

Some problems with that *regilaul**

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Abridged and edited, to be read without score samples or sound samples

Let me introduce myself

I am Veljo Tormis and this is my 77th year on this planet. For fifty years in the last century I was a practising composer. I started to learn the trade in 1950 and retired from composing in 2000, the last year of the 20th century. I knew about the existence of the *regilaul* from the very beginning, but I only began to understand its essence when I was about 35. I started to use it in my works in a new way. It was in the mid-60ies. Now, as a composer emeritus, I have busied myself for the last couple of years with only the *regilaul*, working as a self-taught teacher in our two academies (the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and the Viljandi Culture Academy – translator’s note). I would like to begin today by introducing to our guests some of the peculiarities of the Estonian language which have been the preconditions for the development of the *regilaul*. And I would at the same time also like to remind us of their existence. These are basic things really, but I am not at all sure that we always realize it.

What is a *regilaul*, in other words, a folk-song based on regi-verse? Regi-verse?

“Song” – that’s clear. We also know “verse”. But what’s this “regi”? I googled the word to find out and got a number of hits. How many, what do you think? Fourteen million! They are not all words with a different meaning, of course, they are just derivations of word roots in some European languages. Like *regional*, *regia*, *region*, *register*, *regime*, etc. I think I browsed through some fifty pages of hits. I would never have managed to look at all of them. The language that appeared most frequently in the hits was Hungarian where “régi” means “old”. This explanation would suit us very well indeed, wouldn’t it! Because, after all, the *regilaul* is old, possibly as old as the hills.

How old is it then?

We have taken great pride in assuming that the *regilaul* must be two or three thousand years old. Because it’s paganist. Yes, it’s definitely paganist and pre-Christian, no doubt about it. The paganist lifestyle, however, continued to exist in our country, parallel to the imported Christianity, long past that the ancient times. And it is still alive and kicking in our day and age in the *regilaul*!

So the *regilaul* that we have records of might not necessarily be that old at all. The progressive writer Arne Merilai has written about the format of the *regilaul* that “...the earliest that the quantitative verse could have been born at was the time when Christ was born (which seems pleasantly symbolic) ...”. There have been attempts to establish the age of the language of the *regilaul* by tracing the history of the changes in the language. It is thought that the *regilaul* brings to us the language of the 14th century – the late Middle Ages. That would mean that the *regilaul* lyrics that we sing today are not much older than Martin Luther. Now what do you say to that! But the Lutheran church and the translation of the Bible into Estonian really did influence our spoken language and shifted it towards the language that we use at present.

* *regilaul*, regi-song, runic song, runo-song, folk-song in runic verse are all synonyms of the old Estonian folk-song; “regi” rhymes with “Peggie”. “Laul”, meaning “song”, rhymes with “now” (translator’s note).

In his recently acclaimed essay *Loomise mõnu ja kiri* (The Pleasure and Pattern of Creation) the Estonian writer Hasso Krull talks about the language of songs and claims that in the later centuries "... the language of everyday speech ceased to be the language of songs. It was a ritual language of its own that continued to co-exist along the ordinary spoken language...". It is a remarkable feat of recognition. In that case the *regilaul* of today would also be first and foremost a ritual song, and nothing else. Let's keep it in mind for the future.

About the age of runic tunes.

It is harder to establish the age of tunes. One could assume that the simplest ones that use one to three notes could really date back to the primeval times of mankind. The more primitive the tune, the more it resembles the ancient tunes of other peoples. The runic tune could therefore be part of the shared culture of the whole mankind, the roots of culture. Examples of them would include the tunes for the swing (popularly known as *kiigetoone*) from Jõhvi (*Ki-i kiike kõrge'elle*), or a milking song from Southern Estonia (*Sõõru-sõõru, lehmäkeine*).

These tunes are at the same time typical *regilaul* tunes, that is, if people with a 'proper' European education consider them worthy of the name 'tune'. We know that for a long time the *regilaul* wasn't quite up to their tune standards. But that's their problem.

Let's now come back to our first question: what exactly does the word "regi" mean? Every Estonian knows what a "regi" (sleigh) is! A sleigh is the farmer's horse-drawn vehicle for transporting people and goods in winter. This sleigh, however, has nothing to do with the song, except that the sleigh runners screech in the cold snow and that you can sing a *regilaul* while sleigh-riding. And that there could well be a *regilaul* about the sleigh:

Regi jäi takka tulemaie.

Regi on sõnuda täisi,

reelauad laulusida.

Regi laulab Riia keeli,

reetallad Tartu keeli.

(The sleigh / the *regilaul* was following, full of words, its runners full of songs)

I love puns. This was an extract from one of my *regilaul* arrangements. The same pun logic gave my workshop at the Music Academy the name of Regi-room while in Viljandi I've got a Regi-attic because it is in the attic of the Music House.

