

# FORGING METAL: THE KALEVALA IN THE FINNISH HEAVY METAL PERFORMANCE

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## Abstract

Metal bands have time and again used local mythological narratives to give deeper resonance to their music. In Finland, this has been done e.g. by incorporating the narratives of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. This has been most evident since the 1990s economic depression, and Finland's entry to the European Union, when the interest in nationalist heritage became again fashionable among the youth.

*Please note that parts of this paper have been previously published (see Kallioniemi & Kärki 2009), and appear here for the sake of presenting the parts specifically devoted to heavy metal for the metal scholars.*

## Introduction

Finland's national epic, the *Kalevala*, has shaped the image of the Finnish past and affected the country's art and culture in various ways. It has been a particular source of musical inspiration for the youth culture of those born in the 1970s, to an extent impossible for the post-war generations.

Musical expression has always fit naturally with the Kalevalaic poem. The old epic singer's occupation has been seen to provide a transmission of the oral tradition, a kind of narrated history. This tradition evolved further with each generation of singers. Of particular interest has been that this transfer of the oral folk tradition has traditionally taken place through singing. Thus the linkage of the *Kalevala* to popular music also came about naturally and the impact of the *Kalevala* on the emergence of a national rock culture has been of particular importance. It has provided a lyrical-linguistic model on which a new type of expression in Finnish rock has been built since the 1970s (Knuuti 2005, 132–138).

Singing has a strong esoteric role in the *Kalevala*. Väinämöinen performed powerful acts through singing. The animals of the forest gathered to listen when he sang and his singing sank Joukahainen into the swamp. Important objects, like boats, were created by singing. There are numerous examples of this. This transfer of tradition through singing implies, according to Lauri Honko (2000, 10), that the *Kalevala* is a process that the collector of folklore Elias Lönnrot began with the five publications of the *Kalevala* between 1833 and 1862 and which has continued throughout the era of rock culture on to the present day, culminating in the audiovisual and intertextual *Kalevala* represented, for example, by the *Hyper-Kalevala* (1996).

Kalevalaic Finnish heavy metal achieved unique international visibility both at the end and in the beginning of the millennium. Heavy metal is the popular music category in which mythologies play a particularly important role and the

*Kalevala* was perfectly suited for this context. A number of bands have combined heavy metal music and the *Kalevala*. This is based on a broader interest in the mythologies and national projects of different countries which emerged in metal music circles in the early 1990s. Of course, interest in mythology was already strong in heavy metal circles since the 1970s, when heavy music appeared as a working-class version of middle-class progressive rock in England. In Finland, however, the effects were not truly felt until the 1990s.

Viking metal, the “founding band” of which is generally taken to be the Swede Thomas “Quorthon” Forsberg's band Bathory, is the best-known manifestation of this international phenomenon that reaches out to national mythologies. With his 1989 album *Hammerheart*, Quorthon, who originally played quite satanic black metal, created a wholly new kind of metal music which turned to Nordic myths, the golden shields of Valhalla and Odin, the one-eyed master of the ravens. The later connection between black metal and Viking metal can be seen mostly in the way in which nationalist thinking and pride in one's ethnic roots have gained popularity with the more fanatic listeners. The so-called National Socialist Black Metal bands which form the more extreme contingent leave little room for misunderstanding regarding their rebellious attitude to political correctness. Finnish mainstream metal bands, however, respect our national mythology and use it as material and inspiration for music in which contemporary culture and the *Kalevala* meet on both a musical and textual level.

### **Amorphis: Forging the ‘Silver Bride’**

The most common example of a *Kalevala*-influenced heavy metal band is Amorphis and their song *My Kantele*. Time and again, the song has been presented as an example of ties between Finnish metal music and national mythology because the lyrics have been adapted from English translations of the poems of the *Kanteletar* (the whole of the *Kanteletar* has not, unfortunately, been translated into English).

Truly they lie, they talk utter nonsense  
Who say that music reckon that the kantele  
Was fashioned by a god  
Out of a great pike's shoulders  
From a water-dog's hooked bones:

It was made from the grief  
Moulded from sorrow  
Its belly out of hard days  
Its soundboard from endless woes  
Its strings gathered from torments  
And its pegs from other ills

("My Kantele" (*Elegy*). Amorphis 1996)

In the song the kantele is not a positive force, a symbol of creativity and culture, but instead its sound brings grief – the kantele plays its sorrow. This refers both to Slavic melancholy and to the dark imagery of death metal. The song's tonal world reaches above all, however, in the direction of folk and progressive influences. On their first, more grim albums, *The Karelian Isthmus* (1993) and *Tales from the Thousand Lakes* (1994), the names of which already refer to basic Finnish clichés, the band used the English translation of the *Kalevala* to introduce archaic overtones to their melodic death metal. Through

this, it quickly achieved immense popularity especially in Central Europe and sold hundreds of thousands of records.

