

Interpreting folk humour and wisdom, Estonian style:
Lepo Sumera's vocal cycle as a window to the language and tradition

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Abstract

Although contemporary Estonian composer Lepo Sumera (1950-2000) is mostly known in North America as a symphonist, he has contributed to the development of the world-famous choral and vocal music culture of his homeland. Mushroom Cantata and Songs from Estonian Matrimonial Lyrics are, perhaps, the two most curious compositions from Sumera's vocal/choral oeuvre. In these works the composer uses a non-artistic texts that, he believes, may be more suited for the use in a musical composition than a poem, which already is a complete work of art. In such texts, "some casual words with a suggestive sound" may offer a deeper meaning and allow for a musical reading (Vaitmaa 2005). Specifically, in Mushroom Cantata, Sumera utilizes Latin names of mushrooms growing in Estonia, and in his Songs from Estonian Matrimonial Lyrics – texts from Estonian folk anthology full of sounds of ancient dialects. In the latter work, Sumera sets five texts, structured in a continuum, progressing from a humorous depiction of a folk-style dating scene to a vulgar self-reflection, to a glance into gender roles in a traditional family, a recipe of how to get to heaven, and finally a song about death. And while folk texts are sequenced to intensify the emotion and darken the mood, the composer creates an aura of lightness, humor, and tenderness through the use of eclectic musical language. The spoken phrase "My dear my darling," positioned between songs, creates a type of a rondo form, where the songs function as episodes. In his setting, the composer capitalizes on the idiosyncrasies of Estonian language phonetics, rich in vowels, and unique prosody known as the quantity system (Lippus 1993). This paper advocates exploration of contemporary vocal literature written by composers of different traditions in order to offer a meaningful musical and linguistic journey to performers and listeners.

This project is a result of a collaboration between Dina Lentsner, a Russian-born American music theorist, interested in a musico-poetic analysis of contemporary vocal music, and Saale Konsap, a graduated student in musicology from Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. Our paper grew out of our shared interest in vocal music by contemporary Estonian composer Lepo Sumera (1950-2000), who is known to the professional music community mostly as a symphonist, and our passion for advocating curiosity, study, and ultimately, embracement of new music in academia.

Jane Manning observed in her book *New Vocal Repertory* (1986), “Prejudice against the unfamiliar is unfortunately inevitable...Of all performing artists, singers have sometimes tended to be the least inclined to question accepted patterns or to indulge in intellectual or philosophical argument about their repertory” (p. 2). Twelve years later, in her second volume, *New Vocal Repertory 2*, Manning further encouraged vocal faculty to take steps toward reconceptualization of the “standard” repertoire: “Those of us who perform, teach and listen, should always be receptive to the jolt of the new and unfamiliar, and to be ready to break the mould of a repertoire that has remained stagnant, purely because of the random selection made long ago” (1998, p. 2). Manning brings into her argument rarely heard works by Schubert and Brahms, a stigma attached to the early atonal works by Schoenberg and Berg, and an unwarranted “intellectual” image of perfectly singable Messiaen’s vocal cycles. We would like to take Manning’s call for a critical reevaluation and modernization of the standard vocal repertoire further by suggesting the exploration of the recent vocal music written in a non-standard language.

In his 2013 Ph.D. dissertation, David Stephenson investigated vocal repertoire practices in three US institutions: a large public university, a small private university, and

a medium-size public university. The table 4.2 from Stephenson's study offered below lists fifteen most often programmed composers in all three institutions. The second table below, 4.4 lists languages of the vocal literature used by all vocal instructors in the participating institutions.

Table 4.2
Ten Most-Frequently Programmed Composers as Represented in Titles for All Teachers at All Institutions

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Composer</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>% of Total Titles</u>
1	Schubert, Franz	194	6.27
2	Schumann, Robert	170	5.49
3	Fauré, Gabriel	148	4.78
4	Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus	136	4.39
5	Debussy, Claude	93	3.00
6	Handel, George Frideric	85	2.75
7	Wolf, Hugo	79	2.55
8	Brahms, Johannes	71	2.29
9	Strauss, Richard	62	2.00
10	Vaughan Williams, Ralph	60	1.94
			<u>Total %</u>
			35.46

Figure 1. From Stephenson (2013), p. 33.

