

During the last decade the works of **Veljo Tormis**, the 20th-century Estonian master of choral music, have largely been published as revised editions including English translations. A complete edition of his *Forgotten Peoples* was printed in 1997. Two of his other major works for a cappella chorus, “*Eesti kalendrilaulud*” [Estonian Calendar Songs] and “*Looduspildid*” [Nature Pictures] have also recently been made available by Fennica Gehrman. Included in these scores are English singing translations prepared by the prize-winning translator of Estonian and Finnish, **Ritva Poom**.



(Photo: Tõnu Tormis)

**T**he *Estonian Calendar Songs* (1966–67) use Balto-Finnic traditional poems and melodies integrally, while the *Nature Pictures* (1964–69) set texts by contemporary poets. The latter settings involve newly composed melodies in which, as is always the case with Tormis, elements of traditional Estonian song lurk nearby. According to the composer, neither of these series of cycles belongs to the category of his multi-part choral music whose constituent songs should be performed together, in the order given, because there is a narrative uniting them. In fact, within each of the four cycles of *Nature Pictures* there is a logic to the order of the songs and even the direction “*attaca*” from one song to another. The order of the cycles in *Estonian Calendar Songs* also has a musical logic: I and III are for men’s voices, II and IV are for women’s voices, while the final cycle is for mixed voices, serving as a culmination of the entire series. They can all be heard on the Virgin Classics CD,  *Casting a Spell* (1996), magnificently performed by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir directed by **Tõnu Kaljuste**.

Each of the five groups of songs of *Estonian Calendar Songs* is concerned with an important holiday in the Estonian farmer’s year, related to the beginning or ending of a part of the annual work cycle. These holidays involved rituals which were carried out to assure success in the work of that period, but eventually, as elsewhere, became associated with Christian saints’ days occurring at a particular time of year. The first group, *Mardilaulud* [St. Martin’s Day Songs] would have been sung on the 9th of November, when festive food was being prepared for the members of the household and treats were offered to “St. Martin’s beggars” – the people who

## Estonian Calendar Songs and Nature Pictures: TWO MAJOR WORKS BY VELJO TORMIS<sup>1</sup>

MIMI S. DAITZ

came mumming on that day.”<sup>2</sup> “Martin was a bringer of fair crops, the symbolic receiver of the autumnal harvest and the initiator of a successful new agricultural year.”

Two weeks later came St. Catherine’s day, 25 November, for which there were *Kadriklaulud*. This time it was the young women’s turn to visit the village farm houses in disguise. They, too, blessed the household, begged for goodies to eat, and danced while singing the refrain “Kadriko, kadriko.” The tune on which the entire cycle is based was collected in southern Estonia, where refrains were common in *regilaulud* (ancient Estonian traditional songs). The third group of songs, *Vastlailaulud* [Shrovetide Songs], was for Shrove Tuesday, the Christian beginning of Lent. “The most popular day for manuring the fields was Shrove Tuesday, the reason for it prob-

ably being that there was always a new moon on that day, which was considered to promote growth. ... Wherever there is open ice on the river, there all the young people come together to show their prowess in sliding. The person who makes the longest slide will also grow the longest stalks of flax.”

In late spring and early summer, when the first hay mowing allowed any free time, young people went courting on the village swing. In *Kiigelaulud* [Swing Songs] it is the girls alone who converse with the swing, dreaming of suitors as they watch the countryside fly by. The final cycle of the series (*Jaanilaulud*), which brings the men’s and women’s choruses together for the first time, is for one of the most important holidays of the Estonian year: St. John’s or Midsummer’s Eve, on June 23.

The tunes for the *Calendar Songs* are from volume II of the five-volume collection that Tormis considered to be his bible: Herbert Tamperes’ *Eesti rahvalaule viisidega* [Estonian Folksongs with Melodies], published in Tallinn, 1956–65. Tormis uses these tunes in their entirety, not breaking them up into motifs to be developed. Shamanistic repetition is crucial to his style. He adds harmony, usually created from the pitches of the tune, moving in parallel mo-

39 *f* *accelerando*

tion. He changes the central pitch of a section with no modulation. Rhythmically he creates variety with differing lengths of rests or of sustained tones at the end of a phrase, and Haydnesque unexpected entrances. Above all, he “orchestrates” with voices, using extremes of ranges, unusual doublings, occasional *Sprechstimme*, *glissandi*, and changing numbers of voice parts. The powerful ending of “Jaanilaul,” the final song of *Jaanilaulud*, has the sopranos divisi a tre, and each of the other voice parts split into two lines, for a total of nine vocal lines, moving in parallel major triads and parallel seconds and thirds.

