

From folklore to *народное творчество*: performing runo-song on stage

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In this presentation, we examine the older song tradition representation on stage during the early years of Soviet Estonia, when local cultural activities were subordinated to the Soviet institutional system and ideology. We compare the developments in Soviet Estonia (occupied in 1940) after the World War II with the analogous processes that took place in Soviet Karelia in the pre-war decades (in the 1920s and 1930s). Karelian and Estonian song traditions are connected by belonging to the historical Baltic-Finnic runo-song area. Although the history of the two regions differs, the affinity of the song traditions inspires to look for similarities and differences of the development of the traditions of the two countries within the framework of the soviet modernization processes.

We use manuscripts and audio-visual recordings from different Estonian archives; newspapers, and memories as basic research material. We use thorough studies by Pekka Suutari, Frank Miller and others to draw parallels to Karelian case.

[SLIDE 2: Recording of Karelian and Estonian folk culture, 1950s. Photos: Estonian Literary Museum, kivike.kirmus.ee]

Political-historical background

Both Estonia and Karelia were bitterly fought over by Sweden and Russia. In the 18th century Estonia and most of Karelia was incorporated into the Russian Empire. After the WWI, the Russian revolution and the Treaty of Tartu in 1920, Estonia (including the territory of the Seto ethnic group, Setomaa), and part of Karelia (Finnish Karelia was incorporated into the Finnish Republic) became independent. After the end of the Russian Civil War and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922, the Russian part of Karelia became the Karelian Autonomous Republic of the Soviet Union (ASSR) in 1923. In the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, the Soviet Union attacked Finland, thus starting the Winter War. The Moscow Peace Treaty of 1940 handed most of the Finnish Karelia to the Soviet Union.

Song traditions before the WWII

On most of the Estonian territory, runo-singing tradition gave room to newer style of traditional singing – end-rhymed songs –, literary forms of poetry and institutional choral singing from the late 1800s to the beginning of the 1900s. Choir singing movement had a strong connection to the idea of decolonization and national identity through the activities of cultural societies and singing festivals. In the South-Eastern periphery of Estonia, in Setomaa – the orthodox pale in Western Church Estonia, the central role of the older oral tradition was preserved until the beginning of the 20th century. During the period of independent Estonia it was gradually supported by national institutions and adapted to the stage tradition represented outside Setomaa.

Alongside Seto singers, the last representatives of the older song tradition of other regions of Estonia were also brought to the stage in Estonia during the shows and tours of Estonian folk-musicians.

[SLIDE 3: Karelian runo-singer, newsreel „Soviet Karelia“ 1955.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmCyHC6mtNE>]

Runo-song tradition was gradually replaced by end-rhymed singing in the 19th-20th centuries in the Karelia as well. Even so, compared to Estonia, the equally massive institutional choir singing hobby did not develop in rural areas.

Karelian runo-song was used to construct national identity of Finland, it was seen as core of Finnishness. Or appropriated by Finnish nationalists (Haapoja 2020; Tarkka, Stepanova, Haapoja-Mäkelä 2018).

Similar trends of appropriation can be seen if we talk about the relations of Estonian and Seto cultures, but the attitude seems to be not quite the same – Estonians distanced themselves quite clearly from Seto people, they used more likely Estonian oral song tradition to build up the Estonian cultural identity.

Reception of folklore in the Soviet Union

The position/reception of folklore in the Soviet Union was not invariable, it changed in the 1930s. Before, old traditions were generally neglected being considered backwarded. Keywords were: *agit-prop*, *mass-songs*, *estrada*. Then, a turn towards the enhancement of folklore took place, in Karelia, as well as in the other parts of Soviet Union, started the boom of folk-music/dance ensembles (*ансамбль песни и пляски*) and folk choirs (*народный хор*). The establishment and development of *Kantele*-ensemble was a good example of the use of folkloric sources to make contemporary popular entertainment on stage - *estrada*. The characteristic feature of Stalinist time was that the performers of archaic oral genres were presented on large stages, in the *estrada shows*, festivals etc (Mikkonen & Suutari 2006: 165).

Institutional organisation and supervision of amateur cultural activities by officials intensified with time. Also strengthened the pressure about the content of the creations and forms of creativity. New folklore genre - Soviet folklore - was designed. Like the representations of folklore, professional artistic creations also had to be optimistic, joyful, and “national in form, socialist in content”.

