

## **The New Harp: A Grade Four Play Enacting a Kalevala Rune**

*First published in: Lyre Association of North America Newsletter #48, Michaelmas/Advent,  
2004*

Catherine Read  
Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania

*I am wanting I am thinking  
To arise and go forth singing  
Sing my songs and say my sayings  
Hymns ancestral harmonizing. (Runo 1, lines 1-4)*

Thus, begins the epic poem the Kalevala, the story of the giant Kaleva's land, where the lakes are his footsteps and three bodies of water form the land of the Finns. This poem, divided into 50 runes, tells the stories of three superhuman figures: Väinämöinen, Ilmarinen, and Lemminkäinen. Väinämöinen is a creator figure: he is a poet – he sings objects and natural beings into existence.

*Old reliable Väinämöinen  
Lived his days in lyric leisure  
In the glades of Väinöla  
On the heaths of Kalevala,  
Singing songs and learning wisdom,  
Always singing, night or day,  
There recalling and rehearsing  
Memories of bygone ages  
The oldest lore of origins,  
When and how all things began –  
Songs that children cannot copy  
Nor even wise men understand  
In these dreadful days of evil,  
In this last and fleeting age. (Runo 3, 1-15)*

The Kalevala, as we have it now, is a written version of ancient poems that were sung possibly beginning around 500 BC when the Finns (Suomi) moved into the north east part of Europe from their original home in Asia. The Kalevala consists of unrhymed lines in trochaic

tetrameter rhythm, that is, four long-short segments per line<sup>1</sup>. Elias Lönnrot collected the poems in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, but even into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century they were still sung to the old melodies, which have also been audio recorded.

Stories from the Kalevala are sometimes taught as part of the Waldorf curriculum for Grade Four. The trochaic tetrameter rhythm is important for children around age ten whose ratio of heart to breath pulses is beginning to come into the adult form of four heartbeats to each full breath<sup>2</sup>. But most epics use some version of the trochaic tetrameter rhythm. The Norse (Old Germanic) myths form the core of the material for Grade Four, because the Norse people felt deeply, and express in their poetry, the waning of the consciousness that connected them to the gods; they felt the “twilight of the gods”<sup>3</sup>. Children around age ten experience a similar shift in their consciousness, which begins to become much more earthly, and aware of the earth. They begin to be aware that people in our time are very centered on the material aspects of the world. Where does the Kalevala fit into this educative work of supporting young children in taking their important step toward maturity in today’s culture?

When I was preparing to teach Grade Four for the first time (I teach my children at home using the Waldorf curriculum), a friend who works in pedagogical eurythmy in Germany mentioned the Kalevala. She told me that some educators, and curative educators, see it as relating to the future of human evolution because it shows an influence of the Russian culture whose individuals will lead humanity in the coming epoch<sup>4</sup>. The final Rune, especially, goes beyond Norse epics to tell of the birth of Christ and the consequent withdrawal of Väinämöinen. The stories are taught so that this final rune occurs during Advent at the end of the first half of the school year. This conversation gave me food for thought! I began to search for suitable translations of the Kalevala, to read what Steiner conveyed about it in his lectures (there are at least five lectures)<sup>5</sup>, and, most urgently, to search for the melodies used to sing or chant the runes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Krstović, J. and Minderović, Z. (Eds.) (1991). *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism, Vol. 6*. Detroit and London: Gale Research, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Uehli, E. (1999). *Norse Mythology and the Modern Human Being*. Chapter 4, Thor and the Giants. Fair Oaks, CA: AWSNA

<sup>3</sup> Steiner, R. (1970). *The Mission of the Folksouls in relation to Teutonic Mythology*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press. (Eleven lectures given in Christiania (Oslo) 7-17 June, 1910).

<sup>4</sup> Steiner, R. (1979). *Preparing for the Sixth Epoch*. Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press. (Lecture given in Dusseldorf, 15 June, 1915)

<sup>5</sup> These lectures are as listed below:

I was fortunate enough to find the work of a Finn and an Estonian, who had emigrated to the United States. Eino Friberg was born in Finland, but his family emigrated to the United States when he was a young child. He translated the Kalevala into English in 1988 in a form that is direct and pictorial enough to chant and to bring to children<sup>6</sup>. He is described as having a “willingness to take chances, to be outrageously colloquial”<sup>7</sup>. Dr. Ilse Lehiste, a linguist at Ohio State University, grew up in Estonia where she studied languages and music, before moving to Germany and then to the United States where she obtained a doctoral degree in linguistics. She studies the grammatical and musical aspects of the Kalevala<sup>8</sup>. Dr. Lehiste has recordings of singers in Finland chanting the Kalevala, which I was privileged to hear; a single person singing, a capella, a simple and haunting melody that one could listen to forever. She gave me one version of a Kalevala melody, written with added accompaniment for piano, and one of her many publications on the topic with included two other melody lines. (This music is included at the end of the present Newsletter).

