

Dudeladiduu, or whatever you do

**A modern folk singer's journey into
finding their own ways of trall**

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract:	
<p>This thesis examines the ways a modern folk singer views trall singing as a Nordic folk singing tradition and touches upon the important components a singer uses when tralling. Trall will also be explored generally as a phenomenon of Nordic folk music and folk singing. This study is an artistic research project done as part of the Nordic Master's in Folk Music Education at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts, Helsinki. Attached to it is an audio file, regarding the master's concert that was done as a part of this research project and that took place on November 14th, 2025. In this thesis, the research questions are: What are the most important factors that define my own style of trall? How do you tell a story through a trall, which is traditionally sung with nonsensical lyrics?</p>	
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION.....	5
1.1 Artistic research.....	6
1.2 About trall as a form of folk singing.....	7
1.3 About me as a folk singer.....	8
1.4 Research questions.....	9
2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH.....	10
2.1 Earlier works on trall.....	10
2.2 Trallstyles.....	11
2.3 Nordic points of view.....	12
4 FINDING MY OWN WAYS OF TRALL.....	13
4.1 Methods.....	14
4.2 So what is it that I do?.....	14
4.3 The tryouts.....	17
4.4 The power of syllables.....	19
4.5 Master's concert.....	21
5 CONCLUSIONS.....	22
6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	24
SOURCES.....	26

1 INTRODUCTION

This is a written component of the master's thesis at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts, Helsinki. The thesis also includes the master's concert *Meetings* that was held on the 14th of November 2025. The master's concert and this written work together constitute the master's thesis. In this written part that also includes a video clip from the master's concert, the aim is to describe my artistic process with finding my own ways of singing trall, and to have a general look into the different influences I have acquired during my master's studies in the Nordic Master's in Folk Music. The education I have taken part in (Nordic Master's in Folk Music) is an education that is shared amongst four Nordic universities: The Royal College of Music (KMH) in Sweden, The Danish National Academy of Music (SDMK) in Denmark, Sibelius Academy in Finland and Ole Bull Academy in Norway. The programme includes mandatory exchanges in each of the participating universities. During the education, the students will get an overview of each country's folk music traditions and are offered an opportunity to conduct artistic research on the subject that most interests them. A big part of this education until now has also been working in an ensemble with the other participating students.

Trall is an interesting subject to me, because I have enjoyed the groove of instrumental folk music for a very long time, and have wanted to take part in jam sessions that usually include a lot of instrumental pieces. As a singer, I also have felt that the gap between singers and instrumentalists is sometimes quite big. The folk singers usually prefer to make their own jams or are placed automatically in a soloistic position in an ensemble. By learning trall, I have been able to place myself in the role of an instrument, and by doing this, I have also been able to open new pathways of co-working with a wider variety of folk musicians than before. The accessibility of trall is also a big thing for me. When working in international settings, trall is something that frees the singer, and exceeds language barriers. Furthermore, the ability to tell stories and convey emotions without lyrics has fascinated me for a long time.

Through this thesis, I aim to portray my artistic processes as a modern folk singer and to dive deeper into the different variables that are important when I trall. By striving to look at what trall is, what it has been used historically and in modern settings, and what it brings to my

artistry, I strive to bring forward a coherent picture of it as a folk singing style and analyse my own artistry as a modern folk singer through this lens. By telling about my own experiences, I hope to also inspire others to look into trall traditions, make its historical importance as a folk music tradition more visible in Finland and inspire more cross-cultural co-operation with modern trall- and folk singers.

1.1 Artistic research

Artistic research relies on the artistic practices of the researcher and underlines the researcher's own experiences. Relevant questions for artistic research are also what methods are being used for the research, and what kind of knowledge it produces. These questions are taken to closer inspection in Laura Gröndahls article, *Tools for artistic research* (2024). In this article, Gröndahl states that often the artistic researcher themselves make up the methods for the research as the research progresses through experimentation in the arts and documenting the progress. However, this must be done in a manner that is also understandable for someone who approaches research from a different perspective. Gröndahl also says that research and the activities within it must be transparent, justified and open for critique within the research community. (Gröndahl 2024.)

As an artistic researcher, I try my best to be aware of my position, and the fact that the conclusions and starting points of this research are very specific for my point of view, for a person of my ethnicity, cultural background, gender and experiences, and that I see the world through my own viewpoints. I am a modern folk singer in a Nordic country, so my materials and my own ways of doing art and seeing the world are embedded in these points of view.