[SLIDE 4: To develop Soviet folk-art – socialist in content, national in form! Photos:
kivike.kirmus.ee; muis.ee]

Soviet models in Estonia in the 1940s

After entering the Soviet system in the 1940s, same Soviet models were also eagerly implemented in the Estonian cultural policies. Two main models of folk art or folk creation were sought to adapt in Estonia:

1. Individual singers, who were also improvisers, creators of new, Soviet folklore. The media introduced, for example, Jambul Jabajev, Soviet “singer of tales”, who originated from the solo singing tradition of Central-Asia; but also creators of Karelian runo-song or laments. In the Estonian newspaper from 1948 we can read: *The substances of folk songs have changed considerably during the Soviet order. Before, in Karelia sang about misery, slavery, hard life, care and concern. The topic of the runo-songs is socialistic constructional work: collective farming, forestry, the happy present and future of young people, heroes of work and war. The folklore that is emerging in Karelia today is extremely interesting – in the traditional verse form and the old folk song language, in which most of the world-famous epic’s “Kalevala” verses are written.* H. Laan (Noorte Hääl, 1948.03.12)

The new Soviet folklore genre, introduced in the newspaper was *novina*. Novina was based on the North-Western Russian bylinas, in Karelia also on runo-songs and laments, having a new, socialist content (according to the ideal of the time *the national in form and socialist in content*). Novinas consisted largely of traditional poetical material (alliteration, parallelism, metaphors and poetic images) with new topics blended in. The researchers saw this as a continuation of the folklore process. According to Pekka Suutari, this would be quite a modern standpoint. But folklorists not only collected, but also instructed and taught singers how to create politically correct texts. Novinas were proudly presented at the Union-wide stages. And novinas were produced, collected and published massively till the end of the 1950s.

2. Collective amateur cultural practices – here the Soviet models were the folk choirs (*народный хор*), and the artistic/folk-art ensemble(s) – for example, in 1941 the ensemble of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR visited Estonia, folk choir of M. E. Pyatnitsky was presented on the Estonian broadcast etc.

[SLIDE 5: A review of amateur cultural activities, 1950. Singers from Kihnu island (Film archive, f. 203)]

The Estonian “new leelo”

The solo performance of the runo-song was the main form of folk song performance in Estonia during the pre-war period both in traditional singing situations and on stage, because there were only few skilled traditional singers left. Traditional singers who would have sung together, in the traditional way, were not found elsewhere than in the peripheries, on the Western Coast island Kihnu and in Setomaa.

In addition to the few representatives of a consistent local tradition from Estonia, some young people also began to sing Estonian old runo-songs – they performed already during WWII and the German occupation in Estonia. During the Soviet period, such “revitalized” solo singing developed into a new genre of singing – the new *leelo*. The main representative of the new leelo tradition was Laine Mesikäpp (1915–2012). Laine Mesikäpp alternately sang solo runo-

songs and called (using the genre of herding calls and vocalises). Her sound production was similar to the traditional singing outdoors, although it can be considered as the result of the professional voice lessons. The new *leelo* belonged especially to the “folk art evenings”, the shows of folk music that took place independently or as a part of the programme of country-wide and regional song festivals. *Leelo* was presented as entr’actes in the opening of the show as well as to introduce the next numbers in the show (as kind of overture and interludium).

[SLIDE 6: New leelo. Laine Mesikäpp (1917-2012). Photos: Estonian Theatre and Music Museum]

[SLIDE 7: Opening of the folk-dance show at the song festival in 1950. Laine Mesikäpp performs an opening call. (Archives of Estonian National Broadcast)]

The style of the “new *leelo*” fitted well into the Soviet festival culture. *Leelo*-singing can be seen as an example of the local invention that in some way met the requirements of the monumentality and festivity characteristic to the aesthetics of the Soviet festivals. The performance style, at least of Laine Mesikäpp, was joyful and energetic, corresponding also to the ideas about the (obligatory) cheerful nature of the art of happy Soviet people. It seems also, that more “civilised” and more varied *leelo*-performances fitted better to the taste of the contemporary audiences – notwithstanding the political system – than rough and unelaborated traditional singing of the village singers. The texts of the new *leelo* based were largely on the traditional texts, but they were more understandable because dialect forms were not used. Also, some obligatory political messages (e.g. the friendship of the Soviet peoples) were included and so the new *leelo* was suitable to represent the Soviet folklore in Stalinist period.

[SLIDE 8: Opening of the folk-dance show at the song festival in 1965. Laine Mesikäpp performs a greeting song. A newsreel’s cut (Film archive, f. 203)]

[SLIDE 9: Opening of the dance festival in 1985. Laine Mesikäpp performs an opening call and a song. (Archives of Estonian National Broadcast)]

[SLIDE 10: Political songs of Seto singers. Anne Vabarna and her choir. Photos: ELM, kivike.kirmus.ee]

Political songs of Seto singers

As has been already said, in parallel with the new *leelo*, the runosong was performed quite widely by traditional Seto choirs. In the songs created by Seto lead singers can be seen a direct parallel to the new poetry (novina) and Soviet laments of the Karelia. The difference between the new folklore of Seto and Karelia was the form of the singing - collectively or solo -, and the use of the lament genre. In Karelia – and not only in Soviet Karelian territory – solo lamentation was used for public improvisation. Well-known example is “Karelian mother” by Matjoi Plattonen from the Border Karelia. Although the Seto also had a rich tradition of funeral solo laments, the Soviet-thematic compositions had been sung only in traditional runo-song form, with a lead singer and a choir that is inevitable in Seto polyphonic

tradition. The difference with Karelian tradition could be justified by the fact that Setomaa had preserved the consistent tradition of improvisations in runo-song form. Already before the WWII, Seto singers improvised texts devoted to politicians and officials. These songs were presented and recognised throughout Estonia (with the help of Armas Otto Väisänen also in Finland), thus supporting the survival and development of the tradition. The improvisations with Soviet content were a continuation of this tradition.

