #4)	1925(?)	men's choir/ten. solo
Två turturduvor	1930	men's choir/bar. solo
Kung Gösta och dalkarlarna	1931	men's choir

continued on next page

Table 1 cont.

Måns Stenbocks visa	1931	men's choir
Trindskallarna * #	1933	mixed or men's choir
Nigare-polska * #	1933	mixed or men's choir
Rosor och violer *	1934	mixed choir
Saetergjentens söndag * #	1934(?)	mixed or men's choir
Och inte vill jag sörja *	1936	mixed or men's choir
Sankt Staffans visa *	1937	mixed choir/sop solo
Djupt i havet *	1937	mixed choir
Kosack-vaggvisa * #	1938	mixed or men's choir
Duvans sång på liljekvist * #	1938	mixed or men's choir
Glädjens blomster * # ^	1938	mixed or men's choir
Lilla Rosa * #	1938	mixed or men's choir
Vi ska ställa till en rolig dans * #	1939	mixed or men's choir
Oväntad bröllopsgäst *	1939	mixed choir
Kom sköna flicka	1939	men's choir
Herr Fröjdenborg och fröken Adelin * #	1940	mixed or men's choir
Herr Peder och liten Kerstin * #	1940	mixed or men's choir
Herr Tideman och lilla Rosa * #	1940	mixed or men's choir
Konungabarnen * #	1940	mixed or men's choir
Herr Redevall * #	1941	mixed or men's choir
Klang min vackra bjällra *	1941	mixed choir
Och Jungfrun hon går i ringen * # ^	1941	mixed or men's choir
Anders, han var en hurtiger dräng * #	1941	mixed or men's choir
Tjuv och tjuv det skall du heta *	1941	mixed choir
Simon i Sälle *	1941	mixed choir
Kulldansen #	1941	men's choir
Stolts Margareta *	1942	mixed choir
Inga liten kvarnpiga *	1942	mixed choir
Vedergällningen *	1942	mixed choir/sop solo
Herr Apelbrand och Lena lilla * #	1942	mixed or men's choir
Jungfrun i blå skogen * #	1942	mixed or men's choir
Herr Olof i älvornas dans * #	1943	mixed or men's choir
De sju gullborgarna * #	1943	mixed or men's choir
Rosillas sorg * #	1943	mixed or men's choir
Rövaren Brun * #	1943	mixed or men's choir
Herr Malmstens dröm * #	1943	mixed or men's choir
Lindormen * #	1943	mixed or men's choir
Linden * #	1944	mixed or men's choir
Som stjärnan uppå himmelen så klar *	1952	mixed choir/sop solo

\* - mixed choir version available from Gehrmans Musikforlag AB

# - men's choir version available from Gehrmans Musikforlag AB

^ - mixed choir version in English translation available from Walton Publishing

‡ - men's choir version in English translation available from Walton Publishing

## Translation 1

### Dalvisa

Om sommaren sköna, när marken hon gläds,  
vid Dala två älvarna vida  
från Tunaå strand åt Gagnefmäns näs,  
hur fagert att ro och att rida!  
Gud glädje och styrke de män, som där bo,  
ja, Gud glädje och styrke de män, som där bo,  
vid älvom, på berg och i dalom

I Dalarna bodde, i Dalarna bor  
bland armod än trohet och ära:  
ett släkte, som håller den ed, som det svor,  
och pilar i vapnet ses bära.  
Det blandat med bark icke sällan sit bröd,  
men mäktiga herrar dock funno sit stöd  
hos fattiga män i Dalom.

### Dalecarlia Song

In the beauty of summer, when the earth rejoices,  
in Dala two rivers wide  
from Tunaå's shore to Gagnefmän's point,  
how splendid it is to row and ride!  
God, gladden and strengthen those who live there,  
yes, God gladden and strengthen those who live there,  
by the river, on the mountain, and in the valley.

In Dalarna there lived, in Dalarna there lives  
amidst the misery – faithfulness and honor:  
A kinfolk which keeps the oath it swore,  
and bears arrows in its coat of arms.  
Often did it make its bread with bark,  
but mighty lords, yet, drew support  
from the poor people in Dalecarlia.

