

The Arrival of the Piano in the Estonian home

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In this article I shall examine the arrival of the piano and of piano playing in Estonia, firstly in general terms. I shall then examine what is known of the role of the piano in a domestic context during the period of developing Estonian self awareness among the more educated and prosperous social groups in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

If a piano was available, it would almost certainly have been used for playing popular and folk music, and particularly for dancing. It would be used by amateur musicians who had never studied music and who had little or no skills in music reading. So the piano could be considered a folk instrument, just as a violin could be both a concert and a folk instrument; the boundaries between the two traditions are often blurred. In amateur domestic music it is particularly easy to move seamlessly between the two traditions. However, a piano is a large instrument which cannot easily be transported, for example to a wedding celebration or to an open air event. Playing the piano for folk dances or with folk musicians is therefore limited to wealthier members of society since it requires the living space of a large farm, a school or meeting room. The numbers of those Estonians who could afford to buy a piano increased towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

Methodologically this study falls between music history and ethnomusicology. Studies of comparatively recent households and ways of life are quite common among Estonian ethnologists. A parallel could be drawn with the study of any aspect of everyday life, such as the habits and spread of coffee-drinking. In this study, however, I have not carried out conventional research into piano playing traditions. My sources are mostly historical: memoirs, biographies, newspaper advertisements, novels. I have attempted to assemble a whole mosaic from many small pieces of data in order to demonstrate that the piano can be seen just as we see any instrument which is used both in art and folk music (such as the violin). As such I aim to present domestic music as an area of interest where those two traditions merge.

It is impossible to establish exactly when the piano first arrived in the Estonian (non-German) home, just as it is impossible to establish the point where the Estonian (middle class) household first appeared. For example, the homes of the early Estonian intelligentsia such as the journalist Johann Voldemar Jannsen in Tartu or Pastor Jakob Hurt in Otepää, later in St. Petersburg, were certainly Estonian homes and centres of a developing Estonian society. However, the language spoken among their multi-national family and guests was predominantly German. The piano was found increasingly in the Estonian home as the Estonian middle class grew, both in towns and in the country. A sense of Estonian identity developed rapidly during the second half of the 19th century together with the status of the Estonian language itself. Thus, this article also reflects upon the social aspects of Estonian cultural life.

The piano arrived in Estonia in the late 18th century, when amateur music making had become established among the German middle classes. An important link between local Baltic-German culture and that of Germany were the young German intellectuals who came to the Baltic countries in search of employment. During the 19th century piano playing spread to Estonians themselves. Homes with pianos were initially (1) teachers' and kösters' homes where the piano could be used side by side with a pipe organ or harmonium; (2) wealthier farms, with large living spaces furnished by craftsmen; (3) the families of higher ranking servants in manors; (4) the more prosperous homes in towns. In towns, piano teachers were widely available since piano lessons were widely advertised not only in German, but also in Estonian language newspapers. In rural areas the schoolteacher or köster was also able to teach, since studies at teachers' training schools included a considerable amount of time for music, including keyboard lessons. By the end of the 19th and early 20th century, more and more Estonian societies and schools could afford to buy a piano.

The domestic repertoire certainly included church hymns and popular (choral) songs. Sheet music was widely available; dances and marches were probably also played by ear. Very popular were arrangements for four hands, both of dance music and of more complicated art music. Domestic music, being more

private, is less well documented than that of public musical life. We can learn about music printed for amateurs, but rarely find in written sources descriptions of their playing habits or how they played by ear. However, it is possible to broaden the material we find in memoirs, correspondence and novels to cover similar types of homes. For this, some knowledge of domestic music in Germany and Russia is helpful. Another question is a part of social history: how a home with a distinct Estonian identity developed and adopted a way of life which expected ownership of a piano and taking of piano lessons, particularly for girls. This introduces the gender issue of piano playing: since the 18th century, certain musical skills (playing a keyboard instrument and singing) were a part of the education of middle class girls, considered essential for their future social life. However, in Estonian peasant culture, the playing of instruments was a male role. This gender issue is certainly a further reason why piano playing tends to be omitted from the overall picture of Estonian folk music.

In the study of the history of piano playing and teaching in the 19th and early 20th centuries, we have to distinguish between two overlapping areas. On the one hand, there is concert life and professional piano playing; on the other, amateur music making for pleasure at home. We know about prominent amateur pianists who participated in social semi-public/semi-professional musical life. But apart from these, there were many who were closer to folk musicians than to educated amateurs.