



# H A R M O N I A

Newsletter of early music and the times in which it flourished • Vol. IV/No. 5 • May 1995

## Ancient Roots: Music by Veljo Tormis Based on Ancient Finno-Ugric Tunes

by Kaja Weeks

*"The music of Veljo Tormis taps the most ancient roots in a fluid, powerful idiom, and offers a fascinating counterpoint to the work of another Estonian composer, Arvo Pärt." — Paul Hillier*

When I was growing up in the 1960's, in a small town in New Jersey, my friends forgave me a lot of idiosyncracies because "after all," they would remark in only half jest, "you are part of a people on the verge of extinction." They were referring to my heritage as an Estonian, which in those days, was truly clouded with uncertainty. WWII had brought an invasion and occupation, first by Germans and then by Soviets, from which my family, with many others, fled. Along with the horror of such events, those immigrants brought with them the most stubborn resistance imaginable to the idea of extinction! As a first-born American in the family, I, like many young children of Estonian extraction, grew up steeped in the language, culture and music of our ancestors.

The irony, therefore, of the music I listened to as I visited a free Estonia for the first time this past summer was not lost upon me. It was "Forgotten Peoples," a series of song cycles based on the music of six Finno-Ugric peoples, kin to Estonians, who are on the verge of extinction or who have become extinct already. On my first night in Estonia I listened with headsets to this magnificent *a capella* singing, written by the renowned Estonian composer Veljo Tormis. I was actually trying to sleep, but it was late summer and I had truly arrived in the land of the midnight sun, so that at 1 a.m. the streaks of light were just losing their golden hue. Between the sun and the ancient, almost eerie chanting which forms the underlying web of this music, I had to listen to the performance again, in a more conventional setting, to see if the singing really was as mesmerizing as it then seemed.

One needn't visit the medieval city of Tallinn to hear "Forgotten Peoples," since ECM Records (Polygram) has released a perfect rendition of it on CD. (For travelers/enthusiasts of the Middle Ages, however, Tallinn, with its fortress, beautifully preserved gothic spires and completely walled-in old city, perched on the edge of the Baltic Sea, is hard to beat!) The opening strains of this monumental recording (2 discs-

about 2 hours), performed by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, catapults the listener into another world. Even with its quite contemporary harmonic overlay, there is never any question but that what you are hearing is very ancient music. Tormis, whose composition took over 20 years to complete, had earlier written all forms of music — symphonic, opera, film scores. In his 30's (he will be 65 this year), he made a serious study of runic tunes originating from pre-Christian Finno-Ugric peoples.

"Forgotten Peoples" taps the legacy of such groups as Karelians (in north Finland and bordering Russia), Votians, Izhorians, Ingrians, and Livonians (and my friends thought Estonia was unheard of!). They are part of an ethno-linguistic group whose ancestors, (originating probably from east of the Ural mountains) reached their present locations by the third millennium B.C. The style of singing upon which Tormis bases his work binds these common cultures. Describing them, Tormis says, "The originality of the runic songs comes from the special way of singing that was typical of all the ancient Baltic Finns. The lead singer and the chorus alternate, and the shamanistic monotonous repetitions of the motif overlap to produce a characteristic chain-singing." Other salient traits, clearly displayed in these song-cycles have to do with the sound of texts — alliteration and assonance abound. From these simple chant-like tunes Tormis achieves striking sounds of passion, drama, and tenderness, all rendered with the resonant and wholly responsive voices (alternating choir, soloists, and groups) of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir.

The exotic sound of these languages themselves are a treat to the ear — filled with strings of vowels (try a word like "pereheinee" or the parallel to the playful English "fa la la", which in one song is "Siiiali, saliali, solaili lei ja lei!). The poetry, too, is wonderful and full translations of the texts are provided. They lead the listeners from the cradle to the funeral bier, and evoke imagery rooted in the obscure past. From the "Izhonian Epic" cycle: "Swallow, bird of the sun, the lovely bird of the skies. It sought for a day. . . it found but half of a yolk and another half of a white. What other crumbs there remained were left for other birds and became the stars

HARMONIA, 736 13th St, SE, Washington, DC 20003 • 202/543-1941 office • 202/543-2065 fax • 202/546-1320 eves. • Patricia Cutts, Publisher  
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in the sky. The part of the white she found became the gleaming moon. The part of the yolk she found became the shining sun."

For Estonians, music has always been an integral part of life. In 1988, when the hint of possible renewed freedom was in the air (Gorbachev had just promoted *glasnost*), this tiny group of people who couldn't possibly triumph with arms took up singing with such underlying spirit that theirs was ultimately dubbed "the Singing Revolution." One third of the whole country attended the traditional Song Festival in Tallinn's outdoor amphitheater during the summer of 1990. With up to 30,000\* singers on stage, Veljo Tormis' compositions dominated the repertoire.

Life has dealt many harsh blows for the Finno-Ugric peoples.

\* Though it may boggle the mind, this figure is correct! Ed.

As I left my ancestral homeland, I was filled with the knowledge that often little more than a hairline has separated the fate of Estonians from that of its smaller kinfolk — the now extinct, or nearly extinct, peoples of Tormis' songs. In the 1980's only some 100 Livonian speakers remained. The unique beauty of their music and the profundity of their departure has been well-captured here.

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*Kaja Weeks is a performer and teacher with interests in early music and early childhood music education. She is a music teacher at the Baltimore Estonian School.*

Forgotten Peoples by Veljo Tormis; Theatre of Voices, Paul Hillier; ECM Records (Polygram) ECM 1459/60, 1992.  
A video is available of the 1994 Estonian Folk Song Festival from VCR Duplicators in Ontario. 905/629-2553.