



MUSIC

RESEARCH

AND

ACTIVISM

PROSPECTS AND PROJECTS
IN NORTHERN EUROPE

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11.

The Silences of Labour Music History: Music as a Tool for Social Change

Saijaleena Rantanen

Saijaleena Rantanen is a music historian and professor of cultural study of music at the Sibelius Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki. Her research focuses on the social, political, and cultural history of music. She is particularly interested in people and phenomena that have been marginalized in historiography, including migration, labour history, and the role of women as musical and cultural influencers. Her current research project examines the musical culture of activist 'Red Finns' in North America and Soviet Karelia from the late nineteenth century to the late 1930s.

Historical awareness builds and strengthens individual and group identity in many ways. The activist music historian brings to light those moments in history and those people who have been silenced in the past for one reason or another. This kind of research can be called *awareness-raising research*, a concept originating from public sociology, which demands social debate and practical action from research. It focuses attention on marginalized, oppressed and 'silent' groups of people whose freedom of expression is

restricted or prevented in one way or another. The importance of this approach lies in the fact that it brings to the fore and maintains issues that have previously been obscured by history (Suoranta and Rynnänen 2014: 31–32). The same principles can also be found behind the so-called ‘ethical turn’ in historical research from the 1990s onwards. As a result, the greater emphasis was placed on the responsibility of the researcher to give a voice to people who have remained invisible in their own time, often due to structural violence of some kind (Koskivirta and Lidman 2017: 12–15; see also Vainio-Korhonen 2017). Today, this responsibility has become even more important with the proliferation of marginal research topics. Without such research, there is a risk that certain events, people, and issues will be completely ignored or disappear from the historical debate. This limits the ability of citizens and groups of people to know their own history, to build their identity and to make sense of their lives through personally meaningful connections with the past.

The above-mentioned perspectives have formed the main guidelines of my own research. As a music historian my research interests are in the history of working-class music, especially the ‘forgotten’ music culture of the activist Finnish North Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. Music had a significant role in the lives and actions of the Finnish immigrants. Despite this, their music has largely remained outside the realm of academic research (on the music culture of Finnish North American activists, see Leary and Virtanen 2010; Niemelä 1997; Rantanen 2017, 2020a, 2020b; Sutinen and Pitkänen 2011).

When we look at the history of music, we rarely think about whose history we are actually reading or writing. From whose point of view is it written? Who are the people who have been included in the history of music and who have not? Most music history produced within the disciplinary structure at universities in the Global North is written from a Eurocentric perspective. Therefore, music history research is often understood to mean the history of western art music, focusing on the key works of art music and their heroic (White male) authors, typically from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. Because of this sharply selective perspective, music history research has become associated with elite history, where events are presented from the perspective of the ‘winners’ to the exclusion of details ‘detrimental’ to historiography, i.e. events

and people who, for one reason or another, do not ‘fit’ the narrative (such as women, children, and workers). Thus, a considerable number of real events in the history of music have been left untold. The picture of the musical past is inaccurate, scarce, and incomplete. Our knowledge of music history has long been dominated by stereotypes and myths that need to be dispelled in order to give the diverse, real phenomena of the past the attention they deserve.

The work and author-oriented perspective of western art music and its emphasis on music-theoretical concepts has so atrophied the understanding of music history that many scholars from other disciplines – not to mention the ordinary citizen – think they are unqualified to discuss music history. Several scholars from other disciplines have told me: ‘I don’t understand anything about music’. In practice, the comment simply means that the colleague does not know western music theory, such as harmony and form analysis. However, they are not needed in most music history research, which concerns the history of musical practices of people all over the world in all their dimensions, and the relationship of musical practices to other cultural and social phenomena.

