

Veljo Tormis and Minimalism: On the Reception of His New Musical Idiom in the 1960s¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the reception of Veljo Tormis's (1930–2017) style of composition among a professional audience of composers and musicologists in Estonia in the 1960s. Composers in Soviet Estonia after World War II were caught in their professional work between at least two different ideological currents. One of these exhorted them to develop the national origins of their composition style as a requirement of ensuring cultural continuity, while the other subjected their work to the doctrine of socialist realism – courtesy of the Soviet occupation regime. The style introduced by Tormis in the middle of the 1960s – one that had minimalist leanings and relied on traditional runic songs – was at the time something completely new in Estonian music culture, and for that very reason elicited a wide variety of reactions in society in general and among experts in particular. Tormis belongs among those composers who have not only composed music, but have also actively participated in debates on the role of music in society.

The aim of the present paper is to examine the reception of Veljo Tormis's (1930–2017) style of composition among a professional audience of composers and musicologists in Estonia in the 1960s. Tormis's style is often characterised as based on Estonian traditional music. In the entry for Tormis in a 2008 biographical compendium of Estonian music, Urve Lippus, one of Estonia's foremost experts on Tormis, describes his style as follows:

In most of his compositions, [the composer] draws his inspiration from early traditional songs, especially the old runic songs (Kalevala-songs) of Estonians and other Baltic-Finnic peoples. By monotonous repetition of short traditional melodies, [Tormis] is able to create extensive sequences of rising and ebbing musical tension. He has been compared to minimalists, since many of his compositions feature endless repetitions of minimal musical material. Yet, the strong component of intrinsic drama and the integrity of his songs also link him to the classical tradition of major musical forms. (Lippus 2008: 429)

Before we continue with Tormis, it would profit us to examine briefly the development of the concept of minimalism in 20th century music elsewhere. As is generally known, the term 'minimalism' was used for the first time in relation to music by the English composer and musicologist Michael Nyman in 1968. The American composer Tom Johnson has defined minimalism as follows:

The idea of minimalism is much larger than most people realize. It includes, by definition, any music that works with limited or minimal materials: pieces that use only a few notes, pieces that use only a few words of text, or pieces written for very limited instruments [...]. It includes pieces that sustain one basic electronic rumble for a long time. It includes pieces made exclusively from recordings of rivers and streams. It includes pieces that move in endless circles. [...]. It includes pieces that take a very long time to move gradually from one kind of music to another kind. [...]. It includes pieces that slow the tempo down to two or three notes per minute.²

¹ On 21 January 2017, Veljo Tormis passed away. Besides being a great composer, he was also a member of the Estonian Musicological Society. The following text is published in order to commemorate Tormis's legacy. The text was first read in Estonian at the international conference during the bookbinders' exhibition "Scripta manent IV" in Tallinn on 28 September 2010, and subsequently published in Estonian in the weekly newspaper *Sirp* on 8 October 2010. The paper was given again, this time in English, during a symposium of the Graduate School for Culture Studies and Arts in Tallinn on 2 June 2012. It has not previously been published in English. The text is also a tribute to the late Urve Lippus, whose research had a strong focus on Tormis's oeuvre.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimalist_music (accessed 21 September 2010).

The minimalist composers of international repute best known in Estonia are probably John Adams, Louis Andriessen, Philip Glass and Steve Reich. Several internationally recognised publications also include Arvo Pärt among the modern minimalist composers, although it is known that Pärt himself does not see his works as 'minimalist'. And it seems that he is not the only composer who tends to shy away from the term.

