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## Finnish tango on old amateur tapes – complementing a popular music history with local sounds

My aim is to discuss the use of old amateur tapes as source material in the historiography of local dance music. The other topic is the role of the Finnish tango on the local dance music scene. The tango is often mentioned as an example of transregional music that has “a very high energy that spills across regional boundaries, perhaps even becoming global” (Slobin 1993: 19). However, the Finnish tango is typically a regional phenomenon. Musically speaking – in its melodic structure and performance style – it is very different from its Argentine and Western European counterparts (cf. Åhlén 1987: 125). Furthermore, the Finnish tango has been popular only in Finland and partly in Sweden, among Finnish speaking audiences. In the following I shall point out that the tango in Finland is not only a regional/national style, but that there have also been several local tango styles, invisible and forgotten in the national publicity.

Invisible local music very easily becomes peripheral, insignificant, uninteresting and meaningless. On the other hand, locality is easily related to authenticity and uniqueness that are doubtlessly positive cultural values. It may be needless to say that the judgement very much depends on the critic’s own situation, location, and position. Folk music research has usually benefited from these positive images of locality, whereas in popular music studies, local music quite often remains marginal. (Connell & Gibson 2003, 107-115).

### 1. LOCAL MUSIC AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

I am the co-author of the sixth volume of *History of Finnish Music: Popular music* (Jalkanen & Kurkela 2003). My topic was the period from the Second World War until the 1980s. From the very beginning of the writing process, the authors agreed on two main principles. First, we should make rough generalizations, in order to find the main line of Finnish salon music, dance music, popular songs, and rock music. Secondly, we felt it was very important not to ignore more marginal musical phenomena in the main story.

Finding and verifying the general line was not a big problem. However, after the book came out, I quite soon realized what had happened. I had been writing the history of kings, the story of the great and the grand. Musical mainstream, nationally acclaimed artists and songwriters played the main roles. My examples were selected mainly from the hit parades. Marginal styles were rarities, and local narratives outside the capital city of Helsinki were quite rare in the story. There were many reasons for this.

Even before the writing process I knew that the Finnish popular music scene has always been concentrated on Helsinki. This was true especially of the national recording industry until the 1980s, the decade when the story of the book ends. Concentration is also a proper term to describe music publicity, especially in the electronic media. Up until the 80s, the media image of Finnish pop songs and rock music was firmly anchored in the capital scene.

Still the concentration of the media and music publicity is partly superficial and even misleading. From the perspective of Helsinki all local cultural activities easily seem to be minor and insignificant. The media located in the capital naturally maintains a similar image. In this process the local musical life of Helsinki becomes universal and absolutely non-local and local music elsewhere in Finland becomes marginal.

The situation is totally different in the provinces. Local music has always been decidedly visible, locally speaking. In point of fact, before the age of music recording and broadcasting, nearly all dance music was local. Brass bands, fiddlers, accordion players and small dance music combos lived and played in a relatively narrow geographic area. Transregional dance musicians were practically unknown. Local players were famous, although only locally speaking.

However, the locality of dance and festival music in the 20th century is interestingly contradictory. At the beginning of the century, when a brass band in rural Finland played the overture *Caliph of Bagdad* by François Boiëldieu, it was a really local interpretation of this popular opera music. The same was true in the 1950s, when a local tango singer presented the tango song *Simitaivas* (*Blue Heaven*) by Joe Rixner. The names Boiëldieu and Rixner, however, show that, at the same time, it was a question of very international and transregional music. Similar examples can be easily found in most modern dance and festival music in Finnish dance pavilions and community halls. If a historian does not precisely know how and by which route the transregional music of Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg or New York came to Finland, she or he cannot understand the development of local styles here.

In conclusion, my experiences of writing a general history of Finnish popular music can be summarized in three short comments:

- All music and any kind of music making are essentially local, but music history books typically focus on the national and transregional level. They are histories of kings and stars, and even the social histories very often focus on the musical scenes and audiences in big cities and commercial centres.
- To combine the local and national level in the same historiography is quite difficult. This combination is even more difficult when the research is mainly based on commercial recordings: The national record industry in Finland – and elsewhere – has effectively rejected all kinds of localities.
- It is difficult to write local music history before an extensive general history is written. Without any reference to the general development, local history becomes too restricted and vacuous.

