

Kosijat (2001)

The suitors

0. Intro
1. Aurinko (The Sun)
2. Kuu (The Moon)
3. Pohjantähti (The North Star)

Ensemble :: Kokoonpano 4xS 4xA 4xT 4xB (16)
Duration :: Kesto 20 min
Publisher :: Kustantaja Sulasol S775
Text :: Teksti Kanteletar FI
Commissioned by :: Tilaaaja The Esoterics, Seattle (Washington), USA
Premiere :: Kantaesitys The Esoterics / Eric Banks
Seattle xi.2001

About Finnish folk poetry

Serious interest in ancient Finnish folk poetry emerged in the early 19th century with the development of the National Romantic movement in Finland. This is not to say that the oral tradition was unfamiliar to scholars before that; for example, Henrik Gabriel Porthan (1739-1804) brought Finnish history-writing, study of mythology and folk poetry and other humanistic sciences to an international level and sparked public interest in what later came to be known as Kalevala poetry and Finnish mythology.

Finland had become an autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire in 1809, having been part of the Kingdom of Sweden before that, and this contributed in no small way to the National Romantic movement – the Swedish-speaking upper classes found it difficult to identify with Russia as homeland, and a 19th-century Fennophile expressed the prevailing mood concisely thus: "We are not Swedish, we do not wish to become Russian – let us therefore be Finnish."

In the 1830s, with the move of the University (the only one in Finland at the time) to Helsinki, the new capital of the Grand Duchy, a movement known as Helsinki Romanticism emerged. Its members included four young students who were to prove immensely important to the forming of Finnish literature and, ultimately, the Finnish national identity: the poet **Johan Ludvig Runeberg** (1804-77), the scholar **Elias Lönnrot** (1802-84), the author **Zacharias Topelius** (1818-98) and the Hegelian philosopher and statesman **Johan Vilhelm Snellman** (1806-81).

Suomettaren kosijat on siitä mielenkiintoinen teksti, että se on kutakuinkin ainoa suomalainen kansanruno, jossa aurinko ja kuu käsitellään erillisinä. Yleensä ne esiintyvät aina parina ("ei päivä paista eikä kuu kumota"). Niinpä tämä teksti sopi erinomaisesti tilaukseen, jonka Eric Banks esitti minulle Corkin kansainvälisellä kuorofestivaalilla toukokuussa 2000. Hänen kuoronsa (The Esoterics) tulevan vuoden konserttisarjan teemana oli aurinko, kuu ja tähdet. Se, miksi hän sitten halusi kuorolleen 20-minuuttisen teoksen suomeksi, on edelleen minulle arvoitus, mutta erittäin hyvin he tehtävästä selviytyivät.

Suomalaisille esittäjille ja kuulijoille on päivänselvää, missä määrin tämä teos nojaa kalevalaiseen perinteeseen. Tosin kalevalainen melodiikka on tässä siirretty muunnellen (tai pahoinpidellen) hieman outoon modaaliseen ympäristöön. Synteettiset asteikot (joissa puoli- ja kokosävelaskelet vuorottelevat) eivät tietenkään ole peräisin kansanperinteestä. Teksti tuki tietynlaista impressionistista lähestymistapaa, mikä tuntuu selvimmin Kuu-osassa.

Toistoa on teoksessa paljon, ja vaikka en väittäisikään sitä minimalistiseksi niin runolaulun monotoninen mutta hypnoottinen jorina ei ole missään vaiheessa kovin kaukana.

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(cont.)

Especially important was Elias Lönnrot, who performed a huge task in collecting folk poetry from the remote wildernesses of Karelia (where the ancient oral tradition still survived unbroken) and compiling these to what was to become Finland's national epic, the *Kalevala* (1849). It is composed of 50 poems or cantos (sometimes called 'runo' or 'runes'), altogether 22,795 verses.

The book starts with a creation-myth, then goes on to recount the deeds and adventures of the three protagonists, Väinämöinen the magician and bard, Ilmarinen the smith, and Lemminkäinen the wanton loverboy and warrior, and ends with the introduction of Christianity to Finland.

Lönnrot was under the influence of Homeric ideals and tried to forge the poems into a single epic, adding bits and pieces of his own and altering some parts to make them appear a whole. It has since been established, however, that in the original tradition the narrative stock of the *Kalevala* had never been conceived of as a complete coherent entity or continuous story like the *Odyssey*, for example. But it is also worthwhile to remember that Lönnrot's contributions amount to only 3% of the total volume of the *Kalevala*.

Nevertheless, the importance of the *Kalevala* in the development of Finnish literature, arts and identity can hardly be over-estimated, and having been translated to all major world languages and lots of minor ones, it is no doubt the most important contribution of Finland to world literature.

Lönnrot also published a counterpart to the *Kalevala*, the *Kanteletar*, a collection of ancient lyrical poetry often sung by women. The *Kanteletar* contains 662 separate poems or songs, mostly brief but in the case of certain narrative ballads almost as extensive as some of the stories in the *Kalevala*. These two books, however, cover but a small part of the recorded Finnish folk poetry. Between 1908-48 was published a massive, 33-volume book series called *Suomen Kansan Vanhoja Runoja* (Ancient poems of the Finnish people), containing altogether 85,000 poems, with well over a million verses – one of the largest collections of its kind in the world. This documentation has increased in value enormously since the Second World War since it has become apparent that the oral tradition of which it is a record has to all intents and purposes ceased to exist.