As I have already said, traditional music is regarded as the main pillar of Tormis's style. In the history of Estonian music this feature, however, is by no means unique to Tormis. We may even say that since the end of the 19th century it has been almost imperative among Estonian composers to use traditional music as a direct source of inspiration in their professional compositions. Rudolf Tobias (1873–1918), one of our first professional composers, wrote:

We must revive once again those ideals which already captivated and elevated the hearts of our forefathers, we must fan these still smoldering embers into a warming flame. Where but in our own folklore and traditional music could we find those ideals in their most pristine and pure form? Our traditional songs are [...] rays of light which reach to us from beyond centuries. Let us then pass these rays through the prism of art and we will have a clear vision of what moved and elevated the hearts of our forefathers, we will see the extent to which these emotions are the same as our own [...]. Furthermore, although our folklore may never be truly understood by people speaking foreign tongues, melodies can reach the heart of everyone. There are embers in our folk songs which can rise to a magnificent blaze and be seen from afar. (Tobias 1995 [1905]: 25–26)

Naturally, over more than a century Estonian composers have found more ways than one to interpret traditional melodies in their music. In an article published in 1970, the musicologist Helju Tauk distinguishes three different modes of harnessing traditional music in our professional music compositions (Tauk 1970: 156). She defines these as follows: firstly, arrangements of traditional melodies according to the idiom of homorhythmic four-part harmony; secondly, the development of a melody by establishing a colouristic harmony using the melody as a basis, or

by merging it with an independent complex harmony; and finally, the constant transformation of a traditional melody through the use of potential derived from the melody itself. It is probably evident to an avid music listener that composers like Karl August Hermann (1851–1909) and Miina Härmä (1864–1941) can be regarded as simple harmonisers of traditional melodies, while Mart Saar (1882–1963) and Cyrrillus Kreek (1889–1962) should be credited with merging complex harmonies into their melodies. It is quite clear, too, that the reference to the "transformation of a traditional melody through the use of potential derived from the melody itself" is intended to point to Tormis. Writing this in 1970, Helju Tauk does not yet call Tormis a 'minimalist', since the term, recently coined, had still to establish itself in scholarly musical discourse.

In a paradoxical manner, the Soviet official doctrine of 'socialist realism' to which our music culture was subjected following Estonia's annexation by the Soviet Union after World War II also supported the incorporation of traditional music into professional compositions. It is generally accepted that the resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of 10 February 1948 concerning Vano Muradeli's opera *Great Friendship* is perhaps the most detailed existing 'manifesto' of socialist realism in the field of music. I would like here to quote a few selected sentences from this resolution to illustrate the role of traditional music in professional composition as envisioned and dictated by the highest leadership of a totalitarian regime.

The Central Committee of the party states its belief that the opera *Great Friendship* (music by Vano Muradeli, libretto by Georgi Mdivani), staged by the Bolshoi Theatre of the USSR during the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the October Revolution, is an anti-artistic work pernicious with respect both to its music and its subject matter. [...]. The composer has failed to draw upon the riches of folk melody, the songs and dance tunes that are to be found in such abundance among the peoples of the USSR [...]. The Central Committee believes that the failure of the opera results from the false path of formalism that comrade Muradeli has chosen – a path that brings ruin upon the creative work of Soviet composers. [...]. Students

are not being taught to respect the best traditions of Russian and Western classical music, or to love folk music and democratic musical forms. [...] instead [the Committee for Artistic Affairs of the USSR Council of Ministers and the Organisational Committee of the Union of Soviet Composers] should have developed the realist trend in Soviet music – this is based on recognising the extremely progressive role of the classical heritage and especially the traditions of the Russian school. They should have drawn from this heritage and developed it further, combining their music with the characteristics of this heritage: rich content and artistically perfect form, truthfulness and realism, a deep organic connection with the people and their music, and a high degree of professional mastery conjoined with simplicity and accessibility.³

In the light of the above, we can see how composers in Soviet Estonia after World War II were caught in their professional work between at least two different ideological currents. One of these exhorted them to develop the national origins of their composition style as a requirement of ensuring cultural continuity, while the other subjected their work to the doctrine of socialist realism – courtesy of the Soviet occupation regime. Both ideologies actually encouraged the use of traditional music as a source of inspiration for professional composers. How these two in essence very different ideologies either meshed or clashed in shaping the character of musical compositions at the time, however, is not the topic of the present paper. Yet we can say without a doubt that the style introduced by Tormis in the middle of the 1960s – one that had minimalist leanings and relied on traditional runic songs – was at the time something completely new in Estonian music culture, and for that very reason elicited a wide variety of reactions in society in general and among experts in particular.

