

Classic Poetry Series

Carl Michael Bellman
- poems -

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Carl Michael Bellman(4 February 1740 – 11 February 1795)

Carl Michael Bellman was a Swedish poet and composer. Bellman is a central figure in the Swedish song tradition and remains a very important influence in Swedish music, as well as in Scandinavian literature in general, to this day.

Life and Work

Bellman was born in Stockholm. His main works are Fredmans sånger (Fredman's songs) and Fredmans epistlar (Fredman's epistles), each including some 70 songs, many of which are about sociable drinking, or were designed and are still used for such drinking. But this aspect of his songs is not the main reason he has become such an icon in the Scandinavian song tradition. Bellman was a master of rhyme and rhythm, with a wonderful sense for combining words and music. He wrote songs that were innovative and original in form (parodying and refreshing contemporary literary styles was one of his specialities), as well as challenging in subject matter.

On the surface, his songs centre to a large extent around themes like the joy of inebriation and the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Against this backdrop, however, he manages to elucidate the tender and fleeting themes of love, death, and the elusive qualities of the "present", the here-and-now, in a unique and moving manner. His songs reflect aspects of the life of the common man in 18th century Stockholm, but by his composition Gustafs skål, an informal royal anthem, he had also acquired the patronage of King Gustav III of Sweden.

King Gustav III called Bellman "Il signor improvisatore" ('Mister Improviser').

Bellman has been compared with poets and musicians as diverse as Shakespeare and Beethoven. Kleveland notes that he has been called "Swedish poetry's Mozart, and Hogarth", observing that

"The comparison with Hogarth was no accident. Like the English portrait painter, Bellman drew detailed pictures of his time in his songs, not so much of life at court as of ordinary people's everyday".

Britten Austin says instead simply that:

"Bellman is unique among great poets, I think, in that virtually his entire opus is

conceived to music. Other poets, of course, notably our Elizabethans, have written songs. But song was only one branch of their art. They did not leave behind, as Bellman did, a great musical-literary work nor paint in words and music a canvas of their age. Nor are their songs dramatic."

As for the songs, Britten Austin writes:

"In 1768, .. Bellman had begun to compose an entirely new sort of song. A genre which 'had no model and can have no successors' (Kellgren), these songs were to grow swiftly in number until they made up the great work on which Bellman's reputation as a poet chiefly rests."

Some of the recurring characters in his songs are the clockmaker Jean Fredman, the prostitute Ulla Winblad, the ex-soldier, now alcoholic Mowitz and Fader Berg, a virtuoso on several instruments. Some of these were based on living models, others probably not. His songs often make references to Greek and Roman mythological characters such as the ferryman Charon and the God of wine and pleasure, Bacchus, brought for comic effect into Stockholm's surroundings.

Bellman mostly played the cittern; the instrument is on display in Stockholm City Museum.

Poetry and Song

Bellman was understood as a great humorist by his contemporaries. He achieved this through incongruity, with what at a casual glance seems to be lofty biblical style or delicate pastoral poetry, but is in fact populated with drunks and whores, talking of life in taverns and excursions around Stockholm, frequently ending with allusions to sexual intercourse. For example, "Blåsen nu alla!" ("All blow now!"), begins with the sight of Venus crossing the water, as in François Boucher's Triumph of Venus, but when she disembarks, Bellman quickly transforms her into a lustful Ulla Winblad. Similarly, the ornate and civilized minuet melody of Ach du min Moder (Alas, thou my mother) contrasts starkly with the text, which is about Fredman lying with a hangover in the gutter outside a pub, complaining bitterly about cters such as Ulla Winblad (her surname means vineleaf) recur through the Epistles; Britten Austin comments that

"Ulla is at once a nymph of the taverns and a goddess of a rococo universe of graceful and hot imaginings".