## Ballads

Alfvén's folk song arrangements can, for the most part, be divided into two categories: ballads and dance songs. The ballads tell a narrative story. Many of the original ballad texts are very old, dating from medieval times, and while the stories vary in topic and mood, they are often melancholy, sad, or tragic. Some of the original ballads were very long, comprised of twenty, thirty, or even forty stanzas. The eighteenth and nineteenth-century arrangements of these songs were strophic, and stanzas could be added or left out to make the song and the story as long and detailed or as short and compact as was desired.

Ballads comprise a large majority of Alfvén's folk song output. His arrangements of ballads can be divided into two groups: simpler settings that are basically homophonic and strophic, similar in design to the eighteenth and nineteenth-century arrangements; and more compositionally complex settings that are through-composed. While Alfvén's homophonic settings generally follow the earlier tradition, he differs from it in that he specifies which stanzas will be used—he does not give the option to add, subtract, or exchange stanzas. Some of his homophonic arrangements use only one stanza. Further, Alfvén's harmonic language tends to be more advanced than earlier settings.

*Dalvisa* (*Dalecarlia Song*— Translation 1) is a strophic ballad that Alfvén arranged in 1910. It is one of his most well known settings. It is in the key of G minor (one of his most commonly used keys for mixed choir arrangements), which may initially seem strange, considering the content of the first stanza of text. The minor key gives the song the sense of melancholy and realism that seems to stay ever-present, even in the expression of the text's happy ideas (Figure 1 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>). A distinctive feature of the arrangement is the parallel chords between

the men's and women's parts that occur with the first stanza text "Gud glädje och styrka de män, som där bo," and with the second stanza text "Det blandat med bark icke sällan sitt bröd." They are distinctive especially because they provide a notably different texture, including some open 5th harmonies, than the music that comes before or follows after. The chords' stark quality highlights the text in those places, both the joyful thanks expressed the first stanza, and the reality of difficult times expressed in the second (Figure 2 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>). On the whole, Alfvén's

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## Translation 2

### Glädjens blomster

Glädjens blomster i jordens mull,  
ack, visst aldrig gro!  
Kärlek själv ju försåtlig är  
för ditt hjärtas ro.  
Men där ovan, för hopp och tro  
blomstra de evigt friska.  
Hör du ej hur andår  
ljuvt om dem till hjärtat viska?

### Flowers of Joy

Flowers of joy in the muck of the earth,  
alas, will never grow!  
And love itself is treacherous  
to the peace of the heart.  
But there above, for hope and faith  
they flower eternally.  
Can you not hear how the spirits  
whisper gently of them to the heart?

arrangement contains a significant amount of chromaticism and rich choral voicing, and is a good example of typical Alfvén harmonic language.

*Glädjens blomster* (*Flowers of Joy* – Translation 2), arranged in 1938, is a one-stanza ballad arrangement that has similarly rich sonorities and chromatic shadings as *Dalvisa*. Set in the key of D minor, it contains the same characteristics of hope balanced with melancholic realism, qualities that are reflected in the text. The song is rather short, and Swedish choirs often sing it twice when they perform it, to make it a more reasonable performance length. Swedish musicologist Jan Olof Rudén describes it as one of four Alfvén arrangements, along with *Uti vår hage*, *Och jungfrun hon går i ringen*, and *Tjuv och tjuv det ska du heta*, that are so well known and loved that virtually every Swedish chorister can sing them by heart.<sup>10</sup>

*Som stjärnan uppå himmelen så klar* (*As the Star in the Heavens So Clear* – Translation 3) was published in March of 1952, a

few weeks before Alfvén's 80th birthday on May 1st. Also one stanza long, it was the last folk song arrangement Alfvén published. It is notable for its brevity and also for the fact that a soprano soloist sings the melody and text throughout the entire song, while the chorus is assigned the role of a four-part humming, homophonic accompaniment (which makes this arrangement easier for non-Swedish choirs to learn). The effect of the humming is significant. It adds a wistful, nostalgic quality to the plaintive melody and text. Yet, it is still Alfvén's harmonic language that is the essence of the piece (Figure 3 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>). He writes with the efficiency of an elder statesman; there is nothing extraneous and each chord has expressive purpose. The arrangement's power of expression comes through the direct, simple voice leading that creates rich harmonies filled with meaning, in which Alfvén expresses much in just a few measures.

## Translation 3

### Som stjärnan uppå himmelen så klar

Som stjärnan uppå himmelen så klar,  
hon längtar till sitt rum,  
så längtar jag till dig, min lilla vän,  
var timma och var stund.  
Var timma är som en månad lång,  
en månad som ett år;  
så längtar jag till dig, min lilla vän,  
fast jag dig aldrig får.

