This paper presents some findings from a broader investigation that aims at a comprehensive mapping of phrasing practices in the older layer of Norwegian traditional music referred to as slåtter (literally “tunes”). It also proposes a method for the visualization and subsequent comparison of different styles of phrasing. Phrasing, in this context, refers to how musicians use different tools and techniques to combine individual notes into rhythmic patterns. The sounding result of this practice is a significant stylistic feature of traditional tunes. At the same time, phrasing is largely an area of tacit knowledge among traditional musicians, meaning that no explicit vocabulary is developed for its description and dissemination.

Related work

There is some existing research concerning slåtte music on the relationship between meter, phrasing patterns and the logic of dance movements (Blom & Kvifte, 1986). Some issues concerning phrasing patterns are also discussed in general terms by Eivind Groven (Groven & Fjalestad, 1971), Reidar Sevåg (Sevåg, Blom, Nyhus, Gurvin, & Norsk folkemusikksamling, 1981), Morton Levy (Levy, 1989) and Tellef Kvifte (Kvifte, 1987, 2007). However, these writings do not rely on extensive empirical materials. They focus on the fiddle bow as the producer of the phrasings and do not address phrasing practices on other relevant instruments.

The present study

On this background, an important focus of the present study is to develop and explore a straightforward visualization of the rhythmic imprint produced by phrasings. The end goal is a simple tool for comparison, without the complexity of traditional scores and independent of the instrument at hand.

The empirical material is extensive and consists of archive recordings of Jew’s Harp, the Norwegian Dulcimer called Langeleik, Hardanger fiddle (Figure 1) and Lilting or Hulling in Norwegian.

These instruments have coexisted in Norwegian culture for approximately 400 years. The Jew’s Harp and vocal traditions are supposedly much older. Today, they are all vital parts of the slåtte traditions. For practical reasons, the proposed presentation will be limited to analyses of so-called 3/8 gangar tunes performed vocally or on the Jew’s harp.

The figures below represent a sequence from 3/8 Jew’s harp tune. Figure 2 shows a traditional score notation while figure 3 shows solely the rhythmic imprint produced by the phrasing technique (any number of notes placed in between strokes on the lamella).

---

1Andres K. Rysstad (1893-1984)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLEBV-AWv4o
The length of the phrase segments (notes tied together) and their placement in time is identified by digits and colours (figure 3). The meter is represented by the vertical lines quantified into three subdivisions per measure.

Visualizations of this kind forms the basis of comparison regardless of how the phrasings are produced or what produces them, cf. strokes on a Jew’s Harp lamella, plectrum movements on the a langeleik, bowings on a fiddle and the usage of vocal chords and lungs in Hulling. The system also allows the empirical data to be quantified, which in turn provides the opportunity for comparative analysis of large amounts of data.

**Preliminary results**

There are important idiomatic differences between the instruments. This furnishes the musician with unique options and constraints. For instance, while the human voice is limited by the capacity of the lung, the striking of the lamella on a traditional Norwegian Jew’s Harp produces a tone that is practically manipulable for approximately one second. In this perspective one could think that such differences would have led to the development of unique phrasing practices tied to the idiomatic constraints of each instrument. However, the preliminary analysis suggests that phrasing practices cannot be interpreted solely on the basis of idiomatic properties and that additional musical logics need to be taken in to account. Several interesting questions arise from this observation.

A: How do instrument specific characteristics influence playing technique and phrasing practices on the slåtte instruments? B: To what extent does the data support the notion of a fundamental shared phrasing practice governed by principles that are not directly linked to the instruments? C: If the phrasings to a certain extent are shared, is there a dominating influencer behind these practices, such as the fiddle? Or, would it be more fruitful to discuss whether a common phrasing practice is a result of a long and ongoing negotiation between instruments and humans that extends beyond the historic limitation of specific instruments.

A comprehensive discussion of these issues is too extensive for the present format. Instead, the presentation offers insights into an ongoing investigation and presents some preliminary results and methodological considerations that purportedly also might be of more general relevance to the study of traditional musics. The musical examples presented will consist of traditional tunes for Jew’s Harp and Hulling (Lilting/Diddling) played by the author and from archive recordings, along with visual analysis of phrasing patterns.

**References**


