

## Awakening the Sleeping Beauty: Estonian 1939 Recordings

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**Background in music history.** The study of historical recordings has recently gained more attention among musicologists and investigations have approached these from different points of view. This field of research is comparatively new from the perspective of music historians, because the recordings of art music belong only to the 20th century as the sound recording does not go further back in the history. Historical recordings are a new group of sources that enable us to directly study the qualities of sound and live performance that traditional musicology has investigated using secondary sources like reviews and memoirs.

**Background in sound technology.** Information science can provide a musicologist with helpful tools for doing research. In our case that means discographic knowledge and knowledge concerning sound archives. In addition, studying old recordings often includes technological tasks – transfer, restoration, and evaluation of the recordings. In specific cases, a very special technology has been used to transfer the music from 78-rpm discs into digital form – the bipointed stylus – to play back father matrices.

**Aims.** The present study focuses on a set of recordings made in 1939, when the Estonian government, together with the State Broadcasting Company, launched a program of recording Estonian music and invited the Danish branch of EMI with their technical equipment to Tallinn. Asking questions about the selection of music and the aesthetics of performance, we try to describe the musical scene of the 1930s.

**Main contribution.** The main contribution of our research will be collecting together the material and making it available for musicological research. This task also includes the historical description and evaluation of the music and the performers, discussing the representativeness of the selection – i.e. contributions to Estonian music history writings as well as discographic resources.

**Implications.** Studying this set of recordings from 1939 helps us to understand the formation and the reception of the canon of Estonian music, as well as illustrating the continuity of performance traditions in Estonian art and entertainment music. This study shows how technology can be used as an effective tool for the music historian.

**Keywords:** Music history, recordings, performance history, Estonia, vocal music, choral music, sound restoration, digitized sound

## Introduction

The project “Estonian Sound Recording 1939” (ESR 1939) is an attempt to awaken a sleeping beauty. In May 1939, an ambitious series of recording sessions took place in Tallinn, lasting about one month. The selection of recorded music was made by leaders of State Broadcasting, and as such it was representative, forming a synopsis of Estonian music at that moment. The officially listed musical advisors were two composers: Juhan Aavik and August Topman, and perhaps also the conductors of the State Broadcasting orchestra, although there is no proof for that. The recordings remained forgotten for many years, since the beginning of the Second World War interrupted the production process. Part of the selection was produced in small numbers after the war by Estonian organizations abroad. Decades later, in 2003, it seemed possible to think about searching for the remaining part of the recordings and bringing them back to Estonia. The growing interest towards historical recordings in the field of musicology was definitely one trigger for us to initiate a similar project in Estonia. In 2004, the Department of Musicology at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre initiated the project “The monuments of Estonian performance practice” which faced similar challenges as the ESR 1939 project – to gain knowledge about whether Estonian historical recordings survived, to collect them together and if possible, make them available in modern audio format to listen to and study. The 1939 recordings are especially valuable, because the State Broadcasting archive was destroyed by Soviet air raids in 1944, and the materials for the pre-war Estonian music were almost completely swept away. Of course, there are numerous popular music recordings surviving in private collections, but the present material is unique as a whole, comprising such a variety of genres and performers.

However, it demanded the efforts of different scholars in several countries (including musicologists, bibliographers, archivists, and sound engineers) to develop a project for waking up the sleeping beauty of Estonian music of the late 1930s. The project is not yet finished, but the interesting results of its present phase indicate success in years to come. This paper will give an overview of the work done so far and will discuss some results based on the material already made available. As the basis of this paper is the presentation given at the Third Conference on Interdisciplinary Musicology, which was dedicated to singing, the main aspect discussed is vocal music.

One of the concerns of Estonian cultural leaders and organizers of musical life (mostly the leaders of the State Broadcasting Company, but also people from the propaganda service) in the late 1930s was to develop the recording of Estonian music. This was actually a larger process, taking place in Estonian political life in the late 1930s. We will shed some light on these problems in the next subchapter.