### As The Star In The Heavens So Clear

As the star in the heavens so clear  
longs for her space,  
so I long for you, my beloved,  
each hour and each moment.  
Each hour is as long as a month,  
a month is as a year;  
so I long for you, my beloved,  
though I shall never have you.

## Through-Composed Ballads

A large number of the ballads that Alfvén arranged are through-composed. Many of these songs deal with romantic relationships and contain dialogue between two people. The dialogue provided Alfvén a natural opportunity to vary the compositional texture, moving the melody among the different voice parts so as to indicate the different characters in the story. Additionally, in most of these ballads, Alfvén selected from among the many stanzas between three and five to make the story. As such, the stories are more detailed and have more opportunity for dramatic expression than arrangements with just one or two stanzas. Despite having additional stanzas, these arrangements generally don't take very long to perform. Most are between two and three minutes long.

An example with many typical features is the four-stanza ballad titled *Herr Tideman och lilla Rosa* (*Sir Tideman and Little Rosa* – Translation 4). Alfvén's mixed choir version is set, like *Dalvisa*, in G minor. It is marked *andante* at the beginning, with the basses (and initially the altos) holding the sustained opened fifth of G and D, rather low in their range, establishing a somber atmosphere. The longer note values that the basses often have throughout the song help to reinforce this mood. The dialogue between the two characters is handled in a simple yet effective manner, having the sopranos sing the melody in the first stanza, where Rosa is the speaker, and the basses in the second stanza, where her brother is the speaker.

It is in the second stanza (Figure 4 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>) where Alfvén's interpretive dramatic skill is especially notable. Accentuating the dramatic tension with a new tempo marking of *più mosso, agitato*, he creates an additional layer of dialogue in the story. The basses, singing the folk song's narrative, are met with the agitated responses of the upper three voices, portraying Alfvén's interpretation of Rosa's state of mind. These responses are not part of the original folk song. Rather, they are the dramatic creation of Alfvén, presenting an image (m. 15–17) of Rosa impatiently prodding her brother for the news about her beloved (“you heard...at the hearing...WHAT DID YOU HEAR!?”). He further accentuates the drama through the shift of the rhythm

#### Translation 4

##### Herr Tideman och lilla Rosa

Rosa lilla talte till sin broder så,  
under lidén:  
"Vad sporde du för nytt uppå tinget i går?"  
Så sent om en aftons tider.

"Ej annat horde jag uppå tinget i går,"  
under lidán,  
"Men Tideman är döder och lagd uppå bår."  
Så sent om en aftons tider.

Rosa lilla föll så blek ned till jord  
under lidán.  
Hon talte på så länge icke ett ord.  
Så sent om en aftons tider.

De ringde för Herr Tideman i östra kyrkogård,  
under lidén.  
De ringde för lilla Rosa i väster därifrån.  
Så sent om en aftons tider.

##### Sir Tideman and Little Rosa

Little Rosa talked with her brother,  
by and by:  
"What news did you learn at the hearing yesterday?"  
So late in the afternoon.

"I heard nothing else at the hearing yesterday,"  
by and by,  
"but Tideman is dead and laid upon the bier."  
So late in the afternoon.

Little Rosa fell, pale, down on the ground,  
by and by.  
She said not a word for so long.  
So late in the afternoon.

They rang bells for Sir Tideman in the eastern churchyard,  
by and by.  
They rang for little Rosa in the western, then.  
So late in the afternoon.

in m. 17, making the upper voices wait a half of a beat longer than in m. 15 and 16, so their sforzando entrance on the word "vad?" ("what?") comes directly on a beat. As she learns of the death (m. 21–24), Alfvén brings the upper voices to the highest pitches in the song, all accenting the first syllable of the word "döder" ("dead"). The high, shrieking quality of these notes contrasts very strongly with the low, rich tessitura established in the beginning, and returned to at the end of the piece.

