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Music and place in “The Spring Tune” – Interpretation as improvisation



Abstract

This video essay explores interpretation as improvisation. Our point of departure is an inquiry into the relationship between place, sound, and music in Tove Jansson’s novella “The Spring Tune”. The novella is first interpreted and adapted into music by a young student. This

adaptation is then central to both literary conversations between the girl and her mother, who is a literary scholar, and visual explorations through the camera. The result is an adaptation (the video) of an adaptation (Henia's musical composition), where the first-mentioned adaptation also documents and explores the musical one. Through these creative processes, the video essay and the guiding text reflect on the nature of interpretation – an elaboration whereby we understand the interpretations involved as improvisations.

Keywords: Music, sound, place, interpretation, improvisation

Academic guiding text

One of the unforgettable characters in Tove Jansson's Moomin universe is Snufkin – the solitary musician. In the novella "The Spring Tune" (Vårvisan) (Jansson, 2003/1962), Snufkin is wandering through the woods on his way to Moominvalley to meet Moomintroll, musing about his own ambivalence regarding the meeting. He loves the troll, but cherishes solitude. Jansson is a remarkable world-maker, shaping her fantastic universe with strong sensuous qualities (Westin, 1988), thus creating a specific atmosphere and what is often called a *sense of place* (e.g., Alexander, 2017). When we meet Snufkin in the novella, a melody is developing under his hat, "waiting, nearly full-grown – and it was going to be the best he had ever made" (Jansson, 2003, p. 10). It is the sounds of the woods that inspire Snufkin's melody, and he listens to birds and the sound of a brook which inspire him.

In the video, we explore this relationship between place, sound, and music through literary and musical interpretations conducted by Henia (aged 17) – a young student of music – as well as through Henia's conversations with her mother (a literary scholar: Samoilow) about her creative and interpretive process, and filmic explorations of nature.¹ The result is an adaptation (video) of an adaptation (musical composition), where the video also documents and explores the musical adaptation and literary conversation. Our own creative process made

¹ The filmmakers are Eltervaag, Dagsland and Samoilow.

us aware of some improvisational dimensions of interpretation. This guiding text will explore how the interpretations involved can be understood as *improvisations*.

Philosopher Bruce Ellis Benson (2003) challenges the traditional understanding of composition and improvisation as two different concepts by exploring composition *as* improvisation. In Benson's view, to improvise is "to rework something that already exists (that is, 'conveniently on hand') and thus transform it into something that both has connections to what it once was but now has a new identity" (Benson, 2003, p. 45). Composition-as-improvisation, then, is a concept of constant becoming – an interplay between existing patterns and something new. Consequently, this understanding of composition and improvisation, is a process connected to time (the past, the here and now, and the future) and space – understood in the widest sense of the word (what is conveniently on hand). What the video essay shows is that the filmmakers, Henia and Snufkin all improvise in their compositions and interpretations.

Let us take the example of the brook (Jansson, 2003, p. 11), which becomes central in the video essay (3.40–4.37). Snufkin hears the brook and immediately analyses its tune: it "droned sharp as a mosquito, then it tried to sound great and menacing, stopped, gurgled with a mouthful of melted snow, and laughed at it all". He admires the musicality and decides to integrate it in his melody, as a chorus. Then a "small stone suddenly came loose near the waterfall and raised the pitch of the brook a whole octave". The scene exemplifies how Snufkin uses the nature 'on hand' while composing/improvising and constantly remodeling his melody –transforming the stone and the brook into something new.

When Henia reworks the brook scene into music with the help of the score writer program *Sibelius*, she explains how this changes the melody, making it one octave higher. She verbalizes how she imagines an "explosion of sounds and music" at the same time as "the same theme and melody keeps playing" (4.00–4.38). The descriptions of the varying sounds the brook produces in Jansson's text are clearly stirring a strong auditory response in the young reader. This aural reaction and Henia's musical interpretation in general appear to be closely related to her personal relationship with place. She explains how Snufkin is actively

seeking inspiration from nature (2.12–2.30 and 3.14–3.27). Henia identifies with Snufkin, and explains how she herself, as a musician, moves in the world with auditory attention (4.35–5.12). She is inspired by her acoustic environment, even though her own is (often) more urban than Snufkin’s. Henia’s musical composition is the result of an interaction between the text, her experience with sound, place, and music, and *Sibelius*, which leads to a reworking and transformation – a new composition that both has connections to the original novella and has gained a new identity.