For a time, the band also tired of the stamp brought by the *Kalevala* and there are hardly any references to it in their 1999 album *Tuonela* ('Hades') – with the exception of the name itself. Gradually the band returned to its success-bringing formula, however. The cover art of their 2003 album *Far From the Sun* can be regarded as the all-time best advertisement for Kalevala jewelry, and with the album *Eclipse* in 2006, the band returned also thematically to familiar lyrical grounds with great success – albeit this time with an English translation of Paavo Haavikko's play *Kullervo*, which they became acquainted with through Pekka Lehto's failed film project. The film music originally commissioned from Amorphis thus easily transformed into an album of their own. And finally into a trilogy, as their next album *Silent Waters* (2007), which focused on the character of Lemminkäinen and was based on translations of Pekka Kainuulainen's Kalevala-inspired poems, was followed by another album of translations of Kainuulainen's work. Published in 2009, the band's ninth studio album *Skyforger* actually focuses on *Kalevala*'s blacksmith, Ilmarinen, even though the name refers to the Finnish ancient god Ukko who, like Thor, forges the cover of the sky. The stories again travel along familiar Kalevalaic trails. The wonder-machine Sampo, for example, which Ilmarinen forges and which according to the epic creates wealth for its owner, is the product of a long and painful process:

Into the blaze I shove them back  
To lose their forms to hungry fire  
Again and yet again  
I start my work anew

("Sampo" (*Skyforger*). Amorphis 2009)

The act of forging is central in the song 'Silver Bride', which was also released as a Nuclear Blast record company music video. The story of Ilmarinen losing his wife and deciding to forge himself a new wife out of silver (The *Kalevala*, poem 37), gets a massive video treatment, in which fire and indeed forging are central elements, in a fantasy landscape which would not look out of context in the Game of Thrones or some other modern fantasy series. The band appears to be playing in the midst of rising fiery shapes.

The play with the 'Nordic' mystical and nocturnal elements is central for the narrative. The act of forging, just like act of singing, is a magical practice.

A queen of gold I made  
A silver bride I built  
From the northern summer night  
From the winter moon

("Silver Bride" (*Skyforger*). Amorphis 2009)

But the end-result is not successful, and there is a classical tragic feel to it, the story seems to suggest that silver and gold cannot replace human warmth and contact, no matter how skilful the technology.

Responded not my girl  
No beating heart I felt  
I brought no sighs to the silver lips

No warmth from the gold

(“Silver Bride” (*Skyforger*). Amorphis 2009)

Without doubt, Amorphis has provided more international visibility for the *Kalevala* than any other cultural player, with perhaps the exclusion of J. R. R. Tolkien, who was fascinated by its language and mythos.

Figure 1: Captions from ‘Silver Bride’ video of Amorphis



### Heavy metal as public history

There is, however, a strong history-consciousness in many other Finnish metal bands’ works. This is a form of ‘public history’ or rather ‘history culture’, (*Geschichtskultur*, see Koselleck 1985, passim & Kärki 2014, 34–35) taking the historical elements and ideas, using and recontextualising them in new media and popular culture surroundings. Metal bands have sung of themes as wide-ranging as the raid-warning fires on the coastlines, the plunders of the people of Häme, and the conditions in Finland after the Ice Age. The band Scum from Eastern Finland delight in Karelian mysticism:

We are from Karelia, and the lyrics come from the heart. The region has much more mystery to offer than just the tales of the *Kalevala*. The border during the Greater Wrath (the Great Northern War) runs through Parikkala. In ancient times, raid-warning fires were lit on the nearby *Haukkavuori* and elves are said to have lived there. All of this provides inspiration for the lyrics. (Pete A, Scum. DeFresnes 1996, A12)

Even black metal musicians interested in the forces of darkness no longer limit their quotations to satanic verses; instead, their songs resound with Kalevalaic mythology and Finno-Ugric pathos. Black metal and death metal growlers have lost their hearts to national romanticism.

Our northern nature inspires these bands, but even the imaginations of those swearing in the name of 1980s "old school" heavy metal have started to soar. In the style of its 2002 album *Kalevala Mysticism*, the band Morningstar from Äänekoski sought to connect traditional heavy metal and the *Kalevala*:

Under the northstar we were born...  
Gods of nature will guide our way  
Through the evil, insane world...

I believe that some day  
When the world is gone...  
We'll still be here in the North,  
Our spirits will become  
One with the land...

Strong as the sons of Kaleva  
We'll stay alive, choose our side...

("Sons of Kaleva" (*Kalevala Mysticism*). Morningstar 2002)

The band, founded in 1988, describes in their song *Sons of Kaleva* one of the central themes of Northern heavy metal mythology, survivalism. The sons of the North have been hardened by the cold winds to such an extent that even major upheavals in the world cannot sever the connection between the mystic soil and the heroes of the *Kalevala*. On the album's cover, though, heavily armored warriors attack a giant gothic-style castle – hardly a fitting image for something so attached to Finnish history, however mythical.

