

Results from an experiment in emulating the traditional Seto singing style

Žanna Pärtlas, Janika Oras

The development of the Seto song tradition during the last century seems to be typical of agricultural parts of Europe. The disappearance of the traditional agrarian way of life and the growing impact of media and technology caused the decline of many ancient musical traditions. Yet in many countries (among them, Estonia), changes in the political and social climate have led to the awakening of ethnic consciousness and to the revitalisation of fading cultural practices (see Livingston 1999 for example regarding the revival processes). Old musical traditions were revived; these are considered to be a valuable cultural heritage and a symbol of ethnic identity, but, on closer examination, they themselves are changing fast and losing their most characteristic and original former features.

This is true of the traditional multipart singing style of the Seto people – a small ethnic group living in South-eastern Estonia and the adjoining territories of Russia. The Seto musical tradition is one of the very few in Estonia that has been preserved in active use until today, although after World War II the bearers of this tradition were mostly elderly women. Thanks to recent political and social developments this tradition is thriving again (i.e. it is also practised by younger people), but it is not the same as it was even a couple of decades ago.

The pattern of change seen in the contemporary Seto singing style is typical of many European folk song traditions. The tendency is towards the musical style of European professional music, based on functional harmony, equally tempered tuning, a proportional rhythmic system, and regular metre. In the case of the Seto songs it means the diatonisation of the musical scales, the loss of unique tunings, the simplification of the multipart texture etc. One of the reasons behind the changes is that the old manner of musical thinking (including, for example, the specific manner of voice production and the sense of rhythm) has been almost lost by many contemporary Seto singers due to the impact of school education and to music broadcast by the mass media.

The present paper concentrates on one of the most vulnerable features of the ancient Seto song style: tuning and scale structure. The oldest genres of Seto multipart songs are based on a specific symmetrical scale, which can be called the one-three-semitone scale (Pärtlas 1997, 2000, 2006a). This consists of intervals approximating one and three semitones and could be represented by the notes D-E_b-F_♯-G-A_♯-B (in semitones, 1-3-1-3-1; this is the largest range of the scale). Very typical are also transitional forms between the one-three-semitone and the diatonic scale with the use of alterations and micro-alterations of the scale notes. During the last decades we have witnessed the diatonisation of the Seto one-three-semitone mode (Pärtlas, Toom 2011). From the point of view of the present research, it is important to note that the changes in the tuning and scale structure are of a kind that can be better recognised and perceived by a trained musician. Seto singers generally have no formal musical education, and although many of them understand that their singing differs from the recordings of the older Seto choirs, they cannot identify exactly where this difference lies. The aim of this paper is to investigate to what extent it is possible to restore the old style of singing (mainly in terms of scale structure and tuning) by means of conscious learning by the trained musicians.

The research is based on the pedagogical and scientific experiment that was carried out at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. For one term the students of the department of traditional music learned to sing Seto songs based on the one-three-semitone mode under the direction of the experienced ethnomusicologist and teacher of traditional singing. The students were repeatedly told about the specifics of the old Seto scales, they did the musical transcriptions of the recordings of the songs they learned and their goal was to reproduce the traditional manner of singing as accurately as possible. Then two songs performed by the student choir consisting of 4 singers were recorded in the studio using the multichannel technique (i.e. each singer had his/her own microphone). These recordings and those of the original Seto songs employed in the learning process were analysed acoustically (using the free software PRAAT) and the results were compared.

The two songs under consideration are the work-game song 'Käsikivilaul' ('The Grinding Stone') and the calendar song 'Urbepäeva laul' ('The Palm Sunday song'). Both of these are based on the one-three-semitone scale $E_b-F\sharp-G-A\sharp-B$ (3-1-3-1). The main aspects of musical structure that were analysed in these two songs were as follows: (1) the intervals between the scale notes, (2) the harmonic intervals which occur in the multipart texture, and (3) the width of the pitch zone in which scale notes can be realised by singers (the last aspect is important because in the Seto traditional singing the unisons can be very wide – see Tool 2011: 104).

Before analysis we put forward some hypotheses concerning probable results of the comparison between the original recordings and their imitations by the students. According to Rytis Ambrazevičius (2005) two typical outcomes are possible when traditional songs are performed by people who are not the bearers of tradition. The first tendency is that the specific features of the traditional style remain unassimilated by the singers, and they use instead a more familiar musical system. The second possibility is that unusual (for the European 'ear') features are exaggerated by secondary performers in comparison with the original performance. In case of Seto songs under consideration, this could mean that the students either tend to sing in a diatonic mode or use the one-three-semitone scale in its strict, tempered form (i.e. with intervals between scale notes the size of which is exactly one and three semitones) which is not characteristic of the original performance of the Seto songs (Ambrazevičius, Pärtlas 2011).

The results of the acoustic analysis confirmed our expectation that in the original performance the intervals between scale notes are not exactly one and three semitones and dependent on the melodic context. In the original performance of 'Käsikivilaul' the intervals between average pitches of the scale notes were 2.9-1.3-2.9-0.2 (all numbers designate the size of the intervals in semitones), i.e. the 'semitone' $F\sharp-G$ was extended (1.3) and the upper interval $A\sharp-B$ was very narrow (0.2) (the narrow upper interval is characteristic of the certain types of the Seto tunes – Ambrazevičius, Pärtlas 2011). In the students' performance the intervals were closer to the 'ideal' 3-1-3-1 structure – 3.1-1-3.1-0.3, but the students managed to imitate the narrow upper interval (0.3). In the original recording of the 'Urbepäeva laul' the intervals were 2.6-1.2-2.5-1.2 (with extended 'semitones' and narrowed 'three-semitones'). The melodic intervals sung by the students were much more tempered – 3.2-0.9-2.8-1.

In the theoretical (i.e. equally tempered) form of the one-three-semitone mode, all harmonic intervals, which in the Seto songs are composed of the notes placed next but one in the scale (E_b-G , $F\sharp-A\sharp$, and $G-B$), would be exactly 4 semitones (the major thirds). In practice this is not so. In the original performances of the 'Käsikivilaul' and 'Urbepäeva laul' the sizes of the harmonic sonorities were respectively 4.1-4.1-3.2 and 3.7-3.7-3.7 (the difference between songs is dependant on the melodic context of the tunes). The results of the student choir were 4.1-4.2-3.5 and 3.8-3.4-3.5. In the first song the students' results were quite close to the original performance; in the case of the second song, the multichannel recording revealed that some of the students sang upper scale notes $A\sharp$ and B lower than others did, which made the scale closer to the harmonic minor ($E_b-F\sharp-G-A-B_b$).

The comparison of pitch zones in the performance of notes of the scale showed, as expected, that in the original performance the pitch zones were wider (about 0.9 semitones) than in the students' singing (about 0.6 semitones).

In conclusion, it can be said that results from the acoustic analysis confirmed that the pedagogical experiment was successful. After close study of the Seto scales, the students managed to imitate the ancient style of Seto singing quite closely to the original. All the same, some minor differences were found, proving that in some cases the students tended to follow the more tempered form of the one-three-semitone mode (for example they could not imitate the extended semitones) or sing more diatonically (as in the case with the 'Urbepäeva laul'). The analysis of the original recordings also confirmed that the intervals between notes of the scale in the one-three-semitone mode depend upon the melodic context of the songs.