In order to correct the bias described above, various local histories should be written, from different geographical areas, from different angles and theoretical viewpoints. New research material is also needed. In this work amateur recordings are usually more important than commercial recordings, written biographies of popular artists must be replaced by personal histories and memoirs of dance musicians, often based on interviews. Here popular music historiography could easily follow the principles of traditional ethnomusicology and focus on dance music at the grassroots level. The general aim of this kind of research is to complement national music history with local sounds.

## 2. THE FINNISH TANGO IN SOUTHERN OSTROBOTHNIA

My current research project deals with the development of local music making in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the province of Southern Ostrobothnia. This inland province is located in western Finland, east of the Swedish-speaking seaside regions on the Gulf of Bothnia. The area is famous for being the site of real tango maniacs: Especially in the 1960s the Finnish tango is alleged to have been almost the only accepted dance genre in the Ostrobothnian dance pavilions.

Even today, the myth of tango fundamentalism is repeated and reproduced by local storytelling. Actually, the tango and other older dance music genres seem to be a crucial part of local identity. The Finnish tango is also supposed to be a symbol of the South Ostrobothnian mentality. In recent years, the role of the tango has been strongly emphasised by the famous music festival *Tangomarkkinat* (lit. Tango Fair). Since 1984, the festival has been held in Seinäjoki town. With audiences of tens of thousands it has developed into the biggest tango festival in Europe. The

Finnish commercial TV channel MTV3 has also made the *Tangomarkkinat* nationally well-known. As a result of the media publicity, the image and style of the tango as local dance music has been replaced by those of the gala-like song competition, where the nominees for the tango titles – tango kings, queens, princes and princesses – render classical tangos in evening dress accompanied by the Seinäjoki symphony orchestra (cf. Heinonen 2003: 28-33, 46-49).

The glitzy *Tangomarkkinat* with symphonic tango performances on TV is in stark contrast to the common picture of Southern Ostrobothnia in Finnish popular culture. The popular image consists of provincial peasant habits, flat landscape, plain-spoken men called *puukkojunkkarit* (knife fighters) in folk costumes with cute little sheath knives, big cars, and huge duplex peasant houses. No wonder that Southern Ostrobothnia is often called the America of Finland. In everyday speech the image is strengthened by stereotypic folk characters attributed to all the Ostrobothnians: showmanship and boasting, commitment, directness, frankness, and seriousness.

Thus, the *Tangomarkkinat* festival fits quite poorly into the traditional image of Southern Ostrobothnian traditional culture. Similarly, the festival has little to do with local tango culture, with small dance pavilions and community halls. This dance hall tradition and the old tango recordings form a juncture that unites the mythical tango discourse and the popular image of Ostrobothnian people: the traditional Finnish tango, like stereotypic Ostrobothnian folk, is earnest, rural, masculine, bound to nature and fate, and full of veiled emotions.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.1. LOCAL TANGO EXAMPLES FROM THE MID-60S

From 1962 to 1965 the Finnish popular music scene experienced an unprecedented situation. There was a real tango boom in the country. The boom was easily seen in pop music charts, where strikingly many popular songs in top positions were tangos by Finnish composers and sung in Finnish. The popularity of the tango was even greater in community houses and summer pavilions in rural areas, as the musicians' life stories and other contemporary testimonies frequently confirm. Commercial recordings, however, give quite a one-sided picture of tango singing style in the 1960s. The singers on the tango records were chosen by the recording company headquarters in Helsinki. The prevailing trend was quite monolithic, favouring young male voices, typically with the Roma background or Gypsy-like singing style.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Finnish tango lyrics, see Kukkonen (1996: 150-155, 171-192).

Due to the tango boom, the earlier dominant style of dance music, so-called swing *schlager* (in Finnish: *swing-iskelmä*), disappeared from the Finnish hit parade. It was the end of a very remarkable era in the history of Finnish popular music. In the mid-1950s, for the first time in Finland, hit songs were mainly sung by female singers. These “alto crooners” favoured modern dance music like slow fox and Latin-American genres (Mambo, Cha-Cha-Cha, and Baion), but also Russian-influenced waltzes arranged and performed in a jazzy way. The majority of these swinging popular songs were cover versions of the international repertoire, including a lot of the then popular Italian *canzoni*. In the late 1950s, the Finnish tango was not popular at all.