The agitated tempo continues through the beginning of the third stanza, until a ritard at the text "she said not a word," which is sung softly, in the original *andante* tempo. The final stanza is begun *più lento*, with the basses singing low notes on the syllables "bing, bång," imitating the funeral bells ringing for Mr. Tideman. The sopranos are also mimicking the bells at the beginning of the stanza, although it is not until the very end, when the sad twist in the plot is revealed, that the listener understands that funeral bells are ringing also for Rosa. The altos and tenors begin the stanza singing the melody in unison, a rich timbre that Alfvén uses in several of his unaccompanied choral compositions. In the last half of the stanza, the

melody returns to the sopranos, while the basses continue to toll the low bells, and the altos and tenors fill out the harmonies to the end of the song.

Many of the other ballads involving relationships between a man and a woman follow a similar textual design, including *Herr Apelbrand och Lena lilla* (*Sir Apelbrand and Little Lena*), *Herr Fröjdenborg och fröken Adelin* (*Sir Fröjdenborg and Maiden Adelin*), *Herr Malmstens dröm* (*Sir Malmsten's Dream*), *Herr Peder och lilla Kerstin* (*Sir Peter and Little Kerstin*), and *Jungfrun i blå skogen* (*The Maiden in the Blue Forrest*). In all of these songs, each stanza is comprised of four lines. Lines one and three further the plot of the story, and lines two and four serve as a type of refrain, appearing in each stanza. The songs are generally serious in nature, and Alfvén sets them with the depth of expressive harmony and richness of tone that these old Nordic tales deserve and require. The refrain lines are often especially somber, saying things such as "It seems to me it is hard to live" or "He grieved for her too lovingly." These through-composed ballads are some of Alfvén's more complex folk-song settings and, although they tend to be performed less than his other folk songs, they are some of the best

examples of Alfvén's ability to express deep emotion in small-scale musical compositions.

#### Uti vår hage

Many consider the strophic ballad *Uti vår hage* (*In Our Garden* – Translation 5), arranged in 1923, to be Alfvén's most beloved song, and an arrangement that fully captures the essence of the Swedish folk spirit. In her 1994 article "Uti vår hage: Några anteckningar kring den 'svenskste' av körvisor" ("Uti vår hage: Some Notes on the 'Most Swedish' of Choir Songs"), musicologist Märta Ramsten estimates that she probably has performed Alfvén's arrangement a couple thousand times, and that it has been in the repertoire of virtually every choir in which she has sung.<sup>11</sup> Alfvén biographer Lennart

## Translation 5

### Uti vår hage

Uti vår hage där växa blå bär.  
Kom hjärtans fröjd!\*  
Vill du mig något, så träffas vi där.  
Kom liljor och akvileja,  
Kom rosor och saliveja,  
Kom ljuva krusmynta, kom hjärtans fröjd!

Fagra små blommor där bjuda till dans,  
Kom hjärtans fröjd!  
Vill du så binder jag åt dig en krans,  
Kom liljor...

Uti vår hage finns blommor och bär.  
Kom hjärtans fröjd!  
Men utav alla du kärest mig, är.  
Kom liljor...

### In Our Garden

In our garden the blueberries grow,  
Come, heart's delight!  
If you want me, we shall meet there.  
Come lilies and columbine,  
Come roses and salvia,  
Come lovely catmint, come heart's delight!

Lovely little flowers there invite us to dance,  
Come, heart's delight!  
If you want, I will make you a wreath.  
Come lilies...

In our garden there are flowers and berries.  
Come heart's delight!  
But of all you are dearest to me.  
Come lilies...

\*The word hjärtansfröjd can also refer to another flowering plant, citronmeliss, which translates as "lemon balm."

Hedwall described Alfvén's unique ending of the song, which modulates from the song's wistful minor key (Figure 5 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>) by adding an additional repetition of the refrain in a very satisfying major modality (Figure 6 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>), as so well-known that "it is hard not to add [the ending] even when singing the song in unison...[Alfvén's arrangement] has become a folk song in itself."<sup>12</sup>

The textual images presented in the three short stanzas and refrain are nostalgic and heart-warming. While it is a love song, it also depicts a playful celebration of nature and of the Swedish summer. Summer is a special time for Swedes who, after enduring the cold and dark Nordic winter, when the sun is up for very few hours if at all, spend much time outside in the mild summer sun that, in some places, lights the sky for twenty-four continuous hours. A very specific image is found in the second stanza. Traditionally, for the celebration of the summer solstice (midsommar), country girls would ornament themselves for the festivities by picking flowers and binding them into a wreath to be worn in their hair. Thus, the offer to make a wreath of flowers, as stated in the song, is

a significant gesture, not unlike an offer to make one's sweetheart a simple piece of jewelry or an ornament for a party.

