

# Estonian Music Week sparks reflections of Forgotten Peoples

Kaja Parming Weeks

On October 17, 2021, Estonian Music Week, an event of VEMU (Toronto-based Museum of Estonians Abroad) live-screened the documentary, **“Unustatud rahvaste jälgedes/ In the Steps of Forgotten Peoples.”** The accompanying talk featured commentary by conductors Miina Pärn and Endrik Üksväärv, Finno-Ugrist Taisto Raudalainen and folklorist and ethnomusicologist Taive Särg, and conversations with Piret Noorhani, Chief Archivist of VEMU.

The film details a vast undertaking by Collegium Musicale. For three years, this top Estonian chamber choir traveled to Finno-Ugric peoples whom composer Veljo Tormis musically portrayed in his masterpiece, *Forgotten Peoples*, which included Livonians, Votes, Izhorians, Ingrians, Vepsians, and Karelians. Collegium Musicale's aim was to sing the music by Tormis that was based on their own folklore and in doing so, support these Estonian kinspeople's preservation of their endangered cultures.

Hearing the perceptive discussions, watching the film and

listening to the sheer power of this music, transported me back to the first time I heard songs from Tormis' *Forgotten Peoples*. It was not in Estonia. An American-born child of Estonian WW II refugees, at that time I had not even stepped foot in Estonia. Rather, I heard it in Berkeley, California, over thirty years ago, which turns out to have been just one year after the composer completed the six-part cycle that took him over twenty years to compose.

But in that early March of 1990 I'd never heard of Veljo Tormis. It was nearly a year and a-half before Estonia's renewed independence from their nearly fifty-year Soviet occupants would be declared, and still an exciting rarity to encounter Estonians from the ancestral homeland. But while on my husband's sabbatical I saw a small notice announcing a concert by an Estonian choir! We had to go, I said, securing one of our first-ever babysitters for our infant daughter.

I will never forget the mystery and transcendent joy I felt at that concert. At first, there was some Bach and other music, and sure, it was fine,

perfectly sung. But after intermission the women re-appeared in white linen dresses, the men's white shirts were covered by long black coats. I stared at their delicate leather slippers laced up the ankles that I knew from historic art or photos as traditional folk footwear, *pastlad*.

Then they opened their mouths to sing, and I thought, *What in the world?!* Their singing was like Estonian – the inflections were familiar, and I understood some words, but it was not Estonian; sung a cappella, the music was other-worldly, sometimes with shamanic overtones, hauntingly beautiful and tender at others, with lilting strings of alliteration and assonance – *Siliala, saliala, soliala, lei ja lei*. The evening's program included songs from the *Vepsian Paths and Ingrian Evenings* sections of *Forgotten Peoples*.

Sometimes it surprised with humor, as when a deep bass-voice singer unfurled a near-maniac song tale and then abruptly ended with *Kaik* – That's all! Later, as the singers sang impossibly long-and-longer unbroken phrases, audibly gasping in unison for breath, the audience inserted appreciative laughter.

The Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir had been brought to their first-ever US series of performances by the performing arts tour consultants, ACFEA. Their agent, Hugh Davies, recently recalled to me how he and the group's conductor, then thirty-something Tõnu Kaljuste, had forged a special alliance and dreamt up magnificent concert plans in a Helsinki sauna! The church that night was completely packed with Americans whose pleasure in the music was obvious. It was possible I was the only Estonian in the audience. The Americans were swept away for their own reasons, hearing content so unique and superbly sung, I imagine. But Americans of my childhood and youth, among whom I had gratefully grown up in a land that offered refuge to my family and exiled community, had been pitifully ignorant of Estonia, its cultural riches and even most recent historic plight.