In numerous public discussions, writers complained of the lack of Estonian recordings and the small proportion of Estonian music in the programmes of the State Broadcasting Company (*Riigi Ringhääling*). In 1936, the State Broadcasting Company purchased equipment for sound recording and that strengthened demands

for well-prepared and more extensive projects of recording Estonian music. The first such project was a series of recording sessions of folk music in cooperation with the Estonian Folklore Archives. Those recordings, however, were made for the archives and produced only a few copies. Soon, a more ambitious project was started for recording art music. This time a commercial recording company was involved and the aim was to produce a representative selection of Estonian music for international distribution. The Danish branch of the Gramophone Company or also known as the Electric and Musical Industries (EMI) made the recordings with their equipment shipped to Tallinn in May 1939. The recordings were not made by local sound engineers. First, some facts about the recordings:

- Recording sessions took place between May 15<sup>th</sup> and June 14<sup>th</sup> in 1939
- Altogether 237 recordings (different “tracks”) or about 150 pieces of music were recorded
- The initial plan was to publish 100 copies of each record
- The costs of the recording sessions, 16 000 Estonian crowns, were paid by the State Broadcasting Company (Estonian State Archives, No: 969.5.2320; Rauna 2006: 15).

### **Estonian musical scene and the recording sessions in 1939**

In 1939, Estonia was allocated by EMI to its Danish branch (Skandinavisk Grammophon A/S) and this was responsible for organizing sound recordings here as well as in Denmark, Iceland, Latvia and Lithuania. Thus, there was not only local demand for promoting Estonian music, but also interest from the Gramophone Company to start recording sessions in Estonia. The director of the branch, Mr Eugen Hartkopp, had plans to enlarge the production of records with music from the Baltic countries, and he was in the process of planning similar recording sessions in Latvia in 1940 and Lithuania in 1941. As the Second World War began soon after, these never took place (Hein 2003: 2). In that, the interests of the Estonian cultural leaders and the recording company luckily coincided and, as a result, only in Estonia did the recording sessions really take place. We do not have much information about the preparations for the recording sessions, but the initiative seems to have come either from the State Broadcasting Company or the Estonian government. The documents at the Estonian State Archives (Rauna 2006: 4) demonstrate that the government took at least some official initiative, but it was organized and financed by the State Broadcasting Company without additional financial support from the state. The management of Estonian radio together with the officers from several ministries (the leader of the State Broadcasting, Fred Olbrei; director of radio programming, Hanno Kompus; state secretary, Karl Terras, etc.) also decided on the selection of the repertoire and made arrangements with the performers (Rauna 2006: 5). There are several hints in the press that one of the aims of the enterprise was to distribute a set of the records to the Estonian embassies abroad to enable them to introduce and promote Estonian music.

Estonian history of the late 1930s is often described as a period of authoritarian power. After an attempted *coup d'état* in March 1934, much of the power was concentrated in the hands of three people – the president (Konstantin Päts), the leader of the army (Johan Laidoner), and the minister of internal affairs (Kaarel Eenpalu). Estonia became a strong presidential country with attention centred on defence policies that led to restraints on the freedom of the press. On the other hand, the 1930s are sometimes called the golden era of the First Republic of Estonia. The Estonian government initiated several national propaganda campaigns, e.g. the changing of foreign-sounding names, calls for the populace to use national symbols, and construction of monuments commemorating the Independence War. The central task of these cultural and educational policies was to support and develop national culture, including music, and an important part of it was the promotion of Estonian art abroad. Since 1934, when the institution of the propaganda service was established (from 1939 onwards it was called the Ministry of Propaganda) the promotion of the Republic of Estonia and its culture was its central task. Documents in the State Archive show that for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Estonian Republic in 1938 a lot of advertising material was printed to send to the Estonian embassies abroad, and there were also many performances on European radio stations by Estonian musicians and ambassadors (Vaan 2005: 44). Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the recording sessions of 1939, in a wider context, were part of a general tendency by the government to promote the cultural life of Estonia in the 1930s.