About this text

Suomettaren kosijat (The suitors of Maid Finland) shows many of the typical features of 'Kalevala poetry'. Like all poetry in the genre, it is unrhymed and in trochaic tetrameter – that is, it has eight syllables in each line, with stress on the first syllable and every other syllable thereafter. It is highly alliterative; the alliteration is such an important feature of the style that it occasionally overrides narrative coherence. (For example, we are told that the number of suitors is variously three and nine – but the number nine simply arises from alliteration with a word for 'suitor'!)

There are frequent repetitions, a memory-aid feature found in nearly all orally transmitted literature. Triple repetition of the kind found in many folk traditions (it is always the third prince who gets the princess, etc.) can be seen in this text only in the fact that there are three suitors. Usually 'Kalevala poetry' has this repetition working on several levels: a hero may have three adventures, with three stages in each adventure and with triple epithets applied to everyone and everything appearing in the story. Even a simple action such as chopping down a tree may be mentioned three times:

*Once he struck it, twice he struck it,
And he struck it yet a third time...*

What is also unusual in this text is that it is one of the very few poems in the entire genre that treats the Sun and the Moon as separate entities. Usually, these two are mentioned together as manifestations of the concept of 'celestial body':

*The Sun would never shine upon him,
Nor the Moon shed light upon him...*

Even closer than the pairing of Sun and Moon, however, is the pairing of gold and silver, which without fail (and indeed in the present text) appear together as

interchangeable descriptions for the concept of 'precious metal' or 'richness'. There are many pairs like this in 'Kalevala poetry' – in many cases they exist merely for the sake of alliterative repetition of the same concept at the expense of accuracy. These repetitive devices, often in the form of invariable formulas, are of course a memory aid, intended to allow the singer/chanter to 'play for time' while thinking out the next section.

Suomettaren kosijat was, naturally enough, found extremely suitable by the National Romantics as an allegory for Finland as a nation: The image of Finland as a maiden is an old one, and in this poem she refuses the scorching Sun and the changeable Moon for the modest but steadfast North Star. Although it was originally not created for that purpose, the poem does project a highly appropriate image of Finland's northerly location and her poor but honest people.

About this setting

I need to point out first of all something that will be immediately apparent to Finnish performers and listeners: the musical material of this setting relies heavily on traditional Finnish tunes – not the stanzaic folk songs of the 19th century but the ancient melodic stock that is associated with 'Kalevala poetry'. In its most familiar form, it consists of paired phrases in 5/4 time, the final two notes of each phrase being the same. Usually only a single pair of phrases is used, with variations; the melody is in fact less important than the text, and it is difficult to say whether recitations of poetry in this genre should be described as singing or chanting.

The reason for the phrases going in pairs is the 'call-and-response' pattern, yet another feature that exists in numerous folk traditions all around the world: one singer sings a phrase and the rest of the people present repeat it. An early form of 'audience participation', it was also a framework for passing on the tradition. A feature peculiar to the Finnish tradition (and one that is used in this setting too) is that both the 'caller' and the 'respondents' may pick up on the final two notes of the preceding phrase in preparing for their next entrance. This is done regardless of whether the final two notes have a whole word or not.

The melodic material has been gently teased (or bludgeoned, depending on your point of view) into a slightly alien modal environment, and the synthetic scales (alternating semitones and whole tones) that are used extensively of course have no basis in folk tradition. Then again, the text seemed to prompt a slightly Impressionistic approach to the material – this is particularly apparent in the Moon section. There is a great deal of repetition involved, and although I would not go as far as to describe the music as Minimalist, the monotonous yet hypnotic drone of the ancient singing (or chanting) is never very far away.

This piece was commissioned by Eric Banks for The Esoterics of Seattle, Washington, USA as the result of a late-night discussion at the Cork International Choral Festival in Ireland in May 2000. His brief was for a tripartite piece on the theme of Sun, Moon and the stars, which was the theme for the choir's concert series in the year 2001. Why he wanted The Esoterics to sing a 20-minute work in Finnish is quite frankly beyond me, but sing it they did, and very well too.

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Duration: 5'30"

Commissioned by The Esoterics of Seattle (Washington), USA

[Duration of entire piece: 20']

Kosijat • The Suitors

Kanteletar III:1

0. Intro

Jaakko Mäntyjärvi (2001)

Moderato ♩ = 72

S1

S2 *pp*
a- i a i a i a i a i a- ...

S3 *pp*
a- i a i

S4 *pp*
a- i a i a i

Moderato ♩ = 72

A1

A2

A3

A4

Moderato ♩ = 72

T1

T2

T3

T4

Moderato ♩ = 72

B1

B2

B3

B4

14
a - i-

sempre pp

sempre pp

sempre pp

14
sempre pp

sempre pp

sempre pp

14
a - i-

14 **T1+T2**

p
O - li en - nen nei - ti

T3+T4

p
O - li en - nen nei - ti nuo - ri, (i)

14 **B1+B2**

p
O - li en - nen nei - ti

B3+B4

p
O - li en - nen nei - ti nuo - ri, (i)