

BRIEF STUDIES and REPORTS

THE SAD BUT MUSICAL END OF TRUMPETER
CARSTEN MISTLEFF,
OR HARD TIMES IN STOCKHOLM IN THE 1590s

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1596 was not a particularly good year for trumpeters, at least not for those who were based in Stockholm. There was no resident king in Sweden; the royal castle in Stockholm was without pomp and pageantry; King Sigismund was in his other kingdom of Poland, while the *de facto* ruler of Sweden held his court elsewhere, away from Stockholm.

Just five years earlier, things had been very different. Under King Johan III, Stockholm's castle had resounded to the music of eleven trumpeters, eight trumpet apprentices, three trombones, and two kettledrummers, not to mention four fiddlers, a harp-player, eighteen singers, two singer-apprentices, an organist, and the cantor who directed all of this, making a grand total of fifty-one. Moreover, the choir of fifty or so boys from the local school could be brought in for special occasions.¹

In fact, King Johan had even had an elegant open gallery built on one side of Stockholm castle's main courtyard where his trumpeters could stand, allowing the banners attached to their horns to hang decoratively in front of the parapet. This was known as the Trumpeters' Walk. From here the King's trumpeters gave the signals at mealtimes, sounding their instruments for each new course of food to be brought across the courtyard and be carried into the royal hall.

Then came Johan's long final illness and his death in November 1592. King Sigismund of Poland, now heir to the Swedish throne, arrived in September 1593 to participate in his father's state funeral, and to prepare for his own coronation. He had his court musicians with him. For a few months music life in Stockholm received an injection of Polish musical energy. When the time came for the coronation ceremonies in Uppsala, there was much music-making, with mounted trumpeters in formation outside the cathedral, while inside, the vocal music was accompanied by organ and trumpets.²

When, however, Sigismund and his court sailed back to Poland in June of 1594, the town of Stockholm, normally so dependent on the castle for employment and trade, lost much of its activity. The period from 1594 to 1620 has been called "the low point in Swedish court music."³ Music life went into decline, and for several years after Johan's death there was only a handful of court trumpeters, one of whom was exceedingly old, and just one trombonist.⁴

It is not so surprising, then, that we first encounter ill-fated trumpeter Carsten Mistleff in his cups in a Stockholm pub. Mistleff's name does not appear in the list of court trumpeters. However, there seems to have been a certain amount of circulation among

those trumpeters used for court, military, and civic purposes. Indeed, court musicians were often recruited from the military. An interesting distinction can be observed in 1587 when three court trumpeters are given the lofty title of *musicus*, suggesting that they had higher musical and social qualifications, whereas the rest were called “field trumpeters.”⁵ Theirs was not a low rank, however: whereas the infantry had to make do with simple fifes and drums, the trumpeters and kettledrummers were mounted, and enjoyed officer status.

The records do not tell us any more about Carsten Mistleff’s professional life than that he was a trumpeter. We do know that he came from a town called Wolding in Kurland, a province in the eastern Baltic region, today part of Latvia. Had he gravitated to Stockholm in the hope of finding employment at court? Had he come as a Swedish military field trumpeter? He might even have been a naval trumpeter assigned to some Swedish ship. It is possible that Carsten Mistleff supported himself as an independent musician. In the sixteenth century, on occasion, names of musicians appear for one reason or another in the records of Stockholm’s municipal court—names that have not been observed in the lists of musicians on the payrolls of the court or the military. Carsten Mistleff is a case in point. He may well have been hired as needed by burghers, clerics, the military, or the court without ever being specified in their records by name. A salaried post as official Town Musician is highly unlikely, however, nor is it supported by extant records. The institution of town musician did not get established in Sweden until the mid-seventeenth century, and even then it was Gothenburg that took the lead. Stockholm did not have specially employed municipal musicians until about 1670, when the city fathers decided to hire “tower-blowers” to play on trumpets or other instruments at certain times of the day.⁶

So here is Carsten Mistleff, tankard in hand, drinking together with one Niels Jörenson and others on the evening of 11 October, 1596. He might well have bewailed the sad lot of musicians in general in a royal capital bereft of king and court. He might even have reminisced about the abrupt end of one of the most talented musicians that Sigismund had brought with him from Poland. One night three years earlier, Jakob Sowka (Suca), composer and organist, was, it is said, “walking through the streets, singing to himself with his pleasant voice and playing on the cittern,” when he was brutally murdered in an armed scuffle.⁷

