

# Homage to Veljo Tormis

*By Raul Talmar, choir conductor and teacher, President of Estonian Choral Association*

**This paper does not pretend to be a piece of musical science, but it is one choir conductor's personal and emotional homage to Veljo Tormis and his work.**

My first contact with the works of Veljo Tormis as a choir singer was in the choir *Noorus* (Youth) while performing his cycle *Dialectic aphorisms upon Juhan Liiv's words*. The opening and ending part called 'Dialogue' opened the eyes of a young man with its simplicity and assignment of musical meaning to text. The first part of the song, which speaks of a large nation, is written in fff, B major, **and** Andante Grandioso (chauvinistically). The other half, which speaks of a little nation, is written in p, b minor, Semplice (nationalistically). Through this clear musical confrontation Tormis arrives to a powerful generalisation, which mocks the idea of one nation thinking their love for their country is better than another nation's love for theirs.

By the beginning of the 1980<sup>s</sup> Tormis had positioned (or had been positioned thanks to his beliefs) clearly against the ruling regime. His cooperation with the poet Hando Runnel was especially effectual. Both of them separately and together were masters of a special kind of irony and sarcasm, which expressed Estonian aspirations for freedom; the author is convinced that these two mental pillars were playing very important part main in so-called *Singing Revolution*. Works like *Reflections with Hando Runnel* (1981), *Reflections with Lenin* (1982), *Virumaa and Pandivere*, *The Estonian Man and His Kind*, *Secret Woman* (1981), *Step Forward* (1984) gave a strong impulse to the rise of Estonian pride.

I would like to talk separately about the work *Reflections*

*with Lenin*, because it would be easy to get a false impression about the content of the work based on the heading. Firstly, it should be noted that the premiere planned in 1982 was banned by the Soviet Estonian KGB and the music score was confiscated. Tormis had by that time proven himself more than capable of writing between the lines and directly about things which were important for all Estonians and which ridiculed or outright bashed national injustice. Even the text of the second part of the six-part cycle would have given enough reason to confiscate the music: "We must differentiate between the nationalism of an oppressive nation and the nationalism of the oppressed, between the nationalism of a large nation and a small nation. For the other type of nationalism, we, the nationalists of a large nation, are almost always historically guilty of endless violence and insults..." (Works of Lenin, vol. 36, page 556, Tallinn 1959). Imagine, all of this as a choral work for four voices, that everyone can sing (there are a lot of choirs in Estonia). Of course, the author's memories speak of moments when the power of the 'sung word' could be felt at many performances, where the music caused an almost physically tangible resonance between the choir and the public. It was at that period when I really understood that the *power of the word* was more than just a phrase.

I must also mention an earlier work, namely a song celebration cantata named *The Beginning of the Song* (words also by Hando Runnel), written for the jubilee Song Celebration of 1969, which marked 100 years since the first Song Celebration. It is also in that work that through musical references both the want for independence at that time and from one hundred years before are intertwined into one message that rises to the sky.



Veljo Tormis with Stephen Layton

The world likely does not know much about the Tormis I have just described. However, it seems to me that the same creative sensitivity and deep familiarity with a little nation's soul are what drove Tormis to create and also through his works to directly fight against lies, violence, and immorality and was also the driving force behind the second part of his creative work – rewriting very old Finno-Ugric folk songs.

Tormis graduated from the Moscow conservatory in 1956, where Vissarion Shebalin, his composition professor, urged his students to identify themselves through their nationality and to use national soundscapes in their creations.

In 1958 Tormis and his students stumbled upon a truly ancient wedding on the island of Kihnu. He spent 3 days there as a guest at the wedding (indeed the wedding was that long) and experienced that the whole time variations of one theme were sung to accompany the wedding activities. Experiencing this living tradition awakened a deep interest in both Kihnu

folklore and older Estonian folklore in general. (Kihnu is a little island in the Baltic sea where to this day women in traditional clothing ride around on motorcycles.) It was from there that Tormis got the inspiration to write folksongs using authentic patterns. Thus the first four-part cycle *Kihnu Wedding Songs* was born. In that cycle, he still uses runic songs in different pitches and tonalities and in somewhat changed form. But already in his next major work started in 1966, the five-part cyclical *Estonian Calendar Songs* (1966-1967), he uses folk themes in unchanged form and since that time "Tormis does not use folk songs, folk songs use Tormis" (in his own words).

From that point onward, we can list continuous cycles: *Livonian Heritage* (1970 – 5 parts), *Songs of Song and Singer* (1971 – 5 parts), *Votic Wedding Songs* (1971 – 7 parts), *Seven Livonian Folk Songs* (1972). Votic and Livonian songs also start a new branch in his work – songs of kindred peoples. The conclusion of this monumental task is the collection 'Forgotten Peoples': *Livonian Heritage*, *Votic Wedding Songs*, *Izhorian Epic*, *Ingrian Evenings*, *Vepsian Paths*, *Karelian Destiny*. In all of these six cycles Tormis uses folks' songs (or they use him) in unchanged form, meanwhile also giving them a new life with his unique signature.

It is also important to emphasise once more, that these themes and texts come from the 'paganic and shamanistic' time (up until 3000 years B.C.), where the *power of the word* guided peoples lives much more directly than today. (But You never know...)

