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THE CASE OF *ESTONIAN BALLADS* BY VELJO TORMIS

TRIINU OJAMAA

One Musical Piece, Two Conceptions

Estonian Ballads is a ballet-cantata composed by Veljo Tormis. The lyric texts were compiled by Ulo Tedre and the libretto was written by Lea Tormis. As the composer says, "This piece was commissioned for the 1980 Summer Olympic Games by Theater Estonia. They constructed several grand new buildings in Tallinn in connection with that event. Across the street from my window on Lauteri St. they built the Hotel Olympia. I was at the time composing *Estonian Ballads* and my work was quite in pace with the construction works. I cannot say exactly how we managed to time it – was it like a page by me and a store by them? – but their house grew taller and my score got thicker (Tormis 2000:221)."

The result was a through-composed grand piece for vocal soloists, a large chorus, full orchestra with several traditional instruments, and a ballet troupe. It has been compared to the ballet-cantata *Les Noces* by Stravinsky based on several grounds (Daitz 2004:191); but the most significant common element is that both of them were fashioned on traditional poetry. *Estonian Ballads* is based on 6 traditional narrative songs (*regilaul*): *A Chaste Girl, A Girl in the Wrong, A Husband-Killer, A Wife-Killer, The Wife of Gold,* and *The Wife From the Grave*. (1)

The first staging and the premiere of the piece took place in July 1980 as part of the Tallinn cultural program of the Baltic Sea Regatta of the 12th Olympic Games held in the Soviet Union. The choreographer and producer was Mai Murdmaa,

the conductor Tonu Kalojuste, and the cast by the Estonian Academic Opera and Ballet Theater Estonia. The second staging and its premiere took place in August 2004 in a former collective farm hayloft in Sooranna Village located 44 km. from Tallinn and during the 4th World Congress of the Finno-Ugric Peoples. The choreographer and director was Peeter Jalakas; musical designer and conductor Tonu Kaljuste, the co-choreographer Aki Suzuki; the cast by guest actors and dancers from the Von Krahl Theater, all with academic training and background in traditional music.

Both these stage productions were considered masterpieces of the Estonian music theater. They touched the audience deeper than regular musical performances and found a versed response among the audience who did not limit their discussions to the qualities of the music. My essay presents an overview of the reception given this extraordinary piece in the Estonian and Finnish print media during the period of 1980-2005 based on 6 preliminaries and on 38 critical reviews.

A Novel Hybrid Genre

The genre of *Estonian Ballads* has been referred to in 2 ways: ballet-cantata and cantata-ballet. It seems that the first one lays the stress on the choreography, while the second one foregrounds the music. Although the choreographic arrangement was granted mostly an illustrative function in both stage productions, the media has focused particularly on that. In the case of the first production, the reviewers have asked whether it would be at all possible to combine the 2 cultural phenomena, *regilaul* and (modern) ballet, which are too distant in time and styles of expression. Some early media comments were: "Mai Murdmaa had to overcome an incompatibility: on the one hand, a folk tradition of a 1000 years; on the other, her choreographic vision that had nothing to do with the elements

of folk dance (Putsep 1981, Estonia)." "One undoubtedly balances on the verge of eclecticism and bad taste when one stages a ballet of *regilaul* (Lippus 1980, Estonia)." "It is impossible to imagine by which movements the pagan tribes of the North expressed themselves. The choreographer has made a successful choice by combining folkloric material with modern dance (Vienola-Lindfors 1983, Finland)."

During the last quarter of a century, the attitude towards mixing dichotomous elements of culture has become more tolerant. The kinesthetic solution of the second production was imported from an entirely different continent: *regilaul* was combined with Japanese *butoh* dance. This means that the cultural gap should appear even wider, but the reviews are nevertheless filled with enthusiasm. Of all the topics discussed in media connection with *Estonian Ballads* the combination of *butoh* and *regilaul* is the only one on which the reviewers agree upon: "You may enrich folk tradition into a multicultural one, and you should not fear that it may die or turn into kitsch. The work by Tormis experienced a new coming by being translated into the imagery of *butoh* theater. This piece was staged in the dance boldest, even in a grotesque interpretation (Moring 2004, Finland)." "In general, the 'borrowed' *butoh* static gave in *Estonian Ballads* an impression of being primordially inherent to it when it guarded and empowered the musical essence of the piece (Arujarv 2004, Estonia)."