Legacy

The songs of Bellman have been recorded by modern Swedish artists such as Cornelis Vreeswijk, Evert Taube and his son Sven-Bertil Taube, Fred Åkerström; and even as rock music by Joakim Thåström, Candlemass or Marduk. They are also frequently used as choral music and as drinking songs. Major interpreters of Bellman's songs include Fred Åkerström and Cornelis Vreeswijk.

Bellman has been translated into English, most notably by Paul Britten Austin, and there have been many translations into German (for example by Hannes Wader). German Communist leader Karl Liebknecht liked to sing Bellman in Swedish. Hans Christian Andersen was one of the first to translate Bellman into Danish.

Bellman's songs have also been translated and recorded in Icelandic (by Bubbi), Italian, French, Finnish (for instance by Vesa-Matti Loiri), Russian, Chuvash and Yiddish. English interpretations have been recorded by William Clauson, Martin Best, Sven-Bertil Taube, Roger Hinchliffe and Martin Bagge.

There are a number of books in English with translations of Bellman's work. The authors include Charles Wharton Stork, Hendrik Willem van Loon, Paul Britten Austin, and historian Michael Roberts. In English the most thorough treatment of Bellman's life is also by Paul Britten Austin.

Amaryllis

Up, Amaryllis! Darling, awaken!
Through the still bracken
Soft airs swell;
Iris, all dightly,
Vestured so brightly,
Coloreth lightly
Wood and dell.

Amaryllis, thy sweet name pronouncing,
Thee in Neptune's cool embrace announcing.
Slumber's god the while his sway renouncing,
O'er your eyes sighs, and speech yields his spell.

Now comes the fishing! The net we fasten;
This minute hasten!
Follow me!
Don your skirt and jacket
And veil, or you'll lack it;
Pike and trout wait a racket;
Sails flap free.
Waken, Amaryllis, darling, waken!
Let me not by thy smile be forsaken:
Then by dolphins and fair sirens overtaken,
In our gay boat we'll sport in company.

Come now, your rods, lines, and nets with you taking!
The day is breaking;
Hasten thee nigh!
Sweet little treasure,
Think ill in no measure;
For thee 'twere no pleasure
Me to deny.
Let us to the little shallows wander,
Or beside the inlet over yonder,
Where the pledge-knot made our fond love fonder,
O'er which Thyrsis erst was moved to sigh.

Step in the boat, then--both of us singing,
Love his wand swinging

Over our fate.
AEol is moving,
But though wild proving,
In your arms loving
Comfort doth wait.
Blest, on angry waves of ocean riding,
By thee clasped, vain 'twere this dear thought hiding:
Death shall find me in thy pathway bidding.
Sirens, sing ye, and my voice imitate!

Carl Michael Bellman

Art And Politics

'Good servant Mollberg, what's happened to thee,
Whom without coat and hatless I see?
Bloody thy mouth--and thou'rt lacking a tooth!
Where have you been, brother?--tell me the truth.'
'At Rostock, good sir,
Did the trouble occur.
Over me and my harp
An argument sharp
Arose, touching my playing--pling plingeli plang;
And a bow-legged cobbler coming along
Struck me in the mouth--pling plingeli plang.

'I sat there and played--no carouse could one see--
The Polish Queen's Polka--G-major the key:
The best kind of people were gathered around,
And each drank his schoppen 'down to the ground.'
I don't know just how
Began freshly the row,
But some one from my head
Knocked my hat, and thus said:
'What is Poland to thee?'--Pling plingeli plang--
'Play us no polka!' Another one sang:
'Now silent be!'--Pling plingeli plang.

'Hear, my Maecenas, what still came to pass.
As I sat there in quiet, enjoying my glass,
On Poland's condition the silence I broke:
'Know ye, good people,' aloud thus I spoke,
'That all monarchs I
On this earth do defy
My harp to prevent
From giving song vent
Throughout all this land--pling plingeli plang!
Did only a single string to it hang,
I'd play a polka--pling plingeli plang!'