One of the most famous creators of new folk songs in Setomaa was Anne Vabarna (1877–1964). Her career started during the time of independency, when she, with her small choir, performed traditional Seto repertoire all over Estonia and in Finland. She was presented as a singer able to perform without preparation a song dedicated to any person. Already in the first year of the Soviet occupation, Anne Vabarna performed in Tallinn an improvisation, which praised the new rule. In 1947, she performed in Moscow during the jubilee of the city, and sang in Tallinn on the concert of folk art, which was part of the first Soviet time all-Estonian Song Festival.

[SLIDE 11: *Estonian Song Festival in Tallinn, 1947. A newsreel's cut (Filmiarhiiv f. 203)*]

[SLIDE 12: *Estonian choral movement, 1950s. Photos: Estonian National Museum; Museum of Hiiumaa; Museum of Saaremaa; Museum of Tartu; Museum of Virumaa; Museum of Värskä; www.muis.ee*]

Collective amateur cultural practices

The developments of collective so-called folk creation in Estonia and Karelia were quite different. After the World War II, Estonia had to relate to the tradition of the Soviet “folk choir”. Gustav Ernesaks, the leading musician, who worked in the Soviet rear during the WWII and became the leader of the Estonian Choral Movement, said his influential word here, stressing the existence of this folk co-song tradition in Estonia and linking the classical polyphonic *à cappella* choir singing and the historical choir movement with the Soviet “folk choirs” in the first number of the cultural newspaper “Sirp and Vasar” after the war: “*The specific of our choral singing – a capella style – has been highly valued by professionals of the Soviet Union. It is a mistake to presume that the only choral art is – a line of singers singing in one or two voices accompanied by button accordion – and here we have the highest choral art*”. (Ernesaks 1944)

[SLIDE 13: *The Pyatninsky Folk Choir (founded in 1910)/ Народный хор М. Е. Пятницкого. Photos: <http://pyatnitsky.ru/>; <http://www.popflock.com>*]

Before the Soviet period, there was no country-wide national choir movement in Karelia – there were only some choirs among Karelian Finns. Contrary to the Estonian case, Soviet folk choir tradition became the dominant form of singing together. Obviously, the examples for their foundation were Pyatinsky’s Choir and others in the Soviet Union, but this was never mentioned publicly. It was still written that the singing-desire of the collective farmers gave birth to the choirs. In their singing style and repertoire the folk choirs somehow carried on the

newer end-rhymed folk-song tradition, intertwined with the Soviet mass song and the standard folk choir presentation style designed by the allied education system. In the 1930s, the folk-choirs were enthusiastically founded in Karelia. The participants were amateur singers and mostly untrained women. The managers were, however, (semi)professionals. The songs glorifying Stalin and collective work were an important part of the repertoire. The songs were composed and written by amateur song-writers, not professionals, nor were they folk-songs.

[SLIDE 14: Karelian folk ensemble „Kantele“, 1959. <https://d1.net-film.ru/web-tc-mp4/fs101219.mp4> (01:32-02:40)]

[SLIDE 15: Estonian amateur ensembles of popular songs and folk instruments, 1950s. Photos: Museum of Võrumaa; Estonian Dairy Museum; Museum of Saaremaa; www.muis.ee]

To some extent, the amateur song ensembles in Estonia – mostly women’s groups – corresponded to this folk-choir phenomenon. The repertoire of these ensembles consisted of popular songs composed by professional composers or arrangements of folk songs in newer style; songs were sung in one to three parts, in the classical chamber song-style and accompanied by a piano, sometimes also accordion. The song ensembles remained a relatively local and peripheral amateur form alongside the general choir singing movement.

Estonia also managed to develop folk music orchestra phenomenon, based on the Soviet model, which played music on traditional instruments pieces arranged for the orchestra. These orchestras performed at the local and country-wide festivities – song and dance festivals.

To conclude:

The stage runo-singing in Estonia during first decades of Sovietisation was a relatively peripheral musical activity. It consisted mostly of an invented tradition of improvisational calling and runo-song, performed by the representatives of the younger generation (headed by Laine Mesikäpp); and new political songs in traditional style created by lead singers of traditional singing groups in Setomaa and performed by lead singer and her group. The Seto repertoire has much in common with new Soviet runo-songs of Karelian traditional performers. Because the newly created Soviet content was requested, traditional singers in both countries used traditional improvisational genres, in which they were publicly improvising also before the Soviet times. Unlike Karelian performers, the Seto singers did not use the lament genre for political improvisation and always performed with the choir.

In Estonia, classical à cappella choir singing remained as central in the field of collective singing as it had become a general amateur singing style already at the end of the 19th century. Alongside the general practice of choral singing, the ensembles of popular songs emerged. In Karelia, the tradition of folk choirs evolved, following the Soviet example, style and repertoire of which was based on a new local folk song and Soviet mass song.

Literature

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