

Changes in Estonian Music and Composer's Identity in the Last Decade of the Soviet Period

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ABSTRACT: During the last decade of the Soviet period, both social and cultural as well as several musical changes took place in Estonia. Already since the 1970s we can find many signs of postmodern thinking in Estonian music and other arts, although the society as a whole was far from the postmodern situation giving rise to similar developments in the West. Estonia was separated from the West by the iron curtain, but communication with the West did exist, and knowledge about recent developments in arts arrived Estonia through various channels (recordings, musicians visiting international festivals, etc.). In the present paper, several impulses that were important for the changes that took place in Estonian music in the 1980s will be discussed using some compositions of Lepo Sumera (1950–2000) and Erkki-Sven Tüür (b. 1959) as well as their verbal manifestations as examples. In the works of Sumera we can establish minimalist features, but according to him this developed from rather different sources than American minimalism. Another aspect of postmodernism we can find in the works of Tüür, who is often boldly eclectic synthesizing various earlier styles, including rhythms and musical ideas of rock music. Nevertheless, some of these tendencies in Sumera's and Tüür's oeuvre might be understood as the reception to the previously listened Western music, revealing also something about their (musical) identity.

KEYWORDS: *postmodernism, identity, Lepo Sumera, Erkki-Sven Tüür, 1980s, Estonian music*

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STARTING POINT: THE 1970s – MUSIC BY VELJO TORMIS AND ARVO PÄRT

WE cannot explain the development in Estonian music in the 1980s without referring back to what happened in Estonian music and musical life in the preceding decade. The first postmodern tendencies in Estonian music emerged already in the middle of the 1970s. Therefore, the period discussed below is actually a little bit longer than a decade (the Estonian Republic was re-established in 1991). Focusing on the manifestations of postmodernism and trying to define the identity of some Estonian composers, I will write briefly about the composers Veljo Tormis (b. 1930) and Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), and then more thoroughly about Lepo Sumera (1950–2000) and Erkki-Sven Tüür (b. 1959). These two 'pairs of composers' belong to different, but successive generations, representing thus the large scale of changes in Estonian music of that period.

Around the year 1970 most important stylistic changes took place in the music of leading Estonian composers Veljo Tormis and Arvo Pärt. In many

respects they are opposite personalities not to be compared with Sumera and Tüür, but at the same time both composers turned to consonant sounds, simple structures, early historical sources (Tormis – old Baltic-Finnish runic songs, Pärt – medieval Christian sounds and texts), and aesthetic manifests that denounced composer's personality claiming that his task is to communicate something that is given. This process reflected a general reaction against modernism, postmodernist aspirations that reached Estonia when cultural communication activated during the 1960s. But the new style was also meant and understood as a counter reaction to the strengthening official ideological pressure. For the present discussion it is particularly important that, although Arvo Pärt had emigrated in 1980 and his music was not performed at home until 1988/1989, his influence was strong and Estonian musicians were well informed of his new compositions and worldwide success.

Both composers, Pärt and Tormis, had changed their musical language and composing technique in the middle of the 70s. Today, the music by Arvo Pärt with his unique *tintinnabuli*-technique and Tormis' oeuvre based on runic songs, is well known. Still, it may be useful to analyse which tendencies (musical, as well as extra-musical) helped them to form their new styles. In both cases, we may talk about 'new' tendencies in classical music, which were based on something very 'old' and could be therefore defined as postmodernist.

During his so-called silence-period (1968–1976), Arvo Pärt was really interested in early music, especially in Gregorian chant. Since the beginning of the 70s, early music movement had rapidly developed and expanded in Estonia. There were two early music ensembles – *Viljandi Linnakapell* and *Hortus Musicus* (established respectively in 1971 and 1972) – whose activities had a strong impact also on composers' thinking and writing: The first new compositions by Pärt for *Hortus Musicus* were composed in 1976.¹ The climax of relating 'early' and 'new' in Estonian music and musical life, was a series of Festivals established in Tallinn for Early and Contemporary Music, the first of them took place in 1978. It meant that Pärt was not alone with his ideas.