According to a widespread view (see, e.g., Daitz 2004: 135), Tormis's unique style manifested itself for the first time in the massive choir cycle *Eesti kalendrlaulud* [*Estonian Calendar Songs*]. The cycle comprises five parts: *Mardilaulud* [*Martinmas Songs*], *Kadrialaulud* [*St. Catherine's Day Songs*], *Vastlaulud* [*Shrovetide Songs*], *Kiigelaulud* [*Swing*

Songs] and *Jaanilaulud* [*St. John's Day Songs*], thus representing an annual life cycle that starts with autumn and ends with summer. In 1997, Veljo Tormis, having been invited to take up the position of Guest Professor of Liberal Arts at the University of Tartu, delivered a series of lectures at the university. Overseen by Urve Lippus, these lectures were collected and, three years later, published by the University of Tartu Press under the title *Lauldud sõna* [*Sung Word*; Tormis 2000, in English 2008]. In his second Tartu lecture, entitled "Rahvalaulu leidmine" ["Finding Traditional Songs"], Tormis also picked a song from this very cycle, which was composed in 1966 and 1967, to illustrate the essence of his style.

In Tormis's words:

Let's look at one of these songs – "Illus neiu kigel" [Pretty Maiden on the Swing] from my cycle of *Kiigelaulud* [Swinging songs] [...] I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the tune of the Kuusalu swinging song, which was taken as the basis of this piece, always stays right where it is. Later the voices that sing the tune change; the melody moves from soprano to alto and then back, but pitches are always the same, only the dynamics change slightly. That is to say, this time I've left the folk-tune the way it appeared in Tampere's book (Tormis 2008: 118).

By "Tampere's book", of course, the composer refers to the folklorist Herbert Tampere's five-volume anthology of Estonian traditional songs (Tampere 1956–1965). And Tormis continues:

This time, there are no tonal harmonies any more, instead there is a heterophonic or parallel movement in different chords, which just ends or stops without any resolution. The chords are formed symmetrically around one note: the soloist starts from G, then we build a triad downwards, and later upwards. (*Ibid.*)

In order to better understand the reactions of contemporaries to Tormis's novel style, I went through the minutes of the working meetings of the Estonian Composers' Union (stored in the National Archives of Estonia) from 1963 to 1970. In those days, composers used these meetings as a forum in which to present their newest works

³ <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/USSR/music.htm> (accessed 21 September 2010).

to their colleagues and to receive feedback. To an extent, the minutes of the working meetings served as the basis upon which the Ministry of Culture later made its decisions to ‘acquire’ new compositions, i.e. to pay a fee to composers for their work. One of the anonymous contemporaries reflects on those times as follows:

Although the working meetings appeared a mere formality, the composers whose works were being discussed experienced them as highly intense moments that could potentially wreck their professional lives. The discussion and what was recorded in the minutes had an impact on the ministry’s decision whether to buy [the completed composition], [and] probably also on [the amount] which the ministry would pay for the work. There were also cases where the reactions elicited during the working meeting effectively resulted in a performance ban [for the composition].⁴

The above would lead us to assume that the minutes of the working meetings of the Estonian Composers’ Union cannot unreservedly be taken at their face value, since what was said during the meetings was to a significant extent influenced by various factors unrelated to music. However, having inspected the minutes, I was left with the impression that the content of these records is surprisingly rich in expressions of genuinely held positions and thus allows a fairly accurate reconstruction of the views and beliefs of the participants.

