

Tondiktaren Carl Jonas Love Almqvist
 En musikalisk biografi
The tone poet Carl Jonas Love Almqvist
A musical biography

By Lennart Hedwall
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Can there really be anything more to say about Carl Jonas Love Almqvist's life and work after John Svedjedal's thorough biography? Lennart Hedwall's almost 800-page book gives a clear answer to that question: Yes, there is much more to say when it comes to music! Hedwall writes about music as a part of Almqvist's own life, as a motif and structuring principle in his fictional world, and of music as an indispensable part of *Törnrosens bok* [Book of the wild rose]. Hedwall's book also includes two CDs that present Almqvist's finest pieces of music, a splendid service to the reader. One of the CDs contains a selection of *Songes* and the other a selection of Almqvist's piano music played by Hedwall himself. The book that Hedwall has written is highly engaging with its presentation of musicological analyses of both the vocal music and the piano fantasies, as well as the inclusion of a wealth of new findings. Hedwall also discusses settings to music of Almqvist's poems by later musicians. In addition, and perhaps more unexpectedly, this study of the musical element in Almqvist's work

also offers new perspectives on his literary works.

The first chapter, which gives a biographical overview of Almqvist's life and intellectual activities, may not add so much to the image of Almqvist already documented. It rather functions as an introduction and gives a basis for the subsequent chapters. But one detail, which illustrates the extent to which the focus on music actually brings something new to our understanding of Almqvist's work as a whole, deserves to be mentioned. After the heated debates surrounding *Det går an* [It can be done], suspicions of attempted murder by poison, and Almqvist's subsequent escape to the USA, the writer's work fell out of favour and eventually also into oblivion. It was not until Ellen Key's acclaimed article 'Sveriges modernaste diktare' [Sweden's most modern poet] that Almqvist's renaissance began. Or so the story goes. But Hedwall completes this picture by highlighting the importance of the interpretations of Almqvist's *Songes* in the 1890s by the singer Sven Scholander's in prompting renewed interest in his oeuvre.

In the second chapter, which deals with the importance of music in Mr Hugo's literary salon, Hedwall introduces the passages in Almqvist's texts which deal with music. Hedwall's familiarity with the music that was played in churches, private homes, and large public stages during Almqvist's time makes it possible for him to set the literary texts and musical pieces in dialogue with various aspects of their contemporary cultural context more effectively than has yet been done. Because he knows what music was marketed in printed form by Almqvist's contemporaries, Hedwall can identify possible influences; because he knows what instruments were used – and not used – in different contexts, he can make new observations about composition and instrumentation. For example, Hedwall sees occasional anachronisms in Almqvist's depictions of musical life. Hedwall argues that music is fundamental to *Törnrosens bok* and traces that centrality to the value placed on music by Romantic aesthetics.

Some examples: Richard Furumo, the demonic narrator in Mr Hugo's literary salon, is not paid in money or other material benefits for the stories he presents, he is paid in music. The whole of *Törnrosens bok* is set in Mr Hugo's literary salon where the stories are narrated and sung in a scenic way. Speech and song are thus intimately related to the written word. In this salon, everyone is musical. One of the titles in *Törnrosens bok*, was later to become the name of Almqvist's edition of his piano music, *Fria Fantasier för Piano-forte* [Free fantasies for the piano], 1847–1848. Music sometimes

functions as the basis for Almqvist's literary texts. For example, he used a musical term, 'poetic fugue', to describe the composition of the novels *Amorina* and *Drottningens juvelsmycke* [The queen's diadem]. Many such details have of course attracted the attention of earlier scholars, but the musicological and historical perspectives of Hedwall's study serve to deepen and widen the discussion appreciably.

