

Veljo Tormis and Urve Lippus: A Legacy

Mark Lawrence

Abstract

The death, in January 2017, of Veljo Tormis (b. 1930) marked the loss of one of the most significant composers of choral music of the later twentieth century. Tormis's distinct and diverse choral palette is witnessed in his vast output of some 500 choral songs, many of which are built upon traditional Estonian runic song or *regilaul*. Tormis's music continues to exert an influence on younger composers. This article, based on discussions with Tormis in 2010 and 2011, discusses the 'Tormis style' and the way in which it influenced four composers from the Baltic region who were writing in the 1970s and 1980s and with whom Tormis worked.

Urve Lippus (1950–2015) was a foremost authority on *regilaul* and its place within the music of Tormis. In my own research, Urve provided a bridge with Tormis himself, and a means of setting his music within the context of Estonia and its culture. This article is adapted from a paper given in a day conference by the Estonian Musicological Society in April 2016, dedicated to Urve's memory.

Urve Lippus was instrumental to my research into the music of Veljo Tormis (1930–2017) while I worked on my PhD at City University, London, completed in 2013. She was my first contact at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, and, acting as interpreter, arranged many meetings and conversations with Tormis himself. Urve was particularly enlightening on her specialist area of *regilaul*. With her gentle enthusiasm and encouragement, she provided a vivid insight into Estonian music culture, particularly by putting Tormis's work into the context of its time. The following paper is adapted from one I gave, alongside papers by Lippus herself and Prof. Mimi Daitz, at the Baltic Musics and Musicologies Conference at Canterbury Christ Church University, in May 2011.¹ Material for the paper was gathered on a trip to Estonia and Finland in February that year, and in discussion with Urve Lippus and Veljo Tormis at this time.² A revised version of this paper was presented at the Estonian Musicological Society on 23 April 2016, in a day conference at the Heino Eller Music High School in Tartu, dedicated to Lippus's memory.

In this paper I will examine four composers who acknowledged Tormis's influence on their

work. But firstly, it is worth summarising the characteristic traits of the 'Tormis style' to which they were drawn:

1. The use of the choral palette in an almost orchestral manner, covering a wide emotional and dramatic span through subtly changing voices and colourings.
2. The integral use of *regilaul*, the ancient runic song of Estonia, as compositional material. Other composers have used this song, but the manner in which Tormis uses *regilaul*, that is, preserving melodies intact, without traditional development is a hallmark of his style.
3. The extensive use of repetition. Tormis achieves onward movement not by traditional thematic development, but by changes in choral scoring, meaning and alliteration within the texts. This is an aspect which has often led him to be labelled, erroneously, as a minimalist.³
4. The 'syncretic' nature of the mature works. Tormis first applied this term to *Eesti kalendri-laulud* [*Estonian Calendar Songs*] (1966/67), a work which, he felt, defined his mature style.⁴ Tormis uses syncretism to mean 'words + melody + presentation + performance, function',

¹ Mimi S. Daitz, author of the Tormis biography, *Ancient Song Recovered: The Life and Music of Veljo Tormis* (Daitz 2004).

² This research trip was funded by a Gerry Farrell Travelling Scholarship via SEMPRES (The Society for Education, Music and Psychology research Travelling Fellowship); www.sempre.org.uk.

³ Lippus pointed out that it would have been extremely difficult for a composer in Estonia to access scores and recordings of the music of the mainstream American minimalist movement (Steve Reich, Philip Glass, etc.) in the 1970s and 80s (author discussion with Lippus, February 2012).

⁴ Veljo Tormis, postscript to score of *Jaani laulud* (Helsinki: Edition Fazer, 1996). Also author discussion with Tormis, Pittville Pump Room, Cheltenham International Music Festival, Cheltenham, UK, 11 July 2008 (interpreter: Katri Link).

in other words, a type of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Tormis 2007 [1972]: 48). However, the term is commonly applied to the phenomenon occurring, for example, in the folk cultures of the Arctic (such as the Sami), where Christian and Pagan animist beliefs are reconciled. These are cultures with which Tormis feels a strong affinity and in which many of his *regilaul* works are rooted, perhaps providing him with a counterbalance to the Estonian Lutheranism in which he was raised.