But let's get serious about the origin of the word "*regilaul*".

Eesti keele etümoloogiline teatmik (The Etymological Dictionary of the Estonian Language) by Alo Raun says on page 140

"regi verse – Middle Low German *rei(e)* (dancing song); *rege* (row)"

The Finnish *Kansanmusiikki* (Folk Music) states on page 98 that "*rege-* or *rigenlied* were known in the Middle Low German dialect".

It is quite a likely explanation. The Middle Low German dialect was widely used in the region of the Baltic states in the Middle Ages. The term “regilaul” therefore comes from Middle Low German. Let’s remember this and tell other people about it as well.

In Estonian we use “folk song in runic verse”, “regilaul” and “runolaul” (runic song) as synonyms for old folk-songs. The third one is a Finnish loan. “Runolaulu” means the same thing in Finland as it does in Estonia. They also talk about the runic song as of the “song in the Kalevala-measure”. “Rekilaulu” in Finnish, on the other hand, means a newer folksong or a dancing song. Those of you who have happened to hear “Ingrian Evenings” know what I am talking about /*liilee ja lailee, allalee ja lailee*/. So let’s not mix up the two, *regilaul* (Estonian) and *rekilaulu* (Finnish). They are different things although they sound more or less the same (there are many “false friends” such as the latter in Estonian and Finnish, i.e. words that are similar or even identical but whose meaning is different; at the same time there are many similar words that have a similar meaning - translator’s note).

A side remark: The Jamaican term “*reggae*” has got nothing to do with the Estonian *regilaul*.

The characteristic features of the *regilaul*

Runic verse, as a type of metrical structure in poetry, is based on rhythm, word stress and the number of syllables, just like any poetry in any language. Our runic verse, however, has got some special features and forms that result from the peculiarities of the Estonian language. The structure of Estonian and the languages related to it differs a lot from all the other European languages. Today we are only interested in one major difference in Estonian - the quantity degree, the varying duration of vowels and consonants. In other words, our language is quantitative. There are other languages like that - Ancient Greek and Latin are perhaps the best-known. All the languages in modern Europe, however, use word stress. Verse rhythm in these languages is based on word stress and the number of syllables. It is a stress-syllabic system. Naturally, we’ve also got word stress in Estonian but the length of each syllable is just as important. As a result of that, our verses are stress-syllabic with syllables varying in length (quantity degree). What exactly is the quantity degree? It means that words with the same phonetic composition may mean three different things depending on the length of the syllable. We call it quantity or length alternation. Here are a few examples from school textbooks:

sada (short duration) – *saada* (medium long) – *saada* (extra long): different length of the supporting vowel

kabi – *kapi* – *kappi*: different geminate lengths

lina (short) – *linna* (medium long) – *linna* (extra long): different geminate lengths

Stressed and unstressed syllables, and longer and shorter syllables alternate in Estonian words. The rhythm (prosody) of Estonian is therefore trochaic.

Tule homme meile. Täna polnud aega tulla. Mis seal ikka kurvastada.
Aastatuhandete vahetusel oli kõrgel järjel põlluharimine.

Due to the language the old folk-song became trochaic, and it adapted not only to word stress but to syllable length as well. Here are some examples where the two function together - stressed-unstressed, long-short (the stressed and therefore long syllables are underlined):

kui ma /hakkan /laule-/maie

sööge, /langud, /jooge, /langud
meie /kaksi /vaesta-/lasta

However, there are also many three-syllable words in Estonian and they all have stress on the first syllable. This is where the quantitative system comes to the rescue: the trochee is formed not based on word stress but according to the length of syllables - longer-shorter-longer-shorter (the longer syllables are underlined):

meie /kaksi /vaesta-/lasta –
sa i-/sata, ma e-/mata

There is absolutely no sense in chanting these words in speech, but it's a whole different ballgame when you are singing. We don't really hear distinct chanting in the song because word stress and verse stress are levelled. The result is a smooth flow of syllables.

There is one thing in Estonian (and in the other Fenno-Ugric languages in the Baltic sea area) that will probably remain an incomprehensible and unbelievable mystery for a foreigner - that the syllable carrying the main stress can be short: isa, ema (father, mother). For example Russians would prefer to pronounce it *iisa*, *eema*, or put the stress on the long syllable - *isaa*, *emaa*.

The phenomenon of chanting involves a problem related to the theory and history of verse, which has arisen again recently and given food for many disputes. It's about the huge difference between old South Estonian folk songs and the classical *regilaul*. The territory of the so-called classical, quantitative *regilaul*, or the *runolaulu* as it is called in Finnish, is in Northern and North-Eastern Estonia and further in Ingria and Karelia. While already the West-Estonian *regilaul* deviates a lot from the system, the South-Estonian *regilaul* is completely different with its stressed verse that the chorus word often cuts in half.

