

The 'Finnish Tone' – Phenomenon or Fact? Some Remarks about Einojuhani Rautavaara's Music and Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT: Today, the most prominent and successful Finnish composer is Einojuhani Rautavaara (b. 1928). Besides, he has also left his footprint in modern Finnish musical life being a composition teacher, music critic, musicologist and author. During the recent three decennia he has repeatedly postulated the existence of a 'tone' in Finnish music distinctive from that of other nations. This claim is quite astounding and leads to further questions. The most important question in this context is if his claim has to be understood as the description of a listening attitude or if we can derive certain characteristics of Finnish music from it, i.e., if we can even grasp this 'tone' analytically. It is fair to assume that Rautavaara's statement applies also – if not in the first instance – to his own music. In my paper, I will list seven different characteristics of Rautavaara's compositions, which explain his claim in more detail.

KEYWORDS: *Finnish art music, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Finnish tone, Nordic tone, music analysis, reception, contemporary music*

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INTRODUCTION

IN an interview the Finnish composer and composition professor Einojuhani Rautavaara (b. 1928) stated that he does not believe in the existence of a 'Nordic tone' but instead in the existence of a 'Finnish tone'. Visiting the German music festival *Nordischer Klang* in Greifswald in the year 1994 he was asked

"[...] about the music of Northern Europe/Scandinavia: Is there a 'Nordic sound' in the music, what are its characteristics and how is your relation to the tradition of the music in Northern Europe?"

[Answer:]

"At least there is a 'Finnish sound', a phenomenon which can be compared to the meditation" (dialog 6 [...] 1994).¹

This statement leads to several further questions since Rautavaara's influence on modern Finnish art music is immense. Rautavaara is the most successful and best-known Finnish composer nowadays (cf. Hillila, Hong 1997: 331). Beside his own important role as a composer he taught

¹ "[...] Musik Nordeuropas/ Skandinaviens: Gibt es den 'nordischen Klang' in der Musik, was sind seine Besonderheiten und wie fühlen Sie sich der Tradition nordeuropäischer Musik verbunden?" – "Wenigstens gibt es einen 'finnischen Klang', ein musikalisches Phänomen, der Meditation vergleichbar." All translations in this text are mine.

composition at the Sibelius Academy – two of his composition pupils are Kalevi Aho (b. 1949) and Esa-Pekka Salonen (b. 1958) – and is also an expert in musicology and music history. The discussion about the existence of a Nordic tone arose for the first time in the late 19th century to reach a preliminary halt after World War II. Except for some personal stylistic characteristics, for instance, the so-called ‘Grieg-motif’, no definition was found, which could have helped to identify any piece as ‘Nordic’ by music analysis. In this context Rautavaara’s answer might sound bold. How do we have to understand it?

First, he postulates the existence of a certain music tradition, which is different from that of other nations and can be identified – maybe intuitively – by listening alone. Second, this might imply that this tradition can be found ‘objectively’ in the composition itself, i.e., that music analysis might be able to describe it in some way. Third, this answer could be partly ironic. Irony is an important element in many of Rautavaara’s texts, for instance, in his autobiography *Omakuva* (1998) or his various opera libretti.

The following remarks may help to answer the question if this Finnish tone has to be understood as some kind of receptive attitude of the listener – i.e., as a phenomenon – or as a fact, which can be useful for the analysis of the musical material. We can presume that Rautavaara’s own music might serve as an outstanding example for his theory.

1. CYCLIC CONCEPTIONS OF TIME

In the same interview Rautavaara explained his claim by adding:

Maybe the ‘cyclic’ concept of ancient cultures has survived for a longer time in the North and can be felt there until today... [...] look at the endless long words of Finnish language and the endless midnight sun! We were never in a hurry just like the nature surrounding us. If somebody asks me if I am a religious person, I always quote Schleiermacher: ‘Religion is the sense and the taste for the Infinite.’ I possess that (dialog 6 [...] 1994: 21).²

Rautavaara confutes the Western scientific concept of time. According to his aesthetic model, the subjective experience of time is crucial. This he considers to be the very material of the composer, what he explained in many texts and exemplified even in his work. His chamber opera *The House of the Sun*, composed 1989/1990, is a key work in this context.³

² “Vielleicht lebte das ‘zyklische’ Konzept der frühen Kulturen im Norden länger und wird noch heute gefühlt... [...] schauen Sie sich die endlosen Wörter der finnischen Sprache an und erst die endlose Mitternachtssonne! Wir hatten es nie eilig und auch die Natur um uns herum nicht. Werde ich gefragt, ob ich religiös bin, antworte ich immer mit Friedrich Schleiermacher, ‘Religion ist Sinn und Geschmack fürs Unendliche’. Den habe ich.”