Somehow, these two branches of Tormis' creation meet in *Curse Upon Iron*. Pure folklore it is not, yet there is definitely something ancient and powerful in this shamanistic work. So powerful in fact, that after first hearing it, the author was left in a trance-like state for a long time after the concert.

The myth of how iron came to be is itself from the Finnish

epic *Kalevala*. However, Tormis wished to use it in a much wider and more modern meaning. The thought of such a work started germinating around the year 1966, but even just composing the text took three men, August Annist (main text), Paul-Eerik Rummo and Jaan Kaplinski (additions) around six years.

The main motif of *Curse Upon Iron* is three notes, which all fit into a little third (A,B,C). At first, the shaman drum was not even a part of the plan, until a happy coincidence at the 1970 Moscow IMC congress (VII International Music Congress) gave Tormis the chance to hear the so-called authentic Kalevala drums. From that moment, it was clear to the composer that the work would be written for mixed choir and shamanic drum. Another lucky coincidence revealed that Lennart Meri (the president of Estonia from 1992-2001) had one such drum in his home. By 1972, the composition was ready and cooperation with Tallinn Chamber Choir and the conductor Arvo Rataspepp began. It was a whole year until the work was ready to be performed. To be honest, most likely none of us really knew how to 'curse'. Tormis probably intuitively knew, but for many singers such a way of singing was a true shock. There was even a letter from an otolaryngologist to Tormis, where the composers insistence on singing as the composition requires is referred to as 'unheard of barbarity'. A few examples from the score: guttural, through the teeth, sharply, accentuated, vulgarly, suggestive, sinisterly, colourless, hollow, trembling, screeching, in fear of death, severely, commanding, the voice "breaks", scream.

I believe *Curse upon Iron* is currently one of the most widely known of Tormis' works and I still admire the uppermost timeliness of the text. I also think that concerts outside of Estonia by non-Estonian speaking collectives to non-Estonian speaking listeners still convey the ancient wisdom: "Everything created by man may turn against man himself if he starts using his creation without attention to ethics. The

evil hidden in iron will turn against the man through the man himself; if people will not listen to the voice of reason, iron may destroy everybody. According to folk wisdom, knowledge about the essence and creation of things will give people power over them." (Tiia Järg, Preface to 1991, revised edition of *Curse upon iron*, translated by Urve Läänemets).



Veljo Tormis in London

To affirm this I shall also add a few translated phrases:

*"...New eras, new Gods and heroes, and cannons and airplanes and tanks, and guns. New steel and iron, brand-new, intelligent, precise, powerful killers, equipped with automated guiding devices, armed with nuclear warheads, missiles invulnerable to defensive rocketry... .. Damn you, bastard! Wretched iron! We are kinsmen, of the same breed, of the same seed we have sprouted, you are earth-born, I am earth-born, in the black soil we are brethren. For we both live on the same earth and in that earth we two will merge. There will be land enough for both." (literal translation by Eero Vihman).*

Did Tormis have role models? In his lectures he has mentioned Vissarion Shebalin, his professor of composition at the Moscow Conservatory, who saw that the German approach to harmony was not suited to runo songs and gave Claude Debussy as an example of using modern harmony ("who was possibly one of those who helped me get on my feet"). Tormis also held in high regard the works and aesthetic of Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly, which were also based on treasuring folk music traditions. Tormis has also mentioned that Modest Mussorgski's principle that melody should be based upon speech intonation and be psychologically justified has been an important creative standpoint.

In any case, a stubborn Estonian man he has always been and he also became a composer out of stubbornness (autobiography *A Composer out of Stubbornness*, Prisma Print Publishing House, 2000.) I will add words from another one of Tormis' songs here in the end (Juhan Viiding, translated by Dave Murphy and Jaak Johanson: *We are given*), which might give an inkling of what a great man Tormis has been, is and will remain.

*"We are given the potion, we are taking the portion. Still there is air in proportion, but we sense the distortion. And if we feel the distortion that may kill all that's breathing, why don't we already gather? We need to get together. We*



*cannot be believing, so far apart we are living. Still being pushed together, we'll get it never ever. Room is forever needed, lasting through ages heeded. Still we feel the distortion. Still there is air in proportion. Still we feel the... Still there is air in..."*



Raul Talmar

**Raul Talmar** (b 1959) graduated from the Tallinn Music Academy as choral conductor in 1982. He sang in mixed choir Noorus since 1977 and was the choir's principal conductor in 1991–2012. At present, he conducts the mixed choir K.O.O.R. and mixed choir of Tallinn University BFM Institute. Earlier, he has worked with the Academic Male Choir of the Tallinn University of Technology, the male choir of the Helsinki Trade University, the female choir of the Klementi Sewing Factory, the Pärnu Mattone Chamber Choir, the national girls' choir Leelo, the Tallinn Russian Choir and Tallinn St. Charles Church Concert Choir. In 2006, he was nominated the Conductor of the Year by the Estonian Choral Association. Since 1993, Raul Talmar has conducted mixed and female choirs at the Youth Song Celebrations and since 2004 at all Estonian Song and Dance Celebrations. In 2011, he was the artistic director of the Estonian programme of the 16th Gaudeamus Students' Song Festival. Raul Talmar is Assistant Professor of choral conducting in Tallinn University since 2008 and from June 2013 he is the President of Estonian Choral Association. Email: **[talmar.pohi@gmail.com](mailto:talmar.pohi@gmail.com)**

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