People argue whether the original *regilaul* used word stress or the quantitative system. Which in turn is related to the question which singing style is older, the South-Estonian or the North-Estonian. There's that old question again: which came first, the chicken or the egg?
That much about the form and structure of the *regilaul*.

The status of the *regilaul* in Estonia today

The *regilaul* as an oral tradition ceased to exist in most of Estonia already in the 19th century. A mass-scale campaign was launched to write down the lyrics so that they wouldn't be lost. The minute the lyrics of a *regilaul* are written down, however, it is no longer oral tradition. It became literature, and as such is stored in the right place – at the Estonian Literary Museum. Tremendous work has been done in Estonia to systematize and analyze the lyrics in depth, to ascertain the importance of the *regilaul* as the bearer of traditional culture in all walks of life.

Half a century later, a similar campaign was undertaken to record tunes. By the present day there has been enough collecting and research work done on tunes as well. Now, what are we going to do with all the material?

The two parts should meet up again and begin a new co-existence! This is where we stand with you at present. That's why we have started to meet here in Viljandi. The big question is: how are

we going to do it? How do we put the preserved components of the tradition back together again, how do we make it a living organism again:

*Keelta suhu, meelta pähe,
otsa oidu ümmargusta.*

How to do it? Where to start? Shouldn't we try to draft some postulates or theses? Shape viewpoints and attitudes? Make it clear to ourselves where we stand? I have a number of suggestions.

- 1) The *regilaul* is an oral tradition
- 2) The format of the *regilaul* (metre, alliteration, parallelisms, etc.) is the medium by which the tradition is passed on, the mnemonic and technical framework for it.
- 3) The core principle of oral tradition is repetition (reinforcement of information, not development or improvisation).
- 4) The structure of the *regilaul* consists of an eight-syllable isochronal melody-line, verse repetition, lead singer and a choir.
- 5) It's not the notes that are sung but phonetic sounds and words.
- 6) Singing does not follow the rhythmic rules of spoken language (speaking is one thing, singing something else).
- 7) The main thing in stylistic terms is pronouncing the *regilaul* language within the syllables, and not the expressiveness or timbre.
- 8) The *regilaul* is a continuous activity, an unbroken flow, a non-stop stream of singing where there is no grammatical phrasing.
- 9) The *regilaul* is a ritual song (and not a means of communication).
- 10) The *regilaul* is supra-individual culture, the cultural atmosphere that stretches out above us like the sky. One should not aim for setting a model based on the *regilaul* as performed by a particular singer, and linking it with the so-called 'great' singers.
- 11) The *regilaul* has already undergone its natural historical development once and reached the point of end-rhyming songs. It has played its role to the full. We do not need to start developing it all over again. What would be the point – to get somewhere again?
- 12) That's why we should stop imagining that we are carrying on the *regilaul* tradition.
- 13) We should therefore give the *regilaul* new content and meaning as a ritual of cultural identity and independence.
- 14) I invite you not to break up the things that have been preserved so well. We shouldn't substitute our indigenous antique with cheap imitations or industrial mass production.

Some of the fourteen suggestions might upset you but that's what they were meant to do! You can always dispute and make your contribution. Let's open a *regi*-Wikipedia! We must keep our thoughts on the move.

How to learn the tradition again, how to reanimate it?

It's not a very reliable way to learn the tradition according to the score. A lot depends on the scores that you used to learn to read music. If we learned using Mozart's works, we will sing the *regilaul* in the same way as we sing Mozart.

Tradition should be learnt in a manner as close to the original as possible. It means by ear, as all the generations before us did it. It means that we have to learn to listen and to hear. To listen and to hear not only the formal notes, i.e. pitch, but first and foremost the pronunciation of the words

of our mother tongue in the song. That's about the transformation of the spoken mother tongue into the musical mother tongue! There is, after all, more to the musical mother tongue than just the various combination of pitches.

Let's take a moment to think about the map of Estonian parishes. Our church parishes were born a few hundred years ago and co-incide with the ancient ethnographic parishes. How many have we got? Over a hundred! And each and every one of them has a slightly different dialect and style of singing. And a different version of the mother tongue. This is something that we have to bear in mind when we are learning the tradition. One person can never learn and carry on the whole tradition! Our folklorists and ethno-musicologists have each carried out a most thorough study into the singing style of a particular corner of Estonia, and master it on a professional level, just like the real thing. For example Janika Oras and the singing style of Muhu, Taive Särg and Karksi, and Paul Hagu and the Seto style. One researcher simply could not cover them all, we would need another hundred PhDs for that!

