

Elmar Arro's View of Contemporary Estonian Music

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Abstract

In 1935 Elmar Arro (1899–1985) published an article on “Estonian Contemporary Music”. In his article Arro gives an overview of Estonian composers and their works that is based on his own personal knowledge. Arro’s account also clearly reflects his basic aesthetic concepts. Urve Lippus’s research into Arro’s position in the historiography of Estonian music provides the context for my analysis of Arro’s article.

It was in 2006 that I was fortunate to make the acquaintance of Urve Lippus during a conference in Greifswald. This conference had as its theme *Music and University in the Baltic Sea Region*. Urve Lippus’s contribution was about the letter of Elmar Arro (1899–1985) to Karl Leichter (1902–1987), written in the 1970s (Lippus 2009). I was especially impressed by the empathetic way in which Urve Lippus talked about Arro, and particularly of how he was torn between his involvement in Estonian music history and his inability to publish his research. There were two reasons for this. On one hand Arro, though born in Riga and having lived in Tartu for more than a decade in the 1930s, did not speak Estonian well enough to feel comfortable in Estonian-speaking academia (Lippus 2009: 266).¹ At the same time, however, publishing his Vienna doctoral thesis of 1928 as a history of Estonian music in the German language did not appear to him appropriate.² On the other hand, after being forced to settle in Germany in 1939 during the Nazi-Soviet population transfers, and having been drafted into the German army in 1941 and subsequently been imprisoned as a prisoner of war in Russia until 1955, Arro later found himself in a situation in post-War-Germany where no one

was interested in Estonian music history at all. Nevertheless, Arro focused his research on topics related to Eastern European music cultures. He was active in founding the Ost-Europa-Institut in Heidelberg, later taking this institute with him to Kiel when he moved there,³ as well as in publishing the first four volumes of the series *Musik des Ostens*. After retiring, in 1966 he moved to Vienna, where he founded the periodical *Musica Slavica*; of this initiative, however, only the first volume appeared, in 1977.⁴

In his letters to Leichter, Arro, by that time Professor emeritus at the University of Vienna, complained about the lack of interest in Estonian music that he faced during those years (Lippus 2009: 269). Arro may not fully have appreciated the practical as well as the political and ideological obstacles that caused restraint on the part of Western European musicologists with regard to Eastern European music – obstacles which Arro was not to see being increasingly overcome from the 1990s onward. Three of Arro’s most important research papers have at last been published in Estonian, thus in a way doing justice to Arro’s influence on and importance for contemporary Estonian musicology. First, his attempt to reconstruct

¹ Six small contributions by Arro in the Estonian language were published in the *Eesti Muusika Kuukiri* in 1929, when Arro was editor of the journal (Lippus 1999: 1035). Since none of Arro’s other writings were published in Estonian, however, I assume that these contributions of 1929 were translated.

² Indeed, Arro published an enlarged version of his doctoral thesis as *Geschichte der estnischen Musik* in 1933, reserving the right to publish it in Estonian (Arro 1933: [6]; Runnel 2003: 9).

³ According to Velimirović 2001: 78, Arro moved to Kiel in 1968, but this is definitely incorrect. The J.-G.-Herder-Forschungsstelle für Musikgeschichte where Arro was active had been founded by Walter Wiora in 1958; however, the edited volumes *Musik des Ostens* appeared as *Sammelbände der J.-G.-Herder-Forschungsstelle für Musikgeschichte* only from the third volume (1965) onwards, whereas the hard-to-find first two volumes (1962 and 1963) are subtitled *Sammelbände für historische und vergleichende Forschung*. It can be assumed, therefore, that Arro moved to Kiel around 1964.