An anonymous critic (non-Estonian-speaker) whose knowledge of *regilaul* appears to be more superficial than that of *butoh* dance comes to the conclusion that the latter concurs with the nature of Estonians: "The dance performance was very methodical and slow... I can see why that dance form might appeal to Estonians, who are typically methodical, careful, and quiet in nature (Anonymous 2005)."

In contrast to the visual aspect, the music of the work gets much less attention. Even though the critics consider *Estonian Ballads* to be the best work by Tormis, there appeared only one professional musical analysis after the first staging; and even that took 3 years to happen after the first night (Lippus 1983). Reviewers recall the previous choral music written by Tormis, but the majority only resort to an emotional discussion of Tormis' connection to *regilaul* –an inseparable pair in the history of Estonian music.

"Behind the nearly 120 minutes of an integral composition of *Estonian Ballads* loom hundreds of arrangements of *regilaul* melodies and choral music, composed in a couple of decades... I guess that Tormis could not have managed to write such a neat and effective work a few decades earlier when he did not yet have all that experience. And still, one cannot but envy the calmness with which the composer lets the music created with minimal means and of scant material to unfold itself (Lippus 1980, Estonia)."

"*Estonian Ballads* is based on old folk songs. This music is quite typical of the composer but sounds rather unique in the context of our modern outlook. The melodies are monotonous, built on 2 or 3 intervals like yoiking and even the most benevolent ethnographer could probably put up with listening to them for only a short while.(3) But, despite everything, this music creates a sense of magic and inspires intellectual curiosity. In sum, it sounds beautiful, although the composer has not added beauty to a single measure (Paunu 1983, Finland)."

The critics of the second staging talk about music in a completely different tone. They focus on a new theme: innovation and multimedia. These are the keywords of the turn

of the millennia both for the Estonian culture and for the Estonian cultural journalism. *Estonian Ballads* has now turned into a multimedia project with innovative musical staging. This musical staging is dubbed "a forest of instruments". Time and again the critics repeat the information shared by Tonu Kaljuste in his interviews: this "forest of instruments" was a means to achieve an auditive effect where "...the listener seems to exist within a sound picture. Such an effect requires surround-sound. Kaljuste recorded within 6 months all the scores of all the instruments separately. By means of phonogram he created a sound picture where both the choir singers and instruments appeared more powerful and with the hint of shamanism (Kangro 2005)." In addition, they mention that the performance by the soloists was "a live action" – a choice of words unthinkable in the context of the previous production, regardless of the fact that actually the first production was completely 'live'.

The musical design has been met with contradictory assessments. Occasionally the tone of the discussions gets rather heated. Some critics see in it the key to the enchanting capacities of the piece, whereas the others whose cultural experience is apparently of a different kind lower the innovative design effects to the level of common practices of pop culture.

"The music, at times psychedelic, which filled the hall with energy streams, induced shudders in the audience (Ratt 2004, Estonia)." "What would you call the singing into microphone to the accompaniment of taped music? Karaoke. The rubber rules of postmodernism stretch to turn even karaoke into theater, although there is a world of difference between live performance and a taped one – the pre-recorded one cannot embrace the viewer/listener (Laasik 2004, Estonia)." "When

the reviews after the performance snapped that the singing to the pre-recorded music from the loudspeakers reminded of karaoke, it had to be a misinterpretation. This was a unique recording, which created an effect that can never be copied by any of the existing choirs or orchestras (Mihkleson 2004a, Estonia)." One of the interpretations proposes an example of how a work of music belonging to high culture can transport an ennobling aura to an amateur entertainment: the performance of *Estonian Ballads* has been dubbed "high karaoke" (Inno 2004).

Traditional Versus Professional

In the second production of *Estonian Ballads* 10 soloists perform. In contrast to the first production, this time the soloists get a lot of attention and quite rightly so. The ideal of Tormis himself requires that his vocal compositions based on *regilaul* should sound similar to it, to their original performance by traditional singers. Unfortunately this cannot be achieved with the vocal techniques mastered by professional opera and choral singers. The first production served as a materialized proof to that statement. Stories about how Tormis stormed out of the rehearsal when the singing did not sound as he had imagined it should, have already reached far outside the Estonia Theater (see Daitz 2004: 189-190); and therefore we will not comment on that topic any further. But immediately after the first staging, that problem with the singers was touched upon in press only once: "I know one choral singer, a baritone who used to transfer from one choir to another. This man could not get used to Tormis' music. Whenever they started to sing too much of Tormis, this man had to leave and find a new choir for himself where they would sing less of that composer. But now he has run out of choices ('IKS' 1981, Estonia)."