It should be noted that Alfvén was not the first person to arrange this folk song, and Ramsten even suggests that he may have based his arrangement largely on a previous setting.<sup>13</sup> In any case, Alfvén's arrangement is the one that has kept its place in the repertoire. One of the likely reasons it has done so is the aforementioned ending, where the melancholy and longing of the song (and maybe even of so many other folk songs) is at last relieved. The ending is completely the construction of Alfvén for this specific song. It has no roots in the actual folk song or in any earlier arrangements, nor is it a feature found in other Alfvén arrangements.

## Dance Songs

Sixteen of Alfvén's folk song arrangements (eleven different songs, five of which are set for both mixed choir and men's choir) can be classified as dance songs. They range in complexity, from very simple settings to arrangements with a significant variety of textures and use of polyphonic writing. Further, the dance song arrangements and texts offer a contrast of mood to the mostly somber ballads. All of the dance songs are in major keys, most of them have lively rhythms set to quick tempi, and one can see in the texts that they are intended to be playful and fun.

*Kulldansen* [Maiden Dance] – Translation 6, for men's choir, is one of Alfvén's arrangements that is frequently sung, and is an example of a simple, straightforward setting.

## Translation 6

### Kulldansen

Å vill int' du, så vill fäll ja',  
så vill ja' dansa mä kulla.  
Kullo, kullo, kullo,  
hej, dansa mä kulla.  
Ja' vill dansa mä min kulla.

### Maiden (from Dalecarlia) Dance

If you don't want to, I do,  
I want to dance with the maiden.  
Maiden, maiden, maiden,  
Hey, dance with the maiden.  
I would dance with my maiden.

### Translation 7

#### Tjuv och tjuv, det ska du heta

Tjuv och tjuv det ska du heta,  
för du stal min lilla vän.  
Men jag har den ljuva trösten,  
att jag får 'na snart igen.  
Tror jag, tra la la.

#### Thief, Thief You Shall Be Called

Thief, thief you shall be called,  
for you stole my beloved.  
But, I have a delightful comfort,  
that I will soon get her back again.  
So I think, tra la la.

The text is short, and Alfvén sets the song in two stanzas, using the same text both times. The tempo is indicated as *polskatempo, friskt* (lively dance tempo, heartily), and the first tenors sing the melody throughout, while the lower voices supply a swinging accompaniment figure underneath. Excitement is built through quick repetitions of the word "kullo" [*maiden*] on eighth notes and through a series of *crescendi* and *decrescendi* to the *forte* shout of "hej" [*Hey!*] at the start of the last line of text. *Kulldansen* is one of several songs that are often sung by Orphei Drängar at festive choir gatherings.

Two of Alfvén's most popular dance arrangements, *Tjuv och tjuv det ska du heta* [*Thief, Thief You Shall Be Called*] – Translation 7 and *Och jungfrun hon går i ringen* [*A Maiden Joins the Ring*] – Translation 8, are more freely arranged. They are both lively and short (under two minutes) in length.

The first, *Tjuv och tjuv det ska du heta*, has a relatively small amount of text, making it easier for non-Swedish choirs to learn. Alfvén arranges the tune almost as if it were a comedic drama about relationships be-

tween men and women. The melody passes between men's and women's voices, each side having a chance to state its own case separately, with the other voice parts offering a variety of accompanying figures. The action leads into a proportionally long ending containing two lively exchanges between the men's and the women's voices. The music builds to a *fortissimo*, and then slows and warmly softens, winding down the rhythmic energy in a way that could represent either an acquiescence or a resolution to the matter. However, Alfvén then concludes the song with a quick final statement on the text "men jag får 'na snart igen" [*but I will soon get her back again*]. This ending is like a playful wink, indicating that the story, and drama of relationships, will continue on.

*Och jungfrun hon går i ringen* is a dance song with a longer, narrative text. It is also one of a handful of Alfvén pieces that has been published in English translation, and as such, is familiar to some non-Swedish choral musicians. The ring that the maiden joins is descriptive of traditional midsummer dances, where group dancing around the maypole was a part of the usual festivities. The main

feature of this piece is the whirling excitement of the dance, which Alfvén generates initially through the rhythmically energized accompaniment parts, and later through close canonic imitation of the melody (Figure 7 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>).

