The Male Choral Music of Vejlo Tormis:

a primer

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Tormis History

Veljo Tormis (b.1930) was the eldest son of a music-loving farmer, the amateur violinist and conductor Riho Tormis, who became the köster (parish clerk and choir/schoolmaster Est.) at Vigala church. Under his leadership the church choir sang all kinds of music, participated in local social events and national song festivals, like most Estonian choirs at that time. This early experience of choral music and his involvement with national ideas and feelings related to the Estonian choral movement were certainly important for the future composer. At the age of 12, Veljo Tormis went to Tallinn to study music. A year later he was accepted for the organ class at the Conservatory. In 1951 he continued his composition studies at the Moscow Conservatory with Professor Vissarion Shebalin, graduating in 1956. Shebalin supported his student's interest in national style based on the use of folk music.

In Estonia, the years around 1960 were marked by the enthusiastic study of modern musical ideas made possible by the general intellectual liberation in the Soviet Union. The young composers Arvo Pärt and Kuldar Sink became the leaders of the local avant-garde, experimenting with serial techniques at a time when neoclassical models were more widespread. The breakthrough of modern composition techniques and an anti-romantic attitude to folk music took place in the music of Tormis in 1959-1967. In 1959 he led a student expedition to the little Estonian island of Kihnu, where they attended a real traditional wedding with old folk songs and dances. This event proved so enchanting that it changed Tormis' attitude to the use of folk material. He then wrote the Kihnu Island Wedding Songs (1959), a cycle based on the thorough study of Kihnu songs. His acquaintance with the music of Bartók and Kodály during a visit to Hungary in 1962 was to have a great influence on Tormis. He has confessed that the choral compositions of Kodály were particularly close to him, and that one of his most popular cycles, Autumn Landscapes (1964), was written under its influence. Some years later Tormis finished his first great cycle, Estonian Calendar Songs (1967), for male and female choir, drawing widely on the primeval enchanting power of ancient folk tunes. This was the starting point for "the Tormis' style", as we now know it, and several choral suites based on ancient folk songs of different peoples followed (Livonian Heritage in 1970, Votic Wedding Songs in 1971, and many others). No longer did Tormis use a folk tune as a melodic idea for further motivic development; instead, the old rustic songs sounded in his compositions in their original manner. Around them he has built truly symphonic choral textures and dramatic musical structures.

In the 1970s the scope of Tormis' search for archaic material widened from the nearest Balto-Finnic peoples to different traditions, giving rise to such works as North Russian Bylina (1976), Bulgarian Triptych (1978) and Latvian Drone Songs (1982). Sometimes he wanted to use traditional material close to the singers (e.g. Latvian songs were composed for a Latvian choir). But no less important has been his deep conviction that the ancient song traditions of different peoples have much in common: they reflect a way of life that is closer to nature, its beliefs and morals.

Tormis has often encouraged foreign choirs to sing his compositions in translation, as he insists that the singers and audience should understand what the song is about. However, words do have their musical aspect; music follows the rhythms and accents of verse prosody. Singable translations of the texts have therefore been made under his careful supervision and some compositions have versions in different languages.

In 1980, one of Tormis' greatest works, the ballet-cantata Estonian Ballads, was premiered at the Estonian National Opera. This is music for chorus, soloists and orchestra, and the stories of the ballads are represented by dancers in abstract and modern style. This was a difficult period for the Estonians, for the political climate of the Soviet Union had become harsher during the late 1970s. As a reaction, Tormis wrote several song cycles that almost brought him the aura of a dissident. He has always been outspoken, though in musical terms, about what he thinks about life around him. Some of his most serious compositions are also related to the new turning point in Estonian history, the reestablishment of independence in 1991 - A Vision of Estonia. It may be that the meanings and musical symbols embedded in these songs can be fully grasped only by people who have some experience of that life, but the message of Tormis' music in general has demonstrated its power regardless of language or time.
Opening lines of the Kalevala – the Finnish National Epic

I am driven by my longing,
And my understanding urges
That I should commence my singing,
And begin my recitation.
I will sing the people's legends,
And the ballads of the nation.
To my mouth the words are flowing,
And the words are gently falling,
Quickly as my tongue can shape them,
And between my teeth emerging....
Let us clasp our hands together,
Let us interlock our fingers;
Let us sing a cheerful measure,
Let us use our best endeavours,
While our dear ones hearken to us,
And our loved ones are instructed,
While the young ones are standing round us,
Of the rising generation,
Let them learn the words of magic,
And recall our songs and legends,
Of the belt of Väinämöinen,
Of the forge of Ilmarinen,
And of Kaukomieli's swordpoint,
And of Joukahainen's crossbow:
Of the utmost bounds of Pohja,
And of Kalevala's wide heathlands.