Beautiful as the traditional melodies are, they are a little too complex for singing long sections of the text to fourth graders. At this point, I came across the comment that Longfellow’s “Hiawatha” had been inspired by the Kalevala<sup>1</sup>. This brought to mind the music that Laurie Anderson, a modern performance artist, had used in her song, entitled “Hiawatha” (*Strange Angels*, 1989), which included, as part of the lyrics, sections of the Hiawatha poem. I do not know the original inspiration for this melody, but I adapted it as given below. (See Figure 1.) The melody is simple and clear, and almost every line of the Kalevala fits it perfectly. Now I could make progress.

I sang selected parts of the Kalevala sitting cross-legged beside my daughter with our arms crossed, her left hand holding my left hand, her right, my right, as the old singers did. This

---

The forces of the Human Soul and their Inspirers. Kalevala: The Epic of the Finns. See p. 69 of Lecture IV in Earthly and Cosmic Man. Nine lectures given in Berlin between 23 October, 1911 and 20 June, 1912. London: Rudolf Steiner Publishing Co.

The Connection of Man with the Elemental World: Finland and the Kalevala. Three lectures in Dornach, 9, 14, 15 November, 1914. (quotes are from pp. 15-17 in typescript Z144, available from Rudolf Steiner Library, Ghent, NY)

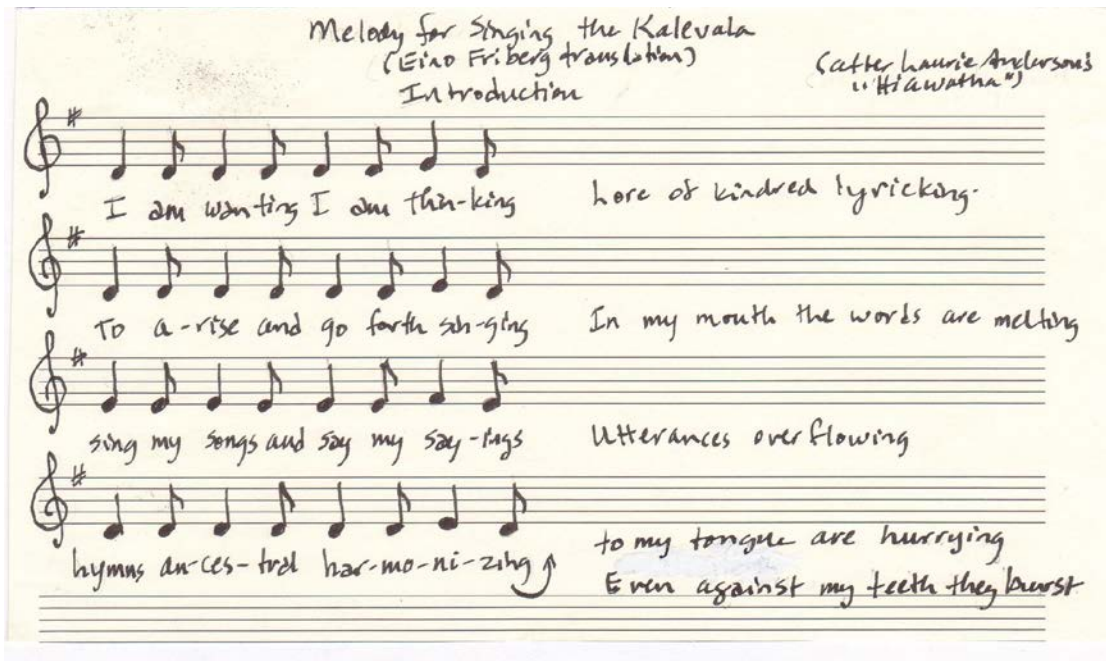
The Essence of National Epics with special reference to the Kalevala. Helsinki, 9 April, 1912. (See Appendix II in *Spiritual Beings* as listed in endnote 10.)

<sup>6</sup> Friberg, E. (1988). *The Kalevala: Epic of the Finnish People*. Helsinki, Finland: Otava Publishing Co. (Available through the University of Indiana Press.)

<sup>7</sup> Schoolfield, G. (1988). Introduction, p. 35. *The Kalevala: Epic of the Finnish People*. Helsinki, Finland: Otava Publishing Co. (Available through the University of Indiana Press.)