5. Shamanism. The shaman drum is used in a number of important works, such as the seminal *Raua needmine* [Curse Upon Iron] (1972) (Lippus 2004 [1985]). Tormis had been deeply affected during the years of his Moscow studies by a performance by visiting shaman drummers from Siberia. Although no historical evidence has yet been found to link the drum to Estonia, Tormis is convinced that the drum played a role in Estonia's ancient past.⁵
6. Finally, an inseparable link between Tormis's music and Estonian-Baltic identity.⁶

Can Tormis's music be said to be a unique phenomenon? There has existed no 'Tormis School'; the composer has worked as a lone voice, and has always been reticent to speak about, and promote, his own music. Existing as a freelance composer from 1969, supported by the Soviet state, Tormis was unsuccessful in securing the academic post which would have ensured a line of student composers in his wake. Indeed, in his characteristically self-effacing manner, Tormis told me that he has had "few disciples, thank goodness". Yet closer examination reveals that aspects of his principles and style were assimilated by the next generation of composers. This is true of two Estonians, both of whom had been Tallinn Music High School pupils of Tormis when he was teaching in the 1960s.

Lepo Sumera (1950–2000) was a well-known symphonist, widely performed in Estonian concert programmes. He was prolific in output in the 1990s, a time when the new-found freedom after the fall of Communism caused a creative surge in Estonia.⁷ Sumera's style is eclectic, influenced by the Estonian national idiom earlier in the twentieth century. These include his teacher, Heino Eller, as well as Cyrillus Kreek and Mart Saar. Yet Sumera was also one of the pioneers of electro-acoustic music in Estonia.⁸ Tormis recounted that in one work, *Saare piiga laul merest* [Island Maiden's Song from the Sea] (1988), for double mixed choir, Sumera specifically acknowledged a debt to him.⁹ Perhaps it was the ritual sea-setting, drawn from Estonia's folk epic, the *Kalevipoeg*, that impelled Sumera to use quasi-*regilaul* melodies: characteristic eight-syllabled rhythms with a small vocal compass.¹⁰ Unlike Tormis's approach, these are, however not authentic, but of Sumera's own devising. In the 'Tormis manner', the *regi*-like themes are varied by transposition, without thematic development, although Sumera contrasts these with chromatic passages. At the opening, one choir whispers while the other sings, heightening the sense of ritual (ex. 1a). The sparse choral textures with this small-compassed folk-like melody, against bare fifths in the accompaniment, recall Tormis's treatment of *regilaul* in "Mistes Jaani oodetesse" ["Why St. John is awaited"] from the last set of *Kalendrilaulud* (ex. 1b).

Tarmo Lepik (1946–2001) was, like Sumera, a composition pupil of Tormis in his formative years at the Music High School in Tallinn (fig. 2). Less prolific than Sumera, Lepik was influenced by the *avant-garde* movement of the 1970s.¹¹ Yet he keenly acknowledged Tormis's influence on his choral music, once telling Tormis that he had "taken his ideas and developed them".¹²

⁵ Author discussion with Tormis and Lippus, February 2011.

⁶ This issue was discussed in Lippus's paper at the 2011 Canterbury conference, and was an area of particular interest to her.

⁷ Author discussion with Evi Arujärv, director of EMIC (Estonian Music Information Centre), www.emic.ee, Tallinn, February 2011.

⁸ Sumera biography from EMIC (accessed 31.8.16).

⁹ Author discussion with Tormis and Lippus, February 2011.

¹⁰ The *Kalevipoeg* is in *regivärs*, the metre used in *regilaul*.

¹¹ Lepik biography from EMIC (accessed 31.8.16).