### Conclusion

Hugo Alfvén stands as a prominent figure in Swedish music history. He composed throughout his life, although many of his major works were written early in his career and, after his 1910 appointment in Uppsala, much of his time was taken up with university duties and conducting work. His compositional style did not change appreciably over time, so that by the 1930s, with new and significantly different musical styles becoming firmly established around the world and finally breaking through in Sweden, Alfvén's romanticism was considered old fashioned.

It may be these circumstances, though, that enabled him to create a body of folk song arrangements for unaccompanied choir with such lasting value. A large number of his arrangements were done between 1937 and 1943, when he was concluding his university duties. Had he been more intensely composing in larger genres, he might not have had the time or the desire to do (or needed the income generated by) the folk song arrangements. Had he been more interested in the new compositional techniques of the era or in developing a modern harmonic language of his own, his body of folk song arrangements may have been very different, or he may not have done them at all.

### Translation 8

#### Och jungfrun hon gåri ringen

Och jungfrun hon går i ringen med rödan gullband.  
Det binder hon om sin kärastes arm.  
Men kära min lilla jungfru, knyt inte så hårdt.  
Jag ämnar ej att rymma bort.  
Och jungfrun hon går och lossar på rödan gullband.  
Så hastigt den skälmen åt skogen då sprang.  
Då sköto de efter honom med femton gevär.  
Och vill ni mig något, så ha ni mig här.

#### A Maiden Joins the Ring

A maiden joins the ring with a red ribbon.  
She ties it on her sweetheart's arm.  
"My dear little maiden, don't tie so tight.  
I do not intend to flee."  
The maiden unties the red ribbon.  
Instantly, the villain ran into the woods.  
They shot after him with fifteen rifles.  
"And if you want me, I am here."



Fortunately, in this case, circumstance aligned with potential. Alfvén's personal aesthetic and inherent sense of drama found a match in the stories told by these folk melodies, and the circumstances of his life and career allowed him to attain his stature as the composer whose folk song arrangements are considered to have most captured the nature and character of the Swedish spirit. It was fitting, then, that when Alfvén retired from Uppsala University in 1939, he did not move back to Stockholm, but rather, moved out to Leksand. He continued to direct Orphei Drängar until 1947, and conducted his last performance with the Siljan Choir in 1957, at age 85. He died in 1960, and is laid to rest in the Leksand cemetery on a slope facing Siljan Lake.

#### Epilogue: *Aftonen*

The atmospheric *Aftonen* [*The Evening*] – Translation 9 is probably the song by Alfvén that is most well known to American choral musicians. It is not a folk song arrangement, yet it seems appropriate to include it with this article for several reasons: it has been performed by many American choirs and is the Alfvén song that American choral directors are probably most likely to already have in their library; its slow tempo and relatively short text make it simpler for non-Swedes to sing in Swedish than many of his other songs; it is one of Alfvén's best songs and an excellent representative of his style; and its soulful sonorities are a trait that it shares with many of Alfvén's folk song arrangements.

Written in 1942 for unaccompanied

choir, the piece is not given a specific dedication, nor is there direct evidence that it was written for a specific purpose. Hedwall suggests that Alfvén wrote it to encourage national pride and unity during the difficult times of the Second World War. After discovering with his 1941 song titled *To Arms* that the military style songs and texts that were so beloved at the turn of the century were now old fashioned and no longer effective, Hedwall postulates that Alfvén turned instead towards a song and text that would create "in its saturated setting a sound of nostalgia, which appears like a dream about a forever lost past."<sup>14</sup> Herman Säterberg's image-filled text serves as an ideal vehicle for Alfvén to paint a scenic, sonic landscape.

The opening sustained chords, in a traditional pastoral key of F major, establish the mood of the quiet forest and the clear sky. Following the text about the shepherd's horn singing a lullaby, Alfvén portrays the horn and its echo, through a series of flowing triplet rhythms passed between the soprano and alto voices, and supported through sustained notes in the men's voices (Figure 8 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>). This motive, which Alfvén borrowed from some of his own film score music, is the defining feature of the piece. It is used three different times, and its appearances divide the song into three distinct sections.

At the beginning of the second section, with the text "kvällsolns bloss" [*the evening sun's blush*], Alfvén sets the alto and tenor together in unison on the melody, accompanied by the sopranos singing in thirds. All the parts slowly descend, as the text describes the sun slowly sinking down into the sea. From here, he goes to the shepherd's horn motive again, this time a bit lower in the

vocal range, and with the thirds passed between the soprano and tenor parts.