On average, during the period between 1963 and 1970 Tormis presented one or two new works every year to be dissected at a meeting of the Composers’ Union. In general, we can say that during those eight years the assessments of his colleagues were quite friendly, and sometimes even amounted to outright eulogies. Yet, other composers who attempted to create avant-garde music were sometimes subjected to very harsh criticism. To offer a quick comparison, I will provide here an example of the treatment that was meted out to some other composers. The following excerpt is from the minutes of the meeting that took place on 1 June 1965 at which the young Kuldar Sink (1942–1995), who at the time was still

a distance learning student in professor Boris Arapov’s composition class at the Leningrad Conservatory, presented to his colleagues two new pieces of music: a composition for two pianos and the cantata *Aastaajad* [Seasons] for mixed choir, solo singer and chamber orchestra. The following dialogue ensued.

Eugen Kapp: “A question for you – who is your supervisor in Leningrad?”

Kuldar Sink: “Professor Arapov.”

Kapp: “What did he say?”

Sink: “He said – ‘most interesting.’”

Aleksei Stepanov: “As far as the piano pieces are concerned, in the West this style is already a thing of the past. Each composer must have his or her own face. Pardon me, that is, everyone goes crazy in a different way. No space age, no age of technology can justify such a style. Maybe professor Arapov’s ear has become accustomed to such music (he spent some time in China). Why on earth do people waste their precious time composing pieces like this? I tried to follow the score but could not understand anything. [...] People imitate Polish experiments. Everything sounds unnatural. It sounds like music from a different world.”⁵

“Polish experiments” in Stepanov’s speech is a reference to the Polish contemporary music festival called the Warsaw Autumn. It had been held since 1956 on an almost annual basis and represented an event that Estonian musicians, amongst others, had many opportunities to attend. The festival was a window for musicians from the Soviet bloc to try and keep abreast of developments in the Western art music scene. As a personal note, let me say that my first trip to a foreign country, which took place in 1977, when I was still a student, was to Poland to attend the very same festival.

Having read the minutes, it seems that avant-garde trends in musical composition which often reached Estonia via the Warsaw festival divided the composers at least in the 1960s into two clear-cut factions whom we may, for the sake of convenience, label as the conservatives and the radicals. We cannot say, however, that conserva-

⁴ Personal communication.

⁵ Rahvusarhiiv / National Archives of Estonia, ERA.R-1958.1.233, l. 74–83.

tive views necessarily dominated each and every discussion in the meetings. Nor can we say that the conservative faction consisted solely of members who performed an 'ideological function' in the meetings – in fact, it often also included several composers of the older generation who were patriots of an independent Estonia. Nonetheless, it is obvious that by the middle of the 1960s music criticism motivated purely by ideology in the composers' professional union had lost the absolute authority it had wielded in Stalin's days. In the 1960s, at the end of a meeting, the chairman would usually peacefully end any arguments by saying: "Let them experiment".

Tormis presented a part of his calendar songs cycle – the six swing songs – at the meeting of the Composers' Union held on 1 November 1966 and the entire cycle at the meeting held on 24 September 1967. The aesthetic or practical merits of the change in the composer's style were not discussed at either of the meetings. The discussion of Tormis's swing songs was relatively short and only a few substantive remarks were made by the participants in addition to general praise.

Ado Velmet: "The author has made an attempt to preserve authentic traditional melodies in their integrity. And so with every song. Thus the songs contain no major development. The entire series is more interesting to listen to than individual songs. Very tastefully composed. Beautiful little miniatures." Alfred Karindi: "I like these arrangements. Especially, returning traditional melodies to the people in this relatively simple form. It is a most welcome development, and very much needed. Of course, it is also possible to arrange traditional melodies as Cyrilus Kreek did. However, here the arrangement has been done in a most skilful and tasteful manner, yet it remains simple and straightforward. It is a most needed thing and it's very nicely done, too."⁶

The presentation of the entire cycle of calendar songs to fellow composers took place the next year and can be regarded as an unconditional triumph for Tormis. The cycle was performed

on the piano by the author himself and by Helju Tauk, who had also prepared a written review of the songs which she read out at the meeting. Here is a quote from her review:

This is a unique cycle of songs in Estonian music – in this monumental work the integrity of ancient runic melodies has been preserved (with a few exceptions) and presented in a modern choral arrangement. Moreover, the cycle is characterised by an organic cohesiveness which lends additional weight to each new or skilfully transformed detail. The composition shows how a culture, in its seasonally determined relationship with nature and life, seeks to interact with these. From a simple turn of melody, the cycle grows on the listener, leading him to broad, evocative philosophical generalisations.⁷

Other composers and musicologists present at the meeting concurred.

Artur Vahter: "I would like to express my admiration of this work. It is unbelievable that such a work can be based on runic songs. Mart Saar turned a page in the arrangement of traditional melodies, but Tormis has turned a completely new page. He has found a modern and appropriate, non-controversial harmony to our oldest type of traditional songs, the runic songs. That is indeed the greatest invention in this work."

Eino Tamberg: "Tonight we had a most interesting evening, having been able to enjoy the performance of two contrasting works. One of them was international, the other both international and national. Tormis's work is more to my liking and is more important, since such compositions are few and far between and we need them very much. This work holds considerable importance for our cultural history."

Aleksei Stepanov: "I was moved by how traditional song can give rise to so many things. Traditional song is a living and breathing phenomenon which continues to develop. And that is also what Tormis has done with his simple arrangement of traditional melodies. We should give him every praise for this."

⁶ ERA.R-1958.1.251, l. 113–114.

⁷ ERA.R-1958.1.265, l. 124–126.

Gustav Ernesaks: "This is a giant tapestry where the big picture is revealed in numerous details. Only one thing: In 'Lina loitsimine' ['Spell Upon Flax'], at the end the thirds are very low. Otherwise everything is technically perfect. Indeed a new page has been turned in the arrangement of traditional melodies. Congratulations! Singers will be glad to start performing these songs."⁸

Two observations should be appended to this excerpt from the minutes of the meeting that took place in September 1967. Firstly, the second new piece of music which was presented at the meeting and was also mentioned by Tamberg was Arvo Pärt's cello concerto *Pro et contra*, which Pärt had dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich, the world-famous Russian cellist and conductor. Second, the issue of low thirds mentioned by Ernesaks in relation to the musical texture of a certain part of the cycle of *Shrovetide Songs* had also been brought up earlier in discussions of Tormis's choir music. At the meeting of the Composers' Union on 10 December 1963, Tormis performed the cantata *Kodumaa sünnipäev* [*Homeland's Birthday*], which he had composed for a forthcoming Estonian national song festival, eliciting the following reaction from Alfred Karindi: "I like the cantata as such. [...] By the way, the thirds for the male choir are too low, they're not going to ring well. Otherwise everything is fine."⁹ The low thirds which move in parallel are placed in the middle of the great octave in both works and indeed seem to cause some dissonance, although it is hard to believe that a composer as experienced as Tormis was in the practical aspects of choral music would have used the thirds in question without a specific aesthetic purpose in mind. These thirds in "Lina loitsimine" sound as follows.

The musical score consists of two staves of music. The top staff is for soprano voices and the bottom staff is for bass voices. The key signature is G major (one sharp). The time signature is common time. The music is divided into measures by vertical bar lines. The lyrics are written below the notes in two columns. The first column contains the first two stanzas of the song, and the second column contains the third stanza.

1. Kü - la li - na kühnd-re - pi - ku,
Vil - lage flax let grow an ell's worth,
li - u - gu, la - u - gu,
2. Val - la li - na vas - sa - pi - ku,
Pa - rish flax let grow a span's worth, li - u - gu, la - u - gu,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ ERA.R-1958.1.206, I. 203.

¹⁰ ERA.R-1958.1.217, I. 205.

