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The Quiet Past and the Loud Present: the Kalevala and Heavy Metal

Le passé silencieux et le présent bruyant : le Kalevala et le heavy metal

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The quiet past and the loud present: the Kalevala and heavy metal

by

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Summary : The first edition of epic poem Kalevala was published in 1835. After its publication Kalevala has been a huge inspiration for Finnish artists in different genres. Finnish heavy metal bands found the Kalevala in the beginning of 1990's, and during last fifteen years there has been an expansion of Kalevala-inspired metal. These bands use either lyrical or musical references to archaic tradition. The two examples of music of Ensiferum and Insomnium show how traditional music is used in heavy metal. Also, the visual appearance of the bands has got influences from mythical past of Finns. The images have many references to visual arts: paintings, photographs. There are many reasons for the appearance of Kalevala tradition to the heavy metal scene. One is obviously the international models, references to Middle Ages and Vikings. And the emergence of world music in the middle of 1980's and the international success of Värttinä have made the atmosphere more acceptable for traditional music. Also some things in Finnish music education have had their impacts. For example the kantele was taken to music education in primary schools, starting in the middle of 1980's.

Key words : *heavy metal — Finnish folk poetry — Kalevala*

What is the Kalevala?

The king of Sweden Gustavus II Adolphus signed a memorandum in 1630, which concerned the collecting of ancient relics. Finland, as a part of the kingdom during that time, followed the memorandum. That meant also the beginning of the collection of Finnish folk poetry.

At the end of 18th century Henrik Gabriel Porthan published his study “De poesi Fennica”. He believed that these Finnish folk poems to be fragments of a larger narrative. Karl Axel Gottlund in the early 19th century, also believed it would be possible to construct an extensive narrative on the basis of these ancient folk poems. Following contemporary Romantic ideals, Finnish scholars began to visualise the Finns’ glorious past.

Mr. Elias Lönnrot then came on the scene. He was the most enthusiastic of folk poem collectors: he walked several times across Finland as far as Karelia in the east and the White Sea in the north. He listened to old men singing almost interminable poems. Lönnrot’s aim was to publish these as the fruits of other collectors’ research in the form of an epic constructed after the model of Homer. In 1835, he published his first edition of the Kalevala with 12000 verses. But, that did not satisfy him. He continued to collect new poems, and in 1849 published his New Kalevala embodying about 23000 lines of verse. This version is the definitive version of the Kalevala still known today with poems that tell stories of epic length. Besides the Kalevala, Lönnrot also published (in 1840) a collection of lyric folk poems entitled “The Kanteletar”.

The cultural impact of the Kalevala in Finland has been enormous. It has inspired painters, sculptors, composers... and now even for rock musicians. It was also important for the creation of the Finnish nation in the end of the 19th century and for the newly independent state in the early 20th century. The call to liberate the famous “song lands” of Karelia was a significant propaganda tool during the war against Soviet Union in 1940s.

What is Kalevala poetry and music?

In this ancient poetry there are several features that should be especially noted:

First of all, the poetry now found in Kalevala was always sung. All of the hundreds of thousands archived verses were performed to their collectors with melodies. Unfortunately the collectors in

the 19th century were interested in the stories rather than music. Field sound recordings began in the beginning of the 20th century; so luckily there are some more or less genuine sources available. Several hundred kalevala melodies have been published in two books: Suomen Kansan Sävelmiä, parts I and II (1910, 1930).

We know, that the music of these poems used pentachord. Kalevala melodies or ‘runosongs’ have usually three, four or five tones. Some may have as many as seven, but those are in minority.

One feature of Kalevala melodies is that they are mainly in 5/4 –time. In Ingria, the geographical area around present St. Petersburg, the other times were more used: like 4/4, 6/4, 10/8, 12/8 and 15/8 (Laitinen, 2006: 69).

I shall use terms ‘runosongs’ and ‘kalevala melody’ as synonymous, although different scholars have favoured one or the other.

The Kalevala poetry adopts a specific meter: trochaic tetrameter, which is octosyllabic, and the verse line never ends on a single-syllable word.

There is no repetition of longer parts in the lyrics. These poems unfold the story without directly repeating any longer sections of the material: an important feature differentiating them from later musical or lyrical styles. Another very distinctive feature is the use of alliteration, for example in the lines “Vaka, vanha Väinämöinen”, or “Alahall on allin mieli”. So, Kalevala poetry is not rhymed poetry. Rhymed folk songs appeared in Finland during the 17th century. Before that folk songs were in Kalevala metre.