As for terminology, Henk Borgdorff has, in their article *The debate on research in the arts*, referred to the works of Christopher Frayling, through which Borgdorff has made his own version of three types of artistic research. Borgdorff calls these three *research on the arts*, *research for the arts* and *research in the arts* (Borgdorff 2006, 5–6; Frayling 1993). These three types were introduced to us in the artistic research classes at KMH as three ways of researching a group of people swimming in the water, the water signifying *doing* the art, or *being in* a tradition. *Research on the arts* can be seen as an onlooker watching the swimmers

(the object) from the outside. They can make remarks about the swimmers in the water, what they do or what they say, the color of the water and so on, but they can't comment on the experience, what it is like to be in the water. *Research for the arts* can be seen more as instrumental research, Borgdorff (2006, 6) writes. The researcher can go around the water, measuring the temperature of the water. Borgdorff's (2006, 5–7) last type, *research in the arts*, can be seen as being in the water yourself, and experiencing everything as a part of the group you are in the water with.

Borgdorff's model has been enlightening to me, but it has also received criticism. Susanne Rosenberg writes in her doctoral thesis (2014) that narrowing down all artistic research into these three types has sometimes been seen as problematic, because art in and of itself tends to escape classification in the ways the research would need. Does it do a disservice to the art in question to be able to narrow it down to be looked through with methods, descriptions, and documentation? Is it then seen through only with a scientific researcher's eyes? (Rosenberg 2014, 20–22.)

Doing artistic research that is based on my artistic practice has, in my case, meant similar things that Rosenberg (2014) has written about her experiences doing her doctoral research. I too am both the subject and the object in this research, looking into myself both as a swimmer among other swimmers (a modern folk singer), and at the same time being in the water myself (being immersed in the traditions, and doing trall). I was not born into a living folk music tradition, but through the opportunities I have had, I have been able to become a part of the folk music student community, and so with time, I have started to feel like I am in the water with the others. I feel this is quite a typical position for a modern folk musician or a modern folk singer, and many who study folk music have their musical roots in a different genre originally.

1.2 About trall as a form of folk singing

Trall or *tralling* is a way of singing that is known around the world, but in each of the countries, it has a different word to describe the style. In Scotland and England, it is called *lilting*, *diddling* or *mouth music*, but most often in Scandinavia and Finland, it's called *trall*.

(Piggot 2014, 1; Åkesson 2007, 243). In Finnish, trall is often called *trallatus* or *rallatus*. Tralling is done by mimicking the traditional (usually fiddle) tunes with your mouth and voice. By using different syllables (for example, tral-la-la or didl-la-di-du), the singer is striving towards retaining the information that the tune holds about the bowing of the fiddle, the swing (often referred to as *svikt* in Swedish) of the tune, the stylistic characteristics of the tune, dance type and the rhythm and tempo of the tune. Trall has been used as a performative form of solo art, but also for preserving and teaching the tradition, or even for accompanying dance when the instruments or players have been scarcely available (Ling 1974, 99). Nowadays, folk music tralling is used both in performances and in dance accompaniment, and although it has not been researched much in Finland, the interest in it within the folk music communities is growing. My own experience is that in the time when the recordings were done for the folk music archival recordings, trall was not seen as an art form of its own, but more as a very mundane everyday form of remembering the tunes. I would argue this kind of mimicking of instrumental music is a very casual everyday thing for people everywhere, even today; it just appears in different forms than it has appeared before. Mimicking instruments is a very widely seen phenomenon in music, and for example, scatting in jazz music can be included in this way of making vocal music from instrumental tunes, although being mostly improvised, it is not used in the same contexts as trall or diddling (Piggot 2014).

1.3 About me as a folk singer

I was first introduced to tralling as a form of folk singing through folk music bands like Gjallarhorn (Sjofn 2000), and later in my studies in folk music pedagogy at Centria University of Applied Sciences in Finland. During my studies, I got familiar with some of the most well-known Finnish trall singers, like Tiila Ilkka (Anna Ottilia Ilkka, Alavus 1875–1963) and the recordings of her in the archives, but the whole concept of trall was not explored much at that moment in my life. Later, when arranging a dance evening with only tralling with my colleagues, we spent quite some time pondering on which syllables would be appropriate to use when tralling to dance. There were no set rules, and back then we were

wondering about the big influence that the Swedish ways of trall seemed to have on us, even when we had not studied folk singing in Sweden.

During my master's studies, I continued with this intrigue towards trall singing, and as the NoFo ensemble consisted of only melody instruments (two fiddles and a saxophone), I found tralling to be a suitable way for me to explore Nordic folk music as one of the instruments. This equal role in the ensemble strengthened my will to explore more of the trall styles, traditions, and the ways I could develop my skills in tralling as a modern folk singer.