A collection of Rautavaara’s articles and reviews, published 1998, bears the title *Mieltymyksestä äärettömään*, i.e. *About the Taste for the Infinite*.

³ See Knust 2008; compare *Auringon talo ja ajan mysteeri (The House of the Sun and the Mystery of Time)* (Rautavaara 1998: 44–48).

2. THE AUTONOMY OF THE ARTWORK

As stated in early 20th century literature about Nordic music, also Rautavaara's compositions are connected to or even deeply rooted in nature. Several aspects of this relation will be given here. According to Rautavaara the work of a composer can be compared to that of a gardener.

To compose should be like the work of a gardener. A gardener who is curious and astonished in a holy manner about the things, which the genetics of the growing material produces – expected or unexpected things. A gardener who recognises the tendencies, aims, and efforts of the growing entities and helps them to appear and who is not forming and never forcing them 'according to his own ideas' (Rautavaara 1998: 263).⁴

⁴ "Säveltämisen pitäisi olla kuin puutarhurin työtä. Sellaisen puutarhurin, joka uteliaana ja pyhän ihmetyksen vallassa seuraa, mitä kasvavan materiaalin genetiikka tuottaa – odotettua vai odottamatonta. Joka oivaltaa kasvavan olion tendenssit, suunnan ja pyrkimyksen ja auttaa niitä esiin. Ei vala muottiin eikä koska pakota 'oman päänsä mukaan'."

The gardener has to know everything about the characteristics of his plants and how to grow them. He will use his knowledge to get the best possible results but he is not able to change the biological premises for the growing process itself. Rautavaara regards his works – of course, within certain limitations – as autonomous entities, as organisms, which grow – and even grow old. The impulse to create a new work can be anything, for instance, a picture, some words or a piece of literature. But as soon as the piece is in the state of genesis it will, according to Rautavaara, seek a form on its own. This happened to him when he started to compose a piece of orchestral music in 1968, which ought to be inspired by the first words of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. After having composed about 50 measures, however, the music started to live its own life and became independent from its creator's will. That piece got the title *Anadyomene* first after it was finished (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 221–225 and 248–249). Also about the genesis of his piano sonatas No. 1 *Christus und die Fischer* (*Christ and the Fishermen*, 1969) and No. 2 *Fire Sermon* (1970), he gives similar reports (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 247–249). In this respect Rautavaara believes in inspiration in a very traditional way. This means, his works are pre-existent before they are written down – like the Platonic ideas. The composer is not their mother giving birth to them but only some kind of midwife (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 220). The process of aging of his works is also part of Rautavaara's specific concept of composition because he is revising many of his larger compositions periodically, for instance *True & False Unicorn* (see below) or his First symphony. The first version of the First symphony was fixed 1956. In the 1980s Rautavaara revised it. He felt that the work had changed its character fundamentally (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 161–163) – like he did in the previous 30 years. The second version was published 1988, the third 2003.

This concept of autonomy has consequences for the analysis of Rautavaara's music. On the one hand, according to him any kind of formalistic analysis is *per se* inappropriate (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 48) because

every piece is – so to say – defining its form itself; this does not mean, however, that certain forms or genres might not be attributed as authoritative in a certain region or nation like, for instance, the symphony, which has gotten a special position in Finland after Jean Sibelius (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 173).⁵ On the other hand, the piece behaves autonomously also after being finished. This applies in the first line to its reception. It will make or will not make its way through the concert halls, it will or it will not find its audience. There is almost nothing a composer can do about it and failure as well as success of a piece are sometimes really surprising for its creator, for instance, in the case of Rautavaara's extraordinary successful *Lorca-Suite*, composed 1973 (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 261).

⁵ Also Rautavaara is a symphonist like most of the better-known Finnish composers. Besides that he focused on the opera, which became a popular genre among Finnish composers in the 1970s (cf. Heiniö 1995: 305–356).