Henia’s improvisation involves close observation and as Dewey (1943, p. 46) has phrased it, a thinking as “relation between the qualities” of the literary text and the qualities of music, similar to Snufkin who identifies sound qualities in nature with sound qualities in music. In a more general literary didactic terminology, it involves textual understanding and analytical ability. Part of Henia’s process is to conduct a sound analysis in a similar way as a literary critic. She chooses an analytical perspective (music) and identifies the musical qualities in the text (1.33–1.53). She underlines and refers to text passages that evoke sound (6.08). The interpretational and analytical conduct is also evident in her ability to differentiate between different storylines. As she explains, she had to think of Snufkin’s composition as well as the melody that expresses the narrative itself (3.00–3.15 and 5.32–6.00).

Let us now turn to the last interpretation, by the filmmakers Eltervaag, Dagsland and Samoilow. Initially, Eltervaag, who directed, filmed and edited the video, was not familiar with the literary text. His wanted to highlight the narrative about Henia who denies being a reader, and the mother who coerces her daughter into reading. He therefore chose the documentary format. After the first cut, we discussed the possibility of including footage from places other than where Henia and her mother interact, in order to highlight the exploration of place. As a result, there is a tension in the video between a documentary and a more aesthetic expression. This was the point in our own process when we, inspired by the literary talk and Henia’s music, decided that Eltervaag should step into Snufkin territory – the woods. He especially noticed some calm and harmonic sections in the music, and interpreted these through a handheld camera with a gimbal stabilizer – to capture what he felt as fluid motions. This is an example of Cathrine Grant’s emphasis on the video essay as “creative research”

(2014, p. 53) that collapses the distinction between the researcher and his/her object through a “form of understanding with hands and eyes” (p. 50). By experimenting on site, Eltervaag reversed his gimbal to be closer to the forest ground to imitate Snufkin’s experience of the woods. To take the Snufkin perspective and to enhance a sense of place, he also chose to film in slow motion. In the editing process, what steers his selection/order of footage is not the Snufkin-story; rather, he tries to establish a rhythm inspired by Henia’s melody in interplay with what *he* has ‘on hand’ – footage from the conversations, notations from Sibelius, Henia’s marked text, and the footage from his own Snufkin-like solitary walks in the woods, using his sight and artistic practices as a filmmaker. The rhythmic awareness and compositional precision are especially evident between 3.27 and 3.37. Similarly to Grant, we experienced that the video essay’s creative process opened for these associations and a playfulness that fits its subject matter better than the traditional article, and generated knowledge that exceeded the initial exploration of place and sound.

On a basic level, Snufkin, Henia, and Eltervaag are all doing the same thing. All three are artistically reworking what is ‘on hand’ into something else with the help of their senses and certain technology; they compose, interpret, and improvise. Snufkin listens to the sounds of the wood and transforms them in his imagination to compose a melody for his harmonica. Henia collects the described sounds, imagines them based on her own knowledge of nature sounds and musical tradition, and then remodels them into a melody using *Sibelius*. Carl then takes the experience from the conversations and Henia’s music with him to the woods and uses his own senses to capture the sense of place that the material have evoked in his imagination and that he reworks with his own technological media.

There is one final point to be made. Place is essential in the story as well as in the interpretations understood as improvisations – but so is ‘time’. As Ricoeur (1984) remarks, stories are not only told in time but are also representations of time. When Henia explains how she imagines the “explosion of sound” (4.00–4.38), it is caused by Jansson’s sequential description of a movement in place and a description of the sound, but it is imagined as simultaneity: a sudden sound and melodic change – a ‘here and now’ – a simultaneity that we can experience by listening to her composition. Carl creates the simultaneity that Henia is

talking about when he starts the music before the dialogic sequence is finished (4.00–4.38). Carl's preoccupation with rhythm in the video is also about time. The footage from the woods combined with the music (and the reading-aloud of the text) conveys a sense of here and now. This experience of time, as here and now and as becoming, is what also characterizes interpretation as improvisation. Our reluctant reader was happy to work with the text when it was just about processing it into music, when it was "art as experience" (Dewey, 1934), which emphasizes the potential of creative and artistic practices in literary contexts. As for the story itself, time is just as important an aspect as place. It is not only about Snufkin's composition or the narrative in itself; at its core, it is a philosophical and poetic reflection about becoming. "He felt happy about the wood and the weather, and himself. Tomorrow and yesterday were both at a distance, and just at present the sun was shining brightly red between the birches, and the air was cool and soft. It's the right evening for a tune, Snufkin thought" (Jansson, 2003, pp. 9).

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Carl Eltervaag works as an advisor and videographer at The Writing Centre, NTNU. He develops learning resources on writing education and research, and produces educational videos and documentaries at the Department of Teacher Education. Carl is also the project coordinator of an ongoing Erasmus+ project called *Vlogging Beyond Classrooms (Vibes)*.

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Appendix

Link to music composition:

<https://usn.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=8fb132da-4958-482d-9fdd-b21100b17a20>