Table 4.4
Percentages and Averages of Languages as Reflected in Titles Programmed by All Voice Teachers at Participating Institutions

<u>Languages</u>	<u>Percentages</u>			
	<u>Institution A</u>	<u>Institution B</u>	<u>Institution C</u>	<u>Total Average %</u>
English	29.62	39.65	34.64	34.64
French	20.48	21.89	14.74	19.04
German	28.52	24.91	18.92	24.12
Italian	16.09	8.70	25.80	16.86
Latin	1.88	1.37	3.19	2.15
Spanish	2.00	1.83	1.72	1.85
				<u>Total %</u>
				98.66

Figure 2. From Stephenson (2013), p. 35.

Stephenson's study substantiates two common-knowledge observations: 1) the literature used rarely includes contemporary art music, and 2) the majority of the vocal repertoire heard in undergraduate and graduate institutions in United States are set to

English, German, French and Italian texts. While there are historical reasons for the dominance of the literature in Italian, French, and German languages, there are plenty of world languages with the innate musicality, resulting from the abundance of vowels, softness of consonants, and specific inner workings of the language.¹ Estonian is one of those languages. And, perhaps, it is not coincidental that the singing culture, and more specifically, choral culture, is foremost Estonian cultural trademark.

Estonian language belongs to the Finnic branch of Finno-Ugric group of languages. It is not, therefore, related to the neighboring Indo-European languages such as Russian, Latvian and Swedish. The best known languages of the Finno-Ugric languages are Finnish, Hungarian and Estonian; less known are South Estonian, Votian, Livonian, Izhorian, Vepsian, Karelian, Sami, Erzya, Moksha, Mari, Udmurt and Komi, spoken from Scandinavia to Siberia. Among Estonians, it is often said that in a worldwide beauty contest of languages, Estonian got the second place – after Italian. Although it is a myth, it may reflect some of the features of Estonian language. It is rich of vowels, which make Estonian, as Estonians say, *laulev keel* - a singing language. More specifically, Estonian phonemes include nine vowels: u o a õ ü ä e i, and the vowel-consonant rate in Estonian is 45:55. There are as many as thirty-six diphthongs can be formed from vowels. For example, consider the compound word *kõueööaimdus* (“anticipation of the thundery night”). Vowels can also carry a meaning on their own: öö (night), ei (no), õu (garden). This kind of fluency is also emphasized by the fewness of consonant clusters, especially initial ones. These became established in Estonian mainly through loan words.

Regarding Estonian prosody, there are two important features. The first one is stress on the first syllable. Estonian is different from Indo-European languages due to the fact that the stress of the syllable and its duration are not dependent on each other: stress of the word can fall on a short or a long syllable. The second prosodic feature is the differentiation between three quantities, both in vowels and consonants. There are three contrastive quantity degrees in Estonian: short, long and overlong. It is sufficient to note the primary function of contrastive quantity in Estonian is to signal differences in lexical meaning and grammatical function.

Lepo Sumera's *Mushroom Cantata* and *Songs from Estonian Matrimonial Lyrics* are, perhaps, the two most curious compositions from his vocal/choral oeuvre. In these works the composer uses non-artistic texts that, he believes, may be more suited for the use in a musical composition than a poem, which already is a complete work of art. In such texts, "some casual words with a suggestive sound" may offer a deeper meaning and allow for musical reading (Vaitmaa 2005). Specifically, in *Mushroom Cantata*, Sumera utilizes Latin names of mushrooms growing in Estonia, and in his *Songs from Estonian Matrimonial Lyrics* for baritone and piano – texts full of sounds of ancient dialects from Estonian Folk Anthology. In the latter work, Sumera sets five texts, structured in a continuum, progressing from a humorous depiction of a folk-style dating scene to a vulgar self-reflection, to a glance into gender roles in a traditional family, a recipe of how to get to heaven, and finally, a song about death. In his Introduction to this work, Sumera cautions his performers and listeners that "For an orthodox serious musician some of these expressions can be too direct, but such is life and such are the centuries-old songs about marriage" (Sumera 2000). The composer interlaces folk texts with the repeating

spoken phrase, “My dear my darling,” which functions as a semantic refrain, alternating with the actual songs as episodes.