Nevertheless, there is one important repetitive element: in each pair of verses, the second line tells the same idea as the first although with a different choice of words. Alternatively, the same line may be immediately repeated.

Another important feature is what has sometimes been called as “aesthetic of length” i.e. these epic Kalevala poems or runo poems are very long. There is no feeling of being in a hurry. By way of example, in 1830s Arhippa Perttunen from Viena Karelia sang his 400 lines of Sampo-poem to Elias Lönnrot in one session. This performance took at least an hour. Altogether, over a period of three days, Perttunen sang over more than 4200 verses. This applies also instrumental music: a fine example can be read from A.O. Väisänen’s article, where he mentions a man who played his song so long

that he almost fell asleep. Väisänen describes it as “silent ecstasy” (Väisänen, 1990: 8). Also there is a story that a player continued his song even the next day, when the collectors returned to his house.

Instrumental accompaniment of Kalevala performances 200 years was limited to the kantele and the jouhikko, some wind instruments and some primitive percussion instruments. The kantele, the national instrument of Finland, is a zither, and in its original form had only five strings. A tuning mechanism was invented in the 1920's, and the latest innovation is the electric kantele with 39 strings. The kantele carries some important cultural connotations which are too numerous to go into here.

Even as the Kalevala poetry was being collected, its use was in decline and it would soon vanish almost completely. New folk songs and especially new dance music forms were conquering Finland. Their melodies came from the west: from Sweden, Poland and Germany. The fiddle, clarinet and later accordion became the favoured instruments.

The role of runosongs in Finnish popular music

Kalevala melodies more or less were neglected in popular music until the beginning of the 1970's (e.g. Tolvanen, 2005). And only in the 1990's did these folk poems and their music become more appreciated in the world of Finnish rock music. Examples can be found with heavy metal and some not so metallic bands. The first metal group that used Kalevala material was Amorphis. It made two consecutive cd:s based on material of the Kalevala and the Kanteletar “Tales from the Thousand Lakes” (1994) and “Elegy” (1996). The “Tales” has been listed amongst the “100 Definitive Metal Albums” (Weinstein, 2000: 294). In “Elegy” the musical style is rather eclectic: vocal delivery varies from clean singing to growling; acoustic instruments are also used, guitars are not always heavily distorted, synthesizers and Hammond organs play an important role in the soundscape, there are even techno music elements etc. After Amorphis have metal bands like Ajattara, Battlelore, Ensiferum, Insomnium, Kiuas, Korpiklaani and Moonsorrow used some kalevala thematic in their music.

Ensiferum and Insomnium and their music

I shall now discuss more closely the music and visual images of two Finnish metal bands: Ensiferum and Insomnium started their careers in the 1990's, and both have released two albums over the last four years.

First, a short excursion to “real” runo singing. This example is an excerpt of runo singing by Iivana Misukka from the beginning of last century, recorded by Armas Otto Väisänen in Suistamo, Karelia, in 1917 on a wax cylinder. Then 55 years old Misukka plays the kantele and sings a long epic runo about the mythical creation of the kantele (from the Sound Archives of Finnish Literature Society).

This is only a short excerpt; the song goes on and on. These first four bars show the melodic material and the delicate variations of the melody. Still, the main emphasis is on the epic storyline. The melody varies with the words, the syllabics make the melody move and alter. This a bit over six minutes long song is accompanied by a kantele. The tempo is appr. M.M. 60.

The next example is from Ensiferum. This excerpt appears in the song “Old Man (Väinämöinen)” from their debut CD Ensiferum in 2001. The composer is Markus Toivonen, the words by Jari Mäenpää, arrangement by M.T., J.M. and two others. (Spinefarm SPI112CD)

Ensiferum emphasizes the slowness and heaviness of the Kalevala melody. The band does not follow the rhythm of the ancient Kalevala melody, but adapts it to 4/4-time. In its original 5/4 metre, this variant of the old Kalevala melodies is one of the most well known to Finnish people in general. The theme is introduced right in the beginning of the song, and it is repeated when the song melody starts.

What is immediately apparent with these examples is how they follow the conventions of death metal: vocals are growled, and distorted guitars behind the vocals play the kalevala melody. The vocals are in English. In fact, there are not many death metal groups in Finland that perform in Finnish; although there is one band, Ajattara, which writes songs in tetrameter true to the spirit of the Kalevala (e.g. Ajattara: Itse, 2003).

