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MART SAAR

ESTONIAN COMPOSER & POET

Consolidating the Past, Initiating the Future

Vance D. Wolverton

Mart Saar (1882-1963) was one of the most important Estonian composers of art music, especially choral music, of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. He lived and composed through a period of exponential political changes in Estonia—not altogether unlike the upheaval accompanying the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990/91—including the first period of independence (1918-1939), the first period of Soviet occupation (1939-1941), the Nazi occupation (1941-1944), and nearly half of the second period of Soviet occupation (1944-1991). It is common knowledge that the Soviets strongly discouraged participation in religious observations and activities, including the composition of sacred music. It is also clear that such significant disruptions to the political fabric of the nation were bound to influence all aspects of society, including music. Mart Saar lived and composed through these momentous times, and his compositions are reflective of them.



The Musical and Poetic Voice of a Generation

Along with his contemporary, Cyrillus Kreek (1889-1962), Mart Saar is considered one of the founders of Estonian professional music and its national style, especially in the field of choral music. He was a composer, organ virtuoso, pianist, music critic, pedagogue, traveler, and nature lover. His *oeuvre* comprises mainly small-scale works including 180 solo songs, 120 piano pieces, several cantatas, and approximately 350 unaccompanied choral works, the most important of which were collected into *Children's Choruses* (two volumes, 1921); *Mixed Choruses* (five volumes, 1933-35); and *Men's Choruses* (three volumes, 1935).¹ In addition to vocal and piano music, he also wrote orchestral works, large-scale works, and incidental music for a children's play, "Kadunud printsess" ["Lost Princess"] by Julius Oro (1901-1941).

Mart Saar was born September 28 [O.S. September 15], 1882, in the small borough of Hüpasaare (now in Karjasoo, Suure-Jaani Parish), Viljandi County, Estonia, then part of the Livonian Governorate of the Russian Empire, to a family of forest keepers. He received his education in the village school at Kaansoo and the Suure-Jaani parish school. His music teacher in the parish school was Joosep Kapp (1833-1894), the father of Artur Kapp (1878-1952), another famous Estonian composer. Additionally, Saar's father was a talented organist, who gave him lessons at home.

In 1901, Saar left home to study organ with Louis Homilius (1845-1908) at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. At the same time he studied composition with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908). He graduated in 1908 but chose to continue his studies in composition with Anatoly Lyadov (1859-1914). While still a student, he took part in the Estonian folk song recording campaign organized by the Estonian Students' Society. In 1911 he became a music teacher and organist in Tartu. Ten years later he moved to Tallinn to work as a freelance composer and

organist. He also edited the music journal "Muusikaleht." From 1943 to 1956, Saar was a professor of composition at the Tallinn Conservatory.

Historical Context and Saar's Compositional Style

The "national awakening" of the 1860s culminated in 1869 in the first national song festival in Tartu, which provided a powerful stimulus to the development of a national consciousness and musical culture and established a national tradition.² Initially following the 1905 popular uprising Tsar Nicholas II agreed to a number of reforms that weakened the autocracy, but those reforms were mostly swept away in the ensuing years. In fact, after dissolving two dumas (parliaments), the tsar instituted the so-called 'Fundamental Laws' that severely curtailed the people's freedoms. These actions had a chilling effect on creativity and culture. A 1982 recording, made to mark the centennial of Saar's birth, featured two of Saar's early works, the solo song *Must Lind* [A Black Bird], text by Karl Eduard Sööt (1862-1950), and the first Estonian atonal work, the piano piece *Skizze* (both published in the magazine *Noor Eesti* [Young Estonia], 1910-11). These works clearly reflect the composer's attempts at radical innovation and the extent to which he was oppressed by the gloomy and hopeless moods ensuing from the tsarist reactionary cultural policy in the years following the 1905 revolution.³

The professional collecting of folk tunes started in Estonia only at the beginning of the twentieth century. This effort was initially organized by the folklorist Oskar Kallas (1868-1946). He had the idea of organizing the collecting of folk tunes with the help of students of Tartu University and the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Collectors were dispatched in pairs, with one person entrusted with recording the texts of folk songs and the other the tunes. The expeditions covered nearly all of Estonia (93 parishes out of the total of 105 parishes at that time and the Setumaa region). Many future composers participated in the collecting when they were students, including Saar, Juhan Aavik (1884-1982), Peeter Süda (1883-1920), Juhan Sikk (1865-1953), August Kiiss (1882-1965), and Cyrillus Kreek.⁴ Saar was the first Estonian composer to study and demonstrate a thorough understanding of the essence of



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archaic Estonian folk song based on the expeditions he made in 1907 and 1910. He cultivated and consistently employed a mode of expression that mixed elements of ancient and contemporary sounds. Some features of his style include lively rhythms, wide dynamic range, and chromatic coloration exemplified by the song *Põhjavaim* [Northern Guardian] of 1910 (Figure 1), text by Marie Heiberg (1890-1942).