Sumera prefaces the published score with his commentaries, directed to both performers and listeners. While he offers interpretive guidance – for example, for the first song, “Dirty woman” that will be the focus of our discussion, he suggests that the main character/performer accepts the consequences of oversleeping while all pretty women were taken by other men, – simultaneously, the composer engages the listener in the semantics of the cycle in ironic and humorous way, “wishing all listeners good family life” in his Post Scriptum (Sumera 2000).

“Must naine”

Oh te uhked uisumehed
ja te lahked laevamehed
tehke uisku uemaks,
laevalasti laiemaks!
Peiud sõudvad, neiud jõudvad,
peiud sõudvad Poolamaale,
neiud jõudvad Saksamaale,
maamehed uinsid magama,
kut need neiud jagati.
Teised kõik said mõisa mukud,
ma sain üksi mustarumal,
tõrvalakk ja tõbine,
sauepott ja patune.
Ei ta sunni sööma viia,
valge vastu vaadata.
Ma lasin Viru jõele,
virutasin läbi viie vee,
tõmbsin kuue kurikaga,
seitsme seebikantsakaga,
siis ta sündis sööma viia,
valge vastu vaadata.
Hakkas ahjule minema,
ei ta saanud ahjule.
Ma tegin lepuuust redeli,
siis ta hakkas minema,
siis ta konnes kukkus kolde,
põletas põlved mõlemad.
Sest ta sai see ebaus,
et ta kuseb kükakil.

“Dirty woman”

Oh, you brave wonderers,
You should start moving!

Grooms will sale to Poland,
brides will arrive at Germany,
shepherds fell asleep
while the brides were given.
All the others got ladies from the maner,
I was the only one who got a stupid one -
she was dirty and sick.

She was not good enough to let the others to see her,
Or let the light shine on her.
I took her to the river of Viru,
poured lot of water on her,
washed her with soap.

Then she looked good enough to go out with her.

She started to climb on to the Russian oven,
but she failed.

I made her a ladder out of the alder tree.
so she started to climb again,
then she, wretched one, fell into the fire -
burned both of her knees.

From this she got the superstition
that she quats when she pees.

Figure 3. The Estonian text and Saale Konsap’s translation of “Dirty Woman”.

The original folk text used by Sumera in “Dirty Woman” is offered above. The story is about a simple shepherd (the narrator), who was late to get a proper woman, so he

got the worst one. The woman was dirty and stupid. The shepherd succeeded in cleaning her, so it was not embarrassing for him to let others to see her, but despite of her decent look, the woman was still so clumsy that she could not climb to her bed, which was on top of the Russian oven. So the shepherd made her a ladder, but it was of no use – the woman fell to the fire and burned her knees. Since this occasion the woman got also superstitious – she had to squat while peeing.

To capture the meaning of the text is quite tricky. The text seems to originate from the period when the new folk song started to replace the runic songs, an ancient song tradition common to Baltic-Finnish people living around an area of the Finnish Gulf that forms an eastern part of the Baltic Sea. The text is not stylistically or structurally coherent, some of the most characteristic elements of runic song can be found right next to or mixed with the features of new folk song.² And since a coherent system, in which some deviations from it could be meaningful, is not established, it would make more sense to analyze the text on the general semantic level of structure.

The text is based on binary oppositions, which are present throughout the movement, except the last two lines. In the first eight lines the opposition is rather impersonal – the wonderers, who went to find women, are juxtaposed to the shepherds, who went to sleep, but the narrator does not yet have a position. The position of the narrator becomes clear in the following five lines, where “the others,” who “all got nice women” are juxtaposed to the “I” character, who is the “only one who got a horrible woman.” Accordingly, the “I” corresponds to the shepherds and the “others” corresponds to the wonderers in the first eight lines. From this point, it is clear that the narrator wants to emphasize the injustice that is committed towards him. In the next lines of the text it

gets more personal – from line 14, it is all about the narrator and his wife, which are also presented as an oppositional pair: the woman as an incapable one is juxtaposed to the narrator (man) as a hero; the woman fails in her doings (climbing to the bed) and the narrator (man) succeeds in his (washing the woman, building a ladder).

