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Research trip to Estonia and Finland

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The legacy and influence of Veljo Tormis

In 2000 Veljo Tormis (b. 1930), one of the most significant Estonian composers, declared at the age of 70 that he had composed his last work. He concluded the score of *The Singer's Last Words* with the Estonian word 'kõik' - 'that's all'. Tormis's music, the vast majority of which is for choir, has, particularly since the demise of Communism opened up communication for the countries of the former Soviet bloc twenty years ago (1991), gained increasing respect and worldwide recognition. Of particular importance is Tormis's accomplished use of the choir almost as an orchestra, covering a vast emotional span in its imaginative, subtly changing colourings, yet using conventional means. His work is also immediately recognisable from his extensive use of *regilaul* ('*runic song*'), the ancient pre-Christian Estonian folk song, often with its ritualistic associations. During a research trip to Estonia last year, funded by SEMPRE, I set out to look at the roots of Tormis's music: I explored the archives of folk song recordings in Tartu Literary Museum used by Tormis himself, spoke with musicologists and composers, and witnessed a *leelo* choir singing in rural Setumaa, in the south of the country, performing songs learnt from a uniquely unbroken oral tradition.

Could Tormis's music be said to be a 'one-off' phenomenon? His style, and the way in which he incorporates *regilaul*, is so distinctive that in many ways it would be difficult for other composers to follow without imitation or even pastiche. Indeed, Tormis had already wryly commented in an email before my trip that he had 'few disciples, thank goodness!' Yet research during this nine-day trip this month proved otherwise: marks of Tormis's principles and style have been picked up on by a number of younger composers, who have in turn managed to make the material very much their own. My discussions during the week of this research trip were with Urve Lippus, Professor of Musicology at the Estonian Academy of Music and Drama, with Evi Arujärv, a former Estonian music critic, currently a writer on music and Director of EMIC (the Estonian Music Information Centre), on several occasions, with Veljo Tormis himself in Tallinn, Estonia, and with Jari Eskola, Director of FIMIC (the Finnish Music Information Centre) in Helsinki.

Two important Estonian composers came to light, both of whom had, significantly, been early pupils of Tormis when he had taught at the Estonian High School for Music in the 1960s; both also died tragically young. Lepo Sumera (1950-2000) was a

prolific composer, well-known today in Estonian concert programmes as a symphonist. Sumera's style is eclectic, often looking back to what could be called the founders of 'Estonian style' earlier in the twentieth century: Heino Eller, Cyrillus Kreek, Mart Saar. Yet in one particular piece, *Saare Piiga Laul Merest* (*Island Maiden's Song from the Sea*) (1980) for SATB chorus, flute, piano and bass drum, many characteristic 'Tormis traits' are employed: traditional folk song is incorporated integrally without development. The repetitive bass drum adds a distinctly ritualistic element within what is really a theatre piece, employing the choir as participants in a drama. Tormis commented that Sumera had specifically acknowledged a debt to him in this work.

Tarmo Lepik (1946-2001) had once told Tormis that he had 'taken his ideas and developed them', without reference to specific examples. Following our discussion in Tallinn, we tracked down two works which show Tormis traits: *Kolm Betti Alveri Lulletust* (*Three Poems by Betty Alver*) (1974) uses repetitive chanting in the opening pages, followed by choral textures where a solo part stands out against wordless chords; in the third 'poem', a cumulative choral texture beginning in the depths of the basses (on bottom C!) closely recalls the haunting opening of Tormis's 'Kutse Jaanitulele I' (Call to the Midsummer Bonfire I) from the last set of *Eesti Kalendrilaulud* (*Estonian Calendar Songs*). Lepik's *Viis Haikut* (*Five Haikus*) perhaps lies closer to the tonal world of contemporaries Penderecki and Lutoslawski in its use of clusters and extended tonality, but the repetitive use of motifs again recalls the Tormis sound world.

The most unexpected discovery of the research trip lay across the (in this extreme winter, totally frozen) Baltic, in Helsinki. There is great cultural affinity between Estonia and Finland: both share a common folklore and song tradition, as well as closeness of languages. Tormis has always had communication with Finnish choirs and musicians and indeed once called himself a 'Finnish composer', believing that he set more Finnish words, particularly from the national epic the *Kalevala*, than the majority of Finnish composers themselves. Tormis had mentioned that in 1976 he had visited Jyväskylä, a city in central Finland, to hear a performance of his (*Karelian Destiny*) part of an epic cycle entitled (*Forgotten Peoples*) derived from the song heritage of minority Baltic cultures rapidly facing extinction. The work was conducted by Pekka Kostianen (b. 1944), a now established and respected Finnish choral composer. Kostianen was strongly affected by Tormis's music, and went on to incorporate ancient Finnish runic song as well as a ritual element in some of his own work. Kostianen's *Pakkasen Luku* is a set of Finnish folk songs, set in simple harmonisations. The nature of a leader's part echoed by the chorus, with the last lines picked up by the next, forming a continuous 'chain' of sound, is a tradition shared by Estonian *regilaul*, much exploited by Tormis. The third song of the set follows Tormis's principles of a repeated, unchanged original melody varied only by cumulative choral textures.

The final 'discovery' of the trip was Pekka Jalkanen (b. 1946), a composer whose roots were in children's and folk music. Tormis had described how he had met

Jalkanen in Helsinki in 1989 during a performance of his entire *Forgotten Peoples* cycle, which Jalkanen greatly admired; the composers spoke extensively about Estonian and Finnish culture, and the *Kalevala*. Jalkanen's work *Viron Orja (The Serf of Estonia)* (1980) for string orchestra was commissioned by the Kaustinen Folk Festival and uses an ancient Finnish *runo* tune, extensively repeated and staggered in a quasi-minimalist way, recalling perhaps Steve Reich's *Shaker Loops*. Like Tormis, Jalkanen retains the melody intact without development, weaving another delicate world of harmonics around it. Finally, in Jalkanen's choral work *Vagehens Otetut Nedizet (The Abduction)* (1999) for women's choir with kantele (the ancient Finnish zither featured in the *Kalevala*) there is a Tormis-like sense of ritual, as well as the extensive use of repetitive motifs.

This research trip proved to be fascinating, even though, as ever in these cases, it posed more questions than providing concrete answers. It is clear that Tormis's music, in all its achievements, has had a quiet but ongoing influence on the wider musical world beyond its Estonian roots. I will present the material from this research as a paper, 'Veljo Tormis: a legacy' at the Baltic Musics and Musicologies Conference at Canterbury Christchurch University, 26-28 May 2011. The paper will form part of a 'Tormis Panel' with Mimi Daitz, Tormis's biographer, discussing composition vs. arrangement, and Urve Lippus, Professor of Musicology at the Estonian Academy of Music and Drama, discussing Tormis's music in relation to national identity in Estonia. My material will also form part of the concluding chapter of my PhD dissertation on Veljo Tormis, to be submitted this spring, 2011. In terms of my own work as a composer, I am completing a work, *The Ruin*, based on a fragmentary Anglo Saxon text, which, in employing some of his principles, will form a homage to Veljo Tormis.

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