

# Singing Accentual Poetry: An Irregular yet Predictable Rhythm

## Two-pulse Accent-pairs May Reveal Old Norse Roots of Norwegian Stev

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### Irregular rhythm, a notational challenge

Norwegian *stev* are one-stanza songs sung through centuries especially in the regions of Setesdal and Telemark. The Norwegian *stev* stanza has four lines. The irregular rhythm of *stev* performance has been a challenge to describe using ordinary music notation.

### Stev melody: rhythm adapts to text

Texts abound while melodies are few: 20 000 *nystev* ("new" *stev*) use 43 melodies, and 5 000 *gamalstev* ("old" *stev*) use 5 melodies. Transcribing the same melody for different texts reveals considerable variation in the rhythm. The *stev* performer, a *kvedar*, enjoys liberty in solo unaccompanied performance, where melody rhythm is adapted flexibly to the text.



**Figure 1:** Film of *stev* performance was used for foot-tap analysis using film frame counts.

### Observation of *stev* performance: not a steady beat but accentual poetry

Seventeen master *kvedarar* performing *stev*, marked word accents with foot-taps. *Kvedarar* who were listening to an unfamiliar *stev* performance could, with remarkable ease, foot-tap in synchrony though the rhythm was irregular. Thus, the traditional reciting-singing style *kveding* has an irregular rhythm, yet a predictable accent pattern.

### Film frame count: two-pulse accent pattern

Each foot-tap marks a word accent. The foot-tap points were analyzed on film by three approaches: metrics, tonal pitches, and duration. The foot-tap points were analyzed in pairs (dipods), first in *nystev* and then in *gamalstev*. A notational system was developed to show the relationships.

### Word accent pairs, dipods, in Norwegian *stev*

The two major forms of Norwegian *stev*, *nystev* and *gamalstev* show similar word accent patterns. A *nystev* stanza has 4 accents per line (4-4-4-4), whereas *gamalstev* has a 4-3-4-3 accent-pattern.

A 4-accent line has two pairs of word accents: each accent-pair is called a dipod or a two-pulse.

Å **kor** eg **kjeme** - hell **kor** eg **vankar**  
sò **gjeng** du **alli** - þor **mine** **tankar**.  
Å **kor** eg **reiser** - og **kor** eg **fer**  
og i **tankan'** **ser** eg **deg** - **mot** meg **lær**.

**Figure 2:** Pairs of word accents, dipods, in a characteristic four-line stanza of Norwegian *nystev*. The last line demonstrates the free use of syllables.

Pairs of word accents are found in Old Norse Poetry.

### Conclusion

Although the *stev* rhythm is irregular, intuitive foot-taps indicate that the rhythm is predictable. Pairs of word accents, dipods, form accent patterns. *Stev* poetry can be described as accentual poetry, closer to free verse than a steady beat. The Norwegian *stev* dipod can contribute to our understanding of complex meter in accentual verse, and may connect *stev* - over a millennium in an unbroken line - with Old Norse poetry.