

# Veljo Tormis

## – in the fields of epic

*Veljo Tormis, Estonia's best-known choral composer, died in Tallinn on 21 January at the age of 86. His extensive, highly-varied choral output drawing on folk songs is a tribute to forgotten peoples, vanishing traditions and cultural minorities.*

**TORMIS WAS BORN** at Kuusalu in Estonia on 7 August, 1930. His father was a church organist and choir leader, and his mother a keen singer in a choir. While still a child, Veljo developed an interest in the organ. This he studied along with choral conducting in Tallinn, and later composition at the Moscow Conservatory. In addition to composing, he was a professor at both the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and the University of Tartu.

A study trip to Hungary in the 1960s, and especially the choral music of Kodály, were great sources of inspiration for Tormis and guided him in the direction of folklore. Other Estonian composers before him had already collected folk songs – **Eduard Tubin** and **Cyrillus Kreek**, for example – but Tormis took his interest further, both temporally and geographically. His style of composition was finally moulded by the realisation that for him, folk songs were not just melodic motifs to be developed. Rather, he felt their spirit should integrate with the music and modern concert form.

Tormis maintained that he was a composer not of folk music but of classical choral music that sought to preserve the authenticity of its source material. The *Estonian Calendar Songs* (Eesti kalendrilaulud) completed in 1967 pointed to this new style. The most popular of the 29 songs is possibly the *St. John's Day Songs* (Jaanilaulud), likened to the jubilant cry of revellers in the nightless Midsummer night; the theme is such that, once heard, it can never be forgotten. Despite the seeming simplicity, the choral writing is extremely resourceful and inventive. The ear is often caught first by the expressive melody, but Tormis's skill at creating harmonies with the accompanying voices and at using subtle alterations to the rhythms is the thing for which he is best known and the reason why choirs have fallen in love with his music again and again.

### Forgotten peoples his mission

Choral conductor and musicologist **Mimi S. Daitz** divides the works for choir by Tormis into three categories: ones based on texts by 20th century poets such as **Viivi Luik** and **Jaan Kaplinski**, ones with traditional words and melodies set within a larger compositional framework, and ones which are more or less folk song arrangements, i.e. those composed for school children. Tormis is best known specifically for

his archaic songs from the Baltic region. His choral output is a tribute to the forgotten peoples, vanishing traditions and cultural minorities whose living conditions have, over the ages, virtually been destroyed.

Tormis composed numerous songs describing everyday life and customs in ancient times: harvest and the daily round, games, weddings, lullabies and incantations. The individual songs are fairly short, but together they often constitute broader cycles, such as the *Nature Pictures* (Looduspildid). His music does not just preserve memories, melodies and traditions that would otherwise be in danger of falling into oblivion; it brings them back to life. Who today would be familiar with the primeval runic songs (Estonian alliterative folk songs) had Tormis not helped to revive them?

*Forgotten Peoples* (Unustatud rahvad), composed between 1970 and 1989 for unaccompanied mixed choir, is the biggest of the choral cycles. The six sizeable movements encompass folklore of the Baltic-Finnic peoples. Tormis just happened to meet some of the few remaining Livonians, and their songs and language inspired him to write this cycle. He carefully adapted the original texts with the help of linguists. Among the movements most often performed is *Ingrian Evenings*, based on folk tunes collected south of St. Petersburg. Tormis also wanted to show that despite their differences, traditions may resemble one another in their relationship to nature, their customs and beliefs.

### The singing revolution

In the 1980s, particularly, folk music was a means for Estonians to express their growing nationalist feelings. Tormis was a conspicuous figure in the "singing revolution" that preceded Estonia's independence, when the programmes for the massive singing events held in his country included popularised folk songs. Many of his works were political statements aiming expressly to raise national awareness. *Vision of Estonia* (Nägemus Eestist, 1989/91) for male choir, to words by **Juhan Liiv**, was a symbolic statement on Estonia's gaining of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Before that, Tormis had done a vast job familiarising Estonians with their common vocal heritage by giving talks and directing singing events all over the country.

In composing a vocal work, Tormis began with the words. The texts gave birth to melodies, and with them often the evocative, repetitive rhythms he used to create effective tensions. Now and then he might be spotted playing the drums. *Curse Upon Iron* (Raua needmine, 1972) based on The Kalevala represents the more primitive side of his music; the hair-raising narrative, swelling to compelling proportions, is seasoned with whispers, whistles, drumming and ostinatos. *An Aboriginal Song* (Pärismaalase lauluke, 1981) is a short, popular, ritualistic piece for male choir and shaman's drum. *Singing aboard Ship* (Laevas lauldakse, 1983) is

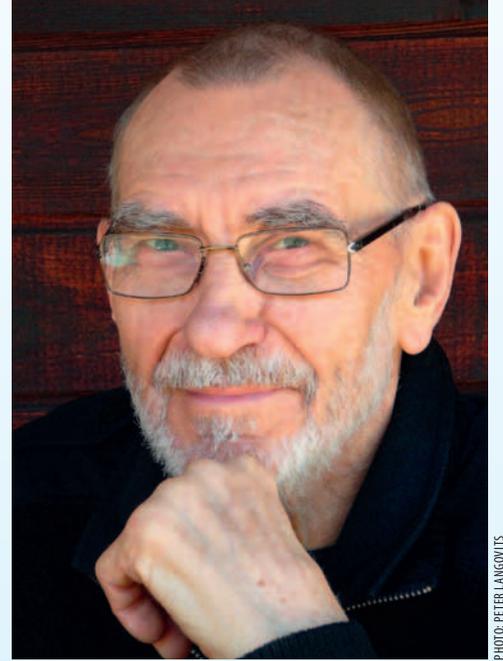


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a women's lament as they stand on the shore, yearning for their husbands sent off to war.

### Tidings of Tormis's creations

Tormis also composed an opera, *Swan Flight* (Lui-gelend, 1966), chamber music, solo works, and film and orchestral music, such as the popular *Overture No. 2* for orchestra often conducted by **Eri Klas** and others outside Estonia. In 2009, Tormis arranged some of his choral works in a suite for string orchestra, *Reminiscentia*, lasting nearly an hour. He had already stopped composing by then but was still working, among other things transcribing works for different types of choir.

The published choral songs by Tormis have found a place in the repertoire of choirs both professional and amateur and have spread far and wide. Many of his songs exist in performing translations into English approved by him. The Estonian Philharmonic Choir, the RAM male choir and choral conductor **Tõnu Kaljuste** have been particularly active ambassadors for his music with their performances and recordings.

"I have always had some specific reason for composing: to say something, to stress some idea, even a political one," Tormis once said. He never called attention to himself, letting the music speak for itself. As a person he was reserved, wise and warm-hearted. **Tiia Järg** wrote in a review of his choral disc *Epic Fields*: "The unity with nature, feeling the link between generations, mental balance and inner dignity – this is the tidings of Veljo Tormis's creations given through the prism of his music. Tormis binds his listener to contemplate on the profound essence of life, responsibility towards the past and the future. Through his creation the voice of our ancestors addresses us. Only if the ethical norms of life are held sacred can human beings survive as species. And therefore Tormis is walking in the fields of epic."

HENNA SALMELA

#### Footnote

"Reflections with Tormis' Music" was a concert organized on 26 January at the Estonia Concert Hall in Tallinn to pay tribute to the composer. There was also a memorial concert on 12 March coordinated by the Estonian Composers' Union.