The band's vocalist Ari Honkonen explains what the *Kalevala* and Finnish folklore represent to him:

It is an interesting topic! I'm not interested so much in nationalist elements, but in cultural ones. We have a rich culture, which we need not be ashamed of. Instead of a viking helmet, a hammer, and Thor, we have birch-bark moccasins, sisu, incantations, songs, and bear-hunting spears! Being between East and West is always interesting. Metal music can do with lyrics, themes from a time and culture in which men had to be made of iron and ships from wood. (Honkonen, Ari: "RE: Kalevala-kysymys." E-mail to Kimi Kärki 26.2.2004)

The band's earlier albums have already dealt with the history of the North: Saint Olaf, the crusades to Finland, shaman spells, and burning boats (De Fresnes 1996, A 12). The cultural conventions relating to heavy metal music and hero epics are similar around the world but they also take on local features. This commitment to the local has produced the kind of originality that Finnish music has been acclaimed for in the international music media.

It seems that a large number of different metal bands are conceived in Finland today, some more strongly linked to our national culture than others. Perhaps being situated between East and West has brought this current eclecticism to the Finnish metal music field. After Lordi won the Eurovision Song Contest, Finland must have become even more closely associated with heavy metal as a nation. Finland appears to be one of the few Western European countries where metal music is almost constantly at the top of the charts. Kalevalaic tones permeate the field of Finnish metal music, all the way to the smallest and most bizarre musical subcultures. The band Ensiferum with its Bathory-inspired Viking metal constantly bows toward the *Kalevala* and its own Finnishness. In addition to the instrumental *Kalevala Melody*, the Finnish national culture receives tribute in the *Finnish Medley* – a potpourri which includes the songs *Karjalan kunnailta*, *Myrskykuodon Maija* and *Metsämiehen laulu* (see Ensiferum's web-pages, <http://www.ensiferum.com/>). The band's album covers feature a bearded man, greatly resembling Väinämöinen, perhaps the most central character from the *Kalevala*, carrying a sword and a shield emblazoned with the Finnish flag (sic!).

Many other Finnish heavy metal bands also draw on the *Kalevala*. The band Aarni's song *The Weird of Vipunen* makes use of the giant Antero Vipunen from the *Kalevala* to delve into Tuonela – a world of mummified reindeer and shaman drums. The very name of the group Finntroll combines Finnishness and mythology. In its imaginative songs priests are chased away by trolls.

There are heavy metal musicians also outside Finland who have seen the *Kalevala* as representing something fresh, perhaps inspired by the interest shown in the epic by J. R. R. Tolkien and, even more so, by the artistic and commercial triumph of Amorphis. But the play with symbols and visual imagery is transnational and not nationally specific.

Thus it is no wonder that music has also become hybrid, its cultural and tonal influences deriving from many different sources. The folk tunes of the *Kalevala* sound alongside the riffs of Anglo-American metal music and even “kebab-metal” (surely a humorous definition, meant to mock the current diversity of metal genres) melodies hailing from the Balkans. Similarly, songs can be inspired by the *Kalevala*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or by the American horror writer H. P. Lovecraft. The heritage of the heavy metal genre, intertextuality, irony and a respectful awareness of traditions are as much a part of contemporary metal music as is adolescent masculine bluster and rebelliousness. Alongside countercultural symbols like studs, leather, ammunition belts and death symbols, many bands value axes, helmets, shields, myths of the past and esoteria, as well as, of course, the imagery of the *Kalevala*.

## Conclusion

Does this kind of death imagery and the legacy of national mythological angst reflect the nausea of the Finns' overly efficient Western society? Maybe the Finns are indeed for ever losing something of their way of feeling, a way that – on the other hand – contemporary youth cultures and their music are once again striving to grasp. Heavy music and its reinterpretation of the *Kalevala* provides a channel to that endangered way of feeling.

As a phenomenon, the popularization of the *Kalevala* is almost as old as the *Kalevala* itself. The malleability of the *Kalevala*, or “Kalevalaness”, to countless appropriations in schools, on stage, in music, in literature, in movies, in

comic books and in jewelry as well as in clothes, is undeniable evidence of its persistence in the Finnish culture. According to folklorist Seppo Knuuttila the *Kalevala* in all its versions and adaptations has penetrated Finnish cultural and social life to such an extent that we do not even notice how the phenomenon surrounds and affects us daily (Knuuttila 1992, 250-251). At issue, then, is the absorption of the *Kalevala* into Finnish culture in a way the mental depth and extent of which is almost impossible to show.

One characteristic of national symbols is the ease with which they permeate everyday thinking. As a written text, the *Kalevala* has been present in Finnish culture for more than 170 years: it lives on in constantly varying interpretations, it reproduces, changes, and renews. But the sung oral tradition from which Elias Lönnrot collected the material for his cohesive *Kalevala* is much older than this. The dim echoes and even clear processual variants of these songs are likely to appear in Finnish popular music in the future, sung both in Finnish and in English. This is probably typical of every country's epic folk traditions; the English are unlikely to soon reject the Arthurian knightly romance they partly inherited from the Continent nor the Greeks their quarrelsome Pantheon, so firmly have they been forged into the cultural deep structures of those countries.

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