In connection with the new production, this old problem surfaced again, but this time popping up one way or another in all the reviews. The obvious reason being that the majority of soloists with academic training had now been replaced by singers with folk music background. The producer Jaak Johanson (simultaneously one of the singers with folk music background) has claimed that the combination of singing in classical style with *regilaul* as it was performed in the first staging had sounded to him grotesque. Therefore they had planned for that second staging from the very beginning to recruit singers who were quite familiar with *regilaul*, but at the same time with sufficient musical training in order to sing with an orchestra (Vastrik 2005). The media even underscores the choice of soloists as the major deviation in comparison to the first production. "By choosing his performers among folk musicians, Tonu Kaljuste took the greatest leap to distance himself from the previous stagings. He has played with timbre and casting, he creates a new musical drama which seems to add even more to the empowerment of the original intentions by Tormis (Mihkelson 2004b, Estonia)."

The soloists get praise, but it all remains rather vague. Most of the reviews mention, however in positive context, the names of particularly these soloists who happen to be professional singers. The only critic who refers to the vocal inaptitude of the singers with a folk music background is Evi Arujarv. She concurs that the choice of performers expressed an attempt to discard the operatic vocal training in the performance of *regilaul*, but "unfortunately, the result does not depend on how someone does not sing but on particularly how one does sing (Arujarv 2004)."

The discussion of the problem of singing in media coverage allows us to draw conclusions on some things. We had limited

ourselves at present only to something that does not concern *Estonian Ballads* directly, but which emerges here more clearly than in the discussion of other issues. Namely, the split between journalists who cover wide cultural scope and those critics who have musicological background appear to be parallel to the split between the singers of folk music background and those with academic training.

About Roots

The following range of topics remains more outside of the scene of music. They mirror in a more general way how *Estonian Ballads* have affected Estonian culture and the image of Estonia. The Finnish critics talk about the significance of national culture in connection with *Estonian Ballads*: "It may be difficult for Finns who have lived under different circumstances in comparison to Estonians to understand the meaning and role of national culture in one's own language and based on one's roots in the existence of a nation. Apparently, this is a question of survival for the Estonians (Ristolahti 1983, Finnish)."

This quote may be interpreted as a hint to the tougher times in the political history of Estonia, while one of them was under progress. The years 1978 till 1982 have been defined as the peak of the so-called stagnation period, then in 1983 a turn towards the eventual collapse of the Soviet system took place. This was the period for escalating censorship. Estonian media theorists have claimed that the cultural journalism still suffered only from a low level monitoring. It denoted mostly the self-censorship practiced by the authors themselves, and the cutting of texts inside the editorial office (Vihalemm & Lauristin 2004). The reviews written on *Estonian Ballads* in the 1980's were free of politics from both the national and Soviet perspectives to such an extent that even the connection of the

work to the Olympic Games taking place in the Soviet Union failed to be mentioned. At the same time, the problem of censoring *Estonian Ballads* was raised in the cultural circles because everyone knew that musical composition also had to be censored under the Soviet rule. Still, the authors have confirmed that texts from traditional folklore were not censored.

In the Finnish media, the first production of *Estonian Ballads* also brought about deliberations on the cultural kinship of Finns and Estonians, on these common roots. "We sensed in the old Estonian *runolaul* also the heartbeat of our nation.(5) Without doubt, Estonian and Finnish traditional poetry has the same origin (Ristolahti 1983, Finnland)." "*Estonian Ballads* took us to the common roots of our culture and heritage. This was definitely one of the reasons for the warm response among the audience (Piila 1983, Finland)."

The theme of roots appears in Estonian media, however, only in the context of the second production. But it finds completely different interpretation, in comparison to the Finnish press. First, there are no signs whatsoever that may refer to the tendency of national romanticism; second, if in the Finnish media the approach to the roots was entirely positive, then the attitude of Estonian critics seems highly contradicting and extends from the theory of roots to the negation of roots altogether. "*Estonian Ballads* is not an abstract trip into the primordial archaic. It is a trip to our actual reality. A trip to our genes and roots (Keil 2004, Estonia)." "In some respect it is absolutely illogical to talk such rubbish as if we had some kind of roots somewhere, and as if we could reach them and as if we could build some kind of modern culture on them (Eelmaa 2004, Estonia)."