To promote a broader knowledge of the history of music, it is clear that much more diverse research methods and perspectives than the traditional history of works and styles in the history of art music need to be used, and this change in research approach has been influenced by the parallel paradigm shifts in musicology and general history since the 1980s at the latest. At the same time in general historiography in Finland, the top-down, myth- and magnate-based historiography began to crack, when research trends directed at the margins of society and the deeper ranks of the people brought to the fore areas of research that traditional historiography had not considered worthy of study. Micro-history, social history, history of ideas, history of everyday life, gender history, environmental history, history of experience, and other recent trends put the ‘losers of history’ on the stage alongside the winners, and human experience alongside the ‘great structures’ of history (see e.g. Koskivirta and Lindman 2017: 11–12). Increasingly, history began to be viewed from the grassroots, from the perspective of ordinary people.

Similar changes in Finnish music research were reflected in the growing interest not only in the social context of musicians and their

social networks, but also in the use of more diverse source material to study musical life and culture. At the same time, research has increasingly focused on questioning, bypassing, and dismantling the canons of music history. It should be noted, however, that even though this so called 'new cultural history of music' (see e.g. Sarjala 2002) is not a new phenomenon anymore, it has reached music history research in Finland relatively slowly. The research trend only really became established in the 2010s. In Finland, professors Anne Kauppala and Vesa Kurkela have done pioneering work in their research projects¹ concentrating on the different social structures behind music, musicians, and musical life in Finland (see also Välimäki and Koivisto in this volume; Koivisto 2019; Mustakallio 2003; Sarjala 1994; Välimäki and Koivisto-Kaasik 2023).

For the activist music historian, the diversification of research methods has provided new and important tools for explaining the connections between music and social events in the past, and for understanding the ways and forms in which the past lives on in the present day, in the lives of individuals and in the cultural practices of communities. The study of working-class music is an excellent example of this. Next, I first reflect on the different meanings of music in the activities of the workers. Second, I will briefly discuss the music of the Finnish North American activist immigrants and present the collaborative project that brought this music to the public for the first time in a hundred years.

Labour music as a subject of research

The history of workers, especially their own musical and other cultural activities, is one of the phenomena of history that remained outside the mainstream of scientific research for a long time. The study of labour music has also been left out of the recent debate. In Finland, labour researchers are pioneers in the social history of music. In the field of labour research, the history of music has been studied already since the 1960s (see e.g. Gronow 1979; Saunio 1974; Saunio and Tuovinen 1978), and one cannot even attempt to understand working-class music culture without understanding the social context. The functional nature of the labour movement means that the study of its musical culture is inherently social.

Just as poetry or literature and other arts, music can help us to understand the events of history and to go deeper into the world and thoughts of the concertgoer, the musician, and the ordinary citizen. Music has been and still is heavily present in the crises of nations and different social groups. Labour songs are a good example of music that presents the political history of the working class. Timo 'Tipi' Tuovinen, a musician and a pioneer of labour music research in Finland, has stated that even if all historical documents of the labour movement disappeared, it could still be possible to reconstruct the history of the working class on the basis of their song repertoire (Saunio 1980: 4). Different occasions in history have given rise to different repertoires of songs, which makes it possible to delve deep into the historical events and the perceptions behind them (Rantanen 2020a: 78).

Songs, and music in general, have been a central part of the labour movement, of workers' activities and communication, throughout its history. At the same time, since the nineteenth century the labour movement has been at the heart of activist art and cultural activity. Alongside the composition of poems, the publication of printed and handwritten newspapers and the formation of associations, songs served as a means of protest against oppressors and deplorable conditions. At the same time, they protested the social order established by the upper classes of society and provided a vehicle for workers' self-expression. In response to the 'language' of those in power, songs, and other communal activities created a language and expression of their own for the working class, not to be ordered around but to educate each other and participate in social debate. Through these tools, working-class people recorded and collected their own history and created a whole new, non-mainstream knowledge of the customs, habits, work, and culture of ordinary people that scholars have subsequently been able to draw on (see e.g. Suoranta and Rynnänen 2014: 49).

