

# 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).<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.