¹² Author discussion with Lippus and Tormis, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, February 2010.

conductors. Pekka Jalkanen (b. 1945) is a Finnish composer whose first compositions drew on folk music and jazz. While acknowledging a fascination with György Ligeti and Witold Lutosławski in the 1970s, Jalkanen also recognises an influence from the American minimalist movement (Steve Reich, Terry Riley), and from the music of Estonian exile Arvo Pärt, who was becoming established internationally in the 1970s (Korhonen 2007: 135–136).¹³

Tormis described how he met Jalkanen in Helsinki in the late 1970s during a performance over several days of his epic choral cycle, *Unustatud rahvad* [*Forgotten Peoples*] (1970–1989). Jalkanen greatly admired the work and recounts how the composers spent an entire day talking in depth about Estonian and Finnish culture and the Finnish national epic, *Kalevala*.¹⁴ Speaking about the influence of Tormis on his music, Jalkanen specifically drew attention to one work by him: this time, an instrumental piece. *Viron orja* [*The Serf of Estonia*] (1980), for two solo violins and string orchestra, won first prize at the prominent international folk festival in Kaustinen (Kaustinen Folk Music Festival), north Finland, in 1980.¹⁵ Based on the *Kalevala*, this Orphic tale recounts the creation of the *kantele*, the ancient Finnish zither. Jalkanen uses a *pelimanni* melody¹⁶ to depict the secular world, distinguishing it from the “sacral, hypnotic world of *Kalevala* music”,¹⁷ to which he gives the rarified timbre of string harmonics. Although the procedure of ‘phased’ entries is perhaps more reminiscent of American minimalist works such as Reich’s *New York Counterpoint*, in *Viron orja*, Jalkanen attributes to Tormis his use of short, repetitive mo-

tifs derived from *runolaulu*. He also acknowledges Tormis’s influence on the way in which he seeks to create a “meditative atmosphere in the manner of ancient *Kalevala* song”.¹⁸

In 1976 Tormis visited Jyväskylä, a university city in central Finland, to hear a performance of his work *Karjala saatus* [in Estonian] / *Karjalan kohtalo* [in Finnish]; (*Karelian Destiny*, 1986–1989), another part of the *Unustatud rahvad* cycle. The work was conducted by Pekka Kostiainen (b. 1944), now one of the most established and respected Finnish choral conductor-composers (Korhonen 1995: 23–24). Kostiainen writes that he was “completely infatuated” with Tormis’s music after that first encounter, and has gone on to incorporate ancient Finnish *runolaulu*, or rather, its essence, into many of his own works.¹⁹ *Pakkasen luku* [*The Frost’s Incantation*] (1983) is another *Kalevala*-based work, a set of short songs for mixed choir in varying combinations of voices. As with the *Sumera*, the musical material is entirely Kostiainen’s own, but based on *runolaulu* principles. Melodies are of a very limited compass, mostly spanning only a minor third, which the composer points out, is typical of the “oldest *runolaulu* style”.²⁰ Some songs follow the traditional performance pattern: a leader’s part echoed by a chorus, the last notes of each line being doubled by the singers of the next, forming a continuous ‘chain’ of sound.²¹ Kostiainen echoes Tormis in his approach, but is less purist: he will combine themes and mix authentic and composed melodies within the same works. The third song of the cycle, “Kyll’ on sulla kylmämistä” (“Oh, you have so much coldness to sow”)²² follows Tormis’s principles of a repeated,

¹³ In this reference, Korhonen applies the phrase ‘minimalism of the Estonian kind’ to the music of Pärt, Sumera and Tormis. Although the work of these composers may bear traits in common with that of minimalists, the term is used inaccurately. Lippus pointed out that in Soviet Estonia in the 1970s there would have been very little chance for composers to encounter the repertoire of the American minimalist school, either through concerts or recordings. It would seem that the styles evolved in parallel, with a considerable degree of coincidence but with entirely different aesthetic foundations (author discussion with Lippus, EMTA, February 2011). See also Jaan Ross’s text in this issue.

¹⁴ Author discussion with Pekka Jalkanen, Helsinki, February 2011.

¹⁵ *Viro* is the Finnish name for Estonia.

