

The question of tune types in the improvisations of Taarka

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There is a long tradition of Seto singers with the ability to improvise words to existing tunes. One such singer was Hilana Taarka (1856–1933). In this article, the author attempts to provide an overview of the tune types used by Hilana Taarka in her song improvisations. This research is based on phonograph recordings made by the Finnish folklorist Armas Otto Väisänen in the beginning of the 20th century. Väisänen first visited southern Estonia in 1912, followed by six further trips, the last in 1924. Väisänen met Taarka for the first time in 1913, when he visited this area with the Estonian folk dance explorer and researcher Anna Raudkats. Both researchers observed that Taarka had only a small repertoire of tunes; it was the *texts* which were of primary importance to her.

At the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, improvised songs were little valued by folklorists. This standpoint derived from the belief that to be of value, songs had to be of ancient origin. Improvisations are, of course, created at the point of performance. Väisänen was the first to take an interest in these songs; he recorded them and wrote about them in his publications.

This article describes Taarka's improvisations from the years 1913, 1921 and 1922. In Taarka's repertoire we find seven improvisations, which can be divided into two categories: songs intended for song collectors, and songs intended specifically for the singer Karaski Toomka. The latter have the character of 'grumbling' or 'scolding' songs. The songs intended for researchers are 'Oi vellokõne mull noore-jallekõne' (1913), 'Olet kulla tii koolipreili' (1921), 'Hüvastijätu laul' (1921), and 'Velesakene küll noorökönõ' (1922). Songs for Karaski Toomka are 'Kuule, kuule Toomka no toroküppär' (1921), 'Toomka, Toomkakönõ meil tubakunõna' (1922) and 'Toomka ommõ vanatigõ' (1922).

I have analysed these tunes using Žanna Pärtlas's method. This is based on the rhythmic form of the songs (Pärtlas 2001, 2006). Basic features described are: (1) the text structure of choruses, (2) the division of the verse to the stress-groups in choruses,¹ (3) syllabic rhythm in choruses, and (4) harmonic rhythm in choruses. I also examined songs from Herbert Tampere's anthology *Eesti rahvalaule viisidega I–V*, to compare songs with similar tunes. Furthermore I compared Taarka's tunes with those by the other famous Seto singer, Anne Vabarna (1877–1964) from Liisi Laanemets's Master's thesis, *Setu lauliku Anne Vabarna viisirepertuaarist ERA helisalvestiste põhjal* (2007) (The tune repertoire of the Seto singer Anne Vabarna as documented in the Estonian Folklore Archives).

Taarka uses four tune types. The most frequently occurring tune type appears in three songs: 'Olet kulla tii koolipreili' (1921), 'Kuule, kuule Toomka no toroküppär' (1921) and 'Toomka, Toomkakönõ meil tubakunõna' (1922). Taarka also employed this tune in the narrative song 'Ilma tütar' (1921). It is clear that Taarka presented the same tunes in songs with texts of different content. Comparing these with Tampere's anthology I found three songs with the same tune type: two wedding songs, 'Elu mehekodus' and 'Mõrsja kiitus' (Tampere 1960: 259, 347) and one narrative song 'Uba ja hernes' (Tampere 1964: 170–175). Tampere asserts that this tune is very common in narrative songs. Comparing Taarka's tune type with Vabarna's tunes, I found no similarities.

The second tune type appears in two songs: 'Hüvastijätu laul' (1921) and 'Toomka ommõ vanatigõ' (1922), with texts on different themes. This tune type is very widespread – in Tampere's anthology it occurs 13 times:² in work, dancing, narrative songs and in legends. The folk term for this tune type is *pöörajooksmine*, which refers to the connection of this tune with dancing songs. Taarka used this tune in the dancing song 'Kurest kasvi korge neio' from 1913 (published in Tampere's anthology – Tampere 1964: 61–66). This tune can be found throughout Setomaa. Anne Vabarna used the same tune type in three songs (Laanemets 2007: 39).

¹ In Estonian runic songs, a stress-group is a group of syllables that begins with stressed syllable.

² 'Ketra, vodikene!' and 'Pesupesemine' (Tampere 1956: 226, 228), 'Illus jaaniaeg' (Tampere 1960:166), 'Nurganine' (Tampere 1960: 234), two *pöörajooksmine* (Tampere 1958: 105, 107), 'Tähe mõrsja' (Tampere 1964: 61), 'Lemmeleht', 'Ilmatütar' and 'Naisetapja' (Tampere 1964: 99–100, 105, 195), 'Ehete riisuja' (Tampere 1964: 237), 'Jeesuse sõit' and 'Jeesuse kannatamine' (Tampere 1964: 322, 325).

The third tune type is found only in one song from 1913, a song improvised for the song collector, Väisänen, 'Oi vellokõne mull noore-jalle-kõne'. This is a tune in the *Vel'okõsõõ* style, as heard in men's songs. One may speculate that Taarka improvised the song for Väisänen when she was told that he came from Finland. The choice of a 'men's song' tune may be determined by the fact that the song was addressed to a man. Väisänen mentioned in his diary of 1913 that Taarka often uses a characteristic syncopated figure specific to men's songs (♪ ♪). An example of this type of men's song is 'Hoi, velekese!' from the CD *Ülge ütte!* (2000, No. 9). Anne Vabarna did not employ this tune in her recordings.

The last tune type appears also only once in Taarka's improvisations – a song for the song collector, Väisänen, 'Ve-le-sa-kene küll noorõkõnõ' (1922). Taarka used the same tune type in her narrative song 'Tütar vette' (1922). The beginning of the song text 'Ve-le-sa-kene küll noorõkõnõ' is typical of men's songs. In Tampere's anthology this tune type can be found in 4 songs: a work song, two wedding songs and one narrative song.³ This tune type is often associated with wedding songs, for which the folk term is *saja ääl*. This tune type, as in the previous example, is closely linked to men's songs repertoire. At weddings *saja ääl* was often sung by men. This tune can be found on the CD *Ülge ütte!* (No. 4), performed by men. We could (again) imagine that this tune was addressed to a man. In this song we also encounter the familiar syncopation. It is possible that Taarka sang this tune in 1913, but no recording exists.

In conclusion it can be said that Taarka, who was a fine improviser of words, worked within the musical framework of traditional Seto tunes. In her improvisations she used a small number of well-known tunes. The connection between choice of the tune and the text content can be found in songs addressed to men. In such cases Taarka often used tunes characteristic of Seto men's songs. Väisänen's remark about Taarka's favorite syncopated figure leads us to suppose that Taarka used the men's tunes more often than is usual in the Seto tradition.

³ Work song 'Ketra, vokikene!' (Tampere 1956: 227), wedding songs 'Pulmade ootamine' and 'Veimevaka toomine' (Tampere 1960: 267, 346), narrative song 'Naisetapja' (Tampere 1964: 192).