English translation W.F. Kirby (1907)

Opening lines of Songs of the Ancient Sea

Iilid tõusevad idasta
teised tõusevad kagusta
kolmandad veel lõuna’asta.
Kui need kolmed kokku saavad,
sis nad vihma veeretavad,
pilved laineida lasevad.
Sajavad savised pilved,
tinakarvased tibavad,
mustad muidu hirmutavad.

Kalevala 1:110, 2136.
Varjele, Jumala, soasta
(God, Protect us from War)
(Edition Fazer)

Translation:
Shelter us, Almighty God,
protect us, fair God
from the feud-foal’s hoofs,
from the cloven feet of the war horse,
from the cutting iron,
from the blunt point of a sword,
from the mouth of a gun,
from long rifles,
from wide battlefields,
from grounds of manslaughter,
shelter us from roads of harm,
protect us from all evil!

Shelter us, Almighty God,
protect us, fair God!

Kanteletar II: 323, 326

Laulja (The Singer)
Like a source of light
Stands the honorable singer
Among his brothers.

The thunder crashes —
And the singer is about to raise
His voice.

And around him
Still as the rocks in the sea
Peoples are listening.

Incantatio maris aestuosi (A Charm to Still the Waves)

(YL)
Translation by W. F. Kirby
“Enter, Jumala, my vessel,
Enter here, O thou most gracious,
Strengthen thou the hero’s weakness,
And the weakling do thou cherish,
on these far-extending waters,
On the wide expanse of billows!”
Kalevala XVIII: 29-34

“Blow, thou wind, and sway the vessel,
Urge the boat upon the water,
Lend assistance to the rowers,
To the rudder give thou lightness,
On the wide expanse of water,
Out upon the open water!”
Kalevala XLII: 197-202
But a little time passed over,
Short the time that then passed over,
When did Ukko, God the Highest,
Of the air the mighty ruler,
Winds arouse in magic fury,
Made the tempests rage around them.
Then the winds arose in fury,
And the tempests raged around them,
And the West wind blew most fiercely,
From the Southwest just as fiercely,
And the South wind still more fiercely,
And the East wind whistled loudly,
Roared the Southeast wind tremendous,
And the North wind howled in fury.
Kalevala XLII: 463-476

“Water, now restrain thy children,
And, O wave, do thou restrain them,
Ahto, do thou calm the billows,
Vellamo, o’ercome the waters,
That they splash not on our timbers,
Nor may overwhelm my boat-ribs!
Rise, O wind, aloft to heaven,
And among the clouds disport thee,
To thy race, where thou wast nurtured,
To thy family and kindred!
Do not harm this wooden vessel,
Sink thou not this boat of pinewood!”
Kalevala XLII: 529-540

**Kolm mul oli Kaunist Sõna (Three I Had Those Words of Beauty)**

Three I had those words of beauty,
Wordless were the words
Nameless were the names,

One it was golden, one silvery,
And one it was shining brazenly.

Oh oy, you my maiden starry-breasted,
All of the three to you I gave!
All that I had, lad so lighthearted,
Piper wandering penniless.

Oy,oy,oy,
One I set to brighten shining daytime
Burn as sun so red and brightly.
There it now is loudly shining,
Golden spurs of his tinkling soft.

Other set as moon to glow at nighttime.
Outside your window, behind the door.
There it now is sweetly calling,
Calling you, darling, in silver voice.

Third one I set it as a star above,
Stars in both eyes of yours,
Stars in both hands of yours,
Star on your starry glowing breast.
Oh, oy you my maiden!
This one kiss I take back again.
Paul-Eerik Rummo
translation from the Estonian by Krista Kaer
sung in Estonian

Muistse Mere Laulud  (Songs of the Ancient Sea)
(Warner/Chappell)

1
Blasts are rising from the East,
others are rising from the South-East,
third ones from the South.
When those three get together,
they will roll the rain,
clouds will rock the waves.
Clayish clouds will rain,
leaden ones will drizzle,
black ones will give a fright.

2
But I am a man who’s a sailor’s son
a precious man — a fisher’s son,
I know how to handle the winds,
and how to row the seas,
how to saill in the Northern wind,
how to dart the Southern wind,
how to stop the wind
and how to turn it around.
(Hail: Up the sails!)

1 sail the Red sea,
and the green sea of Sweden,
the stormy sea of Tarja,
the wicked sea Harju,
the sea of Viru so alive,
and my own sea so right.
(Ahoi! Ahoi!)

3
Come, oh, come thou little codfish,
thou little piggy of the bottom of the sea,
come on — to my golden hook,
come on — to my silver hook!