It is not until 1970 that the minutes of the composers' meetings reflect, for the first time, an extended and more substantive discussion of Tormis's 'folklorist minimalism'. True, a few brief interchanges had been recorded before but they did not give rise to a proper discussion. On 29 December 1964, Tormis presented his first series of *Meestelaulud* [Men's Songs], consisting of five arrangements of traditional melodies of the later period, whereupon the following conversation was recorded in the minutes of the meeting, in which Tormis humorously pre-empted potential mild criticism of his composition.

Tormis: "I must say that these are the traditional melodies, I have not contributed that much here" (laughter).

Leo Tauts: "'Ehal käimise laul' ['Bundling Song'] repeats itself too much."

Tormis: "I had the same problem, but I could not find a solution."¹⁰

But let us return to the year 1970. On 3 March, Tormis presented to his colleagues six narrative Estonian traditional songs for female voices. As we can see, after a short introduction, Tormis himself provoked an argument over their underlying aesthetic principles. I will quote from the minutes again.

Tormis: "I tried to observe the principle that arrangements of traditional melodies should not be forced into the mould of classical forms. Instead, they should take their cue from the melody itself and from the melody's own form, as well as from the fact that a traditional song is itself an independent work of art. Therefore I tried to keep the accompaniment to a minimum."

After that, the songs were performed, and Tormis continued:

"There's something here that I'm curious about – was anybody bothered by the monotonous quality of the songs?"

Avo Hirvesoo: "I liked it very much, since monotony itself in a way became a stylistic device."

Karl Leichter: "It seems that a sparse accompaniment like this brings the archaic into contact with the modern. And that's what impresses me. Our archaic melodies have been preserved, but their original arrangements – the way that they were originally performed – have not. And the loss of the original arrangement is compensated for here by the presence of accompaniment."

Tuudur Vettik: "Where can such music be played? Perhaps in a so-called academic concert? In that case, the audience may feel bored, since our audience no longer cares for lyrics much. So the question remains – where?"

Tormis: "I believe and I will say it once again that each traditional song is in itself an independent work of art which can be used anywhere. This cycle I intend to try out in my personal concert which will be organised by the National Philharmonic Society of the Estonian SSR."

Boris Körver: "Congratulations to Veljo Tormis! Perhaps, if and when other similar works are composed, we will be able to elevate our traditional song to the artistic level displayed in traditional songs of our socialist brother nations."¹¹

Körver's last remark concerning "socialist brother nations" may require explanation, but I will return to this question later.

On 8 September 1970, Tormis presented to his fellow composers four narrative traditional songs for male voices. On that occasion, too, a substantive debate on the aesthetics of Tormis's works has been recorded for posterity in the minutes of the meeting.

Anatoli Garšnek: "It is difficult to say something exhaustive. It seems like these are very interesting things. The author has tried to retain

the original form of the traditional melodies, to convey them as they are sung by the people."

Artur Vahter: "I very much liked the aspiration to perform the traditional song in its natural form and to colour it with accompaniment. The last song was the best one. Here the folk tradition is manifest in its most authentic form – in variation. This applies to intonation as well. The author should have also used the same variation approach with the first songs. What we see here is a most interesting attempt to perform runic songs as they were once performed by village singers and to modernise them with accompaniment."

Garšnek: "I would like to argue against the variation. Each song has its own compositional technique, which must be understood."¹²

The minutes then inform the reader that a debate ensued concerning variation as a phenomenon. The substance of the debate has not been recorded. The debate itself probably ended with the following remarks.

Johannes Jürisson: "These songs are so good that there is no point in discussing them. The songs are original. The performance concept is very good. Listening to them gives one a good feeling."

Vahter: "I am not saying these are bad songs. No, they are very good."

Eino Tamberg: "I would have preferred the compositional device in the first song to have been realised within a shorter time frame."

Hugo Lepnurm: "I very much like the fact that traditional songs have been developed in such a manner. It could be a good idea to consult with the locals, one could thus spice up the performance with features of the local dialects."