Many labour songs were written, and countless songbooks were published in Europe and North America after the mid-nineteenth century. Songs were essential tools for community, struggle, and the raising of working-class identity at social evenings, meetings, demonstrations, and other occasions. Current problems and social events were presented in an understandable way in songs, as opposed, for example, to political speeches full of lofty concepts

(e.g. Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 59). (About the meaning of labour songs and songbooks see also Waters 1990 and Bowan 2017.) The songs are often born in a specific social context and tell the story of their origins in a truthful and unpretentious way. The main characteristic of labour songs is the strong sense of community they create, especially when sung as a group. From the beginning of the labour movement, and even earlier, workers have written and performed songs to vent their feelings and seek solace and strength for the struggle.

Songs can also be used to bring the emotions of the past into the present. The best results are achieved if the songs are presented in a musical form – as they were performed during the period under research. For the researcher, this requires working closely with musicians.

I made such a collaboration myself after discovering songbooks published by Finnish North American Wobblies on an archival trip to Minneapolis, United States and Thunder Bay, Canada, in the autumn of 2016. By Wobblies, I refer to the members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a trade union movement founded in the United States in 1905 with an anarcho-syndicalist ideology, whose mission was to bring the whole of society under the control of the workers. The IWW's radical methods of achieving workers' power were direct action, sabotage, and general strikes (see e.g. Kostinen 1983: 98; Leary 2010: 6). Equality was one of the central premises: women and men, White and Black, were welcome in the organization. True to its ideals of equality, the IWW accepted members from every profession and trade (Goings 2010: 20; Morello 2016: vii). The principle of equality, as it was conceptualized within the movement, was revolutionary at the time.²

Music played a central role in the IWW's activities, so much so that the movement has been called the *Singing Union*. Each of the songbooks published by Finnish members – *Proletaarilauluja* ('Proletarian Songs') (1918), *Palkkaorjain lauluja* ('Songs of the Wage Slaves') (1920) and *Raatajain lauluja* ('Songs of the Toilers') (1925) – contains 70–80 songs in Finnish, with themes ranging from oppression, defiance, and the red flag to the hopeless aftermath of the Finnish Civil War (1918) with its prisoner-of-war camps and executions. However, with a few exceptions, the songs used and published by the IWW have remained unknown to Finns.

It is known that some of the songs of Joe Hill (1879–1915), the IWW’s most famous songwriter, were part of the repertoire of the Finnish political song movement of the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, Hill’s songs were also recorded by the Turku Student Theatre Singing Group in 1975 (see Rantanen 2017, 2020a).

After discussing my archival findings with Timo Tuovinen, whom I mentioned earlier, he became enthusiastic and contacted his fellow musicians. The group started to work with the repertoire and formed an ensemble called *Laulava Unioni* (the Singing Union), after the IWW’s nickname. The IWW and some of its music were already familiar to these musicians, so it was easy for them to internalize the context of the repertoire. We had an ongoing discussion on the subject, and I have also presented the material at research conferences in Finland and the United States. The musicians rehearsed for about a year, mapping out the tunes and rearranging the songs. The original performance of the songs is impossible to trace due to the lack of sonic archival material and written descriptions, but most of the songs are accompanied by the name of the tune by which it was intended to be sung. This was a common practice in labour movement songbooks. The lyrics always came first. The tunes were often familiar, already existing songs that everyone knew by heart (see e.g. Rantanen 2017). This allowed the focus to be on what was most important: the message of the songs.

The debut performance of *Laulava Unioni*, a band consisting of musicians Karri ‘Paleface’ Miettinen, Timo ‘Tipi’ Tuovinen, Ossi Peura, Anssi Nykänen, and Harri Kuusijärvi, was held at Juttutupa restaurant in Hakaniemi, Helsinki, at the end of April 2018.³ At the concert, the songs, most of which had not been heard or performed in Finland before, came to life in an impressive way. The atmosphere was tangible, and the underlying message of the songs was imprinted on the listeners’ minds in a completely different way than when they were read from a book or told orally. After the concert, the aims of the IWW and the reasons for the struggle a hundred years ago seemed understandable – and the ideologies behind the IWW, which later historiography considered harmful and even dangerous to social development, did not seem dangerous or illogical at all. Particularly moving was *Langenneen laulu* (‘Song of the Fallen One’), which tells of the harsh daily life of a sex worker in North America. Written by an anonymous writer,

it is likely to be the only published Finnish-language labour song that defends sex workers and their rights. It is noteworthy that the IWW's Finnish-language songbooks emphasize the active role of women in the movement. This is also conveyed in a very concrete way in the background of the songs, as they were written by women as well as men (e.g. Rantanen 2020b).