The contrast between Veljo Tormis' earlier compositions and music composed in the middle of the 70s and later was not that sharp that in the case of Pärt. But it is important that Tormis' interest for archaic runic songs was also strongly supported by different social groups. In Estonia, there was a strong tradition of investigating runic songs (especially their texts), and there were several state-aided institutions involved in this research. As a part of Fenno-Ugric heritage, the interest in Estonian runic songs spread abroad and, *vice versa*, Tormis was interested in the musical heritage of other nations.

It seems that in both cases, in the case of Pärt and Tormis, their new music included also some protest against the Soviet regime. Pärt used Latin sacred texts and he followed the models of medieval sacred music; Tormis music could be dangerous because of its 'too Estonian' identity. In addition to the

¹ *Arbos*, *In Spe* and *Pari intervallo* were among the others. For example, the first version of *Fratres* (1977) was also performed by *Hortus Musicus*.

aesthetic value of their music, listeners definitely understood and liked that moment of protest in these compositions. Nevertheless, both composers have later admitted, that their new style was primarily cultivated by their inner needs and not by the political situation.

YOUNG COMPOSERS: LEPO SUMERA AND ERKKI-SVEN TÜÜR

It is significant, that in the middle of the 70s, a new and very influential group of young Estonian composers emerged. Among them were Lepo Sumera (1950–2000) and a little later Erkki-Sven Tüür (b. 1959). By the end of the 1970s, Sumera was already known as an influential young composer, frequently performed and interviewed. Tüür, on the other hand, was studying at the conservatory, but already recognized by the listeners as a talented rock musician. After the conservatory, Tüür was a private student of Sumera for a year (1984–1985).

Constructing composers' identity

Preparing for present paper, I tried to figure out, what was the musical identity of young Estonian composers in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, concentrating especially on Sumera and Tüür. Can we find texts, articles or interviews, in which they try to define themselves somehow, or did some other persons (musicologists, for example) try to describe their identity? Therefore, I read all the articles about or by Sumera and Tüür published before 1990 (mostly concert reviews, compositions' analyses and interviews). Of course, the term 'identity' was not used in these texts. Thus, I had to construct the views about identity via different 'keywords' used in these articles – different names of composers, musical styles, techniques, etc. – and relate them with composers' broader ideas about music and their musical preferences.

It is obvious, that Estonian writers preferred to analyse Estonian new music in the context of Western tradition as an integral part of it. At the same time, it seems a little puzzling, that they discussed wide-spread tendencies in Western music (including Estonian oeuvre), but very rarely included any names of Western composers of the newest music. For example, an Estonian musicologist Mare Põldmäe wrote in 1982 about the following general tendencies in contemporary classical music: 1) need for consonant sounds; 2) preferring static music to dramatic effect or musical dramaturgy; 3) preferring descriptive character to conflict and development; 4) extensive use of 'background'-textures, while the importance of melody and harmony in their former sense are minimized (cf. Põldmäe 1982: 76). Apart from Estonian composers, Põldmäe mentions here only three Soviet composers: Gija Kancheli, Avet Terteryan and Alfred Schnittke. Of course,

these tendencies – sometimes called ‘new simplicity’ – truly were more in the focus of Soviet composers (Pärt among them) than Western authors, but the point is that Põldmäe wants to see it as the world-wide movement.

If there are any West-European composers mentioned in these articles in connection with Estonian music, they are composers from the first half of the 20th century. Musicologist Merike Vaitmaa wrote about Sumera’s ballet *Anselm’s Story* (*Anselmi lugu*, composed in 1978):

This is a composition based on extended tonality and modal techniques, full of the use of polyrhythms and polychords. This is a kind of composition influenced by Messiaen and early Stravinsky, as well as early Prokofiev’s music. This is something quite new in Estonian music, because earlier Estonian composers have been more influenced by Stravinsky’s neoclassicism on the one hand and dodecaphony on the other. There are also some excerpts of cluster-technique and texture-aleatoric devices in this ballet (Vaitmaa 1979).