<sup>8</sup> Ross, J. and Lehiste, I. (1998). Timing in Estonian Folk Songs as Interaction Between Speech Prosody, Meter, and Musical Phythm. *Music Perception*, 15, 319-333.

crossing in movement and posture is important for fourth graders who benefit from help in standing up to and meeting what approaches them from the world. We worked through some of the stories about Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen, the smith who forges the magic mill, the sampo, and ended during Advent with the Marjatta, the story of the birth of a child who is christened “King of all Karelia”, even over Väinämöinen. We also did plays based on the Kalevala. The first one was Runo 10, The Forging of the Sampo; and the second time, Runo 44, The New Harp.



**Figure 1.** Melody for singing the Kalevala

I will describe, at this point, the story of the New Harp, something of its significance, and tell how we performed it as a sung-verse play. But before I describe the play, I want to step back and provide background on what Steiner gave as the importance of the Kalevala Epic, as an aspect of the culture of the Finns, because what he tells us gives us significant reasons to use these stories in education. The Finns live at the border of the East and West, just south of the Arctic. They probably came to that area from the east and south. Steiner describes even the geography as showing this border quality, because Finland is a section of solid earth that extends Westward formed by three bodies of water that extend Eastward. To the West is Germanic Central Europe; to the East is Russian Eastern Europe and Asia. Steiner describes the water around Finland as:

...where the West works with the East, where the watery element turns towards the East like a mighty being approaching it in three great gulfs, which are an expression of the three-fold nature of the soul, and in which the peoples of ancient Finland – peoples who were naturally inclined to spirituality – perceived Väinämöinen, Ilmarinen, Lemminkäinen, but which today are given the prosaic names of the Gulfs of Finland, Bothnia, and Riga. There you have in this ancient people of Finland a working together of what comes from the fluid element with what comes from the solid. In the Finns the element that constituted *etheric* man (and has only more of a refining influence on physical man) – namely the fluid element – is united with the element of earth, with what proceeds out of the earth and constitutes physical man.

Steiner goes on to describe the importance of the Kalevala for the future:

And we may say that what the Finns have preserved will be the conscience of Eastern Europe. A time must come, if men's hearts are to be seized with an understanding for the tasks of evolution, when the ideas of the Kalevala will rise up again, from among the people of Finland, and this marvelous epic, being spiritualized and, so to speak, reinforced with modern Anthroposophical conceptions, will be brought right home – in all its depth – to the consciousness of the whole of Europe...It is as a *living conscience* that it remains. It can continue to work if – not the words, but the life that has lived in it goes on living, so that a center is there from which it can ray forth. It all depends on that, -- a center must be there – just as thoughts we have had earlier in life are there in later years.  
(p. 15-17)

Perhaps singing the Kalevala and enacting it in plays is part of working with it in a living way. Especially in enacting it can the stories become living pictures as the verses are sung. The first play we did was on the forging of the sampo, which describes how two heroes, Väinämöinen the singer and Ilmarinen the smith, travel to the dark Northland and are commissioned by the Mistress of that land to forge a magic mill that grinds out money, grain, and things for the house. This rune focuses on qualities of Ilmarinen, the smith, which Steiner related to the intellectual or mind soul, and which forms the etheric body. The second play was The New Harp from Runo 44, which centers on Väinämöinen and his invention of a harp or kantele, its loss, and the forming of a new harp. The harp is also closely bound to the events with the sampo. When the sampo is locked up in the North, the heroes decide to steal it. On the way, they encounter a giant pike, which grounds their boat, even though it is in open water. After contesting with the fish, they kill and eat it. Väinämöinen is inspired to make a harp or

kantele from the pike bones and from the mane hairs of Hiisi's horse (Hiisi is a chief of the demons).

*Old reliable Väinämöinen  
Now became a skilled inventor  
Made himself the master craftsman –  
Made the five-stringed harp of pike bone,  
Made a thing of joy forever.  
What's the body of it made of?  
Of the jawbone of the pike.  
And the pegs, what are they made of?  
Of the strong teeth of the pike.  
And the strings what are they made of?  
From the name of Hiisi's gelding. (Runo 40, lines 219-230)*

No one, although all try, can make music with this harp. Only Väinämöinen, the singer immortal, could call music from the instrument. He led off with delicate chords and the “music rose to joyance”. From his playing all break out in tears, even Väinämöinen, whose great, round tears fall into the water of the lake and turn into blue fresh-water pearls. This wondrous harp is lost in the sea battle over the sampo, which is also broken to pieces and sunk in the sea. Whereas the pieces of the sampo float to shore and bring prosperity, the pike-bone harp is gone forever.

