

A GUIDE TO THE FOLK MUSIC HISTORY OF FINLAND & NEW CONCEPTS IN FOLK MUSIC IMPROVISATION FROM SIBELIUS ACADEMY

BY ALYSSA RODRIGUEZ



Image: Archives of the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle late 1930s
For A.O. Väisänen's Half an Hour Folk Music YLE radio program:
“Puoli tuntia kansanmusiikkia”

This is an Aural tradition. Therefore, it is extremely important to use audio recordings in conjunction with any sheet music provided in this document. To listen to all the music discussed in this document, listen to this [YouTube Playlist](#). You can also click the links provided throughout this article to listen to individual pieces.

ARCHAIC MUSIC

RUNO SINGING

Runo singing (*runolaulu*) is an old Finnish-Karelian song form that is over 2,000 years old. It often has four emphasized syllables per line in the Kalevalic style, such as “MIS-täs TIE-sit TÄN-ne TUL-la” and is made up of poems sung in a narrow range of usually 5 notes. There are “even” lines and “broken” lines. “Even” lines have emphasis on the first syllable of every word, like in the example above. “Broken” lines have an emphasis on a syllable that is not at the beginning of the word. For example (credit: Sinikka):

Va-ka van-ha Väi -nä-möi-nen	even
Tie-tä-jä i- än -i-kui-nen	broken

The Kalevala is an important Finnish-Karelian national epic poem collection that often features this syllable structure. Many of these old runo songs are also played instrumentally on the Finnish instruments *kantele* and *jouhikko*. You can read [this article](#) for more detailed info on *runolaulu*.

One of Finland’s most well recognized *Runolaulu* (Runo songs) is [“Tuu, tuu, tupakkarulla,”](#) a lullaby.

Tuu tuu tupakkarulla
mistäs tiesit tänne tulla?
Tulin pitkin turuntietä,
hämäläisten härkätietä.
Mistäs tunsit meidän portin?
Siitä tunsin uuden portin:
haka alla, pyörä päällä
karhuntalja portin päällä

Translation:

Tuu, tuu, little roll of tobacco,
How did you find your way here?
I came here along the Turku road,
The ox path of the Häme people.

How did you recognize our gate?
I saw your new gate:
There was a hook underneath, a wheel above,
A bearskin over the wheel.

You can listen to some alternative versions here: [Kids version](#) ; [Modern version](#)

KANTELE



Considered Finland's national instrument, the kantele is over 2,000 years old and found in many countries neighboring Finland including Russia and Estonia. Kalevalic legend has it the first kantele was made by [Väinämöinen](#) from the jaw of a pike and some hairs from a stallion or maiden. "Like Orpheus, Väinämöinen's *kantele* playing enchanted all those who listened" (Rahkonen). The oldest kanteles had 5 strings and many 5 string kanteles are still built and played today. The number of kantele strings started increasing in 19th century, and today there are many versions of the kantele including 11 string to 39 string. To learn more about the kantele, read Carl Rahkonen's article [here](#).

In the old tradition, many kantele players played church bell songs, because church bells were the only non-human sound that they could hear, and the church bell melodies were inspiring. You can learn more church bell songs on the kantele by watching [this video](#) featuring Pauliina Syrjälä, kantele player and lecturer at Sibelius Academy:

Music played on the kantele was very different than music as we think of today. This "Archaic Music" was long lasting and didn't have a beginning or end. It acted more like a "circle" and is sometimes called "long music." This archaic style of music died at the start of 20th century but has been revived with study of archive recordings and transcripts by Finnish musicians. To get a sense of archaic music, you can watch Doctor of Music (DMus) [Arja Kastinen](#) play *runolaulu* (runo songs) in the archaic music style of "long music" improvisation on 5 string kantele.

To hear what archaic kantele music was like, you can also listen to Arja Kastinen play [5-string kantele with an archive kantele recording](#) from 100 years ago here.

My first impressions of archaic music immediately reminded me of 20th century minimalist music from the Western Classical tradition, "influenced by other, non-Western styles including Indian raga and African drumming." (allclassical.org) However, minimalist music tends to have a beginning and an end, and is more of a slow transformation with a goal and character shift, whereas Finnish archaic music is more circular, with no beginning and no end, often called "long music." It does not have discernable measures or progress like Western Classical music. It almost feels like trance music to me, and has inspired a new level of "groove" focus in my musicianship. In my

opinion, it is almost a meditation, and an excellent vehicle for exploring improvisation, variation, and increased creativity.