The reference to roots in the context of discussing Estonian national culture has been nearly obligatory during the period dividing the two stage productions (particularly in the 1990s). Scholars in the humanities took serious effort in providing scientific proof for these roots, i.e., the origin of culture, while finding assistance even in the science of genetics. These proofs remained superficial, the word roots became a trendy term, and its content degenerated quickly. Finally, the whole question lost its edge.

The analysis of media coverage demonstrates that *Estonian Ballads* appeared to be an artistic work giving a new impetus to take up that theme again. Why? One cannot find an answer in the media reflections, the talk about roots remains simply assertive. When looking for an explanation in a wider cultural context, it seems to be of importance that *Estonian Ballads* was once again tied to another cultural event: the second staging was part of the cultural program of the World Congress of the Finno-Ugric Peoples, arranged in Tallinn in 2004. It is a fact that the roots of the Estonian culture are found in the ancient common Finno-Ugric cultural space. But if one delves into the socio-political context here, we may find entirely different explanations and sense in the reminiscence of roots a distant connection to the first period of decay in the excitement of joining the European Union.

About the Image of the Estonians

"*Estonian Ballads* is one very open thing. Both to ourselves, ...and also to all the others, to those who read about the image of Estonia as an e-state in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* or in *The Times*, and then take a plane to visit here that carries the sign 'Welcome to Estonia' (Keil 2004, Estonia)."(6) These words were written when Estonia itself had become an open thing. In

the Estonia that saw the first production, one could seldom hear the phrase 'Welcome to Estonia' in English.

During the period of Soviet isolation, Finland functioned as 'a cultural window' for the Estonians, but thanks to the staging of *Estonian Ballads* in 1980 the Finns also discovered the culture on the opposite shore of the Gulf of Finland. (7) The ferry running between Tallinn and Helsinki under the name Georg Ots carried thousands of Finns across the sea not simply for a shopping or drinking tour, but to watch *Estonian Ballads* and other productions of musical theatre.(8) The Finnish journalist Liisa-Maria Piila has written in her travel account *A Trip to the Real Tallinn* (1981) that the real Tallinn can be found actually outside the *Bermuda Triangle* of *varietee* (a restaurant with variety shows) *Viru* and *Tallinn*, and *valuutabaar* (a bar accepting only foreign currency). Piila refers here to the fact that entertainment facilities serving alcohol were on the top of the priority list of Finnish tourists. Visiting events of high culture were not included among the goals of the trip before the production of *Estonian Ballads*.(9)

The statistics of the period following the upsurge of cultural communication nevertheless show that such cultural trips did not play any significant effect in arousing interest towards Estonia among the Finns. In the 90s only about half of the Finns wanted to be provided with information on what was happening in Estonia. The poll carried out in Finland indicated that there were some variations between the sub-groups. Interest in events in Estonia was the lowest among young men (41%) and young people with little education (35%). Interest in Estonia was the highest among women with academic degrees (76%) (Suhonen 1997: 187-190). The latter groups is supposedly characterized by cultural interests higher than the

than the average in any country, and forms a large part of the theater and concert audiences.

Still, there occurred a slight shift on the general assessment scale for the Finns after *Estonian Ballads*. When the Finnish media usually tends to pay attention to Estonia in connection with negative news then the positive effect of *Estonian Ballads* on the image of Estonia was obvious, at least in the early 1980s. In several years, the print media reflected excited fascination with this cultural event and most of the reviews did not limit themselves to the description of the production – they discussed culture in a wider context.

The Finnish consumer usually communicates with Estonians in the Finnish language: the Finnish and the Estonian languages are similar enough to get by on the everyday level. The Finnish consumer of culture apparently experienced a language barrier in connection with *Estonian Ballads*. This resulted in the problems of understanding, disclosed in media coverage from different aspects. "Despite its intense and empowering effect, the music sounded often also monotonous, this may be partly explained by the fact that the Finnish listeners could not always get the meaning and nuances of the text (Pyysalo 1983, Finland)." "If some of the words or verse lines did not reach Finnish ears, then the poetic nature of the dance helped them to understand the content of the piece (Ristolahti 1983, Finland)." In respect to the second production, the Finnish press does not refer to the language barrier at all, but there is one comment on the Internet provided by a foreign listener: "The Estonian language is full of vowels and does not have harsh sounds like Russian and German, so listening without understanding is still a pleasurable experience (Anonymous 2005)."