Also, the continual tempo changes typical in death metal, are apparent in Ensiferums' performance. Insomnium, on the other hand, maintains the same tempo throughout its song, instead introducing greater changes in dynamics.

If we compare these two bands and their application of the Kalevala material, there are clear differences. We may even apply Bela Bartók's classification to this analysis. Bartók wrote that there are three different ways a classical composer can employ folk music material:

- a) A composer takes simple melodic material to his/her works: an arrangement
- b) A composer may adopt existing melodic material, but can also create new music on the basis of folk music: an adaptation.
- c) A composer adapts the world of folk music to composing totally new music in the spirit of folk music: atmosphere. (eg. Jalkanen, 1987: 4; Tarasti, 1994: 43-46)

Ensiferum is more in the level of borrowing simple melodic material. The Kalevala melody is merely a copy of the most commonly used variation. These Kalevala elements are only 'glued' onto the surface of heavy metal. Insomnium is rather different case: although the melody is pentatonic and archaic in its nature, it is not the most commonly used one. And the band uses the pentatonic elements of the music more freely and innovatively. The band is in the level of 'adaptation' – and sometimes achieves the 'atmosphere' of runo songs. Strangely, Ensiferum claim their music to be entirely their own, whereas Insomnium acknowledge the value of tradition, and admit a partial debt to that tradition.

The Images of the Kalevala

We can make similar comparisons in the visual world of these bands. Väinämöinen is one of the main characters in the Kalevala. He is a shaman, a cultural hero, and a creator-god. He is the man who makes the very first kantele out of jawbone of a pike, took the strings from pixie's hair etc.

Picture 1 – Pedri Shemeikka, statue by Alpo Sailo, in Sortavala

His power is in his singing: by singing alone he lures his opponents into a marsh. Rather than using the sword, he exploits his talents as a shaman to defeat his enemies.

The first modern visual representation of Väinämöinen was in 1814. He was depicted more or less as a hero of Ancient Greece with long hair and a long beard. Ever since Väinämöinen has been drawn or painted in a similar fashion. (Knuuttila, 1987: 28) Also, the old singers in Karelia were men with beard. Especially one man, Pedri Shemeikka, was an archetype of runosingers with his long white beard, there were even sculptures made of him. The sculptor Alpo Sailo compared Shemeikka's appearance to the one of Leonardo da Vinci (Sailo 1928, 192).

And here we come to the pictures of modern-day heavy groups.

Picture 2 – Iivana Misukka, Iivana Onoila, Juho Kuokka (1916)

Picture 3 – Ensiferum, promotional photo (2001). Photo Toni Härkönen

The first set of pictures

Compare these kanteleplayers and runosingers at the beginning of 20th century with promotional photos of Ensiferum. Iivana Misukka, Iivana Onoila and Juho Kuokka are in the studio before a painting imitating nature. The picture is very similar than those paintings in the youth league halls or labour leisure-time halls. In the promotional photo Ensiferum is placed in a nature setting, under

a pine tree by a lake. The band members are dressed in the costumes of the Viking era that some believe is the time the Kalevala partly refers to. Ensiferum also dresses like this way in live performance, or they may have their upper bodies naked.

The second set of pictures

Still more impressive is a comparison between this Ensiferum live photo and the famous Kullervo's curse by Akseli Gallén-Kallela 1899. Gallén-Kallela's paintings have been the most influential in creating a 'standard' visual image of the Kalevala. Blond haired Kullervo and Petri Lindroos shout their angers out, upper body naked. Kullervo is the most tragic character in Kalevala: in the end of the poem he makes a suicide. (Amorphis made its latest cd Eclipse [2006] on the story of Kullervo.)

Picture 4 – Akseli Gallén-Kallela: “Kullervo’s curse” (1894) (Finnish National Gallery)

Picture 5 – Petri Lindroos, Ensiferum, photo Toni Salminen (February 2005)

The third pair of pictures

It depicts the kantele: Teppana Jänis from 1916 and Meiju Enho of Ensiferum. The Jänis photo is a classic reconstruction of Väinämöinen: long beard, the kantele and the lake. Meiju Enho is not the kantele player on the record, and she plays only keyboards in gigs. She merely holds the instrument. (Incidentally, the kantele is not held in that position for playing.) In this case the kantele is no more than a decorative element, but its symbolic value is so great as to make it an essential element in the promo pictures.