104 *Piu largo* (♩ = 56) *poco a poco crescendo e piu elastico*

Lää - mi val - lä Jaa - ni kai - ma, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,  
Come out, come out, look at Jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,  
Lää - mi val - lä Jaa - ni kai - ma, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,  
Come out, come out, look at Jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,  
Lää - mi val - lä Jaa - ni kai - ma, jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,  
Come out, come out, look at Jaa - ni, jaa - ni - ka,

This song is one of those most frequently sung by itself, without the six other songs of the cycle from which it comes. Another song which choral conductors have sometimes chosen to program without the two songs which follow it in cycle III (*Shrovetide Songs*) is “Vistel-vastel.”

Less likely to be sung individually are the twenty songs in four cycles for women’s chorus which make up *Nature Pictures*. The exception to this is “Virmalised” [Northern Lights], song number 4 of the cycle *Talvemustrid* [Winter Patterns] which is the longest, by far, of these songs and is often sung by itself.

The first of the four cycles to be composed, *Sügismaastikud* [Autumn Landscapes] became cycle III of the series. It was later adapted by Tormis for mixed chorus. Photo copies of this version, published in Leningrad in 1986, circulated in the West until Fennica Gehrman brought out both the women’s chorus and the mixed chorus versions.

In a 1995 essay about the creation of this work Tormis wrote that he was 33 years old when he was shown the poems of **Viivi Luik**, then 16 or 17. They captivated him “with their direct perception of nature...” He further explained that in 1962 he was able to travel to Budapest for the celebration of **Zoltan Kodály’s** 80th birthday. “The person and the choral music of Kodály exerted a great influence over me,” Tormis wrote. The premiere of the cycle was in 1964, performed by the Women’s Chorus of the Estonian Academy of Sciences under the direction of **Arvo Ratassepp**. Their ninety voices made an extraordinary sound, Tormis told me. That sound, with its special range of dynamics, has not been duplicated in performance.

The entire series of cycles, each concerned with one of the seasons and each by a different

poet, was completed over a span of five years. Cycle I, *Kevadkillud* [Spring Sketches] uses haikus by **Jaan Kaplinski**; II, *Suvemotiivid* [Summer Motifs] sets the poems of **Aleksander Suuman**; III, *Sügismaastikud*, Viivi Luik; and *Talvemustrid* [Winter Patterns], **Andres Ehin**. The styles of the cycles are remarkably similar: tone painting of the poetic images is clear and effective, text setting is syllabic with no melismas, except the occasional sustaining of a vocable through many pitches for special effects. There are few repetitions of words except, again, for special effects such as “virmalised virvendavad” [shimmering northern lights] which is repeated almost throughout song no. 4 of cycle IV. Tormis uses these verbal sounds, pronounced very rapidly, along with chromatic scale passages (very rare in his oeuvre) to create aural northern lights. Other similarities among the songs are their brevity and the prevailing delicacy of their sounds, although they can also be very powerful.

*Allegretto* ♩ = 112 *ppp sotto voce*

Vir - ma - li - sed... vir - ma - li - sed vir - ven - da - vad...  
Bor - e - al - is... bor - e - al - is gim - mer, shim - mer...  
Vir - ma - li - sed... vir - ma - li - sed  
Bor - e - al - is... bor - e - al - is

To my knowledge, there is no single recording containing all four cycles, although there are at least four CDs of *Autumn Landscapes*, all in the mixed chorus version. (See [www.veljotormis.com](http://www.veljotormis.com) for an up-to-date discography.) The women of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Chorus recorded the entire series in 1994, but the recordings have not been released. Tormis knows that any CD by this group is heard as definitive and he does not want the definitive recording of *Nature Pictures* done with just a few voices, as wonderful as those voices are. We can hope that Kaljuste puts together the women’s voices of the three professional choruses he has directed, to record this 20th-century masterpiece. ■

#### END NOTES

1. This article is an adaptation of chapter IX of *Ancient Song Recovered: The Life and Music of Veljo Tormis* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2004).
2. This and the following quotations are from Mall Hiie-mäe, “The Estonian Folk Calendar” in *Estonian Customs and Traditions*, Ülo Tedre, ed. (Tallinn: Perioodika, 1995, 3rd edn.) pp. 16, 17, 27.

*Ancient Song Recovered: The Life and Music of Veljo Tormis* includes chapters on Estonian choral tradition, biography of Tormis and discussion of his major works. Included also is an article by and an interview with Tormis – all of which appear for the first time in English. A works list, discography and CD of sound examples conclude the volume by musicologist and choral conductor **Mimi S. Daitz**.  
ISBN 1-57647-009-1;  
[www.pendragonpress.com](http://www.pendragonpress.com)