The media coverage of both productions indicates that also

Estonians themselves wonder whether the non Estonian speaking audience could appreciate the content of *Estonian Ballads*. From the Estonian perspective, *regilaul* does not function as 'a beautiful song' that can provide an uplifting musical experience despite one's capacity to understand the poetry. *Regilaul* is first and foremost a song with a meaning, which is carried by the words. The reviewers found that in the case of the first production of *Estonian Ballads* the content was supported by the staged choreography.

"Sometimes the images of the lyrics have been translated into choreographic figures quite directly, demonstrated through an extensive use of imitation.... The whole choreographic arrangement assists to transport the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist to the audience without distortion and with a strong effect. The staging is in general quite illustrative and of narrative quality, it follows closely the surface layer of the text (Mirov 1983, Estonia)." In one of the interviews the choreographer has explained that "occasionally the dancers simply perform the words (Paalma 1980)."

The choreographic arrangement of the second production, however, was praised in media in much higher terms as such, but none of the critics saw in it any support for grasping the lyrics any better. The greater expectations fell on the universality of the sacral aspects expressed by the music. "The sacral dimension of music, reaching beyond time toward the transcendental, can be understood also by listeners from other cultures, for whom the tradition is obviously mediated in some other musical language (Funk 2005, Estonia)."

Does the music culture of Estonia meet adequate reception, or what kind of image does the music project of Estonians? These are questions that intrigue the wider public in Estonia. A good

example to prove this claim can be found in the concert performance from October 20, 2006, arranged in honor of the visit of Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh in Tallinn Town Hall Square. The program included the masterpieces of Estonian national culture (among them the choral composition *Litany to Thunder* by Veljo Tormis, and also improvisations of *regilaul*). The organizers evidently wanted to present Estonian music on the widest scope by demonstrating ancient singing traditions alongside with the highest level of professional music.

The royal couple stepped into Town Hall Square at 11:00 am, and the first comments on the music performed were available on the web already 15 minutes later. Some examples of the impressions of what kind image this music supposedly projected of the Estonians. "These primitive folk songs made Estonians look like nomads. Because the royal guests obviously could not understand the lyrics, some of these songs must have sounded rather aggressive. The concert was unique and definitely made an impression on the royal couple, because the English do not have such high level of choral music." The image of the Estonians was discussed also after the second production of *Estonian Ballads*. The impressions shared appear mostly to be positive with only some exceptions like the following: "The versions of *regilaul* staged by Peeter Jalakas project the image of ancient Estonians as listless creatures who are inescapably possessed by two emotions that are schematically manifested: libido and the fear of death... Everything looks very dark, suffocating and hopeless for old Estonians, also for Tormis, because he has chosen from ancient poetry songs that focus on the twilight and murder, no sign of joy, of love, of children, or even of work (Vaus-Tamm 2004, Estonia)." In case of the first production, which was a special

commission to be performed for foreign guests (in the cultural program of the Olympic Games), the topic of the image of the Estonians was not touched upon at all.

The Image of *Estonian Ballads* - Popular Culture

The image was actually largely shaped by the press. The preliminaries were quite intriguing, promising a super event of high culture, though in the context of some kind of mysticism. "One may hear frightening stories about the Soorinana village in Kuusalu parish. Through day and night it resounds of terrible noise. The bulldozers push boulders into a pile and trucks of dirt keep coming as if they are building a huge burial mound. The howling of drilling is accompanied with a chorus by the signature tune of Windows. Strange men stagger in showers of rain, carrying heavy stuff. The searchlights pierce the clouds at night, and the old birch tree runs blood instead of sap. They say that at full moon someone spotted a bald man with an earring running across the field, carrying a calf under his arm. On his back one could read PURE.(10) They are preparing the grounds for the grand stage project of *Estonian Ballads* by Tormis, Kaljuste, and Jalakas, to take place in August (Eelmaa 2004, Estonia)."

The reviewers tried to catch the eye of the reader with unusual headings and attractive photos. A stage production is seldom met with such attention. The critics took to singing their praise by using the most original expressions but there floats still one 'drop of tar': "The new musical approach by Tonu Kaljuste – with his close following of the author's idea – hooks up well with the grand scale circus and street-theater type activities characteristic to Von Krahl Theater (Inno 2004, Estonia)."

