

Leelo and a leaf flute. Representatives of Estonian traditional music on stage at the 2nd half of the 20th century

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In Estonia, performing traditional music on stage became a basic form of traditional music performance during the 20th century. Already between the two world wars, various stage performances of folk music were popular and went on tour around Estonian village houses, alternating between instrumental and vocal music, performances of customs, storytelling, etc. during the show. (e.g. Sildoja 2014.) These concerts had the enlightenment-educational, national and entertaining purposes as well. Both representatives of the traditional oral culture and (half) professional performers were present at these concerts. Such a form of performance gained even greater popularity during the Soviet period, during which stage performances of folk tradition – under the name of folk creations – were especially valued, elevated to the same level as representatives of classical music and arts. The performances took place on ever more prestigious and larger stages, all the way to the Estonian-wide general song and dance festivals. (Oras 2023) Despite the political agenda, performances like this kept traditional music in focus, and more generally, helped re-normalize traditional music among urbanizing Estonians, reducing and softening the invasion of European authorial classical and popular music, and Soviet propagandistic mass music as well.

In addition to professional actors-musicians – such as e.g. Laine Mesikäpp (Oras 2023) – emerged a kind of local prominent performers who acquired the status of a specialist and a symbol of a local tradition, and who embodied the local tradition both outside, for journalists, radio listeners, folklorists, and cultural officials, as well as inside, in the eyes of their own community.

These performers can be defined on the one hand by a great need for performance – performing on stage was a way of self-expression inherent to them. On the other hand, they could also be defined by a sense of mission, the presentation of the tradition was no way random choice, but they were indeed interested in the legacy of the past. Although they were completely modern people, having either received a contemporary cultural education, or being involved with modern cultural practices such as choral singing, or local history research, they

felt obliged to share the knowledge and arts they had inherited from their parents with the modern world.

In Western Estonia, Eliise Emmeliine Junts, or Lääne Liisi (1918–2002) became such a symbolic specialist. A woman from a simple rural music-loving family emerged as a valued performer at both community and regional events, also reaching the Estonian-wide stage at the 1973 General Dancing Festival. She collaborated with folklorists in addition to folk music groups and composers, having correspondence e.g. with Veljo Tormis, the great figure of Estonian choir music. Today, she has gained the status of a memory symbol of her local community.

In the paper, I will study different aspects of Lääne Liisi's creative life, motivations for her practices and the reception of her performances in her community.

Contrary aspects of marginality versus being in focus which played important role both in her biography as well as creativity come under consideration. In the late 1940s she was repressed into the economic and social margins by the Soviet authorities, but this didn't stop her from coming on stage as early as the 1950s. She was a forerunner of cultural activities, the singer, the folk music group leader, etc., but she did not perform on so-called soloist instruments, but rather on marginal, "joke instruments" such as leaf flute, bottle and keg instruments.

Finally, I also pay attention to the changing role of runosongs to her creativity and performative life. It is obvious that the poetic legacy of the Lääne Liisi included rather a newer, end-rhymed and literary singing tradition. The literary experiments of her youth were in the form of stanzaic poems. During her performing career she acquired the reputation of specialist of archaic traditions – which included also the knowledge and creative use of runosongs.

References:

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