'There sat in the corner a sergeant old,
Two notaries and a dragoon bold,
Who cried 'Down with him! The cobbler is right!

Poland earns the meeds of her evil might!
From behind the stove came
An old squint-eyed dame,
And flung at the harp
Glass broken and sharp;
But the cobbler--pling plingeli plang--
Made a terrible hole in my neck--that long!
There hast thou the story--pling plingeli plang.

'O righteous world! Now I ask of thee
If I suffered not wrongly?' 'Why, certainly!'
'Was I not innocent?' 'Bless you, most sure!'
'The harp rent asunder, my nose torn and sore,
Twas hard treatment, I trow!
Now no better I know
Than to go through the land
With my harp in my hand,
Play for Bacchus and Venus--kling klang--
With masters best that e'er played or sang;
Attend me, Apollo!--pling plingeli plang.'

Carl Michael Bellman

Cradle-Song For My Son Carl

Little Carl, sleep soft and sweet:
Thou'lt soon enough be waking;
Soon enough ill days thou'lt meet,
Their bitterness partaking.
Earth's an isle with grief o'ercast;
Breathe our best, death comes at last,
We but dust forsaking.

Once, where flowed a peaceful brook
Through a rye-field's stubble,
Stood a little boy to look
At himself; his double.
Sweet the picture was to see;
All at once it ceased to be;
Vanished like a bubble!

And thus it is with life, my pet,
And thus the years go flying;
Live we wisely, gaily, yet
There's no escape from dying.
Little Carl on this must muse
When the blossoms bright he views
On spring's bosom lying.

Slumber, little friend so wee;
Joy thy joy is bringing.
Clipped from paper thou shalt see
A sleigh, and horses springing;
Then a house of cards so tall
We will build and see it fall,
And little songs be singing.

Carl Michael Bellman

Drink Out Thy Glass

Drink out thy glass! See, on thy threshold, nightly,
Staying his sword, stands Death, awaiting thee.
Be not alarmed; the grave-door, opened slightly,
Closes again; a full year it may be
Ere thou art dragged, poor sufferer, to the grave.
Pick the octave!
Tune up the strings! Sing of life with glee!

Golden's the hue thy dull, wan cheeks are showing;
Shrunken's thy chest, and flat each shoulder-blade.
Give me thy hand! Each dark vein, larger growing,
Is, to my touch, as if in water laid.
Damp are these hands; stiff are these veins becoming.
Pick now, and strumming,
Empty thy bottle! Sing! drink unafraid.

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Skal, then, my boy! Old Bacchus sends last greeting;
Freya's farewell receive thou, o'er thy bowl.
Fast in her praise thy thin blood flows, repeating
Its old-time force, as it was wont to roll.
Sing, read, forget; nay, think and weep while thinking.
Art thou for drinking
Another bottle? Thou art dead? No Skal!

Carl Michael Bellman

Epistle No. 36

Our Ulla lay one morning and slept,
A hand beneath her ear;
Her key alone the taverner kept
Or through its hole might peer.
Outside in the tavern, sir,
All was nocturnally quiet;
Beer was none, nor, I'll aver,
Scarce water to supply it.
On tip-toes
He comes and goes
About her bedside, brothers;
Lifts a bit
Of coverlet,
And whispers with the others.
Ulla quivers,
Snores and shivers,
O'er her head the blanket piles;
Snuggles under,
With a thunder;
Turns about and smiles.

Carl Michael Bellman

Epistle No. 39

Storm and wave their tumult cease.
See, the heav'nly galaxies,
Fainter, even dimmer
Is their golden glimmer
As the morning
Softly dawning
Of the sun's wan ray gives warning.
Asp and maple sighing,
Stream and marsh replying,
Woodcock buzzes,
Peasant passes
Round his filly's neck her harness.
Now in our stove
When it is lit,
Grasses and twigs
Crackle and spit,
Soon our porridge will be boiling.
Now with tousled brow
Cottager, I trow,
Seeks to light his pipe,
And out in the field
Leaning on a stone,
Dalesman lifts anew his spade.