It means, Sumera’s music was accepted as new and inventive in Estonian music, although he took his models from the early 20th century Western music. The question is: were Estonians aware of the main tendencies in the late 20th century West-European music? The answer is ‘yes’ and ‘no’. The most important channel for Estonian composers to study West-European music, was via Estonian Radio. Several composers and musicians also listened to Finnish Radio, which was possible with small technical additions to the radio-receiver, and there were also recordings of the newest music available. According to an Estonian journalist Immo Mihkelson, who has investigated music broadcasted by Estonian Radio, the most common West-European 20th century composers heard from Estonian Radio in the 1960s and 1970s were Olivier Messiaen, Arthur Honegger and Paul Hindemith (cf. Mihkelson 2007: 70).² It is important to know, that in addition to music broadcasted, the radio archives contained more recordings of new music acquired by different music-exchange programs between the radios of different countries. Musicians working for Estonian Radio could listen to everything in the archive, including Lepo Sumera, who was a sound engineer at Estonian Radio from 1971 to 1980.

²Mihkelson also mentions the music by Béla Bartók, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Richard Strauss, Ernst Křenek, Witold Lutoslawski, Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Arnold Schönberg and earlier compositions by Igor Stravinsky (cf. Mihkelson 2007: 63–70).

Sumera’s verbal manifestations about (his) music

The first articles about and by Sumera were published in the press at the end of the 1970s, since 1977. At that time, Sumera wrote more about the states of mind in music, than about specific techniques or styles. In an overview article about Soviet Young Composers Festival in Moscow, Sumera states that the music of young Soviet composers is too serious:

All these composers seemed to deal with some kind of philosophical problems. It seems that the main purpose of music is to cultivate serious people instead of enhancing their spirit. It is believed, that the music of

young composers should be cheerful, but this festival proved contrary (Rääts, Sumera 1977).

There are many verbal manifestations by Sumera in different articles, which also sound cheerful. For example: "I can't stand vocal music, therefore I'm going to compose it now. I'm already impatiently waiting for the text for this composition from the poet Henn-Kaarel Hellat" (Kulo 1977). It must be mentioned, that the text Sumera was waiting for, consisted only of Latin names for mushrooms (*Mushroom Cantata*, 1979–1983).

In 1977 Sumera told in the radio program, that during his studies at Tallinn's conservatory (1968–1973), he was really interested in some avant-garde composers, particularly Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez, but retrospectively it seems, that their oeuvre did not have any specific influence on Sumera's compositions. Now, in 1977, he was really fascinated by French music, especially Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel and Olivier Messiaen (cf. Mihkelson 2007: 88). This exemplifies clearly, that Sumera had had a kind of shift in his musical thinking preferring 'older' composers to avant-garde and this tendency continued in time. From Estonian music Sumera liked very much Arvo Pärt: "Pärt's music attracts me because of its inner beauty" (Mihkelson 2007: 88). Pärt's music impressed many young composers and although his name couldn't be mentioned in public writings after Pärt's emigration in 1980, musicians did listen to his music via recordings. Later on, Sumera did not say anything about his musical models.

In several articles Sumera worries about the popularity of young Soviet composers abroad – or, more precisely, about the lack of it. Sumera was quite lucky to visit many countries outside the Soviet block already in the 1980s (including Costa Rica and Italy). In 1984, there was a Soviet Music festival in Helsinki and composers presented there were Andrei Eshpai (b. 1925), Alexander Holminov (b. 1925), Tihon Hrennikov (1913–2007), Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931), Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998) and Mikael Tariverdiev (1931–1996) – the youngest of them, Schnittke. A year later, Finnish music was played in Moscow, and composers presented there, were all born around 1950 (Magnus Lindberg, b. 1958, among them). It was a general tendency, that only the music of older Soviet composers was performed outside the Soviet Union. For example, in 1984, Sumera visited Costa Rica. According to Sumera, Costa Rican people had thought – hopefully with some exaggeration – that there were no younger composers in Soviet Union than Sergei Prokofiev, Aram Khachaturian, Dmitry Kabalevsky, Dmitry Shostakovitch and Tihon Hrennikov, because they had never heard of them (cf. Huik 1989: 88).

