

"AWAKE, MY HEART!"

Archaic and sacred folk songs from Estonian villages

Arranged by Tõnu Kõrvits

ARSIS

Handbell Ensemble

archaic songs

sacred folk songs

collected from the villages of Estonia

roots of the bells date back to 13th – 14th centuries

carillons are found throughout Europe

carillons were the forerunners of handbells and handchimes

Grand Prix of Eisteddfod festival

best handbell ensemble in the world 2001

Liner notes

The bountiful heritage of Estonian folklore dates back to the dawn of ancient times and has disappeared from the active use since long ago. Luckily a lot of it has been preserved in the form of sound recordings or manuscripts in archives and a part of it has gone back to circulation through books or records.

Museum collections are normally referred to as dead material. Actually only the part that disappears together with its bearer can be considered a dead culture. The archived collections of folklore can rather be seen as a chest of treasure where one can always find something to decorate the culture of newer times. Thus, the old folk songs often get a new life sometimes imitating their ancient sound, sometimes in a completely new form, as a synthesis of archaic and modern means of expression, the composer with his or her individual talent being here a co-author like folksingers in the old times.

The author of the music on the current CD, Tõnu Kõrvits has turned to the most archaic layer of Estonian folk song that with its minimalist but original language of sound has attracted composers' attention before. Characteristic to Estonian folk song are the rich system of poetic patterns and lyrical introvert impressive feeling. The majority here are the songs of women and young maidens. The thoughts and feelings are hidden behind beautiful poetic images. The idea in one verse is repeated and varied in parallel verses the number of which is not determined. Every singer has the right to add, change or omit something. The basic feature of poetic form is alliteration, no end rhyme exists. The poetic message is the most important part of the Estonian folk song, the melody being just a means of expression. The melodies can vary during the singing according to the words or in pure musical purpose by melodics, mode as well as rhythm.

The earliest compositions based on Estonian folk tunes appeared in the second half of the 19th century being influenced by German Liedertafel choral songs. Due to the fact that Estonian folk song is mostly monodic, most of the tunes fit better into different music styles and means than into polyphony based on functional harmony. The synthesis of the means of expression of archaic folk music, contemporary modern musical language and composer's own free creative idea was characteristic of the works of Mart Saar and Cyrillus Kreek at the beginning of the 20th century and also of the style of Eduard Tubin, Veljo Tormis and Ester Mägi in the second half of the 20th century.

During the Singing Revolution in the 1990-ties especially popular became the songs by Alo Matiisen where the traits of old folk song (the repetition of a short melodically narrow ranged phrase in the duration of the whole song) was connected to the style and sound of rock music. That kind of songs were chanted like freedom mantras at the big political rallies, thousands of people repeating phrases after the foresinger. Thus the old cultural phenomena may return in a new form, in new situations and in new context to the existing culture, creating in their turn unexpected

connections and expressing completely new ideas and feelings.

Nowadays several young Estonian composers have again got fresh inspiration from old folk songs intermingling them into the means of rock and modern classical music as well as the facilities of contemporary acoustic and video technology. At the current CD Tõnu Kõrvits has arranged old folk tunes for English handbells using different means of harmony – polyphonic development (Whoops And Calls), cluster chords (Grow Into Shepherd), modern harmony of pop music (Come Little Cuddy).

The composer has chosen the base material first and foremost from pure musical point of view. At times he has been fascinated by the simplest tunes (it was exciting to see what can be made out of a melody with only a couple of notes in it), at times by the special and original sound of a melody, at times by varying mode and tonality. He was as well attracted to the tender lyricism of the songs' poetry. Though program was not an aim, the cycle is still penetrated by a certain thematic line.

Grow Into Shepherd introduces the shepherd theme. In Northern Estonia the village herd was normally kept together by an older shepherd – a hired worker – who was aided by girls or boys from each household. They had sufficient time for song and play on the pasturelands. In Southern Estonia where the herd was separate for each household, it was guarded by underage boys or girls. As a means of communication between the shepherds whoops and calls – a specific melodic vocalise – were practised there. Every single shepherd used to have his, her own melody characteristic only of him or her. These also contained intonations of different shepherd pipes and the background could include the tinkling of cowbells and birds' song. The whooping was done on asemantic syllables or sounds which could have been interchanged by short textual phrases. Still, even the wordless whoops carried a message, melting into a poetic picture together with the surrounding nature. This mood has vividly been described by folklorists of the 19th century.

Almost holy was each clear morning with the Sun disk glowing over the dense young swamp forest, the vault of heaven so brightly blue, twilight still between the bushes. From afar, from the direction of Pupastvere, the inviting calls of some girls could be heard. They were soon answered by boys' voices from Metsanuka woods... The words in all of them were nearly the same, the difference being only in the name of household and the shepherd. All like this: „Oe, oe, dear Maali, come this way, I am heading that way, oe, oe, oe, oe, oe!“ The tunes had many nuances. One was whooping plaintively and longingly, another prosaically inviting, a third one arrogantly, carelessly as if saying: come if you want, don't if not, I do not care!“. One could enthusiastically listen to the melodic whooping of girls. The voices of some boys were like that of a clarinet or oboe. (The Memoirs of Writer Mait Metsanurk).

Shepherds' days were long. The boys blew home-made whistles and pipes, the girls used to sing. In the cycle we can also hear several lyrical songs of maidens.

A maiden walks singing through the forest her voice sounding like a kantele for the trees (A Maiden's Voice). Shepherds were frequently orphans. In the song The Chamber Of The Wind is a question: where is the home of the lonely, shelter for the orphan and an answer in a beautiful poetic picture: where the wind has built a chamber, the water rolled the logs, the rain packed the walls, the fog closed the doors. Roll Sun is the shepherd's evening song. By the fall of the evening the shepherd begs the Sun to roll to the brothers and sisters where he/she is allowed to sleep on the pillows, rest in the silky bed, float in a silver berth.

The cycle contains also some lullabies. – Come, come sleep, come sleep, come from the door, step through the window... (A Baby Rocking Song). Come Little Cuddy and Songs Sung By The Burbot are the fishermen's songs.

The Wife of A Snake is a fairy-tale. The king promises to give his daughter to the one guessing all his riddles. The snake is the only one to succeed and the king is obliged to keep his promise. The princess marries the snake and the couple live happily having three daughters. Once she comes to visit her childhood home. Her brothers do not like their sister being married to the snake and decide to kill the latter. The youngest daughter unwittingly discloses the secret: for returning home her mother has to sing: Ho-lo, bring the sails, let the boat in the waves. The brothers call the snake by

singing the song and kill him. The next day the princess wanted to return home but at her singing the boat arrived, full of blood. Understanding what had happened she turned herself into a birch-tree, the elder daughter into greenery, the middle one into white bark, thus keeping them close to herself but the youngest one is changed into a thin trembling peel and the mother exorcizes: tremble like my heart!

The cycle is framed by two sacred folk songs that date back to the Christian tradition. The first one sings praises to the Saviour who takes the Man's worries upon himself, helps him in his work and leads the way to the Heaven. The other one is an evening song: the hard daily work has ended, night is falling and everybody drifting into peaceful sleep...

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