Carl Michael Bellman

Fredman's Song No. 10

Drink till after twelve or more,
Live it up with madmen !
Earth is but my chamber floor
And the sun my lantern.
Nothing else is worth a pin
If my head but giddy spin,
Giddy spin, giddy spin,
Giddy spin, giddy spin,
Until it's so drowsy
Nothing more can rouse me.

In my grandad's overcoat,
Torn and out at elbows,
Here I stand, on brandy dote,
'Mid the queerest fellows;
Out of pretty goblets bright
Tipple morning noon and night,
Noon and night, noon and night,
Noon and night, noon and night,
Till I'm just another
Boozy red-nosed brother.

If my sainted father stood
Suddenly before me
"Son", he'd hiccup, "skål ! That's good,
Brandy best doth warm me."
"Brother mine," I'd then reply,
Let us toast the morning sky,
Morning sky, morning sky,
Morning sky, morning sky,
Then to thy repose, sir,
Thou again mayst go, sir."

Were I but a man of wealth,
Gold my pocket lining,
Christmas day I'd dress myself

Like the king, when dining.
Then I'd purchase and I'd use
Coat and waistcoat and new shoes,
New shoes, new shoes,
New shoes, new shoes,
And of course I'd buy, sir,
A watch upon my thigh, sir !

But my throat can't stand such loss,
'Tis a very drought, sir.
What is gold, when got, but dross ?
Pull the cork right out, sir !
Let us steady on our legs,
Drain this bottle to the dregs,
To the dregs, to the dregs,
To the dregs, to the dregs,
Then let death attack us
In the blood of Bacchus.

Carl Michael Bellman

To Ulla

Ulla, mine Ulla, tell me, may I hand thee
Reddest of strawberries in milk or wine?
Or from the pond a lively fish? Command me!
Or, from the well, a bowl of water fine?
Doors are blown open, the wind gets the blaming.
Perfumes exhale from flower and tree.
Clouds fleck the sky and the sun rises flaming,
As you see!
Isn't it heavenly--the fish market? So?
'Heavenly, oh heavenly!'
'See the stately trees there, standing row on row,--
Fresh, green leaves show!
And that pretty bay
Sparkling there?' 'Ah yes!'
'And, seen where sunbeams play,
The meadows' loveliness?
Are they not heavenly--those bright fields?--Confess!--
Heavenly!
Heavenly!

Skal and good-noon, fair one in window leaning,
Hark how the city bells their peals prolong!
See how the dust the verdant turf is screening,
Where the calashes and the wagons throng!
Hand from the window--he's drowsy, the speaker,
In my saddle I nod, cousin mine--
Primo a crust, and secundo a beaker,
Hochlaender wine!
Isn't it heavenly--the fish-market? So?
'Heavenly, oh heavenly!'
'See the stately trees there, standing row on row,--
Fresh, green leaves show!
And that pretty bay
Sparkling there?' 'Ah yes!'
'And, seen where sunbeams play,
The meadows' loveliness?
Are they not heavenly--those bright fields?--Confess!--
Heavenly!
Heavenly!

Look, Ulla dear! To the stable they're taking
Whinnying, prancing, my good steed, I see.
Still in his stall-door he lifts his head, making
Efforts to look up to thee: just to thee!
Nature itself into flames will be bursting;
Keep those bright eyes in control!
Klang! at your casement my heart, too, is thirsting.
Klang! Your Skal!
Isn't it heavenly--the fish-market? So?
'Heavenly, oh heavenly!'
'See the stately trees there, standing row on row,--
Fresh, green leaves show!
And that pretty bay
Sparkling there?' 'Ah yes!'
'And, seen where sunbeams play,
The meadows' loveliness?
Are they not heavenly--those bright fields?--Confess!--
Heavenly!
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