Sumera's observations on the concert program by chamber choir ELLERHEIN

Since the beginning of the 1980s, Sumera quite often tried to define and analyze in public the more important tendencies in Estonian music. There is a concert review written by Sumera in 1981, which explores these tendencies accurately and which simultaneously reveals the background of his own compositions from that period. It was a concert by the chamber choir *Ellerhein*, conducted by Tõnu Kaljuste.³ Here is the program of it, consisting of 20th century composer's music (mainly Estonian) and early music:

³ In autumn 1981 the choir was renamed as Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir.

Rein Rannap (b. 1953), *Heled helid*

Kuldar Sink (1942–1995), *Poem*

Toomas Siitan (b. 1958), *Gaudete*

Veljo Tormis (b. 1930), *Ingerimaa õhtud*

Clément Janequin (1485–1558), *Le chant des oiseaux*

Adriano Banchieri (1568–1634), *Contrapunto bestiale alla mente*

Gunnar Hahn (1908–2001), *Swedish folktunes*

Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933), *Stabat Mater*

Sumera made several observations on that repertoire. Analyzing Rein Rannap's composition, he draws a parallel with an English musician and composer Mike Oldfield (known at that time for his new progressive-rock, electronics and world music oeuvre). Without knowing the term itself, Sumera describes Rannap's music almost as minimalistic: "It is the magic of colouring and repeating, that builds up static blocks of music. Instead of conflict and development, music flows through the fields of more and less dense texture, through the repetitions of melodic figures, moving on innerly" (Sumera 1981). This description suits well to Sumera's own compositions of that time, especially to the piano piece entitled *Piece from the Year 1981* (*Pala aastast 1981*) and for his first two symphonies (composed in 1981 and 1984). Sumera continues: "This kind of developmental process with many repetitions is natural and significant to Estonian classical music. It associates with our ancient musical language, runic songs" (Sumera 1981). Later, when Sumera was already acquainted with the minimalism, he claimed that diatonic scales and repetitions in his own compositions came from runic songs and had nothing to do with international minimalism. Sumera had really been fascinated by the runic songs. In 1984 he told:

While listening to archaic runic songs, you will discover the real foundations of music. These foundations are different by nations. [...] Our [Estonian] thinking is very different from European. Things that might be suggestive to the others – Mike Oldfield's "Incantations" for example – sound like as a child's babble compared to Fenno Ugric archaic incantations. Oldfield's music is beautiful, called "incantative" just

because of its repeatings; this is form rather than content. Incantation is still an integral part of us, vigorously in runic songs. Another question is, should the intonations of folk music be used in classical oeuvre (Vaitmaa 1984).

These quotations show clearly that Sumera noticed similar trends in Estonian and Western music, but he also noticed different background of these similar musical structures. While coming back to the concert program in question, Sumera writes about Toomas Siitan's choral piece *Gaudete*, that it is a nice stylization of medieval music, where additionally to vocal parts some instruments (string quartet and two flutes) were also used: "It would have been more stylish, if some medieval instruments were used in this composition instead of classical ones, an ensemble of recorders for example" (Sumera 1981). As written above, combining new music and early instruments, was quite popular at that time in Estonia. The first compositions for Estonian early music ensemble *Hortus Musicus* were composed by Raimo Kangro in 1975 and a year later Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli*-works were performed. Erkki-Sven Tüür had used some recorders in his progressive-rock ensemble *In Spe*, and Sumera composed his first composition *Pantomime (Pantomiim)* for *Hortus Musicus* in the autumn 1981. In that composition alongside of early instruments, electronics was also used – significant contrast between old and new. In the 1990s, Sumera became one of the most important composers in Estonian music using electronics. In 1995, when the Studio of Electronic Music was established at the Estonian Academy of Music, Sumera became the head of this department.