¹⁶ *Pelimanni* is a form of traditional Nordic dance which can be clearly distinguished from the much older *runolaulu* by its more ‘Westernised’ tonal character and by its rhythmic qualities. (Discussion with Dr. Tina Ranmarine, Lecturer in Ethnomusicology, Royal Holloway, University of London, at the conference Baltic Musics and Musicologies at the Canterbury Christ Church University, UK, 26 May 2011.)

¹⁷ Author discussion with Jalkanen, February 2011.

¹⁸ Author discussion with Jalkanen, February 2011.

¹⁹ Kostiainen, emails to author, February 2011, via FIMIC (Finnish Music Information Centre), Helsinki, www.musicfinland.com.

²⁰ Kostiainen, email to author, February 2011.

²¹ Authentic performance of *regilaul* is described in Tormis 2008 [2000]: 130.

Ex. 2. a) Lepik. “Räägi tasa minuga,” bb. 1–7 (score: Lepik 2009).

The score for Ex. 2. a) is for the piece "Räägi tasa minuga" by Lepik. It features a vocal line with lyrics in Estonian: "rää-gi ta-sa mi-nu-ga süs mu-kuul-mi-ne an-ge-m rää-gi ta-sa mi-nu-ga". The piano accompaniment includes parts for Trumpets (tr.), Trombones (tbn.), Basses (b.), and Basses/Chorales (b.ch.). The score is marked with dynamics such as *b.ap.*, *2p*, and *b.ch.*, and includes a *sotto voce* instruction. A large number '3' is written above the first measure of the vocal line.

Ex. 2. b) Tormis. *Jaanilaulud*, “Kutse jaanitulele I”, bb. 1–3.

The score for Ex. 2. b) is for the piece "Kutse jaanitulele I" from the cycle *Jaanilaulud* by Veljo Tormis. It is marked *Andantino* with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 72$ and *(in distanza)*. The score includes parts for 2 Alto voices (2 Altii soli), Soprano (Soprani II), Alto (Altii II), Tenor (Tenori I), and Bass (Bassi I). Dynamics include *sempre PP* and *mm*.

unchanged original melody, varied only by choral scoring. A sense of onward movement is created by a thickening of the choral texture; this ‘choral orchestration’ is one of the most recognisable hallmarks of Tormis’s style (ex. 4).

A clear example of Tormis’s ‘cumulative’ choral technique is the final song, “Jaanilaul” from *Jaanilaulud* (1967), the final set of the *Eesti kalendri-laulud* cycle. Here, the *regilaul* melody moves between voices, subtly building in intensity with a

sense of inevitable onward movement (ex. 5a). The texture builds from a unison line against a pedal note, through simple imitation, to harmonisation in parallel triads, then parallel chords of 7th, 9th, and finally 11th (ex. 5b). The practice of ‘cumulative scoring’ was surely coloured, even if subconsciously, by Tormis’s formative experiences at the church organ as a child.²³

Pekka Kostiainen provides a neat summary of Tormis’s legacy: “I feel the most significant

²² Translation by Tuuli Elo, Finnish Music Information Centre (by email, 1.6.17).

²³ Tormis recalls playing the organ alongside his father, Riho Tormis (1899–1967), the *köster* (Sacristan) of his home village of Vigala in Kullamäe parish. “The [sound of the] loud organ, made by a village master, attracted me; five ranks of pipes lured me into the pleasure of pulling out a stop and changing the sound.” (Daitz 2004: 100) He seems aware, even at this early stage, of the almost shaman-like power of the organist, although he has declined to acknowledge the subsequent influence of the instrument on his choral writing and technique. He is now somewhat disparaging about the organ, considering it to have “a very limited range of colours and sonorities”. This prejudice is perhaps explained by the organ’s associations with historical events of this period. In 1944 Tormis had begun organ lessons at the Tallinn Music High School, followed by studies at the Tallinn Conservatory in 1947. He was forced abruptly to end studies when the organ course was suppressed by the Soviets because of the instrument’s close association with the Lutheran church. This was in 1948, the period of *Zhdanovshchina*, the notorious ‘Zhdanov purges’. One clear legacy of Tormis’s organ studies, however, remains: the repertoire of the time included arrangements of Estonian folk songs by Edgar Arro, the teacher of his own, and his father’s organ tutor, August Topman. These works were widely performed in the 1940s. So this was, effectively, Tormis’s first, and early, encounter with *regilaul*. (Author discussion with Tormis, Cheltenham, 2008 and with Lippus and Tormis, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, February 2010.)