Mets mühab ümberringi.
Ma seisatan lagedal
ja mõtlen: Küll armas on elu
siin Põhja taeva all!
Kui sügav sinav süli
end laotab ta üle maa...
Ja kuuskede õõtsuvail ladvul
käib kohin tuulena.
Ja metsa puude varjul
kui heljuks õnneaim,
kui laulaks lõputa laulu
me kaitsja Põhjavaim.

The following English translation of the text was made by Kaja Kappel⁵:

The woods are sighing around me.
I am standing in a glade and thinking:
how sweet life is here under the northern skies.
When the deep blue is spreading
and covering all the land...
and the wind is sighing among swaying sprucetops...
as if in the shadow of trees were hovering an inkling
of bliss,
and our guardian spirit were humming his endless
tunes.

Early in his career, Saar was influenced by the European music of the early nineteenth century. Saar's first collection of choral songs for mixed voices (*Segakoorigaulud*), containing eleven songs, was published in 1909. Concerning this collection, prominent Estonian musicologist Harry Olt (1929-2016) noted:

Even here his leaning towards [*sic*] innovatory modern means of expression is evident. This is best illustrated by his song *Vana-aasta öösel* [On New Year's Eve], text by Karl Eduard Sööt (1862-1950).⁶

Estonians celebrate the New Year by decorating villages, visiting friends and preparing lavish meals that symbol-

17
Maestevolmente

S
A
Kui sü - gave si - nay - sü - li end la - o - tab ü - le maa ja

T
B
Kui sü - gave si - nay - sü - li end la - o - tab ü - le maa ja

21

S
A
kuus - ke - de õõt - su - vail lad - vul käib ko - hin tuu - le - na. Kui

T
B
kuus - ke - de õõt - su - vail lad - vul... käib ko - hin tuu - le - na. Kui

Figure 1. Mart Saar, *Põhjavaim* [Northern Guardian], m. 17–24.

Tallinn: Kirjastus Eesti Raamat, 1982. Used by permission.

ize having sufficient food during the coming year. Foods should not be consumed entirely; instead, some residue should be left out for the ancestors and spirits who visit the house on New Year's Eve. The text of *Vana-aasta öösel* [On New Year's Eve] is reflective of this tradition (translation by Juta Ristsoo; used by permission):

Küllalt pikast külmast unest!
 Haud sõbrad, ärkake!
 Vana-aasta viimsed tunnid hüüavad meid ülesse!
 Kohe! Kohe! kostab haud kalmult õudsel.
 Valged vaimud lehvitudes ilmuvad,
 vanal teoliste tantsul mitmed kümned heljuvad,
 mitmed sajad heljuvad.
 Nende hulgas eite, taati, Karja-Jaan ja väike Liis.
 Torupill see eemal üügab, tumedasti kostab viis.
 Ilmub muil ja kohutavalt vaikselt liigub valgel
 lumehangel vaimuliste ring.

Korraks käib kui luude lõgin, ohkab nagu unund hing,
 ohkab nagu unund hing.
 Kukeluugu! kostab külast äkki musta kuke laul.
 Kooljad kohkuvad nad kapvad kalmu alla kiiresti
 Tundub ainult tähte paistel,
 nagu takt käiks edasi, nagu takt käiks edasi, edasi.

Enough of this long, cold sleep!
 Deceased friends, awake!
 The last hours of the old year are calling on us to
 awake!
 "Right now! Right now!" is heard horrifically from
 the graves.
 Fluttering white ghosts appear,
 dozens soaring in the old dance of the peasants;
 several hundred soaring.
 The old lady, old man, Karja-Jaan and little Liis are
 among them.