Picture 6 – Teppana Jänis (1916),
photo by A.O. Väisänen

Picture 7 – Meiju Enho, Ensiferum,
promotional photo (2001)

The following of pictures are the CD covers. The Ensiferum cover is more or less an ironic caricature of the Kalevala world – a comic representation. Väinämöinen stands in a rowing boat holding a sword and a shield. Mist is rising from the forest lake or river. At the centre of his shield is a Finnish flag ... which was, of course now invented until the early 20th century! [The cover art is by Necrolord.]

The Insomnium cover represents the mythical Finnish forest in gloom and mist, perhaps in the late autumn. Some snow is already on the ground. The full moon lurks behind the mist. [The cover art is by Jarno Lahti.]

What is missing in these pictures: the archetypal image of metal groups expressing their anger. True, the Ensiferum has their swords... but something from the world of folklore has softened the usually aggressive image of heavy metal.

Picture 8 – The cover of *Ensiferum*: *Ensiferum* (2001), by Necrolord

Picture 9 – The cover of *Insomnium*: *Since the day it all came down* (2003), by Jarmo Lahti.

The same motifs can be also seen on the covers of both bands' other CDs. (*Ensiferum*: *The Iron* [2004], *Insomnium*: *In The Halls of Awaiting* [2002]).

The final pair of pictures shows an old, blind runosinger Miihkali Perttunen, and singer, bassist Niilo Sevänen from *Insomnium* (see next page). The picture of Perttunen is one of the most famous photos of old runosingers. It is said to show the glorious and grandiose nature of runosingers. Sevänen's photo is in the same mood, though perhaps unintentionally. In both photos the light is coming from from a window to the left. The window Sevänen looks out is an old window typical to the kind of that Perttunen is sitting in. [Perttunen's photo by I.K. Inha, 1894, Sevänen's by Sakari Lindell, 2003.]

Picture 10 – Miihkali Perttunen.
Photo I.K. Inha, 1894

Picture 11 – Niilo Sevänen, *Insomnium*.
Photo Sakari Lindell, 2003

The role in the modern culture: Why the Kalevala just now?

By the time these metal bands started in the 1990s the role of Finnish folk music had changed. There were bands like Värttinä, which is internationally famous in world music circles. One of their records sold platinum in the 1990s in Finland, and it was played repeatedly on national radio. The folk music was now taught in the university etc. (eg. Ramnarine, 2003). The situation had changed completely from when Vesa Kurkela wrote in the preface to his dissertation: “As a rock musician I couldn’t understand why somebody could be interested in choral singing, kantele, folk musicians or in folk dancing.” (Kurkela, 1989: 9)

One reason for this new Kalevala inspiration in heavy metal comes, of course, from international precedents. Ancient myths, Middle Ages, paganism and the Vikings have been significant inspirations for heavy metal groups well before the Kalevala became fashionable in Finland.

In the 1990s it became increasingly acceptable in the Finnish rock world to turn and look inside its own culture. In earlier decades, musical influences came more from abroad. The new trend was already making itself felt in the 1980s with the ‘new wave’. At first bands took their influences from the old dance music; later even folk music was accepted.

One interesting hypothesis is that a project called “A kantele to every school” had an influence on the rise of Kalevala metal. The Folk Music Institute initiated this project in 1985, and the result was that every primary school in Finland received a 5-stringed kantele. Teachers were also eager to teach kantele music to the kids. At this point, the instrument had almost vanished, and it had never before been taught in the primary schools.

The musicians of Ensiferum and Insomnium are all born between 1978-1981, so they have certainly experienced kantele music in the school. And they were in their early teens when Amorphis made its Tales-CD. The hypothesis is that these key experiences (in the sense of Karl Mannheim) may

have played an important role as the styles of these bands were evolved (On the key experiences eg. Virtanen, 2001: 33-35).

The relationship between heavy metal culture and the Kalevala is a very interesting. It is a continuously evolving process. At the beginning summer 2005 there was an exhibition presented by the Art School of Vantaa. Its teenaged students had created pictures from the world of the Kalevala. Some of the images were full of heavy metal references. We can see that these Kalevala metal bands today represent the world of the Kalevala for teenagers. Such images come from the web sites of Kalevala metal bands.

This again produces new adaptations of ancient Finnish culture, the transformation of the national epic to modern times continues.

One of the greatest paradoxes of this relationship between metal and the Kalevala is the process of adaptation of ancient culture. Not many of the well-meaning folklorists and enlightened educators in the 1900s were able to make the Kalevala popular amongst young people. But now these notorious “loud and horrible” heavy metal musicians have brought the Kalevala into the everyday life of young Finns.

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