3. SUGGESTIVE SOUNDS

A personal remark: if you listen to the music of various Finnish composers like Jean Sibelius, Erkki Melartin, Leevi Madetoja, Selim Palmgren, Uno Klami, Aarre Merikanto, Tauno Pyykkänen, Einar Englund, Joonas Kokkonen, Aulis Sallinen, Kalevi Aho and Rautavaara – do they all really have something in common? I would say 'yes'. All of those composers have created a musical style, which is highly suggestive and – so to say – relatively easy to listen to. The sound of all their compositions evokes some kind of dense atmosphere. It is a matter of fact that the atmospheric dimension of Rautavaara's music is not a product by coincidence. His way of composing music is consisting of two steps: First, he seeks to get a vision of the entire piece, defining its '*Stimmung*', its atmosphere. Second, he chooses the material. That can be a scale, a chord or a row, any sort of structure (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 202). Thus, the atmosphere he is aiming for determines the whole piece from the beginning of its genesis.

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4. TRANCE AND REPETITIVE STRUCTURES

Sulho Ranta described Sibelius's music as a shaman drum.⁶ The dedicated listener of the finale of Sibelius's Second Symphony op. 43 or of his symphonic poem *En saga (A Saga)* op. 9 will feel like being in trance. That ability of the music was essential for Rautavaara already as a child. In Sibelius's case the state of trance is achieved normally by using repetitive ostinato structures, which are to be found very often in his works. Also Rautavaara became aware that he preferred to use such structures when he studied composition in the USA in the late 1950s. But surprisingly he owed this to the fact that he was a pupil of Aarre Merikanto. All of Merikanto's

⁶ "There is something about this music – at least for us [Finns – M. K.] – that leads us to ecstasy; almost like a shaman with his magic drum" (quoted after Keller).

students tended to write ostinato structures. That implied the use of some kind of central tonality, according to Rautavaara (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 127). One wonders why Rautavaara keeps himself so distant from Sibelius's music in this context. Maybe also this statement has to be understood as partly ironic? It is impossible to give a short answer about that. To outline Rautavaara's relationship to this mighty and until today most prominent figure of Finnish music would exceed the limitations of this paper considerably.

5. INDIVIDUALITY OF STYLE

Like the title roles of his operas – with only one exception Rautavaara did write all libretti for his ten operas himself – he is describing himself as a loner. Already as a child Rautavaara was fascinated by the composer's work, which meant for him to create a whole world on his own by lonely working (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 35–36). In fact, the individualism of the composition style is a *conditio sine qua non* for him. In his autobiography he articulates his disgust for the serial music, which – because of its overall determination of parameters – eliminates every individual trace. He goes even so far to call the IRCAM for a “gigantic international dairy, in which everything is homogenised” (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 195; see also *ibid.*: 255–256). This institute and the impersonal serial technique are consequently able to extinguish not only every personal but also any national style, what is a veritable *horror scenario* for Rautavaara. In this context, his postulation of a ‘Finnish tone’ has to be interpreted as polemic. Every kind of music ideology is refutable for him, for instance, when he recalls his experiences with Aaron Copland in Tanglewood, who categorically avoided the use of composition and analysis techniques developed by the Second Vienna School even though he admitted that they were useful (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 124). Such a point of view is absolutely incomprehensible for Rautavaara who has developed a highly individualistic style. He likes to use different or even contradicting composition methods in one and the same piece like 12-tone rows, Messiaen's modal scales, clusters, pseudo-traditional triads and scales, etc. His personal style is pluralistic in the broadest meaning.

6. THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOIL

A composer has always to face the historicity of his material. Like Paavo Heininen (b. 1938) – who can be seen as an aesthetician opposite to Rautavaara in many respects – also Rautavaara takes certain qualities

of Western art music for granted without scrutinizing them. One of those qualities is the language-like character of art music. And of course a language is always linked to a certain region or nation, especially in the case of the Finnish language, which is entirely different from the Germanic and Slavic languages of the neighbour countries. In this respect, every composer is formed thoroughly by his environment.

Another important element of Rautavaara's Finnish tone is the folk music of Finland. His op. 1, the piano suite *Pelimannit (The Fiddlers)*, was inspired by Finnish folk tunes, and in his autobiography Rautavaara claimed to have been influenced strongly by the folk music of his home country: "For me the modal south-ostrobothnian folk melodies were a great find" (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 66; see also *ibid.*: 264–265).