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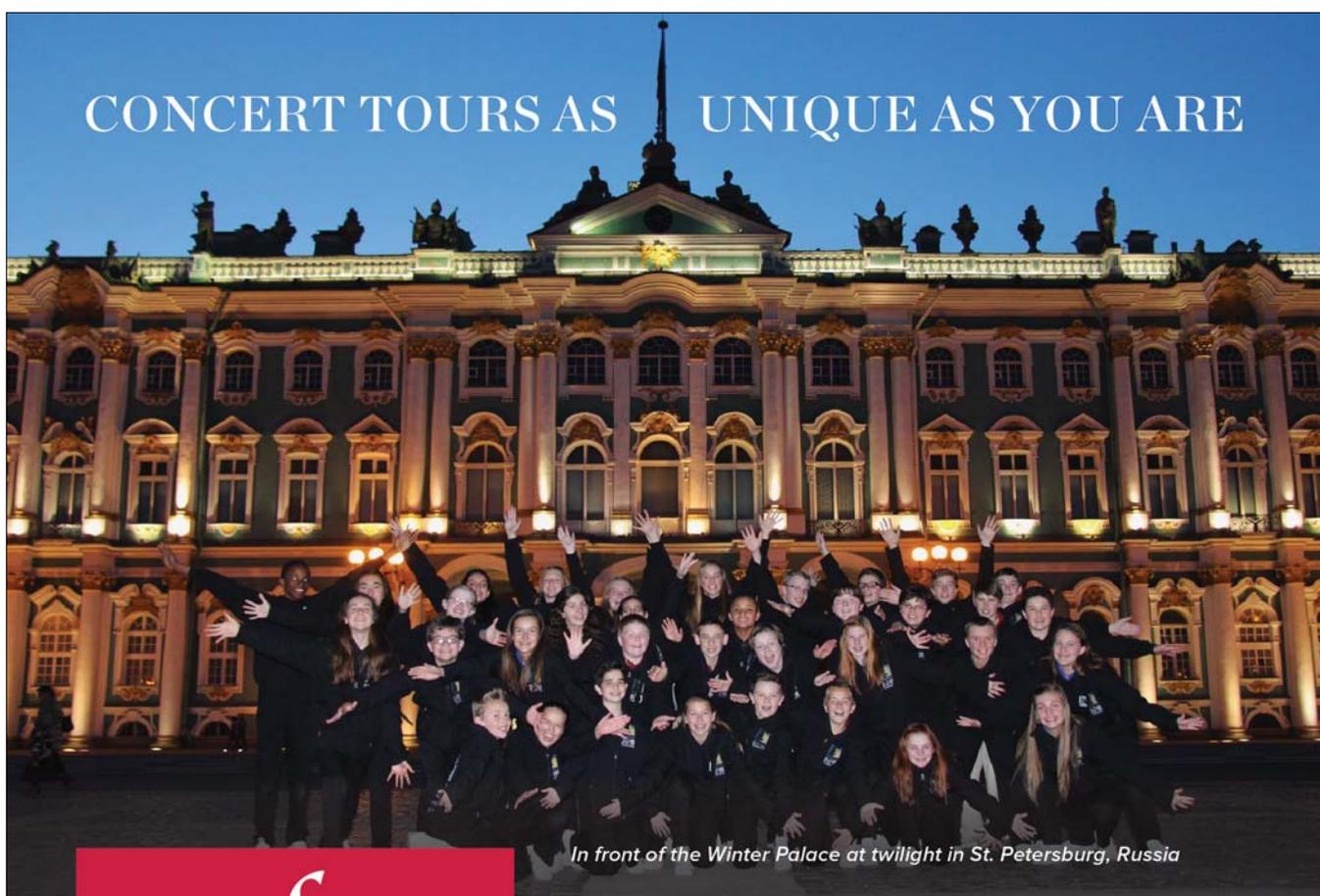
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Woods are sighing and the sky is overcast, serene...
My yearnings are flying far away from here.
Still see you, my angel, in my mind's eye;
the sighing of the woods has been telling me of you.
Woods are sighing and the sky is overcast, serene...
My yearnings are flying far away from here.

“yearnings” that are central to the text. He marks the piece *pikkamisi* [slowly], which appropriately characterizes the “sighing woods” and “overcast sky.” It’s clear from the opening motive in the bass voices that Saar envisions the speaker as a man, but he quickly adds the woman’s perspective in the second phrase. The harmonization is full and lush and the melody is lyrical and lilting, altogether reminiscent of Brahms’s choral settings (Figure 3).

