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Stuck as a Symbol: [An Inside-Outsider's View of the Finnish Kantele]

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Notes from Abroad

By CARL RAHKONEN

In Finnish Music Quarterly's new column people all around the world give their view of Finnish music.

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Stuck as a Symbol

Kantele has a strong symbolic identity among Finns. That holds true to Finnish Americans too. Nonetheless its role as a living tradition can be hard to grasp to others than so called 'kantele people'.

All Finns and Finnish Americans know about the kantele, but only some know it as a living tradition. Back in the late 1960s, I fell in love with the sound of the kantele from a recording that my mother owned. I loved that sound because it was a truly Finnish sound. I went to the local university library to find out something about that instrument, its history, music and how it was played, and found next to nothing! The kantele is so rare an instrument in the United States that I never saw one, except in pictures, and I never heard one played, except on recordings, before I arrived in Finland in December 1982. It was the greatest thrill of my life to do research on the kantele for my doctoral dissertation.

In Finland, I found the kantele to be a set of living traditions, with kantele players and builders active throughout the country. Kantele builders made everything from small ancient five-string models to large technically advanced instruments designed for playing Western art music. These instruments were used for playing a wide variety of folk, popular and classical music. The 'Kantele Traditions of Finland' all had in common a central concept of the kantele as the national instrument. Part of this concept is the great symbolic significance of the kantele to the Finns. The image of Väinämöinen singing with kantele accompaniment is a type of metasympol which is ingrained in the Finnish

psyche. It has had an enormous influence on what the Finnish people believe about the kantele.

When I left Finland in December of 1983, I was under the impression that the kantele was uniformly loved and supported. I had just spent an entire year traveling to all parts of the country interviewing dozens of kantele players and builders, and there was no doubt in my mind that the kantele was a thriving and living tradition.

I had the good fortune of returning to Finland in 1985, at which time I became a teacher of English at two business schools in Helsinki. I taught around three-hundred students in twenty-four classes, who provided me a good sample of 'typical' Finns ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-four. Since I was writing my dissertation at this time, I thought it would be interesting to test them on their knowledge of the kantele. I asked each class to name one famous kantele player. At least one person in each class named Väinämöinen, but the most interesting thing was that only three people out of three hundred were able to name **Martti Pokela** as a famous kantele player. No-one could name any other kantele players!

I also found surprising resistance among these young people to the kantele. Its symbolic value seemed to be a detriment, since they viewed the kantele as being

'old' and 'Väinämöinen's instrument,' which had little to do with life in our day and age. My students assured me that my point of view about the kantele had been formed because I spent all my time with 'kantele people' and never had really bothered to find out what average Finns thought about it.

I was forced to confront the symbolic value of the kantele as it truly exists in Finland, which at times may hinder as well as help the cause of living kantele players. One primary task of all kantele players, builders, and researchers is overcoming the prejudices caused by this symbolism.

The kantele has two distinct types of symbolism in Finland. Among those who actually built and played kanteles, they were an integral part of their lives. The kantele could be said to define a part of who they were, where they lived and what kinds of lives they lived. The kantele was an important part of their identity. It was an extension of, or a symbol of, themselves.

But for the majority of Finns, the kantele was primarily known as a symbol of the Finnish nation. From their point of view, the kantele was a mytho-poetic, somewhat abstract concept – a motif of folklore which, together with the other motifs of folklore such as the Sampo, Väinämöinen and the national epic Kalevala, symbolised Finnishness. They knew that the kantele existed in reality, but contemporary kantele players and builders could not be taken entirely seriously. After all, this was Väinämöinen's instrument. They could not comprehend what it had to do with modern life. They did not think of the kantele as a living tradition.

The symbolic nature of the kantele had the effect of both uniting and distinguishing groups of people. To the players and builders, the kantele was an important part of their lives and identities, so it was something which united them, even if they played or built kanteles in a wide variety of styles. At the same time it distinguished 'kantele people' from those Finns who knew little or nothing about the kantele.

Those to whom the kantele was mainly a symbol of Finnish nationalism used its symbolic nature to represent a common heritage among all Finns and something which distinguished them from other peoples, in spite of the fact that many of the surrounding peoples in the Baltic had their own versions of essentially the same instrument, which acted as symbols of their own nationalism. When a tradition becomes symbolic, it helps to insure its survival. To some, the living tradition

may not be as important as its symbolism. Even a dead tradition may be resurrected if there is some kind of symbolic significance which remains for the present or future generations.

It is a similar situation among Finnish Americans. The kantele is well known, but mostly as a motif from the Kalevala. Finnish-American kantele players are passionate about playing and promoting the instrument and its music. There are also American builders, some of whom make a living with their craft. The purpose of 'kantele people' in Finland and America is to make the kantele more widely known, so it will be an equal among all other musical instruments.

Carl Rahkonen received his Ph.D. degree in Folklore and Ethnomusicology from Indiana University, Bloomington, with a dissertation on the Kantele Traditions of Finland. He is a Music Librarian and Professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is an active researcher, most recently on Scandinavian music, and a musician who plays classical, popular and folk music in a variety of ensembles.