⁴ It seems to be unknown that Arro also published two books of poetry, *Rastloses Wandern*, Kiel: Schmidt & Klaunig, 1970, and *Stahl: ein Zeitpoem*, Kiel: Schmidt & Klaunig, 1970, as well as the autobiographical sketch *Zwölfhundert (“dawaj-dawaj!”)*, Kiel: Schmidt & Klaunig, 1969.

the Baltic German 'Liederschule' of 1965; secondly, his article on Baltic choral books and their authors of 1931; and thirdly, the archive-based study on Tartu's town musicians from 1587 to 1809 of 1932 (Arro 2003: 11–106, 107–130 and 131–220 respectively). Arro's importance for Estonian music history research was one of Urve Lippus's subjects from the 1980s onwards (Lippus 2003: 225), resulting in a number of publications, the most comprehensive of which is an essay, included in the volume just mentioned, written with the aim of making Arro's name known to a public beyond the world of musicology, which concludes with the view that Estonians have long been in Arro's debt (Lippus 2003: 240).

This tribute to Urve Lippus's memorial focuses on one of Arro's contributions that is not included in the book just mentioned but which is referred to in Urve Lippus's essay (Lippus 2003: 229). The article "Das estnische Musikschaffen der Gegenwart" (which I translate here as "Estonian Contemporary Music") is, in fact, not widely known at all, published, as it was, in a magazine that is not known for including articles relating to music: The *Baltische Monatshefte* (*Baltics Monthly Magazine*), issued by the Ernst Plates publishing house in Riga. In 1935 Arro had his article published there (Arro 1935b), together with another article on the Liphart string quartet in Tartu from 1829 to 1835 (Arro 1935a); in the same issue there were 42 other contributions on various matters from past and present, a number of reviews and smaller contributions, Estonia's and Latvia's political chronicles, and monthly reports from the Riga theatre. In terms of the regions covered, the articles in the *Baltische Monatshefte* are not limited only to Baltic subjects, but also extend to those of the Sudeten-Germans and the Transylvanian Saxons – in other words, those regions where there were similar constellations of parallel cultures as in Estonia and Latvia. Therefore, it may not come as a surprise that some of the articles in the *Baltische Monatshefte* have rather nationalistic undertones, even if this is not a predominant feature of the contributions.

Arro's article (1935b) certainly does not rank among his most important ones. Urve Lippus sees Arro's work on this article as being in a way

connected with the planned continuation of Arro's history of Estonian music (Lippus 2003: 229); it does, however, clearly show Arro's aesthetic premises in dealing with Estonian music. In his article, the author gives an overview of the works of some Estonian composers that he was familiar with. The term "contemporary" means, for Arro, the period from Estonia's independence to 1935; some of the composers are mentioned only *en passant*, whereas other composers are treated quite extensively.

Arro's starting point, the first of five chapters in his article (Arro 1935b: 71–7), is the rich tradition of choral music in Estonia, where composers like Miina Hermann (Härma) and Alexander (Aleksander) Läte prepared the ground for younger composers such as, among others, Artur Kapp and Mart Saar. Arro characterizes Saar as a fascinating artist who bases his compositions on ancient runic melodics that no one else has delved into so deeply. Further composers of interest to Arro are Juhan Aavik and Cyrillus Kreek. Kreek, however, is valued primarily as the first composer to use sacred folk songs in his works, whereas his *Estonian Requiem* failed to convince Arro.

Some of the observations to be made with regard to this first chapter are more or less symptomatic of Arro's entire article. First, Arro tends to portray the composers and their works from the perspective of the notion that Estonian music should be dependent on Estonian folk melodies or even on archaic runic melodics. Secondly, Arro translates the title of each work or song into German without citing the original Estonian title. In the case of some examples of vocal music he even translates the Estonian texts into German without noting the fact. Thirdly, Arro evaluates the composers and their music more or less according to personal taste. Apart from the question of whether a work is based on folk melodies or not, Arro does not establish any aesthetic criteria to support his evaluation at this stage.⁵

In the rather short second chapter (Arro 1935b: 77–9), Arro focuses on instrumental music. Again, he goes back to the first generation of composers, namely Rudolf Tobias, Peter (Peeter) Süda – whom Arro regards as over-rated – and finally Artur Kapp. The third chapter (Arro 1935b: 79–80)

⁵ National characteristics were important to the Estonian culture (and politics) of the time in general; see Anu Kõlar's contribution to this issue.