The tango boom of the 1960s brought the male artists back to the dominant position – there were only a couple of female tango singers in the charts and no one with any great success. Furthermore, the share of Finnish songwriters in the domestic pop music charts considerably increased.

The amateur tapes found in Southern Ostrobothnia highlight a slightly different local reality. The tapes were recorded in Seinäjoki in 1964 by the accordionist and dance music composer Keijo Kaivo-oja (born in 1924). The existence of the tapes became known when Mr. Kaivo-oja was interviewed for a book consisting of the life stories of local dance musicians (Kurkela & Kemppe 2005).

The title and the purpose of the compilation are seen on a tape case: “The Seinäjoki District Hit Song All-Stars”. Originally, the recordings were made for promotional use – to be sent to the record companies in Helsinki. The singers were young Ostrobothnians, mainly from Seinäjoki town. Some of them were semi-professional dance band vocalists, the rest were amateurs. A brief listening to the songs reveals much about the technical conditions of the recording process. The recording session was organised at Mr. Kaivo-oja’s home. The singing is normally accompanied by a distant-sounding accordion only, and the recording is made by using one microphone, a slow tape speed and without any noise reduction. As a result, the recording is far from any hi-fi standard.

As mentioned above, in the early 60s, the tango singers on the commercial recordings were mainly male. The same holds almost true for the Seinäjoki tapes, but still, altogether 6 singers among 28 artists in Kaivo-oja’s recordings were female. So women could also perform tangos in Seinäjoki, although they usually preferred other genres of popular song. However, the most surprising feature of the recording is the abundance of singing styles. The local singers sang in various styles with different musical backgrounds.

The most well-known local artist of the time was Yrjö Tammilehto, whose tango band actually founded the tango craze in the area: This happened in the late

1950s, a few years earlier than the domestic tangos shot onto the national hit parade. His singing style was often compared to that of Olavi Virta, the most famous Finnish hit singer in the 50s.

Yrjö Tammilehto belonged to the older generation of dance musicians with their roots in the 1940s and wartime dance music. The tango boom, however, was mainly personified in young male singers with a very sentimental way of singing. A good example on the Seinäjoki tapes was Jorma Salo, whose singing style is close to that of the young Romany singers, Taisto Tammi and Markus Allan, then very popular on the Finnish tango scene.

The third locally well-known singer on the Kaivo-oja tapes was Hannu Hietikko. He also belonged to the younger generation of pop singers, but stylistically he was quite different from the popular Romany style. His interpretation of famous Finnish tango *Kangastus* by Unto Mononen is a good example how the traditional schlager singing could be combined with jazz phrasing and intonation.

In Seinäjoki in the mid-60s, swing playing was still an important part of tango performances. The influence of earlier swing *schlager* era of the late 1950s was still strong. Since this era was famous for female singers, it is not surprising that the young female tango singers from Seinäjoki followed the old path. The most skilful female singer in the Seinäjoki tapes was Sinikka Luhtala. She was stylistically very near to older alto crooners of the late 50s. Her interpretation of the domestic tango *Tummanpunainen ruusu* by Toivo Kärki and Reino Helismaa is quite far from the standard tango singing in the mid-60s. In a way, her singing style was, simultaneously, too old fashioned and too modern for the prevailing aesthetics of the Finnish tango industry.

Finally, it is important to say a few words about Keijo Kaivo-oja, the initiator and organiser of the Seinäjoki tango documentation. In the recording year, 1964, Kaivo-oja was 40 years old and had a career of almost 25 years as a dance musician behind him. Kaivo-oja was also a singer, but no tango singer. His speciality was yodelling, or as we say in Finnish, "jodlaus". This Alpine singing tradition had been well-known in Finland since the early 19th century, due to wandering harp and zither bands and singers from Tyrol and elsewhere. However, in the mid-1960s, Tyrolean music was already forgotten, and Kaivo-oja's Ostrobothnian-Tyrolean singing style was a real innovation, which made him very popular among local audiences.