1.4 Research questions

The research questions for this thesis have formed to be the following: What are the most important factors that define my own style of trall? How do you tell a story through trall, which is traditionally sung with nonsensical lyrics? As previously mentioned, during this education, I had a chance to look closer at the possibilities of using my voice as an equal instrument to the ones my friends in the NoFo ensemble played. This new role as an instrument, among others, presented its advantages and disadvantages for me early on. Voice is not as loud as an instrument, and most often, not having a microphone brings volume issues to the forefront in the ensemble sessions. At the beginning of my education, I also struggled a lot with feeling like I should be playing the accordion instead to better match the energy and swing (*svikt*) of the dance tunes we were playing. This eventually led to the Eureka moment, that I could indeed use my voice to be equal to the other instruments and act in the same roles as they do, and I kind of already knew how to do that in my own way. Singing in unison or second voices was quite natural to me, but accompanying the other instrument in ways that suited the Nordic dance styles in question was something new to me. I also wanted to know what the stylistic details were that made a tune danceable.

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Trall, as a form of folk singing tradition, has not been researched that much yet in Finland. Désirée Saarela-Portin (2012) has made an analysis report *Trallstavelser* for Sibelius Academy about the Finnish and Finnish-Swedish trall-syllables in 2012. Juniper Hill has also touched on trall traditions in Finland in her doctoral thesis in 2005. Most of the material and research of trall I have come across and used in this thesis are from Sweden and written in Swedish.

2.1 Earlier works on trall

Some of the research I have read for this thesis is, for example, Hanna Andersson's degree work from 2022 in Kungliga Musikhögskolan, which includes a style analysis of five different Swedish trallers. In her work, she analyses the personal trall styles and syllables used in the folksongs sung by Måns Olsson (1865–1961), Jonas Eriksson Røjås (1921–1989), Maria Røjås (1959–), Martin Martinsson and Ulrika Gunnarson. She also analyses briefly the vowel and consonant qualities used in trall, and the different places in the songs that they are often used in.

Marika Appelholm wrote a degree project for the music pedagogy programme in Ingesund's Music Academy called *Dudeladi vadå?* in 2016, in a similar fashion to the name I chose for this thesis. She has studied the way trall can be used in teaching folk music and talks about trall as a way of folk singing in Sweden in general. In her research, she focused on the questions how the singing pedagogues see trall as a musical expression. Do the pedagogues think trall develops the singing technique and how? And how do the pedagogues use trall as a method in their teaching?

Ingrig Åkesson has published the book *Med rösten som instrument - Perspektiv till nutida svensk vokal folkmusik* in 2007 in collaboration with the Svensk visarkivet or the song archives. In this book, she touches on many aspects of folk singing, its styles, and even tralling specifically.

2.2 Trallstyles

The ways of trall are so numerous as there are trallers. Trall is usually done solo, or even with two voices, but it is rarer to have several different voices tralling at the same time for dance. (Appelholm 2016, 10–12.) Tralling a cappella with multi-voiced arrangements is done quite a lot in modern folk music a cappella groups.

As a style of folk singing, it often requires a lot of technique from the singer, since being originally instrumental music, it does not naturally contain breaks for breathing. Trall can also be challenging when it comes to articulation. (Appelholm 2016, 6). My style of trall includes a more continuous way of singing the phrases all the way to the end, which can be very straining for the supporting muscle mechanisms. This is one way of looking at trall, and it is also linked to the way I am used to doing trall. There are also more performance-based ways of doing trall, which then give possibilities to trall to the singer's own accord and preferences, and to take time for the ornamenting as much as they please.

The trallers' own style of trall can be affected by, for example, the purpose of the trall; when singing over a big crowd of dancing (and possibly mingling) people, the loudness, tone height and sound quality of the trall are emphasized (Åkesson 2007, 243–245). Trallers singing for dance without amplification tend to go to a sharper and firmer quality of sound in their singing. Åkesson (2007, 245) does give an example of the way some old Swedish men used to trall, and calls it *gubbtrall* (old man trall), and says that a characteristic way of singing *gubbtrall* is to sing with almost a closed mouth and with indistinct articulation. This is a phenomenon that can also be found in some of the Finnish archival recordings.

Choosing the syllables for trall is also very personal and depends on the singer in question. This is something I will touch on more thoroughly in the next chapters; how people choose the syllables is not completely random. There are certain patterns people tend to follow when they do trall folk music that do not depend on the singer's country of origin or the language used, as far as I have observed.

In its nature of being very personal and varied, tralling includes a lot of improvisational components. In Åkessons interviews of Swedish trallers, Ulrika Gunnarson said that, in her opinion, a trall singer should never attach themselves too tightly to any fixed trall syllables,

but to vary within the frames of the piece (Åkesson 2007, 152–153). This is something I have observed myself doing on almost all occasions I trall in.