then returns to the subject of folk melodies. Arro proposes four different ways in which composers can deal with these influences: first, by reworking the melodies thematically or contrapuntally; secondly, by merely citing a motif here and there; thirdly, by choosing specific themes without exploiting the folk melodies (“auf [...] melodische Ausbeutung [...] verzichtend”); and fourthly, by establishing an individual style that is dependent on the composer’s ties with his homeland. Arro writes of a “naturhafte Verbundenheit mit der heimatlichen Scholle”: hard to translate into English, perhaps “being naturally tied to the native clod” comes close to Arro’s words. This is a clear ranking, in which this fourth category is set at the top of an ascending order. Of course, Arro knows a composer who works in this style, to whom the fourth chapter that follows (Arro 1935b: 80–3) is exclusively devoted: Heino Eller. Arro characterizes Eller, with whom he had a close personal relationship (Lippus 2003: 232), as an intuitive genius who, remarkably, wrote not a single piece of vocal music, thus standing out as a composer striving against the predominant flow of his Estonian contemporaries. He sees Eller as influenced by Scriabin as well as by Debussy and Grieg, but at the same time as the composer who, among his compatriots, managed to develop the most individual style. Although Eller himself influenced composers such as Olav Roots, Eduard Tubin and Alfred Karafin (Karindi), Arro claims that Eller was appreciated far more by Baltic German music critics than by Estonians.

In the fifth and final chapter (Arro 1935b: 83–6), Arro names four composers whose works come close to Eller’s reputation, though without reaching his level: Adolf Vedro, Artur Lemba, Raimund Kull, and Evald Aav. These seem to be in descending order in terms of merit, with Vedro coming closest to Eller while Kull composes more or less to popular taste. Aav is the outlier here, since Arro only refers to his opera *Vikerlased (The Vikings)* of 1928, but to no other compositions. There are other compositions by Aav, who died in 1939, notably the symphonic poem *Elu (Life)* of 1934, which Arro had obviously not had the opportunity to get to know at the time of writing.

Arro concludes that contemporary Estonian music has been fortunate in its development.

Even though it would take some time for Estonian music to come close to European standards, the aberrations and vain experiments of modern music have been avoided, unlike in the visual arts. He recognizes that there is no composer to represent Estonia’s national idiom as Sibelius does for Finland. Finally, in drawing a comparison with Latvian composers, he notes that the strength of Estonian composers lies in choral music, while that of Latvian composers is in instrumental music – and this, in his opinion, is a racial difference (“rassische Verschiedenartigkeit”). Since the preference expressed for Latvian instrumental music is at odds with Arro’s almost hymnal praise of Eller, and since Arro otherwise always demonstrates a holistic understanding of Baltic culture (Lippus 2003: 235) – in Arro’s sense this means Estonia and Latvia, consequently those parts of the Baltics where there are German communities – it may be assumed that this part of Arro’s conclusion has something to do with censorship, though there is no evidence for this. To sum up, Arro’s view of contemporary Estonian music clearly supports Urve Lippus’s portrait of Arro as being torn between two cultures: the Estonian culture, to which he sees himself committed, and the German or Baltic German culture that is the culture both of his family and of his academic environment (Lippus 2003: 234). The article raises crucial questions that are hard to answer: To whom is it addressed? Why was it written?

I do not have answers to these questions. However, in my research I have come across something interesting. Parts of Arro’s article were published earlier in the second volume of Guido Adler’s *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte* of 1930 (Arro 1930). Adler is known to have been the supervisor of Arro’s doctoral thesis on 19th century Estonian music (Arro 1928). The runic melodies are explained in Adler’s book, in which there is also some background information on Estonian music history. Moreover, Eller’s music is highly valued, as is Aav’s. It thus seems clear to me that the 1935 article in the *Baltische Monatshefte* is merely a reworking of a text that had originally been written for Adler’s handbook. This does not answer the questions posed above; however, once more it supports Urve Lippus’s portrait of Arro as a person torn between two cultures.

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