Summarizing Sumera's review, we can bring forth three statements that present three tendencies in the Estonian music of about 1980 and which can be defined as postmodernist trends:

- 1) the great role of repetitions as a new type of dramaturgy: fluent changes as development instead of conflictive dramaturgy is associated with musical minimalism;
- 2) searching for one's musical roots from archaic runic song;
- 3) searching for 'new sounds' in music in new instrumentation, using early instruments together with electronics. All these tendencies were also significant in Sumera's own oeuvre.

Postmodernism as a mixture of musical genres and eras: the case of Erkki-Sven Tüür

By musical genres I consider here differences between classical music, rock and pop music, and jazz; also the connections between old and new – the influence of early music to contemporary oeuvre. Erkki-Sven Tüür was born in 1959 – nine years later than Sumera – and his musical models differed a lot from Sumera's. Sumera had noticed the influences of jazz and rock music in Estonian classical music already in the late

70s, but he himself was not affected by that. Tüür, on the contrary, had a background as a rock-musician and mixing these three worlds – classical and rock music plus early music influences –, became his trademark.

In his last year at conservatory, in 1983, Tüür was asked about his musical models. The answer included at first only pop music artists like Jethro Tull, King Crimson, Genesis and Mike Oldfield. After that he claimed: “From our century’s non-rock music I love very much Messiaen, Britten and Stravinsky. For me, the last sensation in Estonian music was the Symphony by Lepo Sumera” (Tooma 1983). Tüür was the leader of progressive-rock ensemble *In Spe* from 1976 till 1983. In that band, he used some acoustical instruments like violin, cello and recorders alongside with traditional electric rock music instruments. In his opinion the sound of acoustical instruments and electronics suited together very well. Broader background for using old instruments in his compositions (for *In Spe* as well as later for the early music ensemble *Hortus Musicus*), was the general spiritual atmosphere in Estonia at that time. In 2009, Tüür described very emotionally the impulses that cultivated his musical ideas in the late 70s and early 80s: “Into that grey and bleak Soviet world, another World was created. The world, which was mentally much bigger than the one into which it was intended to hide” (Paulus 2009: 48). Tüür became fascinated by Pärt’s *tintinnabuli* music, the activity of *Hortus Musicus*; he attended with the enthusiasm of the non-public lectures on religion and early cultures by a theologian and reverend Einar Laigna, also by and historian and future politician Tunne Kelam; he also got acquainted with a young musicologist Toomas Siitan who was interested in early music; together with some friends Tüür sang early-christian monody, sometimes even at the catholic church (cf. Paulus 2009). These impulses didn’t affect only the instrumentation of Tüür’s music, but also the musical style bringing in diatonic scales, melodic figures and rhythm-patterns typical to early music.

In the end of the 1980s Tüür considered minimalism as the most important model for his music. Analyzing his own oratorio *Ante finem saeculi* and the Second symphony (composed respectively in 1985 and 1987), Tüür wrote in 1988: “At that time [in the middle of 1980s] I was fascinated by minimalism, sonorism in music and controlled aleatorics” (Tüür 1988). These are new impulses in Estonian music that were almost absent in Sumera’s oeuvre. Sumera had found something like minimalism through runic songs, Tüür was already familiar with Steve Reich’s music.

CONCLUSIONS

We can discuss changes in Estonian music at the end of the 70s and through the 80s in the context of postmodernism. The tendencies referring to wider postmodern thinking in Estonian music are the following:

- 1) Music was renewed through different kinds of 'old' elements;
- 2) The use of diatonic scales and meditative repetitions were popular (we can see influences of early music and runic song);
- 3) The use of electronics and early music instruments in classical new music was popular;
- 4) The boundaries between classical and rock music were dimmed.

The self-definition, ideas about identity differed by composers, but we can point to some general tendencies. For many composers it was not specifically musical nor more narrowly classical music field they wanted to be part of. For them, music was an integral part of broader cultural thinking. Classical music itself was seen as an integral part of broader musical culture, including rock and jazz music. Composers identified themselves as Estonians through their own ancient musical heritage (runic songs) – that was cultural heritage, not political history, that made them Estonians. At the same time, composers also identified themselves as Western composers because of similar tendencies in their music.

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