

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).