We notice in the reviews of the second production that it has

been particularly associated with bloodshed. In the reviews of the first production that theme did not appear, although the ballads on which the story was based were the same. This emphasis becomes apparent already in the review titles. A few examples are here compared: First production, *Estonian Ballads* on the Stage of Estonia; Runo Tunes on Opera Stage; The Runosong Danced; Ballads and Ballet. Second production, The Ballads Haunt in the Corners of the Soul; *Estonian Ballads* – Blood, dirt, and Shock; Ballads in the Sauce of Dirt and Blood; Women Get Killed and Women Kill in the Hayloft of Soorinna.

In the case of the first production, the critics considered the most important general ideas in the ballads to be the feelings of guilt and responsibility after an offensive act. The actual events recounted and the storyline remained in the background. We should mention here that all the reviews were printed in papers and journals keeping high standards, there were no tabloids at the time in Estonia. Most of the critics of the second production, also published in the so-called quality press (except for one, Viira 2004); but by this time the headings, and often also the content, follow more the standards of a tabloid. The driving idea of the staging is pushed to the background, and action stands in the spotlight.

What is the action covered in the 6 ballads like then?

1. A chaste girl killed the man with her knife when he tried to rape her.
2. A young woman made love to a man but when she got pregnant and gave birth, she left her baby in the forest to die.
3. The wife killed her husband because he had prevented her from bringing gifts to her in-laws when she arrived in her new home.

4. The wife was murdered by the request of her husband who love her only until their first child was born.
5. The young man took a wife made of gold instead of marrying a real girl.
6. A young man made a promise to marry a bride from the grave if the living dead of the graveyard would help him get a good crop and when he did not keep his promise dreadful consequences followed.

These actions make the critics reflect on the act of killing: "The act of killing has probably been important in the early folklore of all nations. Well, it is one concrete act with a closure and an exciting one for sure (Vaus-Tamm 2004, Estonia)." One of the critics writes that today we would consider these events describe in the ballads to be criminal: "These are such stories to which *Õhtuleht* would reserve at least 2 pages if something similar would happen today (Laasik 2004, Estonia)."

During the period of transition in Estonia *SL Õhtuleht* (The Evening Paper) transformed from a quality periodical focusing on Tallinn news into a national tabloid, which among other things gives ample space to crime coverage. They also publish cultural events. As a matter of fact, all the major newspapers in Estonia published reviews on the production of *Estonian Ballads*, among others *SL Õhtuleht: "Estonian Ballads*–Blood, Dirt, and Shock (Viira 2004). Considering the flood of information characteristic of today, a piece thus introduced would attract very modest interest, but Estonia in connection with blood – that is quite another story!

How about the references to pop culture? In the reviews written for the second production there were indeed references to pop culture. The staging is compared to the horror or action movies or musical thrillers released by Hollywood: "trying to

be ironic, one might call the version by Jalakas-Kaljuste a *regilaul* musical, its thriller like theme is similar to the recent hit about women murderers, *Chicago*, only this time it all takes place several centuries earlier. A desperate situation on the edge of a marsh or in a hotel room – what is the difference... (Vaus-Tamm 2004, Estonia)."(11)

There is also a noteworthy parallel found in Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (Merilai 2004). By the way, Jackson's piece dates back to the time of the first production of *Estonian Ballads* (1983). This music video has been quoted and parodied at least in more than 20 American or British productions of visual arts (there are no statistics made on other cultures).(12) What concerns *Estonian Ballads* (the interviews made with the production team give no reference to the conscious exploitation of *Thriller*) according to Veljo Tormis is that there were hint towards it heard from the music circles more than once while the staging was under progress. Merilai is the only critic to touch upon *Thriller*, but he does not explain his associations. However, with certain caveats one could talk about the connection between the ballads and *Thriller* even in their content: a living dead (an undead being) is betrothed to a man alive (a living being), cf. the 6th ballad "The Wife From the Grave". The difference being that in Jackson's case, the groom comes from the grave, not the bride. But evidently even more important seems to be the zombie-scenes of the horror-video, because the critic makes no reference to the betrothal.

The following quote describing that same zombie-scene connected to *Thriller* demonstrates the scope of different interpretations expressed by the critics: "The most typical to *butoh* visual imagery was the emerging of the Toonela people into the world. The bleached-like hands stretching out from the grave, naked white wriggling bodies haunting around (Garancis 2004, Estonia)(13)."