The final section describes the echoes ringing around the valley. As the choir moves into the third and concluding shepherd's horn section, Alfvén utilizes a very subtle, yet poignant effect. The ending of the section of text and the beginning of the shepherd's horn section overlap, so to speak, so that the first triplet of the now familiar motive is not there. It is covered up by the ending of the previous statement, much in the same way the first part of an echo is never heard because it is covered up by the ending of the sound that made it (Figure 9 <[www.acda.org/publications/choral\\_journal](http://www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal)>).

*Aftonen* is quintessential Alfvén: Alfvén the painter; Alfvén the dramatist; Alfvén the composer who creates colors and stories in sound.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Per Lindfors, ed., *Hugo Alfvén berättar: Radiointervjuer utgivna av Per Lindfors* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1966): 127. All translations have been done by the author, except where noted.
- <sup>2</sup> The principle Alfvén biography is Lennart Hedwall's *Hugo Alfvén: En svensk tonsättares liv och verk*, published in 1973. Sources in English are limited. They include an entry in the New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians and a small pamphlet, titled *Hugo Alfvén*, authored by Hedwall, and published by the Swedish Music Information Center. The text from the pamphlet, which includes a thorough timeline of Alfvén's

#### Translation 9

##### **Aftonen**

Skogen står tyst, himlen är klar.  
Hör, huru tjusande vallhornet lullar.  
Kvällsolns bloss sig stilla sänker,  
Sänker sig ner uti den lugna, klara våg.  
Ibland dälдер, gröna kullar eko kring nejden far...

- Herman Säterberg

##### **The Evening**

The forest is still, the sky is clear.  
Hear how the enchanting shepherd's horn sings a lullaby.  
The evening sun's blush silently sinks,  
Sinks down into the calm, clear waves.  
Among the valleys and green hills the echo  
resounds near and far...



life, and a brief descriptive summary of his works, can be found in English on the Hugo Alfvén Society Web site: <[www.alfvensallskapet.se](http://www.alfvensallskapet.se)>.

<sup>3</sup> Per Lindfors, ed., *Hugo Alfvén berättar*: 98.

<sup>4</sup> Per Lindfors, ed., *Hugo Alfvén berättar*: 99.

<sup>5</sup> Gunnar Ternhag and Jan Olof Rudén, ed., *Hugo Alfvén: en vägvisare* (Stockholm: Gidlunds Förlag, 2003): 156.

<sup>6</sup> Gunnar Ternhag and Jan Olof Rudén, ed., *Hugo Alfvén: en vägvisare*: 161.

<sup>7</sup> Gunnar Ternhag and Jan Olof Rudén, ed., *Hugo Alfvén: en vägvisare*: 156.

<sup>8</sup> Gunnar Ternhag and Jan Olof Rudén, ed., *Hugo Alfvén: en vägvisare*: 164. The

quotation is taken from a newspaper interview of Alfvén by Björn Johansson, originally published on June 22, 1956, in the Göteborgs Handels-och Sjöfart-Tidning.

<sup>9</sup> Per Lindfors, ed., *Hugo Alfvén berättar*: 100.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Olof Rudén, interviewed by Nathan Leaf: December 1, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Märta Ramsten, "Uti vår hage: Några anteckningar kring den 'svenskaste' av kör-visor," *Alfvéniana*, Vol. 1, (1994): 3.

<sup>12</sup> Lennart Hedwall, *Hugo Alfvén: En Svensk tonsättares liv och verk*, trans. Helena Karlsson (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag, 1973): 370.

<sup>13</sup> Märta Ramsten, "Uti vår hage: Några anteckningar kring den 'svenskaste' av kör-visor": 5.

<sup>14</sup> Lennart Hedwall, *Hugo Alfvén: En Svensk tonsättares liv och verk*: 363.

<sup>15</sup> The author was assisted in the translation of the song texts by Sharon Berg, an American Scandinavian scholar, and Jan Olof Rudén, a Swedish musicologist and Alfvén scholar.



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I have found the venerable combination of choir and harp to be a deeply rewarding ensemble to compose for. A composer who has taken to heart the received caveats concerning writing aptly for the harp as well as for the voice will find an abundance of expressive resources in this compelling genre. – William Hawley