2.3 Nordic points of view

Out of all Nordic countries, trall is most well researched in Sweden. It is more visible as a tradition in Sweden than in Finland, but it has still struggled to be recognized in recent years. Only recently trall was included in the Zornmärket competitions in 2025. Zornmärket (given out since 1930) is a badge of honor that one can get if one has a wide enough repertoire of Swedish folk music (Svenska folkdansringen). Before 2025, folk singers were only allowed to take part with *vallåts-musik* (sheparding music) and *kulning* (cow calling), and the question of trall as a way of tradition-bearing had been on the table at least from 2005 (Appelholm 2016, 8–9). The conversation was brought up again by, for example, Óskar Guðnason in 2024 in an open letter to the Zornmärkets jury, saying that the voice is the oldest instrument in the world, and that there are many hard-working and very knowledgeable tradition-bearers, and that there should be given an equal chance for trall as one of the traditional instruments used in folk music. (Spelmannen 2024.)

In Norway, trall is also a prominent part of folk singing traditions and is featured in folk music festivals and competitions. In Norway, trall is also often associated with the *slåtte*-singing traditions, which means that either the fiddler or the singer will sing short pieces of lyrics as a beginning of an instrumental piece to remember how the song went. These kinds of short songs with and without trall can also be found in Sweden and Finland.

In Denmark, the trall tradition does exist but has not yet been researched. Trall has been, and still is, a part of the folk music culture of Denmark and has some distinct syllables that clearly differ from those used elsewhere. Lene Høst Mees has been working with trall in Denmark both as a solo artist and vocal group leader, and the interest towards trall as a singing tradition in Denmark in general has been growing.

4 FINDING MY OWN WAYS OF TRALL

During this time of exploration in the Nordics, I have concluded that I really learn best when I immerse myself in the tradition at hand, and for that, the NoFo education has been exceptionally great for me. Being surrounded by the music, playing it and seeing the patterns has really trained my ear to mimic the styles with trall to the best of my ability. Dancing the folk dances and talking about the dancers' perspectives in each country has also been vital to this process. In the following chapter, I will describe the practices I used for my artistic research during this education, and the findings that came thereafter.

Alongside immersing myself in the traditions, I have found it to be very enlightening to have conversations about trall with my peers, teachers and artists who do trall. There are no set rules on how to trall, no guidebooks and a limited number of materials to learn it from, so it has been very important to widen my horizons to the ways others think about and of trall. I have found that the toolboxes of people who practice trall tend to resemble one another, yet each conversation has also revealed something new.

4.1 Methods

The above-mentioned immersion in the traditions has, in my experience, been the most important of my methods. Immersing oneself in a tradition can be done in many ways. The most relevant ways for me to do this were to listen to archive recordings and the way my teachers taught me, and to use mimicking as a tool for learning trall. Alongside these, I have found that being able to be a part of the learning community is one of the absolute best ways of learning for me. Getting to be a part of the everyday learning, concerts and dances with my peers in the countries we visited gave me so many opportunities in learning some of the tacit knowledge, the how-tos and who-to-ask of the communities we visited.

Archival work is one of my most used methods in learning about trall. This approach is widely used by modern folk musicians both to identify source material within the traditions they study and to interact creatively with archival recordings, adapting them into personal practice or incorporating stylistically relevant features into their own artistic expression. Working with the archival recordings has been extensively researched from a folk musician's

point of view by Emilia Lajunen (2023). In their artistic doctoral thesis, Lajunen explains many of the ways archive materials can be used as a tool for a folk musician, and how the material can become alive once more through the musician who is making their own interpretation of it. (Lajunen 2023, 67–70.)

Immersing oneself in a tradition leads very quickly to mimicking, and this requires one to have sharp ears. When one has acquired a general picture of Nordic folk music traditions, it becomes easier to notice the subtle changes in the tune styles one listens to. At least this has been the case for me. I do not read sheet music fluently, but I feel that having trouble reading has made my ears more precise in hearing subtle changes.

Mimicking (or mimicry) has been mentioned as one of her artistic methods by Susanne Rosenberg (2014, 42–44). According to her, longing is the first starting point to spark the desire to mimic. Mimicking is, in her words, to 'try on' someone else's artistry or the way they embody the art, and then, without or with thinking, leading to the mimicker making their own version of the art they have just mimicked. (Rosenberg 2014, 42–44.)

I have used mimicking as a method to learn trall from my teachers, folk music artists, archive recordings, and most importantly, my instrumentalist friends. I have found that co-working so closely with fiddlers has opened my ears to the multitude of techniques one can use when tralling a tune. I have experienced that mimicking the fiddler's bowings, embellishments, and playing attitudes has taught me the most about trall, and so has said also one of my singing teachers, Berit Opheim, who has consciously used mimicking as a method to learn trall from fiddlers in Norway (Opheim 2025).