Ex. 3. Jalkanen. *Viron orja*, bb. 1–3 (score: Jalkanen 1980).

Violini I

Ex. 4. Kostianen. "Kyll' on sulla kylmämistä", bb. 1–5 (score: Kostianen 1983).

③. *Kyll' on sulla kylmämistä* (rk.)

p. a p. crescendo - - mf (sempre cresc. ...)

KYLL' ON SUL-LA KYL-MÄ-MISTÄ, KYLL' ON SUL-LA KYL-MÄ-MIS-TÄ,
 PAL-JO--KI PA-LE-LE-MISTÄ, PAL-JO--KI PA-LE-LE-MIS-TÄ,
 IL-MAN IH-MI-SIEN I-HOTTA, IL-MAN IH-MI-SIEN I-HOTTA,
 E-MON TUOMAN RUUHI-HITTA E-MON TUOMAN RUUHI-HITTA

4. kerralle.

KYLMÄ SOI-TA, KYLMÄ

f (sempre cresc. ...)

KYLMÄ SOI-TA, KYLMÄ MAI-TA, KYLMÄ KYLMI-Ä KI-UI-Ä,
 PA-LE-LE-VE-SI-PAJU-JA, PA-NE HAAVAN PAIKKUROI-TA

poco a poco crescendo - -

MAI-TA, KYLMÄ SOI--TA, KYLMÄ MAI--TA KYLMÄ

Ex. 5. Tormis. "Jaanilaul".

a) bb. 1-8.

Andante
♩ = 66-69

pp

S
Jaa - ni,

A
p
Laa-mi val - la Jaa - ni kai - ma, jaa - ni, jaa - ni, kas om Jaa - nil kah - har paa, jaa - ni,

S
sis om - ma kes - va kee - ru - lid - se, jaa ni, jaa ni, kaa - ra kat - so kan - di - lid - se, jaa - ni

T
p
Laa - mi val - la Jaa - ni kai - ma,

B
sis om - ma kes - va kee - ru - lid - se, jaa ni, jaa ni, kaa - ra kat - so kan - di - lid - se, jaa - ni

b) bb. 104-107.

104 **Piu largo** (♩ = 56) *poco a poco crescendo e più estatico*

p
Lää - mi väl - lä Jaa - ni kai - ma, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,
Come out, come out, look at Jaa - ni, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,

p *poco a poco crescendo e più estatico*
Lää - mi väl - lä Jaa - ni kai - ma, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,
Come out, come out, look at Jaa - ni, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,

p *poco a poco crescendo e più estatico*
Lää - mi väl - lä Jaa - ni kai - ma, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,
Come out, come out, look at Jaa - ni, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,

p *poco a poco crescendo e più estatico*
Lää - mi väl - lä Jaa - ni kai - ma, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,
Come out, come out, look at Jaa - ni, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,

achievement of Tormis's music is how he [...] emphasises the most relevant characteristics of 'real' folk music. The product is clearly archaic, yet clearly music of our time."²⁴

In turn, Urve Lippus leaves her own invaluable legacy. She was instrumental to my own Tormis research, during which I witnessed her fervent conviction in Tormis's music. She was convinced

that Tormis deserved to be known more widely, outside the confines of the specialist choral circles of choirs, performers and their directors. Lippus believed that Tormis's music could stand its own against that of any contemporary twentieth-century choral composer both in, and beyond, Estonia.²⁵

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²⁴ Kostiaainen, email to author, February 2011.

²⁵ Author discussion with Lippus, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, February 2014.