To turn back to popular culture, one needs to note that the producer of the second production of *Estonian Ballads*, Jaak Johanson, compared the work to soap operas focusing on family violence and love affairs (Vastrik 2005). In addition, critics have found, both in the work itself and the visual effects used in the stage production, a great deal of imagery of New Age qualities (Luuk 2004). The libretto author, Lea Tormis, was the only one who continued to stress also after the second production, that for the authors of the piece the actual stories told in the ballads were of little importance, whereas they found significance in the emotional and ethic assessments expressed. These ballads were not narratives of concrete bloodshed, but of human predicaments, mistakes and remorse (Tormis 2005).

The second production of *Estonian Ballads* has also been discussed in the context of high culture in these media reflections. We will continue with the art of film. One review draws parallel between the staging of the *Estonian Ballads* and the works of Akira Kurosawa (Pesti 2004). Because the critic mentions no films, the reader gets a chance to guess which of his films may have caused this comparison. Kurosawa has produced about 30 films. We take the liberty of guessing that among the inspiring ones might have been *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams* released in 1990 and screened on the Estonian TV in 2003, that is, the year preceding the production of *Estonian Ballads*. This work would offer comparative moments on several levels, beginning with the theatrical dance scenes, and ending with the motives of guilt and responsibility, which links well to the author-conceptions of *Estonian Ballads*.

The references to other works of art picked out from other reviews are mostly vague hints. It may well be that they are nothing more than simply wondering thoughts, based on a

happenstance cultural experience of the critic. But even so these references are still meaningful as they indicate how Estonians try to explain the culture they consider authentic Estonian by applying another culture which today still seems to be foreign. The same happened during the first production as a great number of reviews mentioned certain similarities apparent between *Estonian Ballads* and the ancient Greek tragedies. These were different times, the practice of discussing and finding meaning in culture was different. In the 1980's, the base for everything was found on high culture; the generation of critics of this millennium feel more at home in pop culture. Admitting a risk to sound cynical, I would say that the difference does nto reach deeper than the level of nuance, because in both cases one seeks to find support in a super culture.

In Conclusion

Let us return to the beginning of this 'story'; that is, to the process of the evolvement of a symbol of national culture which denotes the dual effect of 2 factors: the creation by Veljo Tormis and its reception. Media foregrounds the role of Tormis as the carrier of Estonian-ness quite openly as the critics call him both the symbol and cion of national culture. But this analysis allows us to draw conclusions also concerning the second factor, the recipient. Through the media coverage of *Estonian Ballads* loom several characteristic features of cultural self-colonization, among which I would briefly dwell upon one: the concept of 'self-colonization that was introduced into the discussion of Estonian culture by the media theorist Tiit Hennoste. In brief, self-colonization takes place under the principle of "let us become someone else". This is a process where the circles of authority among the colonized adopt the cultural model of the colonizers and start to shape their culture accordingly, to become similar with the culture of the coloni-

zers. Hennoste has based his study mostly on literature and concludes that the behavior of Estonians as self-colonizers was ambivalent. On the one hand, they adopted the patterns of Europe and felt proud about that; but on the other hand they fought against these patterns by stressing the significance of cultural independence.

In connection to *Estonian Ballads* one should naturally refer to global patterns instead of the European ones, but in principle through the media coverage emerge similar contradictory goals. On the one hand, the media celebrates the pagan *regilaul* culture, and on the other, the innovative use of it. The media coverage of *Estonian Ballads* mirrors an adequate picture of both the attitude of Estonians towards their national culture, and the uniqueness of Tormis' work, which may indeed be defined by calling it a pagan-innovative music.

NOTES

1. *Regilaul* is the ancient Estonian traditional song. Its origin dates back to the times before the 13th century.
2. The structure and content of this work has been thoroughly discussed by Mimi S. Daitz in her book *Ancient Song Recovered: The Life and Music of Veljo Tormis*. The texts are available on the web.
3. Yoik is an improvisational Sami song, one of the oldest forms of music in Europe. It distinguishes from the western European notions of singing in several ways.
4. A piece submitted under the codes "IKS" to the competition of music reviews arranged by the daily *Paevaleht*.
5. *Runolaul* is the Finnish equivalent to *regilaul*.
6. According to the study of e-states carried out in 32 states by the international firm Taylor Nelson Sofres PCL, Estonia is one of the most advanced user of e-services among the Central and Eastern European countries.
7. For example, the channels of Finnish TV are visible in Tallinn (distance between Tallinn and Helsinki is 85 kilometers).
8. Georg Ots (1920-1975), a widely famous Soviet Estonian singer of both classical and popular music who found a way also to the hearts of many Finns.