Hedwall's third chapter examines Almqvist's musical aesthetics, taking as its focus a letter to Vendela Hebbe in 1843, a self-review of his own piano pieces of 1847, and the series of articles 'Om musikens framtid' [On the future of music] 1839. In the letter to his friend, Almqvist writes that his music is based on pure intuition and does not take any account of music theory. He thus expresses a Romantic view of creativity: Almqvist writes that trained musicians had tried to adapt his music to the rules, but that they had failed and instead eventually accepted his music as it was, with all its peculiarities. Almqvist claims in the self-review, that his music, like folk music, comes as a spontaneous impulse. He identifies the ability to create a melody as something which cannot be learned, but which springs from the artist's interior, while educated musical composing is described as learned craftsmanship.

Almqvist portrayed himself as illiterate in terms of musical theory and argued that this was rather an artistic asset than a problem. Hedwall finds this self-styling curious given the fact that Almqvist was extremely aesthetically aware in his literary oeuvre: Almqvist was musically untrained

but did not lack musical experience. Hence, his claims about his lack of musical training can perhaps be interpreted as a defence of his music and its shortcomings. However, Hedwall also proposes another, more radical interpretation: 'It is quite possible to interpret Almqvist's words about an instinctive and natural given music simply as a plea for impromptu music as opposed to "composed" music with all that implies in terms of technical knowledge. He shows in several of his stories that folk songs could be improvised, and when it is said that he was seeking his way on the piano, it is actually what we today call improvisation' (p. 319).

Chapters four and five are devoted to close analyses of Almqvist's songs and piano music. Some of the musicological reasoning in this discussion is demanding for the general literary scholar but Hedwall also draws clear conclusions about the relationship between music and poetry in Almqvist's oeuvre.

Hedwall argues that the artistic form of *Songes* is unique in an international perspective. In these naive and expressive songs Almqvist had found a congenial relationship between text and music. His fondness for the unfinished, for open endings in both text and music, can be found in many of them. Almqvist often broke aesthetic rules. In Almqvist's lyrics, these violations are deliberate artistic effects, but it is not so obvious that his violations of musical rules were also deliberate: perhaps Almqvist simply was not, after all, a master of musical craftsmanship.

Hedwall writes about the relation-

ship between music and text even in his analyses of Almqvist's piano music. He regards the piano fantasies as a part of the Gesamtkunstwerk *Törnrosens bok*. Each piece has a name, which was quite unusual in the mid-1800s, and each has a motto which functions as a rhythmic quote from the piece of music in question. Hedwall reads the piano fantasies as a kind of 'program music' and suggests that 'each piece portrays something outside the tones themselves' (p. 698). They are not 'absolute music', but rather kinds of narrative. Interpreted in this way, elements which had been regarded as weaknesses in Almqvist's music, are re-understood as features of his artistic expression. His 'indifferent way of dealing with harmony and modulation can be seen as a victim on the altar of narration – the important thing for him was "the domination of melody". He must have perceived melody as the obvious and most perspicuous agent for narration' (p. 708).

For Almqvist music could not only create tones. It actually could tell stories, even if this could not be done in an easy and unambiguous manner. Hence, Hedwall proposes that the piano fantasies *Richard Furumo* and *Love Almqvist* are 'self-portraits of the same magnitude as the literary self-confessions and *Skaldens natt* [Skaldens nat]' (p. 709). Musical portraits were unusual at this time.

Almqvist's music has so far not received much attention and appreciation except for a number of *Songes*. Hedwall's thorough and ingenious book will hopefully change this. He represents Almqvist's music as highly original: 'It is like nothing else in ei-

ther Swedish or international music in his time and hardly after that either, and it must be understood and assessed on its own merits’.

Tondiktaren Carl Jonas Love Almqvist is a valuable contribution to research on Almqvist’s work, important not least because music was so essential in his Gesamtkunstwerk. In *Biografiskt lexikon* [Biographical lexicon] (1835) he wrote about himself: ‘I can say, as strange as it may sound, it is the musical mind, who secretly has dominated me all the way from childhood, and in all respects: without playing any instrument myself, a kind of inner music nevertheless has worked its way both in my life and in my writings’ (p. 365).

(All translations from Hedwall’s book into English are by the reviewer.)

Eva Borgström
University of Gothenburg