Close friends eventually gained appreciation, and thankfully the government's official position did not recognize the legitimacy of Soviet occupation, but for those of with roots there, Estonia still remained a world apart, bursting with beautiful, painful secrets, pride and longing for restoration to freedom. Thus, sitting among cheering by those of my birth-land while washed over by the exquisite sounds of my ancestral homeland, sung by singers whose lives were still beyond an iron curtain, created a stunning artistic and psychological



CENTRAL & EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNCIL IN CANADA

## CEEC calls on Canada to adopt measures to deter Kremlin aggression against Ukraine

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**TORONTO – The Central and Eastern European Council in Canada (CEEC) is deeply concerned by the Russian Federation's dramatic troop buildup and military escalation along its borders with Ukraine and the Belarusian border in northern Ukraine.**

The CEEC calls on the Canadian government to work with our NATO allies and adopt greater measures to impose costs on the Russian government's hybrid warfare and deter its neo-imperialist ambitions.

Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. Crimea and parts of the eastern Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk remain under illegal Russian occupation.

Vladimir Putin has now amassed over 100,000 troops along Ukraine's borders which may soon be ordered to invade further into Ukraine in the coming weeks or months.

The 4.5 million Canadians of Central and Eastern European heritage stand with the Ukrainian people and their nation's aspiration to become a modern European democracy. We strongly urge the Canadian government, our Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of Defence, to suggest and adopt measures to deter the threat of Russian warfare against Ukraine and against NATO's eastern member states. We suggest the following measures:

1. Immediately renew and increase Canadian and allied

military training missions to Ukraine and provide surplus Canadian defensive weapons systems, including naval defence, anti-tank and anti-artillery systems. Canada should increase its commitment to the NATO EFP in Latvia as well.

2. Apply pressure on Germany to cancel the Nord Stream II pipeline immediately. The completion of this pipeline would allow Russia to use natural gas supplies as leverage against Canada's European allies and a weapon against Ukraine and other NATO allied nations in Eastern Europe.

3. Increase sectoral economic sanctions on Russia and apply sanctions on the Russian oligarchs who enable the Putin regime, specifically those with significant assets and interests in Canada. Those oligarchs that have been identified by Russian anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny should be prioritized.

Finally, Canadian officials must realize that Vladimir Putin's objective is not greater cooperation or making deals with Canada or any of our allies. Putin's aim is to assert complete control over his people and the world around him through repression, corruption, intimidation, and violence. Since coming to power in 2000, Putin has demonstrated that compromise only emboldens him and encourages further aggressive behaviour.

A strong Canadian voice, presence and deterrence, will help protect vulnerable democracies in Eastern Europe and stop the march of Putin's neo-imperialist authoritarianism in Europe and beyond.

The CEEC represents the interests of 4.5 million Canadians of Central and Eastern European Heritage.

convergence.

By pure serendipity, shortly before VEMU's presentation this Fall, I came upon a home video from my time in Berkeley, recorded on one of those mammoth video recorders one had to hold on the shoulder. Having it digitized in order to see the contents and expecting family events, I was taken aback when the opening twenty minutes showed excerpts from none other than that 1990 concert of Tormis' music.

As I re-watched that long-ago performance, I remembered how even then the final piece, "Ending and Going Home" from *Ingrian Evenings* invoked a sorrowful edge to what had been a light-hearted portrait of village youth playing and singing. Groups of singers began to depart the stage, each vocalizing snatches of songs, until there was one lone singer, repeating, "night is done, we end our play and songs." She, too, departed, her mournful lines

floating away, and we were left with an empty stage.

Tormis has talked about the significance of this enactment that he recreated for our eyes, how it is like those people's departure through time and space from the stage of life into non-existence. In the many years since that first viewing of *Forgotten Peoples*, I have personally been motivated to delve deeply into the runic song heritage we share among Finnic cultures. Significantly, I have also been struck by the knowledge that possibly little more than historic hairlines have separated the fate of Estonians from her smaller kinfolk – the now extinct or nearly extinct people of Tormis' songs. During VEMU's many-faceted 2021 program, I viewed Collegium Musicale's robust gathering of past riches and their insistence on breathing life into them. I knew I was witnessing steps whose profound reverberations continue.



The Hamilton Estonian School did not cancel a visit from Santa Claus this year. The old gentleman was very agreeable to don a mask as were the students and teachers, both of whom enjoyed their presents. The teacher is Karen Duckett and the organizational strength of the school is Lia Hess. Who was Santa? Ask Erik Kadai. He knows. Photos: Martin Kiik