Who decides what to say about the past?

An interesting example of the selectivity and deliberate 'forgetting' of historiography relates precisely to Finnish immigrants in North America. As early as the 1980s, Peter Kivisto, who studied the Finnish American labour movement in the United States, applied the concept of *social amnesia* to his research (Kivisto 1984: 16), describing a situation in which a community consciously chooses to omit from its history what it considers to be negative events. This is still a reality among the descendants of Finnish immigrants living in the United States and Canada, many of whom, even after decades of living in North America, remain silent about the immigrants' radical and activist past in the labour movement. However, it is worth noting that the majority, almost 90 per cent, of the Finns who left for the other side of the Atlantic had a peasant or labourer background, pushed on by the recession, unemployment, and the social problems caused by the prevailing conditions. For others, the political climate in Finland after the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Sveaborg Rebellion (1906), and finally the Finnish Civil War (1918) also contributed to their departure (see e.g. Kero 1996, 1997).

Because of their social background, many Finns who went to North America were basically sympathetic to the labour movement and took a radical role in it. As a result, they also left behind a wealth of written and other material as well as an oral tradition that enables the historian to trace the events of the past. Music played an important role among the Finnish immigrants from the very beginning (see e.g. Niemelä 1997; Virtanen 2014), and by studying their music culture, it is possible to follow and analyse different phases of their lives. However, access to the material is not easy. This 'amnesia' has been evident not only in the complicated attitude of informants towards their ancestors' past but also in some of the archives that keep immigrants' records,

where officials deliberately do not bring out material on the history of the labour movement unless specifically requested to do so.

However, since the labour movement and its musical culture were a central part of political and cultural activity among the immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, excluding them from the historiography would significantly distort our understanding of the Finnish immigrants' past. In my archival research, it has become clear that material relating to radical Finns does exist. It is important to add, that there are also informants who are willing to talk about it. It is crucial to reach out to these people and communities in order to dispel distortions and myths about history. But how? One way is for the researcher to go out into the communities and try to gain their trust. Writing about difficult issues and presenting them objectively can also reduce the sense of shame and intergenerational burden shifting associated with community trauma. At its best, community engagement allows for more open discussion and a truer presentation of history and enriches and strengthens the identity and sense of community of people and communities. A connection to the past is built in a way that, rather than breaking, integrates, and enlivens the social fabric of life.

In spring 2018, the centennial commemorative year of the Finnish Civil War, Finland was more ready than ever to dispel the myths of history, despite the fact that the events of a century ago continue to provoke strong opinions for and against. During the spring, numerous publications appeared, examining the perspectives of both Reds and Whites (the warring parties) in a varied and truthful way. Perhaps the most important lesson has been that one can never judge historical events solely by their outcome but must take into account the whole picture with all its details. By presenting a comprehensive view of the different stages of history and by considering the different perspectives in a truthful way, it is also possible to influence the present and the way things develop in the future.

Music as a tool for activist historical research

Music is a powerful tool of political influence, which can bring back memories of the past, of how things were and why they developed in a certain way. Studying historical songs and music can also

help us better understand the present and the future. People and communities need music today as much as they did in the past, and the connection that music brings to the past, to one's heritage, and to other people is an important part of any musical experience. Whatever the style of music, music and the history of music must be the common property of all – not just of an elite or some single group of people.