9. In the early 1980's the Finnish society of singers and musicians SULASOL started regular cultural cruises to Tallinn.
10. The use of the word 'pure' is obviously ambivalent. The text on T-shirt is often in English, thus one may refer here to the connotation of authenticity, but in Estonian this combination denotes the verb 'bite' in the imperative.
11. This musical of the 1970's has been called "a recent hit' probably because of its staging in Estonia in 2004, the same year as *Estonian Ballads*.
12. This information is based on a list present in the web which might not be exhaustive.
13. Toonela is the Estonian mythologic underworld or the rest home of the dead.

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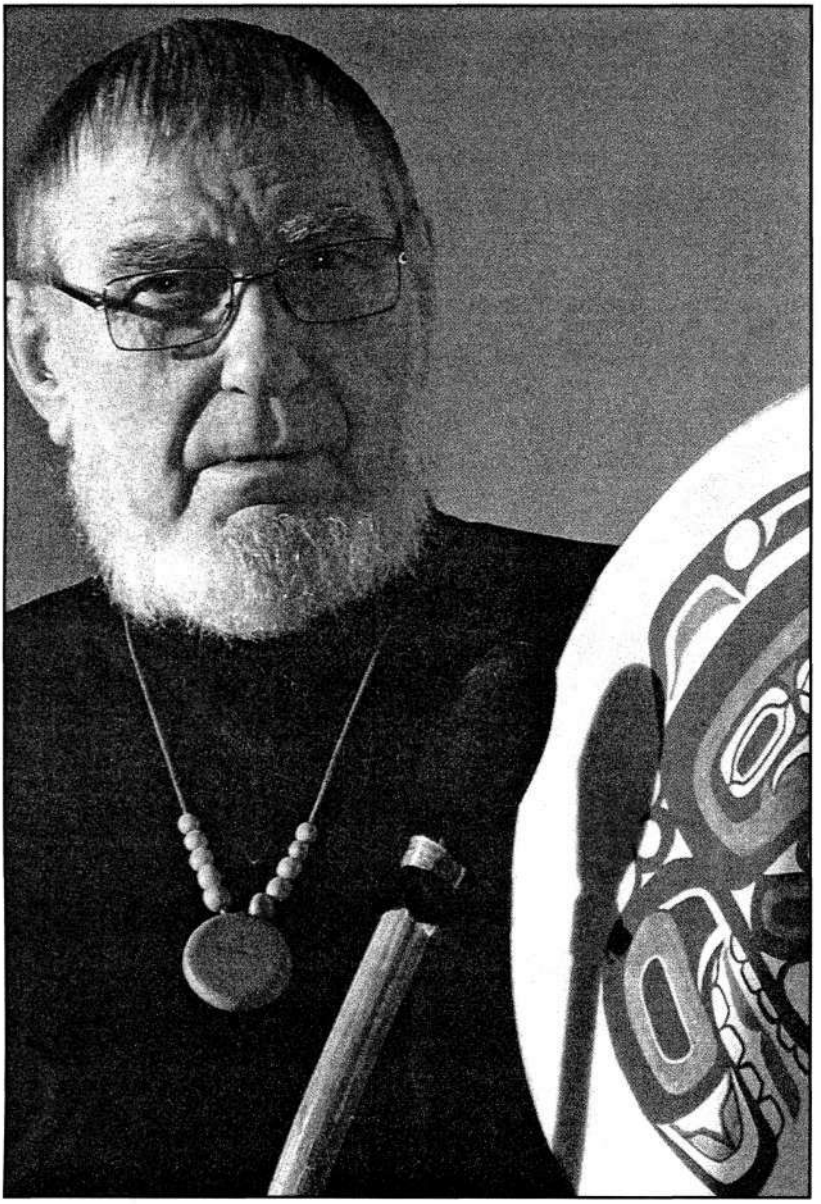

Veljo Tormis (1930-) began his work based on Estonian traditional music by the 1950's. Since then he has grown into a national symbol of Estonia. Photograph by the author, Prof. Triinu Ojamaa.