It can be said that up to this point everything that concerns the man and the woman has happened on a positive-negative scale. Now, the whole text ends with rather odd lines “*from this occasion she got the superstition that she needs to squat while she pees*” which may seem to refer to something negative – it would be something to expect since it applies to the woman, and you could also assume that this is the result of falling into the fire. But after some research I found other folk texts that also include this kind of motive³ and in general it appears as something really positive, something that the men are proud of. So it is possible that this kind of shift of the emotional charge in the end of the text also changes – retrospectively – the meaning of the preceding text. For me, after the end lines, the text turns into an ironical self-reflection of a man, who really knows the value of his wife, but doubts his.

Musically, “Dirty woman” is representative of Sumera’s overall musical language in *Songs from Estonian Matrimonial Lyrics*, and also the semantic consequences of Sumera’s interpretation of the text. Figure below demonstrates harmonic and melodic structural features of the piece. Structurally, the song is divided into five sections articulated by piano’s arpeggiating passages in quasi-Romantic style. These short harmonic interludes do not always point to the tonality (or polytonality) of the section to follow; rather, they function as a large-scale architectonic and semantic frame of the piece, intimating both tonal ambiguity and tonal intensity. The latter originates in

the tritone relationship between C and F# as tonal centers, major-minor chromatic variations within one key, and polytonal simultaneities. Additionally, a “Romantic” arpeggiated figure creates stark stylistic contrast with the highly repetitive vocal line mostly constrained within the interval of a minor third.

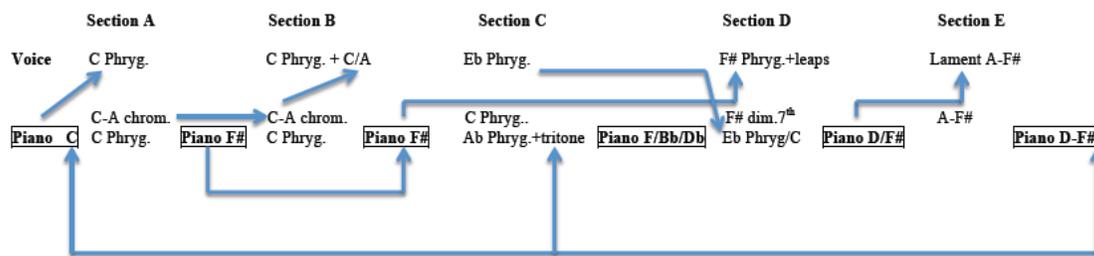


Figure 4. Melodic-harmonic scheme of “Dirty Woman.”

This song may be viewed a composed-out piano-vocal story of an emotion of despair, however a humorous one. In the vocal part, the rising emotional heat is expressed within first four sections of the piece in the rising of the tonal centers of the original tertian chromatic motive. This motive incorporates characteristics of counting-out rhyme and lament, the latter, however unnoticeable due to the *Allegro affettuoso* tempo chosen by the composer. From C Phrygian in section A, the motive progresses to its metric variation and chromatic expansion downward to implied A minor in section B, to a longer section C in Eb Phrygian (repetitive throughout, only with rhythmic variation), to the longest section D, where baritone combines the original motive, now moved to F# Phrygian with the melodic expansion (similar to section B), but now in Eb minor, and then adding a wide leaps to Eb above middle C, outlining a fully diminished seventh chord.

Furthermore, on a larger scale, the first four sections outline a diminished triad –

C – C -Eb – F#. Section D serves as emotional pick of the piece that also includes agitated spoken replicas of the pianist, but then, in the last section of the song, E, Sumera switches to an unequivocal lamenting motive, consisting of only two pitches, A and F#, repeated many times, slowly fading away.