The recording sessions took place at the most prominent concert hall in Tallinn, the *Estonia*. The sound engineer Johan Dændler came from Denmark, together with his recording equipment. At first, there were plans to record about 100 pieces of music, but according to Dændler, the number increased during the sessions. He remembered that extra wax matrices had to be shipped from the UK during the sessions (Hein 2000). It is clear that the amount of music to be recorded within a limited time span was really large and that meant very hard work. As was normal for the sound recording of that time, each piece was usually recorded once or twice. Dændler has said that mostly he recorded a piece in two takes. A rehearsal period preceded the actual recordings. Altogether this process (rehearsal and two takes) took about one hour for popular music. However, as the majority of the repertoire was classical music, the time actually taken was probably longer in this project. After the recording sessions, all the wax matrices were sent to the EMI processing plant in Hayes, Middlesex, UK, but according to Dændler, something went wrong in the further process (and of course, the Second World War also began), so the recordings remained unknown for many years. Later on, about one third of the recordings were used for producing a limited number of records in 1952. This was done upon the initiative of Estonian organizations abroad and the records were sold among these same Estonian communities (i.e., outside Estonia). A copy of each record was stored at the EMI archives in Hayes, UK. In 1961, when the recording company rearranged their archives, they considered the Estonian father matrices as Danish, being made by the Danish branch and having Danish matrix numbers, and sent them from Hayes to Denmark, where later the Danish branch of the EMI transferred them to the Danish National Sound Archive. One third of the matrices was unaccounted for and believed

to be lost until the summer of 2007. During the re-recording process of the matrices in the Danish National Sound Archive it was discovered that the apparently lost matrices were wrongly catalogued in the sound archive. Currently there are only 5 matrices lost from the original material.

The well-known discographer Alan Kelly together with Reino Sepp, an Estonian living in Sweden, has compiled a discography covering all the Gramophone Co/EMI recordings in Estonia for the Estonian market (Kelly & Sepp 1988: 39–47). He stated that their work was based on known collections and the ledgers of the 1939 recordings. These ledgers no longer exist. There is only the Danish monthly recording ledger summary describing all used matrices numbers, but this quotes the Estonian recordings only as a block of numbers without any contents. The Kelly-Sepp discography is an invaluable source about the 1939 recordings today, but there are several inaccuracies and open questions. Therefore, a new discography will probably have to be compiled, but so far we have used the existing discography as a basis for our work.

### **The (vocal) repertoire recorded**

As we know from the Kelly-Sepp discography, there were 150 items recorded altogether (mostly music, but also some speeches). The number of matrices was 237; one side of a record contained about 3–4 minutes of music and recording larger compositions demanded several matrices (one matrix = one side of a disc). The correct number is unclear though, as different sources give different numbers, but 150 is the most likely number.

The repertoire recorded is very diverse, although some certain principles can be observed in the selection. At the Estonian State Archives there is a document with the initial list of compositions selected for the recording sessions divided by genres (Estonian State Archives, No. 1093.1.300; Rauna 2006), revealing that the organizers have tried to include the best examples from almost every genre of music. The genres are as follows:

- Orchestral music (subdivisions: serious, light)
- Instrumental solos (subdivisions: piano, violin, cello, organ)
- Vocal solos
- Choral music
- Chamber music

The vocal music recorded can be divided into several subgenres depending on the performing ensemble: choral music, vocal solo with piano accompaniment, vocal solo with orchestral accompaniment, and duets. It can also be divided into serious or classical, and light or popular music. Among the performers, there are seven choirs (perhaps even eight – there is one unidentified choral performance in the discography, and we have not been able to identify it from the sound recording later) and eight

different singers (five women, three men). It is remarkable that vocal music was much better represented on the records produced in 1952 than instrumental music. This confirms the widespread opinion that in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century vocal music and singers dominated the record market (Day 2000: 9). While there are several well-trained and excellent singers among the recorded opera soloists, the recordings offer an interesting insight into the singing style of popular singers and amateurs of that period.

