

About the Process of Singing and the Conception of Authenticity in the 21st-Century Estonian *Regilaul* Tradition

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According to the history of the Estonian language, the verb *laulma* ('to sing') predates the noun *laul* ('song'), which is derived from the verb (Kasik 2015). The linguistic usage in folk song *regilaul* suggests that verb forms dominate among words with the *laul*- stem, indicating that in traditional song texts, singing was primarily discussed as an activity rather than songs as objects. Moreover, the *laul* in *regilaul* texts could appear as an indivisible entity, as illustrated in verses such as: "There's plenty of song if I let it out, plenty of tune if I roll it along" (Särg, Veski 2024). In today's music world, shaped by written culture and audio recordings, the central focus has shifted to the *work*, i.e., the individual song.

Regilaul (or runosong), the Finnic singing heritage with a long history, has adapted to contemporary Estonia, existing both as a distinct tradition and in fusion with other musical styles. *Regilaul* is performed collectively in both (partially preserved) traditional settings, such as by the Seto *leelo* choirs, and new contexts. The *regilaul* singing skills, once fading, have been revived across Estonia and are taught in music education (since 2007 also at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre) and in workshops, many organized by Janika Oras and the folk song group *Väike Hellero*. Numerous arrangements of *regilaul* and new music, inspired by it, have been created; to name a few, 21st-century examples include choral arrangements by composer Pärt Uusberg, rock arrangements by Trad.Attack!, and tradition-adjacent renditions by Celia Roose with various ensembles.

This presentation addresses questions arising from the tension between preserving and innovating the traditional features of *regilaul* performance and the associated discourse on authenticity. As orally transmitted folk music originates from the past, its performance in a new era is influenced by the desire to sing in a way resembling the original and the need to provide meaningful experiences for today's audiences.

Modern *regilaul* performances usually are structured around the concept of the *work*, as seen in concert programs and album tracklists. However, some musical events aim to

organise singing as a continuous process. An example is Jaak Johanson's (1959–2021) "Gate Games", where participants moved through the city while singing together.

In music, and especially in historical music, authenticity has served as a criterion for good performance. This concept is subjective, multi-faceted, and encompasses various aspects of performance. While 20th-century musicology often associated authenticity with the supposed "correct" rendition of a written musical work, later scholarship has emphasized the sincerity of the performer's and listener's experience. An authentic performance has been defined as the ability to create, based on a notated work, a cohesive harmony between adherence to period traditions, the performer's artistic intuition, and audience reception and expectations (Mardhatillah et al. 2023).

Similarly, in the late 20th-century discourse on folk music revival, the category of authenticity (or analogous terms such as 'tradition' or 'genuineness') was frequently used to analyse and evaluate performance characteristics. Here the authenticity defines the relationship between the source and the performer to the presumed "correct" performance. Different aspects of authenticity have been distinguished, such as the authenticity of process, result, or audience experience (Ronström 2014). Today, aesthetic(s) of folklore revival, influenced by prior local musical experiences and global music, integrate authenticity as one of their components. We examine 21st-century ideas of good *regilaul* singing, drawing on press materials and the Regilaul Conference roundtable (2023), as well as *regilaul* singing occasions, such as the Forest Song Festivals (since 2018), and Regitram during the International Music Day (2024). Our focus lies on the categories through which the ideals of contemporary *regilaul* are achieved. One such categories is often a poetic form, but there may also be a process-like, partly improvised participatory singing.

References

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