Sumera's treatment of the piano is notable: while he clearly means it as an accompaniment to the vocal part, it has a split harmonic identity communicated by the right and the left hands, respectively. In sections A and B, the right hand figure outlines descending minor third, c-a while the left hand mimics vocal part's C Phrygian motive. In the second part of section B, the descending chromatic c-a tertian motive appears in the baritone part, retroactively mimicking piano part's right hand. In Section C, Eb Phrygian motive in the voice is supported by Ab Phrygian motive in the left hand, further enriched by the descending chromatic third Eb – C of the right hand, as if harmonically "suspended" from the vocal part in sections A and B. This section of the song is characterized by gradual accumulation of harmonic complexity achieved through superimposing composed-out polytonal tertian motives. The following section D, corresponding to the F# Phrygian motive of the baritone, surfaces F#-A-C-Eb fully diminished seventh chord in the right hand, with the bi-tonal C minor – Eb Phrygian content of the left hand, thus combining all implied harmonic centers of the song. To generalize, Sumera's harmonic techniques in the first four sections of the "Dirty woman" include major-minor variations, the prevalence of Phrygian motive and harmonic chromatic mediant relationship between and within vocal and piano parts. In addition, each piano interlude relates to the previous section by melodic modulation, smoothly connecting foreign keys. Thus, harmonically, piano part both supports vocal

line and pushes it forward. It function as a generator and accumulator of harmonic ideas. And while melodically the song grows out of the first four pitches of the baritone part, it is piano that creates effective context for the motive's unfolding.

The last section of the song presents an abrupt switch from the piece's culminating point to its opposite, a dispirited lament of the baritone echoed by the piano part. Thus, similar to the binary oppositions found in the text, this section demonstrates opposition within musical structure, creating a unity of musico-poetic dualities. This section of the song corresponds to the point in the text describing how the woman failed to climb to her bed on the top of the Russian oven to sleep. And while structurally this section opens up the piece to the following songs of the cycle, semantically it intimates an emotion of sadness and loss, something that does not sound or feel humorous unless the performer choses to interpret it as such. However, based on the poetic analysis above, this text, and especially its last lines, are proverbial, offering a "moral" to the story, perhaps intimating the strength of Estonian women, both physical and emotional.

We maintain all the levels of tension that Sumera creates in the song – stylistic one (between piano interludes and five sung sections), harmonic one (between and within vocal and piano parts, as discussed above), and semantic one (between comical playfulness and sadness, and its quasi-narrative unfolding and an underlying ethical aspect) - contribute to the exceptional compositional and aesthetic integrity of the piece. Furthermore, the song's structural and semantic levels mimic the large-scale design of the cycle, with its quasi-rondo form and a curious mix of humorous and tragic. Lepo Sumera's *Songs from Estonian Matrimonial Lyrics* and particularly, the first song, is an example of an unfamiliar contemporary postmodern vocal music that has attractive

elements of a character song, intriguing stylistic juxtapositions and interplay of harmonic familiarities, and an introduction to a less-known language. Finding music like that requires looking for it, being aware of the current compositional practices and styles, and being proactive in getting help with the language basics. Only about 1.3 million people in the world speak Estonian language, so it is unlikely that you will find a native speaker among your friends or in your community. However, Estonians are proud of their music culture, so there are human resources readily available to those who are interested. Specifically, Estonian Institute in capital city Tallinn supports a worldwide dissemination of Estonian cultural heritage, and its staff members would be an excellent source of information, including translations and pronunciation of the texts. Estonian Information Music Center provided an access to music publications and recordings, and information about the composers.

In his book, *The Accessibility of Music*, Eisentraut discusses two contexts where musical accessibility matters – modernism and community music. He juxtaposes avant-garde and community music as two areas with contrasting accessibility agenda: modernism takes development of the musical language as its priority, thus, the audience is always expected to catch-up eventually, whereas community music tries to bring music to people by lowering the bar in terms of the repertoire and expectations. Lepo Sumera's vocal cycle is a great example of the contemporary non-avant-garde art music that belongs both in the academia and the community: its musical language is hardly "foreign" to anybody, since it is rooted in the familiar modal and tonal idioms; its text is a folk poetic language of the community to which the composer belongs, Estonian people. In our contemporary globalized world, where national music borders do not exist, we

invite everybody to open their eyes and ears to recently written music for voice that may just become the favorite art song you have ever heard or sung.

¹ Here we use the notion of musicality of a language found in Feld, et al., p. 340, signifying the combination of phonetic, morphological, and semantic properties of the language that influence the perception a language as “musical.” The philosophical aspect of this notion is beyond the scope of our study.

² For the discussion of the characteristic of runic songs, see Jaago and Sarv (2001).

³ For some examples, see *Arhailise Meestelaulu Selts*,
<http://meestelaul.metsatoll.ee/foorum/read.php?9,3986>

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