Moreover, many of his works have genuine Finnish subjects, for instance, his choir opera *Sammon ryöstö (The Rob of the Sampo)*, composed 1974 and revised 1982, the mystery play *Marjatta matala neiti (Marjatta the Low Maiden)*, composed 1975, the operas *Thomas*, composed from 1982 to 1985, and *Aleksis Kivi*, composed 1995/1996. He stated that he was inspired by Finnish music in different degrees and ways when he created these works (cf. Rautavaara 1998: 264–265).

7. HISTORICISM AND PLURALISM

Rautavaara is a neo-romanticist, not only as a composer but also as an aesthete.⁷ His belief in inspiration has already been mentioned. Moreover, his point of view is basically historicistic like the perspective of the 19th century, which was the era of historicism. Rautavaara claims to have been one of the first post-modern composers. *True & False Unicorn*, composed in 1971 and revised twice in 1974 and 2001/2002, is according to him a post-modern composition *avant la lettre*:

It is a post-modern work written ten years before Post-Modernism began to trickle into music. Irony, parody, and paradox occupy the centre of the stage for most of the time, but there is also a moment of tenderness towards people, the world and the life spirit (Rautavaara 2003: 6).⁸

To this end, he added, among others, a blues band to the 'classical' instruments in this score. But even before he expanded his music into that poly-stylistic direction, he had made experiments with the use of different styles and composition techniques in one work. Already 15 years before Rautavaara had employed a pluralistic style in his opera *Kaivos (The Mine)*, composed 1957/1958 and revised 1960/1963. To compose in that manner implies for him that the composer has the right to regard the European music of the last millennium as his private property⁹; this requires the

⁷ About his highly specific concept of Romanticism see Korhonen 1995: 20.

⁸ See CD-booklet *True & False Unicorn* (Rautavaara 2003: 6); according to Tim Howell, already Rautavaara's Third symphony, composed 1961, is a post-modern piece (Howell 2006: 119–120).

⁹ "Sanoin itselleni [...] että säveltäjällä piti olla oikeus hallita omaisuutenaan koko länsimäinen musiikin tuhatvuotista valtakuntaa" (Rautavaara 1998: 209).

¹⁰ For instance, by Anne Sivuoja-Gunaratnam (2005).

thorough knowledge of the music history. As I have suggested in another article, his most recent composition period, which has been baptized his 'second serial period' by some scholars¹⁰, could be described more properly by the term 'synthetic period' (cf. Knust 2008: 451), because it is obvious that he tries to synthesize different styles and aesthetics of different periods since the early 1980s. For instance, in his opera *Auringon talo* (*The House of the Sun*) the central duet between the main characters in the first act sounds like a late romantic piece of music even though it is based on a 12-tone row. Beside Jazz-like passages, aleatoric elements and baroque dance forms also electronic sounds are used in this opera. In the same way Rautavaara's aesthetics integrates elements of heterogeneous models, too, for instance, by combining Eduard Hanslick's aesthetics of the autonomous artwork – which is coming into being according to its own laws – with the romantic aesthetics of inspiration and musical expression of feeling and emotion. And there are even more synthetic traces to be found in his texts.

CONCLUSIONS

The Finnish tone – as Rautavaara takes it – can be found in large parts of his own work. Of course, there are some exceptions like the serial Fourth symphony *Arabescata*, composed 1964 and revised 1968, and other compositions from his so called first serial period, which covers about one decennium from the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s. But of his music written prior and after that period the lion's share is displaying his individual style, which he declares to be decidedly Finnish. For him "scientific modernism (better said: structuralism), mysticism and national Finnishness have been the holy trinity" during all his different periods.¹¹ Especially since the 1980s, this typical synthesis of modernism, mysticism and Finnish tone became almost omnipresent in his works. Rautavaara's remarks about this issue reveal that he considers his own work to be part of a genuine Finnish music tradition, and because of his nationally and internationally dominant position as a contemporary Finnish composer this tone is vice versa strongly influenced and defined by his music. Some characteristics of this tone, which I have listed in this paper, might be identified also in the works of other Finnish composers.

¹¹ "Voisi sanoa 'yhtenä kolmesta', sillä tietoinen modernismi (paremmin sanoen strukturalismi), mystiikka ja kansallis-suomalaisuus ovat olleet se pyhä kolminaisuus, joka [...] esiintyy yhtäaikaan ja rinnakkain läpi kaikkien kausien" (Rautavaara 1998: 264; see also Leslie 2002).

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