From the music recorded, the largest group is choral music (55 compositions), followed by orchestral music. The selection also includes popular music of the time and about 10 songs from popular operettas sung by Estonian singers. In addition to music, there are some speeches of political leaders. Almost all the important Estonian composers are represented: those who were active at the time of recording (Eugen Kapp, Artur Kapp, Mart Saar, Cyrillus Kreek, Juhan Aavik, Heino Eller, Eduard Tubin) as well as those of the past (Rudolf Tobias, Peeter Süda). In the case of choral music, approximately half of the repertoire was composed before 1930s; hence the selection of choral music represents the canon of the genre.

There were no professional choruses in Estonia in the 1930s. Even the best Estonian choruses consisted of amateur singers who normally rehearsed once or twice a week. At present, all the 55 items of choral music recorded in 1939 are available. Roughly about half of them represent a men's chorus (The Society of Men's Singing in Tallinn and The Society of Men's Singing in Tartu), the other half being performed by a mixed chorus (the mixed choir of the theatre *Estonia* music department, ÜENÜTO mixed choir, the choir of the Tallinn Conservatory, mixed choir *Raudam*). All these choirs were well known in local musical life and are important for forming the reception of several contemporary composers. Besides, among the recordings there is also the Tallinn Russian mixed choir with four performances, all of which can be described as examples of traditional Russian choral music. Now we can listen to these performances and compare them with the later performing style.

The selection of choral music seems well balanced and comprehensive. The large proportion of such music among the recordings certainly indicates that it was considered to be the central genre of Estonian music, and there were many choruses available for recordings. Also, the inclusion of one Russian choir is quite remarkable, documenting the cultural diversity of pre-war Estonia. When comparing the selection to the canon of our time (in the case of Estonian song festivals for example), there are some concurrences, especially in the case of the earlier music. Most of the Estonian choral songs included in this early collection belong now to the core of our choral repertoire, the canon of choral music – Miina Härma's *Tuljak*, Juhan Simm's *Oma saar*, etc. This indicates that Estonian choral music canon has retained some of its traits for at least 100 years.

As for solo vocal music, eight different soloists were able to record during the 1939 sessions. All of them are well-known singers in that time. Among them there are well-known opera singers like Ida Aav-Loo, Liidia Aadre, Olga Lund, Eedo Karrisoo, but

also artists singing popular music like Artur Rinne. The latter was a highly appreciated Estonian artist for several decades and much recorded after the war; thus, his early recordings are really interesting documents. In our material, his recordings mostly represent popular hits of that time like *Mickey Mouse*, *the Castaway* or *Bel Ami*. As far as we know, the 1939 recordings were planned for commercial purposes; therefore this kind of repertoire included in the selection is definitely something to reflect upon. However, it is very interesting to have sound documents from different kinds of singers from one and the same period – opera singers, popular artists, and amateur choral singers – reflecting the different ideals of a singing voice at that time.

### **Recorded speeches**

In addition to music, there are some speeches from political leaders: Konstantin Päts, Estonian president; Jaan Tõnisson, opposition leader; Mihkel Pung, chairman of the upper house of the Estonian Parliament; Kaarel Eenpalu, prime minister of Estonia; Jaan Soots, Lieutenant General; and one other not yet identified. The inclusion of these speeches shows once more the strong political influences behind the recording process.