4.2 So what is it that I do?

During this education, I have started to understand the ways that contribute to the way I sing trall. An important part of this has been the conversations I have had with folk singers and teachers, who already have their own distinct trall style and use it in their artistry, most of all Berit Opheim, Désirée Saarela-Portin and Maria Kalaniemi. These conversations have been of immense help in my own processes and have, on the other hand, verified that trall styles

are as many as voices are singing them, and that the ways people trall Nordic folk music are not completely random or devoid of certain unifying factors.

For me, the most defining factors in analyzing the ways I trall have been the following: singing technique, breathing, aesthetics and style of the tune, embellishments, placing of the sound in the mouth, leaving room for little improvisation, rhythmical force, *svikt* and interplay with the dancers or the players I trall with.

What I have found with technique and breathing with trall is that it is a very demanding style of singing, especially when my own trall is usually for dance (trall is not always done for dance). This is something Appelholm has also referred to experiencing in their remarks about the ways they trall but also sees the demanding nature of trall as an excellent exercise of singing technique and articulation (Appelholm 2016, 6). Striving towards good support and singing technique has been a big part of my former studies as a singer, both in pop-jazz and folk singing. Despite this, I still felt like I struggled a bit to carry a whole hour of trall in my master's concert. Often trall requires the singer to sing long phrases continuously after another, and this can result in feeling like you have run a marathon after tralling for a time. The long phrases and trying to keep up with the tempo of dancers when tralling to dance requires the singer to take very short breaths between the phrases, and for this reason, the breathing technique must be on a solid foundation. If the singer starts to breathe shallowly, the support system starts to give in, giving space for strained vocal cords, pushing the voice and breathlessness. What I have found is also that when tralling for dance, it's not the end of the world if you need to take a bigger breath. The interplay between the dancers and the singer will continue, because the dancers are continuing the beat with their steps. Some modern folk singers even use breathing as a percussive tool in their trall.

My sound placement when singing tends to be leaning forward, creating a room for the sound to resonate around the palate or the roof of the mouth. The Finnish language tends to sit further back in the mouth, so when singing or even speaking English, I notice I tend to bring the sound more towards the front of my head. I have found that with trall it is also quite important not to let the vowels "fall back", but to keep them in the same place in the mouth, to create a more effortless way of singing and keep the timbre of the tune in the same place. The sound of trall also tends to be higher up on the register of the singer, because it must be

heard over the dancers' steps (Åkesson 2007, 243). This is true in my case too, and I have often noticed my tendency to do different trall pieces from the same (mezzo soprano) vocal register.

When it comes to rhythm, especially when tralling for dancers, I need to keep the feeling of the meter, beat and pulse in my singing. The rhythmic patterns weave a form of patterns that, in the end, is the thing that makes you feel like dancing (Paavola 2021, 34). Additionally to the rhythm, the swing of folk music also consists of the phrasing of the tunes. Paavola writes in their pedagogical master's thesis about the phrasing style of *pelimanni* music (tune-based, or the newer layer of Finnish folk music) as follows: phrasing refers to the structuring of the music, and it could be compared to the ways people speak and make different rhythmical and gestural changes to liven up the message they want to convey. This could, in folk music, regarding phrasing, be called the distinct handwriting of the folk musician, and it can include many elements of variation on multiple levels. (Paavola 2021, 35.) This way of thinking also applies to tralling in my opinion. The signature trall style consists of the different influences the singer has had from other singers, players or even their own instruments. I find my trall has adapted the same mannerisms that I have when I play folk music melodies on the accordion, especially with the embellishments I do, which are the same in both trall and accordion. This implies to me that I too have developed a so-called handwriting in my folk musicianship, which has probably been influenced by my teachers, peers and the folk music I listen to daily.

On many of my singing lessons during this education, I have come across the term of intent in trall. A kind of inner drive and a gesture of moving the music forward. If this inner drive is missing from the trall, it leaves it feeling a little bit flat and unenthusiastic, like something is missing from it. In Appelholm's work, the trall singers she interviewed call this phenomenon a *flow* or a *direction*, which is important to hold when carrying the dancers forward on the dance floor (Appelholm, 2016, 25). This, in my case, is an attitude, but also a notion of concretely imagining the singing to go forward like a continuum of little shooting stars. When I imagine myself dancing, embody the dance by tapping my foot or bouncing a little, and I can more easily get to this mindset of movement when doing trall.

As I have mentioned before, I have also been looking into the ways how trall could tell a story without any lyrics. I have found that without context, the feelings behind the trall can be conveyed, but they are more deeply understood by prefacing them with something. It can be a dramatised story like the ones I wrote for my master's concert, or even just telling the origin or the mood of the piece can give people better opportunities to grasp the feelings behind the stories. Usually, the trall pieces I want to tell a story with are not dance tunes. The ability to dictate the tempo and mood alone or with another singer has given me the most freedom to interpret the tunes. I would compare the feeling of trall with another singer to the feeling of playing an instrument together with someone as a duo. The interplay can bring up fun possibilities to use counterpoint, and to bring fun question-answer moments between the singers. At its best, the instruments, or singers, are in the piece together at the same time, bringing and receiving impulses to the point that it is hard to differentiate who is leading and who is following. The same can be said about a working interplay of an instrument or traller and a dancer.