Archaic music is a living tradition in Finland. Finnish musicians are continuing to explore the archaic music tradition. The band “[Juuri & Juuri](#),” made up of fiddle player Emilia Lajunen and Eero Grundström on harmonium, explores new ways of playing archaic “long music” improvisation on fiddle and harmonium.

WIND INSTRUMENTS

Shepherding flutes and horns played a vital role from the Bronze Age up until the 1950s in the Finnish-Karelian (then Ingria) countryside. Shepherds would play horns for a variety of purposes and make them out of any kind of organic matter they could find: birch bark, cow horns, cane reeds, etc. Male shepherds would play the horns to call to other shepherds, express their loneliness, and see who had the louder horn. Much of this music was improvised and personal to the shepherd player. “In the autumn there was a party for the herder, who was expected to play music for the villagers. Some skilled shepherds were asked to play at wedding parties, too.” (Minna Hokka)



In Ingria, cow horns (left) that are called “*trubas*” were used for calling cattle. A *truba* has five fingerholes on upper surface and a thumb hole underneath. The body is made of hollowed halves of juniper and the echo funnel is a bull’s horn. The trumpet is tied together with a long strip of birch bark. The bigger horse horn is similar, but without fingerholes.”

“The birch bark horn was a common trumpet instrument in both Finland and Karelia. The goat’s horn was adapted as an instrument in south-eastern Finland in the 16th century, being the first melodic wind instrument that could be played throughout the year. In Karelia, where goats were not commonly kept, horns were made out of wood instead. In Karelia, folk clarinets (right) with a cane reed were known since the Middle Ages, and they have also been played on the west and south coasts of Finland.” (Finnish Music Quarterly)



Child shepherds would play flute because they were not strong enough to play the horns. Some examples of horn and flute uses were:

“The housewife called workers from fields to eat by blowing into a cowhorn.”

“Vepsian boys and men used to play wooden clarinets, called *luttu*, as they were about to harvest potatoes. The reason for this was to prevent evil.”

Noise to scare away predators/beasts.

“It was believed that the sound of a whistle would raise the wind and bring rain, which would take the insects away.”

“According to a scientist from Petrozavodsk University, mighty herders in eastern Karelia made deals with the forest elf for the cattle’s protection. The agreement written on a piece of birch bark, was set against the wooden body of a horn and hidden inside the belt of birch bark. This procedure made the horn a magical item, which shouldn’t be touched by anybody else. After the herder had lead the cattle into the forest by playing fast tunes, he could take it easy, because the herd would stay safe, invisible and untouched the whole day. Before the sunset, the herder would sound his horn three times in order to get his cattle back.” (Minna Hokka)

“By the beginning of the 1930’s, there were only a few old and odd fellows, kind of outsider artists, who still played pipes and horns. The rich culture of self-made wind instruments came extremely close to dying out.” You can learn more about shepherd horns at Minna Hokka’s [website](#).

For an idea of what these flutes sound like, listen to Teppo Repo play [Ingrian shepherd flute](#). He was one of the most popular performers in the Half an Hour music series by YLE (Yle article). You can read more about Teppo Repo (in Finnish) [here](#).

“A folk music instrument is any instrument used for certain functions and in certain environments outside the church and beyond the public and private musical milieus of the bourgeoisie.” ~ Minna Hokka



Handmade reed pipes played by children
Photo credit: Minna Hokka

What is Missing (Hurts)

Shepherd song after Juhana

The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff and consists of four lines of music. The first line starts with a 2/4 time signature, followed by a 3/4 time signature, and ends with a 5/8 time signature. The second line begins with a 5/8 time signature, followed by a 2/4 time signature, and ends with a 3/8 time signature. The third line starts with a 2/4 time signature, followed by a 3/4 time signature, and ends with a 2/4 time signature. The fourth line begins with a 2/4 time signature, followed by a 5/8 time signature, and ends with a 2/4 time signature. The score includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and features several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' above the notes).

Transcript from Karjasoitto

ARCHAIC "LONG MUSIC" ETUDES

Exercise # 1: "1, 2, 3 notes:"

This exercise will get you creative in your music making outside of melody. First, pick one note to start. For example: A (in any octave). Set a timer for 2-5 minutes.

Experiment will all you can musically do with A to start for 2-5 min, then add B for as long as you can, then C. You can try different octaves, different note lengths, and make sure you try to fill 5 min of time with one note to start and leave room for silence.