Later in his life, Saar was increasingly drawn to folk

Saar utilizes the minor mode and the gentle rise and fall of crescendo-diminuendo to effectively portray the



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elements that helped endear his music to the Estonian people. Saar's predecessors typically treated the folk songs they used in their compositions simply as melodies divorced from meter and harmony and set them in the German Romantic style. Saar, on the other hand, saw folk song as a whole where the word, melody, and style of performance are inseparably connected.⁸ His style departed from the Romantic and hymn-like harmonization practices and focused instead on the modal (Dorian, Lydian, Mixolydian) harmonizations typical of Estonian folk music. Heather Garbes says:

Saar's compositions focus on the natural beauty of the area around him and are based on the folklore and songs from that area [Hüpassaare]. He developed the technique of using a folk melody

repeatedly in a composition while varying the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and textural elements that accompany it.⁹

In the same vein, Tuudur Vettik wrote:

Mart Saar may well be the best to have ever caught the soul of Estonian folk music in his choral songs. He has created his own style, the Saar style, the authentic Estonian style quite in the same way as Glinka accomplished it in Russia, Grieg in Norway, and Sibelius in Finland.¹⁰

These archaic songs with their changing meters, assonance and alliteration fascinated Saar. An example of both assonance and alliteration on the word 'tsiu' [hush]

The image shows a musical score for a choral piece. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes vocal parts for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B), along with a piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the first system are: "Mu i - gat - su - sed lend - vad siit" (repeated for S, A, T) and "Mets ko - hi - seb ja - tae - vas on pil - ves tõ - si - ne, mu i - gat - su - sed lend - vad siit" (for B). The second system continues the vocal parts with lyrics: "a - ra - kau - ge - le. Sind näen, sa mu in - gel, mu vai - mu - sil - ma ees; mul'". The piano accompaniment provides harmonic support throughout. Dynamic markings include *p* (piano), *f* (forte), and *pp* (pianissimo).

Figure 3. Mart Saar, *Mets kohiseb* [Woods Are Sighing], mm. 1–12.
Tallinn: Kirjastus SP Muusika, 2012. Used by permission.

can be seen in *Latsõ hällütamise laul* [Lullaby], text by Jakob Hurt (1839-1907). The text of *Latsõ hällütamise laul* (translation by Kaja Kappel) follows below.¹¹

Tsiu, tsiu, tsiu, tsiu, tsillukene,
ole vaik, väikukene jo.
Tsiu, tsiu, tsiu, tsiu, tsillukene,
ole vaik, väikukene jo.
Tulõ Olev koduje, tsiu,
tuu ta vaka valusida, tsiu,
kilimidü kirevida, tsiu,
tsiu, tsilluke, tsiu,
tsiu, tsillukene jo.

Hush, my baby, hush,
hush my little one.
Olev will come home soon
bringing a bushel of bright things,
a sowing trayful [sic] of colorful things,
hush, baby, hush. (Figure 4)

In some songs Saar employed complicated sonorities, even tone clusters, and liberal use of *divisi*. He also used the folk music modes in his more classically oriented songs such as *Kõver kuuseke* [The Humped Spruce], text by Eduard Ludwig Wöhrmann (1863-1934). The artful juxtaposition of gentle dissonances with open harmonies and calming consonances add to the nostalgic sense of

The musical score for 'Latsõ hällütamise laul' (Lullaby) by Mart Saar, measures 10-17, is presented for four voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The score begins at measure 10 with the tempo marking 'a tempo'. The vocal lines are characterized by complex harmonies, including dissonances and clusters, and dynamic markings such as *ppp* (pianissimo) and *mp* (mezzo-piano). The lyrics are in Estonian. The score concludes at measure 17 with the tempo marking 'rit.' (ritardando).

Figure 4. Mart Saar, *Latsõ hällütamise laul* [Lullaby], mm. 10–17.
Tallinn: Kirjastus SP Muusika, 2012. Used by permission.

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Wöhrmann's poignant text. The text of *Kõver kuuseke* (translation by Kaja Kappel) follows below.¹²

Meil kodu koplis kasvas
üks kõver kuuseke,
see oli armas,
nii armas minule.
Ta küüru kõverusel
ma ist' sin mõtetes,
siis igatsesin ilma ja võitlust,
võitlust elu sees!
Nüüd karjakoppel kadund
ja kadund kuuseke.
Jäänd meelde karjarajad
ja kõver kuuseke.
Küll kuusekõverusel
veel tahaks puhata.