4.3 The tryouts

The artistic practice of doing trall has formed slowly but surely over time. My working style usually consists of a time when nothing seemingly happens, and then there is a sudden leap of progress, or at least it often feels like that. One of these leaps happened in Denmark, when we were given an assignment to learn a *sønderhoning* (a dance type that is specific to Fanø, Denmark) in pairs. I noticed the way I was tralling the tune fit very well in the fiddle bowings, and since we had both learned the tune from the same recording it seamlessly made a two-instrument duo. The way the fiddler in the recording accentuated the bowings was clear and distinct, and as such made it easy to sit onto the swing of it. I would call this one of the pivotal moments in my artistic practice with trall, and I started to experiment more with trall and composing with trall after that.

Another small project within my tryouts regarding trall also happened in Denmark, where we had a singing/tralling duo with a friend. During this project, we learned songs by ear and tried out different singing roles, from being the lead to being the accompaniment. The most important lesson for me during these tryouts was the importance of keeping the danceable

beat and bouncing feeling in the singing by tapping our feet and keeping the swing (*svikt*) always embodied. I found it enlightening to have another singer as the other instrument, since I had before been tralling with instruments that were not ones that needed to have breathing breaks. When the instrument one is singing with does not have a bow or harmonic elements, it requires more intense following of the other singer and their breathing patterns to keep the flow in the tune, and keep the pieces elevated. It also gives more space for each of the singers, possibly exposing the places where one usually would lean more into the fiddle players playing, but it also gives more space for the smaller nuances to be heard and reacted to.

Tralling for dance has been a big part of my exploration of trall. I have sung for dance on a couple of occasions and been talking and trying trall as an instrument for one dancer in my lessons at the Sibelius Academy with Reetta-Kaisa Iles. I have noticed it feels very different to be tralling for dance with a big group of dancers compared to just one. Before tralling to dance in the Kaustinen Folk Music Festival in 2025, I had made a couple of recordings of myself in the moment when I was practicing alone at home, and then recorded the same pieces live in the dancing event. Compared to the live session, my singing alone sounded tired, uninspired, and I was struggling to keep the rhythm. My breathing sounded difficult, too, and I could hear that I was frustrated at myself for not being able to keep the phrases until the end. In the live session, I was still trying to catch my breath on many occasions, but in general, I sounded more in tune with the tunes and even changed the tempo of a few tunes by accident to fit better for the dancers. In the moment, I had kept my eyes closed when I was singing, but hearing the footsteps of the dancers around me kept me in the moment, and I was enjoying myself and felt lighter in my singing. Getting instant feedback from the dancers was also very important. If the tempo was not quite right, I could correct it in that moment, and in one piece where I seemed to find an extra good tempo, the dancer's enthusiasm helped me to also sink more into the swing.

Tralling alone with my accordion as the accompaniment has also been a big part of my trall journey. This is something I will be looking further into in the future, but for now I have settled on two ways how I can support my trall with an accordion without it taking too much attention away from my singing. The first way of doing this is playing basic chords, bass, octaves or most often fifth intervals on the treble side of the accordion. The treble side

matches better on the ambitus of my voice, and by varying the rhythm, it is possible to get an easy flow that sustains and carries the trall. I prefer to use the bass side of the accordion (the accordion being my secondary instrument) when I am looking for darker tones or striving towards a sharper higher pitched trall. The second way that I have found nice is to keep the tonic on the bass side or the treble side and play second voices to the melody I trall on the treble side at the same time. I like the way this sounds, and I can blend the tone of my voice to the accordion, but it takes a bit more away from the trall and makes the sound overall thicker, which does not always give enough space for the different nuances in the trall. This is something I would like to explore further later.

4.4 The power of syllables

As I briefly touched upon before, the syllables singers use when they trall are as many and varied as there are trall singers. The way people trall is still not completely random, and a few recurring similarities can be observed. There was an article published in the Swedish folk music research yearbook *Sumlen* in 1989 by Johan Sundberg, in which he describes an interesting experiment. As a part of a seminary work in the University of Stockholm for the speech therapy education, the researchers had given six different melodies from different genres to trall for 11 musicians, most of them players from the Radio orchestra. They found out that while people indeed had big variations in their trall (some tralled in one or two syllables, others had a wide variety of syllables), they tended to sing the accents with *pa* or *ta*, when they were preceded by a nasal vowel. In a three-tone phrase with an accent in the middle, the most common way of tralling it was *tampada*, and the eight- and sixteenth notes were most often sung in similar nonsense words like *tidelidedam* or *tidadida*. (Sundberg 1989). This was extremely interesting to me, and it also piqued my curiosity; could an experiment like this be repeated in Finland in Finnish? What would it reveal about the natural tendencies of trall in the Finnish language?