## 2.2. DEMO TAPES – A HIDDEN MUSICAL TRADITION

The Seinäjoki tango recordings are fairly typical early demo tapes. By recording a demo, local artists wanted to attract attention at the headquarters of the national recording companies in Helsinki. Due to primitive conditions, the technical quality of the recording was very poor. The primary goal for everyone was, of course, to get a recording contract. In the 1960s it was not an easy task to get such a contract in the Finnish recording business. Only one singer on Keijo Kaivo-oja's tapes, Yrjö Tammilehto, gained a reputation as a recording artist. However, many of the artists recorded were really popular in their own province or became locally famous later on. In the 1960s Finland was still a country of really local music.

It is very likely that in the 1960s, amateur recordings like Mr. Kaivo-oja's tapes were made in all Western countries. During this decade tape recorders became relatively cheap so that almost every eager music lover could buy one. However, most old amateur recordings got lost and never found their way to scientific archives. As the Seinäjoki case indicates, old amateur tapes can still be found in the private collections of musical aficionados.

The technical quality of such tapes is often bad or very bad – a fact that depends more on storage conditions than on the original recording conditions. In any case, there is not much time to save the old tapes for future generations. There are also a great number of tapes that are useless for archival purposes. Typically, this group consists of badly damaged tapes and those with very little or no contextual information. From the scientific archive viewpoint, this kind of material is usually irrelevant and valueless.

In the 1970s, the quantity of demo tapes increased significantly in the wake of recording cassette players. Quite soon many diligent musicians started to achieve small home studios. Local bands and artists could quite easily make their own recordings, and by the 1980s the quality of non-commercial recordings and cassettes improved. Furthermore, a greater part of these recordings were also filed in the scientific archives or public libraries. For instance, in the folk life archives at the University of Tampere, there is a collection of about 5,000 demo tapes or non-commercial recordings produced by the musicians themselves. It is highly interesting source material that only waits for eager researchers (see Kurkela 2002: 469).

Storage life poses a major problem for this material as well. Although the tapes and cassettes are filed in the archive, their future is not guaranteed. The technical quality is very uneven and some recordings have already lost all the information content. During recent years, fortunately, the Tampere archives have received some resources for digital editing and archiving so that the – from the scientific point of

view – most important materials have been digitalized and stored in adequate archival formats. However, the operation is far from complete, and a lot of new resources will be needed before the preserving of old demo tapes for the posterity can be guaranteed.

### 3. CONCLUSION

My experiences of the historiography of local dance music in Ostrobothnia can be summed up as follows:

Before the 1980s the great majority of Finnish dance music vocalists and orchestras had never been recorded. Therefore, we do not know precisely what kind of music was played in rural dance pavilions and community halls. A variety of styles and idioms of popular music survived several decades in the provincial areas and small towns.

There are some written sources and abundant information by word of mouth (life stories, anecdotes, narratives) about the music played in the post World War II dance halls, but the picture of musical style and change remains unclear and susceptible to misinterpretation. However, with the aid of amateur recordings we can gain a clearer picture of local styles in the 1960s and sometimes even earlier.

The knowledge of one's own musical past is important for constructing local identities. In Southern Ostrobothnia local identity is closely connected to the Finnish tango. The common image of the tango is rather mythical and monolithic. The Ostrobothnian case shows how old recordings can correct our view of the past. In the 1960s, there was no single tango style, but various competitive models of singing the tango with different musical backgrounds.

So far in Finland, the history of local music remains largely unwritten. A large amount of various amateur tapes waits for the collectors – and not only in Southern Ostrobothnia. Technical support and knowledge of digital copying, editing and storage is also needed in future research and archival work.

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## OLD TAPE RECORDINGS

Yrjö Tammilehto: *Kuinka saatoitkaan* [Oh What Do You Do to Me] (tango, Twomey & Weisman)

Jorma Salo: *Iltä Santa Cruzissa* [Summer Evening in Santa Cruz] (tango, Jose & Payan)

Hannu Hietikko: *Kangastus* [Fata Morgana] (tango, Mononen)

Sinikka Luhtala: *Tummanpunainen ruusu* [Dark Red Rose] (tango, Kärki & Helismaa)

Keijo Kaivo-oja: *Pyhävuoren jodlaus & Joupin jodlaus* (yodelling, Kaivo-oja)