Ma karjakiplis hõiskaks,
hõiskaks huikeid heledaid,
ma karjakiplis kuuse all
veel laulaks lapseõlve ra'ast.

At my home pasture there was a humped spruce,
it was dear, so dear to me.
Sitting on its curved hump I used to wonder
and crave for the world and fight,
for some fight in my life!
Now the pasture is gone and gone is the spruce.
I well remember the cowpaths and the bent spruce.
I would still rest on its curved hump.
I would still roam joyously at pasture, give ringing calls,
and under the spruce at pasture
would still sing of my childhood paths. (Figure 5)

Andante espressivo ♩ = 48

S
Meil ko - - - du kop - lis kas - vas kuu - se - ke, see

A
Meil ko - - - du kop - lis kuusk - see

T
Üks kõ - ver kuu - se - ke, see

B
Meil ko - du kop - lis - kas - vas üks kõ - ver kuu - se - ke. see

6
S
o - li kar - ja - põl - ves - ar - mas.

A
o - li ar - mas, nii ar - mas mi - nu - le.

T
ar - mus. Ta küü - ru kõ - ve - ru - sel

B
o - li ar - mas mi - nu - le. Ta küü - ru kõ - ve - ru - sel

Figure 5. Mart Saar, *Kõver kuuseke* [The Wellspring], mm. 1–11.
Tallinn: Kirjastus SP Muusika, 2012. Used by permission.

Mets kohiseb, Latsõ häällütamise laul, and Kõver kuuseke, along with seventeen additional Saar songs, have been recorded by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir under the direction of Mikk Üleoja. The CD (*luule, see ei tule tuulest*) was awarded the Choir Recording of the Year in 2008 by the Estonian Choral Association.

In addition to composing, Saar also wrote lyrics to some of his songs. Usually, these lyrics express a love for Estonia and nature. They also address the brevity of life. Saar's lyrics are reminiscent of the poetry of Anna Haava (1864-1957) and Juhan Liiv (1864-1913). Saar died in Tallinn on October 28, 1963, and is buried in the Suure-Jaani Cemetery. After his death, the home where Mart Saar was raised and where much of his work was created was transformed into a museum showcasing the life and work of one of Estonia's most famous choral musicians.

Mart Saar was a seminal figure in the history of choral music, not only through his numerous compositions, but also through his use of Estonian folk music as both inspiration and thematic material in the overall structure of his work. His innovations place him squarely in the vanguard of early twentieth-century composers who pushed the boundaries of tonality and expression. His choral compositions are still beloved by Estonian choirs, continue to feature prominently in the Estonian national song festivals, and are increasingly heard abroad. As Western choirs continue to explore the repertoire of the Baltic states, so brutally and explicitly suppressed during the Soviet occupation, they would do well to strongly consider the

beautiful, stirring works of this superlative composer. ■

NOTES

- ¹ Nick Strimple, *Choral Music in the Twentieth Century* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2002), 164.
- ² Vance Wolverton, "Breaking the Silence: Choral Music of the Baltic Republics. Part One—Estonia," *Choral Journal* 38, no. 7 (February 1998), 23.
- ³ Vardo Rumessen, LP notes (*Mart Saar: Must Lind, Skizze*; Ivo Kuusk, tenor; Vardo Rumessen, piano; 1981).
- ⁴ Anu Vissel, "A Century of Collecting and Preserving Estonian Traditional Music," *Fontes Artis Musicae*, Vol. 51/3-4 (July-December, 2004), 306-307.
- ⁵ Kersti Inno, CD notes (*Mart Saar: luule, see ei tule tuulest*; Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir; Mikk Üleoja, conductor, 2007), 19.
- ⁶ Harry Olt, *Estonian Music* (Tallinn: Perioodika, 1980), 132-133.
- ⁷ Inno, 20.
- ⁸ Evi Arujärv, "Mart Saar," Eesti Muusika Infokeskus [Estonian Music Information Center].
- ⁹ Heather M. Garbes, "To the bards: the choral works of Estonian composer Ester Mägi." *College Music Symposium* 49 (2009/2010): 365.
- ¹⁰ Inno, 10
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ¹² *Ibid.*

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