Language affects the trall style quite a lot. Upon talking to my peers and colleagues about trall, it became evident that the Finnish ways of doing trall are more likely more comparable to the way the Estonians trall, because our languages are related to each other. In the same way, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish trall have similar components, because their languages

are from the same language family. The Swedish-speaking Finns have a more similar trall style to the Swedish one. Where a Finnish traller might sing *hila-himppaa-himppaa-hilatula-himppaa* (a snippet from Tyyne Pahkamäki (1911–2005) in 1972: Saksanpolkka (SKSÄ 183:1-16.) or *rilitali-tilitila-ralitula-rinttaa* (a snippet from Juho Suomela: Mylly-Kallen saksanpolkka 1976, University of Tampere, Archives of culture and research) the Finnish-Swedish traller would sing, for example, *trai-di-dai-di-dal-laa* (a snippet from Agda Nyberg (1928–2013) in 1968: polka). Analysing the syllables people have historically used for trall in Finland is not much researched. What all these examples have in common is the will to signify the bowings and the accents clearly in the way that the tune type requires. In some of the tunes, the more commonly used instrument for the tune is also visible, for example, in my opinion, in the polka Juho Suomela tralls it is clearly visible that he is a melodeon player and accentuates the bellow changes and rhythmic patterns of a buttoned and bellowed instrument instead of those of a fiddle. As a difference to Scandinavian trall syllables, the Finnish trallers use, for example, the rolling *r*, *p* and even the glottal *h* to signify the bowing patterns. They also tend to use a lot of the non-aspirated *t*, which in some cases sounds a lot like a soft Finnish *d*. The letter *d* is not originally a part of the Finnish language but has been included later, which can be seen in some dialects (and tralls) even to this day. There has been phonetic research done into this phenomenon, and it has been concluded that the letter *d* as a consonant of foreign origin has taken over the *t* in almost all Finnish dialects at the end of the 1800s as a part of consonant gradation (Häkkinen 1997, 38–39).

As it comes to the way I use the syllables in trall, I do not have any system that I have particularly decided on. I have learned primarily through the practice of singing trall, gradually developing preferred syllables either by imitating existing models or by intuitively discovering variations that suited the musical context. However, I find that the swing of the tune type turns my interest towards different syllables. For example, when tralling polkas or a faster beat, I like to accentuate by using the rolling *r* in the phrases, I use a lot of *l*, and in polskas I often like to end in *di-deijaa*. When it comes to the vowels, I tend to stay quite put, and use mostly *a* and *i*, ending on either *a* or *o*. I think this is quite a normal way for a modern folk singer to be singing trall in Finland. I feel like I have taken some small influences from my studies around the Nordics, but they show up mostly in the pieces and styles I have learned them with. It would be interesting to compare the different ways modern

folk song students trall, since from what I have heard from my peers, it seems to be generally quite similar regardless of the country for some reason.

When it comes to the swing or *svikt* of trall, I enjoy making nuances to the songs by using my diaphragm as a sort of a bellow for the phrases to keep the intensity, similarly to the way I would do if I were playing the accordion. I also bounce quite a lot while doing the trall and stomp my foot quite loudly at the same time.

4.6 Master's concert

My master's concert *Meetings* was held at the Black Box, Music Centre on the 14th of November 2025. I had decided to make trall the focal point of it and play and sing my favorite tunes from the Nordic Master journey. With me I had a band that consisted of percussions, kantele, accordion, fiddle, cello, and another singer. In between the pieces of music, I did minimalistic storytelling moments of little texts I had written about the feelings that had risen while traveling across the four countries with my fellow students.

Conveying feelings and telling stories with the pieces I took as a part of my concert was a big thing for me. I was so glad the people who played with me made it easy for me to throw myself into the pieces, and also helped me to find the right ways of conveying emotions without lyrics. I chose the instruments I played duos with, thinking of their timbers and how they would support the stories at hand. The cello was with me in the darker and sombre pieces, the kantele was there to bring the sunshine and glimmer into pieces where there was happiness and safety, and another singer was there to bring playfulness and beauty to the interplay. I made a conscious decision to have the duo pieces move in a similar timbral area, supporting each other rather than contrasting, and I feel that contributed to being able to convey the stories of the pieces in a clear way to the audience, even without lyrics.