4
The sea has fed us, the sea has watered us,
the sea has taken away many men from us.

5
Once I had three brothers.
I sent one to the pasture-land,
I sent the second to a berry-patch,
I sent the third one fishing at sea.
My brother came home from the pasture-land,
the second came home from the berry-patch,
no-one came from fishing at sea.
Water had taken my brother away from me,  
water took him away, wind threw him away,  
the high coast had lost him.  
I cried for a month for my brother's coat,  
I cried for a day for my brother's wreath,  
I cried for a life-time for my dear brother.

6  
One cannot sleep on the coast,  
the sea roars,  
(Imitation of gulls: Kajak, kajak, kajak...)  
seals cry, brents sing,  
sea-gulls scream:  
Get up, people of the coast,  
wake up, masters of the sea,  
wake up mistresses of the sea,  
rise and pick up the net,  
take a look at the seine.  
(Hail: Anchor, let's go!)  
The sea rises to the storm,  
the coast starts to crack,  
rocks in the sea start to shrill,  
coastlines start to thunder.

7  
The wind must not come  
not the wind nor the wave,  
not the wave nor the rain,  
not even the bad weather.  
I've got my brother on the waters,  
and my sister at the sea,  
my daddy is over the ocean,  
my darling mother is in Helsinki.  
Let my brother come home from the waters,  
let my sister come home from the sea,  
let my daddy come home from behind the ocean,  
let my mother come home from Helsinki,  
Then the wind may come  
and the wave my roll.  
8  
Clear up, clear up, weather,  
clear up,  
clear up, skies,  
show a fresh and friendly face!
Where to Start…

Varjele, Jumala Soasta – God Protect Us from War (1984)

- **Length:** 5:00
- **Language:** Finnish (original) Latin
- **Solos:** None
- **Instruments:** Tam-tam
- **Theme:** A prayer to protect yourself from the perils of War
- **Difficulty:** 2 - Not a lot of text to learn, repetitive melody, intonation is the toughest thing with this piece.
- **Programming:** Any works about war and peace
- **Recording:** Ancient Voices
- **Publisher:** Edition Fazer
- **Comments:** This one of those pieces that no one has to understand the language to get the music. This song has great payoff for the singers and audience alike.

Lauluja – The Singer

- **Length:** 5:30
- **Language:** Estonian, English possible (see below)
- **Instruments:** Organ, Bass Drum, Cymbles
- **Theme:** Singers rock.
- **Difficulty:** 2 in English, 2.5 in Estonian
- **Recording:** With a Mighty Voice
- **Publisher:** Fennica Gehrman
- **Comments:** Great piece for male choir, Organ and percussion. This would be a wonderful concert opener. If you are singing with organ, you should do this piece. This makes a powerful statement about singing. Do this with the Pärt “De Profundis” - you have already paid for the organist and percussionist to be there. You’d have great contrast in works from two Estonian composers writing music for the same ensembles.

Incantatio Maris Aestuosi – Incantation for a Stormy Sea (1996)

- **Length:** 6:00
- **Language:** Latin
- **Solos:** none
- **Instruments:** Whistling
- **Theme:** A prayer to clam a storm as the men are out at sea. Written to memorialize the sinking of the Estonia a ferry that went down in the mid 90’s.
- **Difficulty:** 3.5 – lots of divisi but you only need to teach one melody. The Latin is much more familiar to American singers. Sounds harder than it is.
- **Recordings:** Vision of Man
- **Publisher:** YL
- **Comments:** This piece is programmatic – you can hear the waves in the vocal line, the storm surge with the whistling, the prayer to command the storm and the dissipation with the whistling at the end. This is a great tour-de-force work that is actually doable by a college choir. Your audience and singers will thank you.
Kolm mul oli kaunist sõna – Three I Had Those Word of Beauty 1962

Length: 6:30
Language: Estonian (modern), English
Solo: None
Instruments: Flute
Theme: Love is in the air! This piece is all sunshine and joy. It features lovely, caressing vocal lines and a delightful, idiomatic flute accompaniment. I find the singing English translation of this a little clunky but it can be done.
Recording: Goin’ Home
Difficulty: 2.5 – music is pretty easy, a decent amount of Estonian text.
Publisher: edition 49

Helletused – Childhood Memory (Herding Songs) 1982

Length: 8:00
Language: Phonetics
Solo: Soprano
Instruments: None
Theme: Herding calls reminiscent of childhood. The idea here is that the first songs sung by most children are herding songs, so this work is both a remembrance of youth and an ode to singing.
Recordings: Vision of Estonia I
Ancient Voices
Difficulty: 3 for the choir, 4-5 for the Soprano
Publisher: Fennica Gehrman

Vastlalaulud – Shrovetide songs (1968) part of Estonian Calendar songs

Length: 5:00 (3 movements)
Language: Estonian, English
Solo: None
Instruments: None
Theme: Estonian Mari Gras! Instead of throwing beads, the men sled down hills – the longer the run, the longer the flax would grow.
Difficulty: 2 in English, 3 in Estonian
Recordings: Casting a Spell
Publisher: Edition Fazer
Comments: Easy intro to Tormis. These pieces could pair well with other Shrovetide music- Saltarelle by Saint-Saens, Tarantella by Elliot Carter etc. The third movt is funny and evocative of sledding and could be sung on its own. You could use this at a holiday/winter concert as well for the sledding theme.