### **(Re)locating the material and sound restoration**

In 2003, contact between the librarians of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and a Danish archivist and researcher of historical sound recordings, Mr Morten Hein, was established. Thus, the search for the materials was begun by comparing the matrice numbers in the archives with the Kelly-Sepp bibliography. Meanwhile, many of the recordings produced in 1952 abroad had begun to appear in Estonia and were known to a narrow circle of specialists. However, it was important to locate the archival copies to get new and high quality digitized sound transfers. In 2006, according to a contract between the project “Estonian Sound Recording 1939” and the EMI Archives, the transfer was accomplished by the Abbey Road Studios: the recordings were digitized from the archival copies of discs released in the 78-rpm format. As a result, this part of the material is now available as archival *wav*-files (24-bit, 96.000 Hz) and is waiting for the other part of the material to undergo final sound restoration.

The other part of the material has survived as father matrices, never used for producing records at the Danish National Sound Archives, now held at the Århus State and University Library. Nobody had ever heard this recorded sound, and it was uncertain what had survived and what could be restored. The problem was how to make the recordings available for listening. Using the old way of producing discs, i.e. having records pressed in vinyl from the father matrices, would have made the project extremely complex and expensive. Such manufacturing plants are rare and it is not safe to transport the unique matrices. At the same time, the aim of the project was to

digitize the surviving recordings according to the guidelines established by IASA, the International Association for Sound Archives (IASA 2004), meaning that the final recordings should be in a high resolution format for archival purposes along with a normal audio-CD format for listening and publication.

Therefore, the Danish partners of the project experimented with a method used by Stanton many years ago, with a 'Y' shaped stylus riding on top of the 'negative' groove of the father matrices. At first, a homemade pickup system could get sound but only in a bad quality, and attempts to order a special 'Y' shaped stylus were unsuccessful. Then, the Stanton Company was consulted and, by a lucky chance, they had some styluses left over. Using this method with original Stanton styluses has produced results far beyond expectations in sound quality. Asinus Elektroakustik has performed the transfer of the father matrices, and this company will finish the overall sound restoration of all the recordings as the next stage of the project.

In publishing old recordings and matrices, it is often preferred to press vinyl copies for re-recording instead of using original shellac pressings, which results in less noise. Choosing the Stanton stylus should be comparable to the vinyl pressing method. Pressing from a father matrice is complicated, as it cannot be mounted in a press. Often it is necessary to go on with the process and produce a mother that can be played. This mother will be a copy and therefore not be of the same quality as the father. For mass production, a son will be needed. Then this is a copy of a copy resulting in further loss of audio quality – but it will still sound better than an old shellac pressing. We knew all this and were prepared to cover the costs for the vinyl method if the Stanton stylus had not produced a result of sufficient quality. By the end of the day, it reproduced sound from 1939 HMV matrices in a quality far above anything heard before from that period.<sup>1</sup>

The re-recording to create a digital version is one step in the process. The next step splits this process, as we have to think in two directions: the preservation line and the publishing line. For preservation, the guidelines of the International Association for Sound Archives will be followed, as mentioned before and the recordings will be held in archival and published format in Estonian sound archives and libraries. For publishing, the format will follow that of the publication media. In the latter case, the sound shall be restored to be as good as possible to reflect the original musical performance. The project partners are confident that the quality of the digitized material is sufficient to fulfill our expectations. One problem will be to have the transfer of the material from the EMI archives restored to a quality level where it complements that of the father matrices.

## **Conclusion**

The story of the awakening of the sleeping beauty is still unfinished. This article gave a brief overview of the work done so far and offered first glimpses into the Estonian vocal repertoire. The skills and knowledge of specialists from different areas, such as

librarians, archivists, sound engineers and musicologists, were required in order to achieve the results presented in this paper. In addition, there has been a series of lucky coincidences. We will continue to work on the project and hope to reach the initial goal: to publish the remaining recordings with extensive commentaries which, we hope, will be a valuable source for those interested in Estonian music.

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<sup>1</sup> The illustrative sound examples can be heard online at <http://www.musicstudies.org/>