So, Väinämöinen in his homeland now turns his mind again to music. He tries to rake up the pike-bone harp from the sea bottom, but he does not find “that lost harp, the joyance giver”. As he walks home, dejected, through the forest he hears a birch tree crying, and he consoles it by saying:

*You will have a merry future,  
New and joyous life awaits you.  
Soon now you will weep for gladness  
And sing out in ecstasy. (Runo 44, lines 147-150)*

Then he carved from the birch tree an instrument, the body of the “new joy-giver”. He carved the pegs from an oak in the barnyard; but where to find the strings? Seeking these strings, he walks through a clearing where he sees a maiden sitting. He steals up to her and asks:

*Give me, virgin, of your hair,  
Of your hair a few long tresses;  
Strands to string my joyance giver  
Tongues of gladness everlasting.” (Runo 44, lines 203-206)*

When the new harp is finished, he plays again as he had the pike-bone harp. All of nature and all the people gather around to listen to the “clear-voiced instrument”, “the thrilling of the harp”. When he played in his own cabin the rafters rattled, the ceilings sang. When he sauntered in the fir woods, spruces bowed down and pine trees turned. When he roamed the leafy groves, the flowers waked to frolic and the seedlings set to dancing. So ends the rune of the New Harp.

What is the fate of this harp? The last rune describes the birth of a man-child who had made the stars to shine out in the cold and twinkle through the darkness; who placed the moon to keep night vigil and sleep away the daytime; and who created the sun for “these good times”. This boy is christened:

*King and lord of all Karelia  
As the guardian over all. (Runo 50, lines 430-431)*

Väinämöinen then conjures a copper boat and leaves, sailing to the “upper worldly regions”, the “lowest levels of the heavens.

*But he left his harp behind,  
Graceful instrument to Finland,  
Joy eternal to the nation  
And the great songs to its children. (Runo 50, lines 458-461)*

The harp remains to go into the future with its great songs for those who are coming.

We enacted this story by narrating certain sections of the rune to provide background for each character’s chanted lines. To set the stage, the children drew scenes in chalk on a three-panel free-standing blackboard to provide backdrops. On one panel they drew the birch tree in a meadow, on another the oak tree with barn and tree stumps, and on the third, water with boats moored ready to go to sea and search for the old harp. The presentation began with four people singing and doing a simple crossing dance to a song I entitled Dance of the Baltic Wizards. This song is a combination of old Estonian folk song melodies, and the text to Francis Olcott’s poem of that title. The play began with the narrator singing the first few lines at the very beginning of the Kalevala using a gesture appropriate to an epic: drawing with the right hand and arm from upwards and behind and bringing to the audience out and to the front. From that point on, he spoke in trochaic tetrameter rhythm from a lectern. Väinämöinen began the rune by descrying

the loss of the pike-bone harp, and searching for it with the help of Ilmarinen, the smith. Then he encountered the birch tree (dressed in white with green silks pinned to her hair and shoulders) who swayed and shuddered as she sang her lines. After he carved the body of the harp, the older members of the players came on and sang a round about a cuckoo, as a cuckoo sang in the oak tree which was the source of the pegs. Then Väinämöinen sees the maiden and obtains her hair. When he played the new harp, again all came out to marvel and sing a last song, which was a song with a simple ostinato ( an example of a step into harmony for the fourth graders). The final moment consisted of all the players chanting a set of lines which often ended a singing session:

*Of what use are we as singers  
What good we as cuckoo callers  
If no fire spurts from our mouths  
No brand from beneath our tongues  
And no smoke after our words?*<sup>9</sup>

We ended the whole program with the children and I playing on lyres and singing part of Pracht's version of the Marjatta.

The children loved this story, and easily memorized long sections of the rune (much more easily than the adults!). Our lyres sounded for the new music for the Kalevala out of the background of their history, their earlier incarnation. I would like to end this article by quoting from a lecture Steiner gave on the Kalevala (Helsinki, April 9, 1912)<sup>10</sup>. He quoted a Finnish rune:

*Certainly those speak falsely  
And find themselves in error  
Who believe that Väinämöinen  
Shaped the kantele  
Our beautiful stringed instrument  
From the jawbone of a pike  
And that he spun the strings*

---

<sup>9</sup> Bosley, K. (1999). Introduction, p. liv. *The Kalevala*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Steiner, R. (1992). *Spiritual Beings in the Heavenly Bodies and in the Kingdoms of Nature*. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press. Appendix II. The essence of National Epics with special reference to the Kalevala. Helsinki, 9 April, 1912, p.273.



*From the tail of Hiisi's horse,  
was shaped from want,  
Affliction bound its parts together,  
And its strings were woven  
By suffering and tears of longing.*

And so all being is born, not out of matter, but rather out of the realm of soul and spirit.  
So, too, this old folk rune, and so spiritual science, which seeks to play a role in the living  
process of culture in our time.



*“Väinämöinen” - watercolor by Sara Read*