Yet there are things that the different regions of Estonia have in common. I usually try to point out some of them at my sessions. I suggest that you listen to how the supporting vocals of the syllables are sung. Here in Viljandi County, for example in Kolga-Jaani they are heavy and weighty, as if each syllable were leaning on the foundation. There is none of the hopping and skipping as you often hear in speech.

Can we also hear other details in the singing? How do the sonorous consonants sound next to support vocals? How are diphthongs distributed? How do the actual people who pass on the tradition do it? Listen to Marie Sepp, Kadri Asu, Juuli Ott – the singers from Kolga-Jaani!

There is a brilliant opportunity to hear the singing heritage of the whole Estonia – the CD set *Eesti rahvamuusika antoloogia* (Anthology of Estonian folk-music, recordings from the Estonian Folklore Archives), EKMCD 005. You can buy it at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, Vanemuise st 42, but also at some bookshops (*sic!*).

Finally a few words about the *Uus Regilaulik* (New Book of Regilaul) that is being compiled. When we were compiling the new collection with co-author Ülo Tedre we took into account our colleagues' friendly advice. First, we added about an extra hundred new songs that represented genres different from the lyrical and narrative. We included an armful of St Martin's and St Catherine's Day songs (Estonian tradition where children go from door to door wearing masks and costumes, singing for treats – translator's note), supplemented them with a bunch of swing and wedding songs, and a handful of girls' and women's songs, and beefed it up with a batch of men's joking songs. We have got about 150 songs so far. We didn't look for songs of outstanding beauty but just took the songs in the order that they were listed, using sources starting with the above-mentioned Estonian Folk Music Anthology, Tampere Pentalogy, and ending with the *Võrumaa Väike Kannel* (an electronic collection of *regilauls*). I hope that you will also notice that we focused on the unity of style and compactness of the lyrics, rather than the possible unique features of the singers. We made adjustments based on the reviews of the original *Regilaulik* (Regilaul Book) – we left most of the new material in its dialect form. Which does not at all mean that we give up the principle that we can do the same thing with the *regilaul* as had been done with the Estonian language and convert it into the song that unites all the Estonians, following the example of Estonian dialects that were brought together under the hat of one standard version of Estonian that is the same for all Estonians. We are following the extremely well-justified initiative of Jakob Hurt (he started the campaign in the 19th century to

collect Estonian folklore – translator’s note) who translated texts in the Seto dialect into standard Estonian. Without the above-mentioned initiative our national culture would have had to do without *Ilulaul* (Song of Beauty), *Kalmuneid* (The Maiden of the Grave), the *Estonian Ballads* and *Naistelaulud* (Women’s songs, compiled by Jaan Kaplinski). We wouldn’t even have the Republic of Estonia without Jakob Hurt! And without Estonia’s independence we would not be able to declare our dialects independent. We’ve come the full circle.

In the songbook we tried to give a rough idea of the syllabic-stressed-quantitative form of the *regilaul* where there was no chance to give up chanting. I have tried to explain everyone, starting with Eduard Tubin, a good friend of Herbert Tampere, that the graphic highlighting of the quantitative characteristics of the verse in the *Regilaulik* does not mean that we lay excessive stress on the verse rhythm and distort the language, but it is just a simplified system for using the material.

I think that when linguists discuss and dispute sound length and stress among themselves they would definitely benefit from inviting ethno-musicologists to join them. They could discuss the issues together, and not only based on written records but also sung records. That what is written is fiction. Only that what is sung is truth.

Veljo Tormis

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APPENDIX

It often happens that people pick a book of poetry from a shelf and a collection of tunes from another and combine them into a “traditional” song. Doesn’t that ring a bell? Then they get a band to accompany them and add the disco beat as a finishing touch. And they march on the stage of the local community centre and claim that they carry on and develop the national tradition. Really? It’s got an official name as well – secondary tradition. It is actually a big misunderstanding. Sometimes I feel like calling it a pseudo-tradition.

It is not my task to study what the *regilaul* is telling us, but rather to find out how it is doing that and how it has managed to preserve the wisdom of a thousand years in the oral tradition. The content of the *regilaul* has, after all, come to us by singing only, as a song. We need to know how they sang and how we should sing to carry on the tradition.

To make sure that you understand me and my stories correctly I would like to emphasize once again that I’m not working with the philosophy and the deeper meaning of the *regilaul* but with its structure, with the mechanism that has brought the tradition to us, with the format of singing the *regilaul*. If it were a subject on a curriculum we could call it *The Stylistics of Singing the Regilaul*.

I have not aimed to teach and preach in the presentation. There are no final answers in it, only endless questions. As is usual in life.

Translated by Ülle Leis