

Favourite Children and Stepchildren: Elite and Vernacular Views of Estonian Folk Song Styles¹

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Abstract

Estonian song tradition could be divided into an older and a newer layer – *regilaul*, which is part of the common Baltic-Finnic oral tradition, and the newer, end-rhymed stanzaic folk song. The newer song style with two main substyles – local situational song and sentimental song – developed on the example of the poetry of the European peoples and became the dominant song style in Estonia in the second half of the 19th century, the period of Europeanisation, rapid modernisation of the agrarian society, and the emergence of the Estonian intelligentsia and the national movement. The views of the Estonian cultural elite with regard to the two song styles are compared with “vernacular” views, using as the source manuscripts that Marie Sepp (1862–1943), a singer from Kolga-Jaani parish in Central Estonia, sent to the archives.

In the discourse of the Estonian elite, *regilaul* acquired the meaning of the more valuable genre. Owing to national, aesthetic, gender-ideological and disciplinary reasons, newer songs, and particularly sentimental songs, occupied a lower position on their value scale. In the material recorded in written form by Marie Sepp, the sentimental repertoire plays a central role as an important part of nineteenth-century youth culture, offering opportunities for versatile creative self-expression, the development of youth’s agency, adaptation to the model of romantic love, and the discussion of other contemporary topics related to modernisation. Nevertheless, the preferences of the elite and “vernacular” groups reveal reciprocal influences and points of convergence, as well as a divergence of the views within the groups.

“On our way back [from the recording session], the women complained that they had been urged to sing only the old dronings [songs of older style], but these have no melody or anything. Beautiful long ballads such as *Bored in the monastery*, etc. were not sung at all. To please Charlotte and Anna, we sang these sorrowful and heart-warming ballads during our car drive to pass time.” (From the 1957 fieldwork diary of folklorist Ottilie Kõiva.)²

“While songs of the older style are like the favourite children for Estonian (and Finnish) folklore researchers, the newer style folk songs are seen as stepchildren. Folklore collectors, as a rule, record them only if they have no songs of older style or other interesting folklore available; a manuscript collection of songs of mainly newer style is frowned upon ...” (Anderson 1932: 2).

Two major layers can be distinguished in the Estonian oral song tradition. The earlier oral song culture, *regilaul* or runosong, is characterised by alliteration, parallelism and special meter (the Estonian version of Kalevala meter, see Sarv 2015). Estonian *regilaul* is part of the common oral song tradition of the Baltic-Finnic peoples. In terms of music, the older tradition is characterised by linear, monophonic thinking.³ The repeated narrow-range melody of *regilaul* is comprised of one or two phrases, the rhythm depends directly on the poetic text: each of the 8 rhythmic units in a phrase corresponds to a syllable (Lippus 1995; Ross, Lehiste 2001; examples: ERmA). The newer end-rhymed and stanzaic song tradition evolved during the 17th–18th centuries following European examples, and by the second half of the 19th century this had replaced *regilaul* in most parts of

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² RKM (Riiklik Kirjandusmuuseum / State Literary Museum) II 63, 103.

³ A unique multipart singing style is common in the Seto region in south-eastern Estonia.