My own approach as an activist music historian is based on the idea that because societies are organized inherently unequally, those in positions of power should use their privilege to work for social equity where all people have the same opportunities, all people are fundamentally equal, all have the right to live a human life and the capacity to act to change the world. Here I follow the ideas of Juha Suoranta and Sanna Rynnänen, social scientists and educationalists who in their conceptualization of rebellious research, suggest that 'marginalized or oppressed people are not the poor to be saved or helped, as they are often treated, but valuable individuals who have a will of their own and are capable of changing reality' (2014: 278). This is important to bear in mind in the study of the history of music, and it is the basis for the study of the history of the margins. The most important and most difficult thing for the researcher is to put themselves in the shoes of the subject and to see the subjects or the people involved as equals, without putting themselves on an expert's pedestal. This is also a challenge because it can be difficult to gain the trust of a group that is often very heterogeneous. Some marginalized communities can treat researchers with respect or great suspicion and be selective about what they say and what they reveal. Related to this is another important aspiration of the activist historian. The collective collaboration and division of work between researchers and actors should be as loose and open as possible: researchers act and actors research. All keep each other informed of what they are doing and the progress of their projects and form a functioning whole (Suoranta and Rynnänen 2014: 278).

It is the duty of the activist historian to bring their research topics and results to the public eye without concealing the political or ethical background and principles of the research subjects (or the researcher's own), even if they cause disapproval or anger among those who seek to preserve the established social order.

The researcher should be ‘change-oriented, with an emphasis on research and support for civil society, independent communities, and social action, and on the identification of autonomous areas that are self-organized and capable of change’ (Suoranta and Rynnänen 2014: 279). To avoid distortions of history, activist researchers should call a spade a spade. It is through these means, with open-mindedness and courage, that it is possible to present the history of music as it has happened – whether elite or popular, working class or bourgeois – in a comprehensive way. This is the only way to do genuinely egalitarian and inclusive historical research.

In addition to highlighting phenomena, the researcher aims to raise people’s critical awareness. By bringing to the fore issues and situations that have previously been silenced, the researcher can influence the course of history and its interpretation, even future choices.

In order to understand, for example, the actions of Finnish North American immigrants a century ago, it is particularly important to highlight the reasons for joining political movements, i.e. the factors that shed light on the choices made by these people. The role of the activist researcher is to help people understand the past in a holistic way that transcends the political climate of today. In the United States and Canada, Finnish immigrants were generally employed in heavy physical occupations where working conditions were poor, and improvement was a constant source of contention between workers and employers. The situation eventually led workers to resort to increasingly radical associations, such as the anarcho-syndicalist IWW.

Rather than, for example, treating the history of the labour movement as the history of the ‘losers’ and its culture as dangerous or harmful in one way or another, and therefore unnecessary to remember and write down, we should pay more attention to the courage of these people to take action to improve conditions and accept as members of the community all comers, regardless of race, profession, or gender. This idea has much to contribute to thinking about the problems of today’s world and society. History teaches, enlightens, and inspires, but only if it can be listened to from the perspectives of different people and groups.

Notes

1. Anne Kauppala's projects: (1) *The Finnish Opera Company (1873–79) from a Microhistorical Perspective: Performance Practices, Multiple Narrations, and Polyphony of Voices*. Funded by the Academy of Finland, 2010–13. (2) *Opera on the Move: Transnational Practices and Touring Artists in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Funded by the Joint Committee for Nordic research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS), 2013–16.
Vesa Kurkela's projects: (1) Rethinking 'Finnish' Music History: Transnational Construction of Musical Life in Finland from the 1870s until the 1920s. Funded by the Academy of Finland and the Finnish Cultural Foundation, 2011–16. (2) *Translocal Cultural Fields: Music as a Cultural and Economic Enterprise in the Four Biggest Cities in Finland, 1900–39*. Funded by the Academy of Finland, 2017–20.
2. For example, women only had the right to vote in Aotearoa New Zealand and White women in Australia. Finland became the third country in the world to grant women the right to vote in 1906 as part of universal and equal suffrage. In the United States, all women gained theoretically the right to vote in 1920 (some states had tried it much earlier) but in practice Black people only received this right after the civil rights movement in the 1960s.
3. The performance was also the evening programme of the *Työväentaide ja -kulttuuri muutosvoimana* ('Workers' Art and Culture as a Force for Change') symposium. See Rantanen et al. (2020). The band is still active, and its first album was released in 2019.