Maarjamaa ballad - Martinmass Songs (1968) part of Estonian Calendar songs

Length: 8:00 (9 movements)
Language: Estonian, English
Solo: None
Instruments: None
Theme: The songs for Martinmass (Nov 10) are similar in idea to our idea of wassailing. The men would travel from house to house in costumes. The nine movements outline the ritual that would take place in each home – a greeting, a blessing, a dance, a spell, begging for gifts etc.
Difficulty: 2 in English, 3 in Estonian
Recording: Casting a Spell
Publisher: Edition Fazer
Comments: A great alternative to all that Christmas music. This represents very straightforward music mostly with some nice surprises for singer and audience alike. Gives a great flavor of Estonian folk music, but maybe not in the most powerful way. Try this at Thanksgiving or Christmas.
Muistse Mere Laulud – Songs of the Ancient Sea (1979)

Length: 10:00
Language: Estonian
Solos: Two Tenors
Theme: Runic songs about the sea. The songs range from fishing songs to laments for those killed on the waters.
Difficulty: 4 – Lots of text but not for everyone (choir sings “oo” much of the time)
Some very difficult places where the beat gets turned around. Lots of divisi. Very exposed to intonation problems. All of that said, it sings well.
Cantus has found this piece VERY satisfying.
Programming: Could go with anything about the sea, chanties etc.
Recordings: Ancient Voices
Litany to Thunder,
Diamonds
There Lies the Home
Publisher: Edition Fazer
Comments: This really is a more advanced work – may not be the place to start but certainly is a place to end up!

Pikse Litaaania - Litany to Thunder (1974)

Length: 5:00
Language: Estonian
Solos: Bass, Tenor
Instruments: Bass Drum
Theme: Ritualistic song to bring the rain.
Difficulty: 5 – this one is a screamer. Lots of text to learn and challenging bits for the ear.
Not for the faint of heart.
Recordings: Litany to Thunder
Publisher: Edition Fazer
Comments: This is a tough piece. Very evocative and will unleash the testosterone-laden shaman in all of your singers. A real show stopper.
Recordings

Vision of Estonia I & II
Ants Soots, Conductor

works featured Volume 1:
- Helletused
- Incantatio maris Aestuosi
- lots of others!

works featured Volume 2:
- God Protect Us From War
- lots of others!

There Lies the Home
works featured:
- Songs of the Ancient Sea
- Incantatio Maris Aestuosi

...against the dying of the light
works featured:
- God Protect Us From War

Litany to Thunder
Tõnu Kaljuste, Conductor

works featured:
- Litany to Thunder
- Songs of the Ancient Sea

Vision of Man
Matti Hyökki, Conductor

works featured:
- Incantatio Maris Aestuosi

Goin’ Home
Diane Loomer, Conductor

works featured:
- Kolm mul oli kaunist sõna

Songs of War and Peace
Diane Loomer, Conductor

works featured:
- Varjele, Jumala, Soasta

Diamonds
Robert Sund, Conductor

works featured:
- Songs of the Ancient Sea
Muisted Haaled: Ancient Voices
Olev Oja, Conductor
works featured:
	- Songs of the Ancient Sea
	- God Protect Us From War
	- Helletused

With a Mighty Voice
Jon Bailey, Conductor
works featured:
	- The Singer (sung in English)

Casting a Spell
Tõnu Kaljuste, Conductor
works featured:
	- Martinmas Songs
	- Shrovetide Songs

Keeping Together
Olev Oja, Conductor
works featured:
	- The Singer
	- Hamlet’s Songs

People of Kalevala
Ants Soots, Conductor
works featured:
	- The Seventeenth Rune of “Kalevala”

Estonian National Male Choir

Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles

Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir

Estonian National Male Choir

Estonian National Male Choir

Resources

Veljo Tormis’ official website
www.tormis.ee

Recordings of Estonian Texts Spoken
Erick Lichte – lichte@cantusonline.org
I have recordings of many Tormis texts that I can email to you via mp3.
I also have contacts to native Estonian speakers that would be willing to
make recordings of texts.

Ancient Song Recovered - The Life and Music of Veljo Tormis
Mimi S. Daitz, Pendragon Press
Book on Tormis