Villem Reiman: "Naturally these songs will have a greater effect if they are sung with more enjoyment. The current degree of enjoyment was insufficient. At the beginning, I felt slightly bored, especially when listening to the first song, maybe a bit of shortening could help with that."

Helju Tauk: "We are getting bogged down in the perspective of art music. When one fol-

¹¹ ERA.R-1958.1.313, l. 14–16.

¹² ERA.R-1958.1.313, l. 59–60.

lows the lyrics, the songs make for an exciting listening. To me it seems that the way that these songs are arranged is the right one. Elsewhere in the world, similar arrangements have also been considered and realised. May be we should pursue this avenue further in our compositions.”¹³

Having read this conversation, it is difficult to overcome the impression that the essence of Tormis’s style and place in music has been best understood and expressed by Helju Tauk. An anonymous contemporary recently put forward a hypothesis that Tauk’s reference to similar aesthetic trends elsewhere could have been made in relation to the Lithuanian composer Bronius Kutavičius, with whom, according to the informant, “they often socialised and with whom Helju Tauk had a cordial relationship”.¹⁴ Indeed, if we read the short article on Kutavičius on the webpage of the Lithuanian Music Information and Publishing Centre, much of the characterisation of his music is also applicable to the works of Tormis. And it is quite possible that it was Kutavičius whom Körver had in mind when he made his remark. I will quote from the webpage.

Bronius Kutavičius (born in 1932) is considered the harbinger of minimalism in Lithuanian music. The way the composer uses many-layered repetitions and reduces the musical material to rather elementary archetypal patterns may resemble American or early European minimalism, but it sounds quite different. Kutavičius’ special kind of minimalism is his own invention, and is rooted deeply in the archaic forms of Lithuanian folk music. On the other hand, he is able to develop such an intense drama out of minimalist repetitions that the audience is sometimes left almost bowled over with sounds.¹⁵

In hindsight, it is difficult to assess why the debate on the aesthetics of Tormis’s style only took place at a meeting of the Composers’ Union several years after Tormis had actually revealed his

new style. Neither will an astute observer miss the fact that the debate was sparked not by Tormis’s choral compositions, but rather by solo songs with piano accompaniment. If one compares the first song “Mere kosilased” [“Suitors from the Sea”] and the last song “Suur härg” [“The Great Ox”] of the *Four Estonian Narrative Folksongs*, which many of the participants at the meeting held on 8 September 1970 contrasted to one other, one cannot fail to note the extreme minimalist arrangement of the first song, in which a sparse chord accompaniment is added to a repeating solo part. In the last song the character of the accompaniment is far more elaborate, more in line with a more traditional composition technique. It is possible that it was this contrast which effectively triggered the substantive debate on Tormis’s aesthetic choices. It is also possible that the solo songs were able to expose Tormis’s ‘folklorist minimalism’ to the listeners in an even more direct fashion than the composer’s choral pieces.

Veljo Tormis belongs to those composers who have not only composed music but have also actively participated in debates on the role of music in society. In his programme notes for the performance of his composition *Eesti ballaandid* [Estonian Ballads], which was staged at the Estonian national opera theatre “Estonia” in 1980, Tormis wrote:

For me, traditional music is not a vehicle of ‘self-expression’. On the contrary – I feel the obligation to convey traditional music, its essence, spirit, idea and form. It is my conviction that runic song is the single most remarkable and original phenomenon in Estonian culture. Since in our modern times the runic song has lost its original form of existence as an inseparable part of our way of life, I try to embed it in current forms of art – in order to highlight its uniqueness and its message. (Tormis 1997: 23)

It is hard to envisage anyone but Tormis achieving such a degree of perfection in this endeavour. We should be proud to boast a brilliant composer of such stature.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Personal communication.

¹⁵ <http://www.mic.lt/en/classical/persons/info/kutavicius?ref=%2Fen%2Fclassical%2Fpersons%2F41> (accessed 21 September 2010).

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