As the concert was centered around the stories from my travels, I found it came quite naturally to make the pieces of music into small windows into the stories. It was also a question of language, since most of the pieces I sang were either in Swedish or trall, so it was important for me to create these little moments of feeling and story. I wondered whether it would be possible at all to convey emotions with trall, but my concerns were in vain. Just as

emotion can be expressed through the fiddle, accordion, saxophone, or any other instrument, it can likewise be conveyed through trall, arguably with even greater immediacy. A human voice is inherently a very intimate instrument, and it conveys emotion very strongly. The possibilities of creating an emotional piece of music with the variety of tools a singer has in their possession are vast.

I have attached to this thesis a snippet from this concert as a concrete example of the trall that is most fun for me to do, a duo with trall. We sang a Danish tune called *Ostindiens Velkomst* with Geneviève Andræsen and made our own arrangement of it for the concert. I had sung this piece before as a duo first with a fiddle and then with a saxophone, and felt that the possibilities of musical interplay with another singer made it a fun tune to trall. The swing of the song is clear, making it easy to stay in the rhythm and to find playful moments for callandresponse interaction with the other singer. We also changed roles in the tune, from the leading melody to accompaniment, as I have done before with other players and singers I have tralled with. This gives the tune variation, and keeps the intention of a forward leading direction, as is important when tralling a tune that only has an A and a B part. This clip from the concert is a good example of where I am now with trall, and I wish to continue working with it further with singers and instrumentalists alike.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis, I have examined trall as a Nordic folk music tradition, reviewed current research on trall in the Nordic countries (primarily Sweden), and reflected on my own experiences both as an artistic researcher and as a modern folk musician who sings trall. By choosing to write this thesis in English, I have hoped to make interest in trall more visible across a wider range of folk music communities and to invite critique and further knowledge about trall as a phenomenon within Nordic folk music.

The first research question was: What are the most important factors that define my own style of trall? I have found the most important factors that define my own trall style are my own "handwriting" in the phrasing, using syllables that work for me, mimicking the bowings of a tune with my tongue, embellish accordingly to the tune type, changing the timbre of my voice

to fit the tune, and keeping the *svikt* present in my body by tapping my foot. I have been affected by my teachers during this education, archival materials and maybe most importantly, the ways my peers and friends play folk music, which I have had the joy of witnessing and being part of when immersing myself into these different academic modern folk music environments. I have learned the ways of doing my own trall by doing it, through co-operation, interplay, mimicking, listening, observing and pondering what it is that makes the people dance to the music and how to embody the feeling of dance in my singing. The most I have learned from working with instrumentalists who embody the bowings and *svikt* clearly. It has also helped to have a strong second instrument during the education, and both singing and playing the accordion have supported each other in forming my own style of playing and tralling Nordic folk tunes.

The second research question was: How do you tell a story through trall, which is traditionally sung with nonsensical lyrics? I have found during this research and through my artistic practices that storytelling through trall is possible and contains similar elements to the ways instrumentalists tell stories through their playing. The varying nuances and the inherent emotional nature of the human voice open a large spectrum of possibilities to convey feelings to the audience in musical performance settings, and through the interplay of the musicians. An important aspect of engaging the audience in the storytelling of trall is to introduce the mood of the tune with a brief story when appropriate, and to fully immerse oneself in that mood while singing. The interplay between musicians also gives colour to the trall, for example, through the question-answer format. The different timbres of the voice also play a key role in evoking feelings in the listener. Blending my voice with the sharper tones of the accordion can more easily bring forward sharper feelings, like anger or longing. In contrast, tralling with a softer instrument or solo gives space for a softer palette of sounds and a large variety of nuances.

Writing this thesis has opened new pathways of thought for me and made visible some of the tacit knowledge I already had about tralling but did not yet know how to put into words. Thinking about this subject has enabled me to make new connections in the folk music field, and to have conversations about subjects regarding trall that I would not have found by myself. I have also noticed how little trall is researched here in Finland and how the modern ways of Finnish trall in Finland are influenced by the surrounding trall cultures. Researching

trall is not easy in Finland, because what I have found is that trall has been common here, but it was not necessarily accurately documented and labelled as "trall" when the archive recordings were done, so it is difficult to find and research. The Finnish-Swedish trall traditions have been, and still are, strong, and when doing my research, I have found the materials from the Swedish-speaking side easier to access.

For my artistry, this research has opened a whole new world of possibilities to work as a folk musician in the field. I have found many tools I can use for both my artistic work and teaching. Taking on the role of an instrument rather than a soloist has brought me closer to the other instrumentalists and strengthened my feeling of belonging in the folk music community. My understanding of the tacit knowledge that relates to the ways of playing Nordic folk music has also grown immensely when taking the role of an accompanying instrument in dance events.

This thesis can be seen as a beginning for many different directions for me. I would like to research trall in Finland more closely, as it is not much researched and as finding the materials for archival work regarding trall might be a difficult and time-consuming task. As for my artistry, I will continue to work with trall both in my solo projects with the accordion, and with bigger groups containing both singers and instrumentalists.

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