

# Veljo Tormis and Urve Lippus: A Legacy

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>
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.<sup>4</sup> Tormis uses syncretism to mean 'words + melody + presentation + performance, function',

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

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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).