Indeed, the streets of Stockholm were not always safe, as Carsten Mistleff was about to demonstrate. This is how, on 11 October, the records of the Stockholm municipal court describe the events of the previous evening:

Carsten and Niels Jörenson and others had been sitting and drinking, and then Carsten said, “Let’s go out and raise Cain.” So Niels Jörensen and a boy went along. When they were in Smithy Street they heard someone coming, and they called out, and it was [the goldsmith] Matz Anderson, who had fetched two gallons of beer, and did not have his sword with him, and his wife was nearby. Then Carsten ran out, leaving his drinking companion, and stabbed him to death, in the presence of the wife, with a long sword, and then came running back to Niels Jörenson and the boy, who were standing

a little way off with a lighted lamp, carrying the bloody sword and saying he had stabbed the fellow, and then Niels Jörensén had taken him back with him to his inn, where [they had spent] the night. In the morning, Niels Jörensén, who did not dare hide such a thing, reported it to the authorities. And since this Carsten had no defense for what he had done, and the dead man's wife demanded justice and condemnation, and those who sat on the bench could only conclude that this manslaughter was committed freely and willingly, rather than for any justifiable reason, or in self-defense or any other life-and-death situation, therefore the members of the court could not allow him to retain his life.⁸

Executions were public events in Stockholm in the sixteenth century, and justice was swift. Five days after his sentence was pronounced, Carsten Mistleff was taken to Iron Square in what is now the Old Town of Stockholm, to receive his punishment. There, on 16 October, the onlookers stood in a ring around the place where the executioner would soon raise his sword and end Mistleff's life. The condemned man arrived, with his trumpet. The court records recount his final public appearance:

He blew his trumpet in the ring, several times [i.e., playing different pieces], in many kinds of ways [he played variation after variation], and he also played some verses of comforting hymns, for his own solace, and then he died courageously, strengthened by his Christian faith.⁹

Less than a week after trumpeter Carsten Mistleff had used his sword against an innocent man, he himself was put to death by the sword.

As we have seen, 1596 was not an especially good year for Stockholm's musicians. To this one particular trumpeter it brought both crime and punishment. Things might well have been otherwise, we can speculate, had there been an active royal court with a need for brass musicians to punctuate the rhythm of the royal day, and to play at dances, and enhance the church's liturgy, or had the town been home to thriving military or naval units with their dependence on trumpeters' signals, or had there been a corps of town musicians to serve the needs of the city fathers and the citizenry.

In 1596 there was none of this, but that of course constitutes no excuse for Mistleff's deed, however drunk he may have been. At the very end of his life, however, the musician left us a poignant legacy, preserved in the records of the court scribe: the image of a single trumpeter raising his horn, and the sound of a solo trumpet spreading beyond the circle of spectators and the waiting executioner, filling the city square with musical inventiveness—with variation upon variation—Carsten Mistleff's final performance.

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NOTES

¹ Tobias Norlind, *Från Tyska kyrkans glansdagar. Bilder ur svenska musikens historia från Vasaregenterna till Karolinska tidens slut. I: Reformationsstidevarvet 1523-1600* (Stockholm: Musikhistoriska Museet, 1944), pp. 107ff.

² Åke Holmquist, *Från signalgivning till regionmusik* (Stockholm: Allmanna, 1974), p. 19.

³ Tobias Norlind, Emil Tröback, *Kungl. Hovkapellets Historia 1526-1926* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstradn, 1926), p. 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 272ff.

⁵ Holmquist, *Från signalgivning*, p. 16.

⁶ Carl-Allen Moberg, *Från kyrko- och hovmusik till offentlig konsert* (Uppsala: n.p., 1970 [first published 1942]), *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia musicologia Upsaliensia*, Nova series, 4, p. 100.

⁷ Erik Kjellberg, "Vasadynastins renässanskultur", in *Musiken i Sverige. 1. Från forntid till stormakts-tidens slut*, ed. Leif Jonsson et al. (Stockholm: Fischer, 1994), p. 217; Gunnar Larsson, "Sigismunds polska hovkapell i Sverige 1593-1594," *Liljevalchs exhibition catalogue no. 327* (Stockholm: Liljevalche Konsthall, 1976), p. 37.

⁸ *Stockholms Stads Tänkeböcker från år 1592, II, 1596-1599*, ed. Daniel Almqvist (Stockholm: Stockholms Stadsarkiv, 1954), pp. 80ff.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.