A video example of Emilia demonstrating this etude is available on YouTube [here](#).

Exercise # 2:

This next exercise will get you started learning an old Finnish *jouhikko* melody by Pratsu. Take some time to listen to the melody several times, then try to play along, then play through the sheet music below. Video recording of this melody is on [YouTube](#).

Pratsun Laulu

The musical score for "Pratsun Laulu" is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a 2/4 time signature. The melody features eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3' in the second measure. The second staff continues the melody, also in 2/4 time, with another triplet of eighth notes. The third staff changes to a 3/4 time signature and continues the melody. The fourth staff concludes the piece in 2/4 time, ending with a double bar line. The number '6' is written above the second staff, '12' above the third staff, and '15' above the fourth staff, indicating measure numbers.

Copyright © Väisänen, A.O., 1916

Exercise # 3:

- Take your base melody “source”
- Note the pitch set used- which letter names of notes are used?
- Vary the melody by adding repeated notes or notes in the pitch set
- Vary the length of notes – long notes, short notes, etc.
- Continue variations; should feel like there is no start and no end =“circle music”

Begin with the written melody below. Vary the melody at first a little then more within the 5 notes limit. Keep the phrasing. Experiment with adding repeated notes. An example of this etude can be watched [here on YouTube](#).

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Kattila, Mihaita, Ontrei

Copyright © Karjasoitto

You can watch Emilia playing in the archaic style (her field of research) in her doctoral recital [here](#).

If you're interested in improvising in the archaic music style more, here's an excellent [archive of Runolaulu](#).

JOUHIKKO



Jouhikko is the Finnish bowed lyre, also found in Sweden (*stråkharpa*) and Estonia (Talharpa). The bowed lyre is over a thousand years old and is descended from the Celtic plucked lyre. The use of the bow was possibly invented in Central Asia around 700 AD. By the 12th century, using the bow had become common throughout all of Western Europe. A drone tone typically sounds beneath the melody when played.

Much of the Finnish *jouhikko* tradition has been lost because the playing of the *jouhikko* died out in the early 20th century, but it has been revived recently in the 1970s. There are only 48 remaining traditional tunes transcribed by A. O. Väisänen in 1916. Here's a couple examples of [modern jouhikko playing](#); one more [here](#).

In Sweden, only two *stråkharpan* have been found, and the music was never recorded or written down. The *stråkharpa* likely died out when the louder violin became popular.

It is possible that the melody *Långdans efter Nämndemans Ola* (Raunon valssi in Finland) was played on the *stråkharpa*, and *Långdans* is the oldest dance form in

Sweden to survive since it is strongly attached to weddings. Here is a [modern recording](#), recorded by Syrbjörn Bergelt in the playing style of Johan Magnus Dagl.

Långdans efter Nämndemans Ola

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of four staves of music, each starting with a repeat sign. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and contains 4 measures. The second staff is marked with a '5' above the first measure and contains 4 measures. The third staff is marked with a '9' above the first measure and contains 4 measures. The fourth staff is marked with a '13' above the first measure and contains 4 measures. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

A song melody traditional played on jouhikko by player Fedor Pratsū (Rauno, 54) was a Karelian tune called “Kukkuu Kukkuu.” Here is a modern recording of the song “[Kukkuu Kukkuu](#)” sung by children.

Here’s another, [instrumental version](#).

Kukkuu - Kukkuu



Kuk - kuu, kuk - kuu, kau - kan - a kuk - kuu, sai - maan ran - nal - la rui - kut - taa.

5
Ei ol - e ruuh - ta ran - nal - la, jo - ka min - un kul - ta - ni kan - nat - taa.

Transcribed by Alyssa Rodriguez

Translation:

Cuckoo, cuckoo, I hear the cuckoo from far away.
Weeping in the shore of Lake Saimaa.
There is no horse on the shore that would bring my love to me.



ESSEHARPA

Esseharpa is an old Finnish evolution of the nyckelharpa with 10 keys and four strings. It had increased tonal capabilities compared to the Moraharpa, from Mora, Sweden, the earliest known version of the nyckelharpa. It was called “Esseharpa” because it was from Esse, Finland. It had no resonating strings and one row of keys, and two drone strings. You can hear a modern built [esseharpa played here](#).

This instrument is called *avainviulu* in Finnish, and is the same name for the Swedish name *nyckelharpa*.

Image: Rauno Nieminen, who builds modern copies of Esseharpas.

NEW TRADITION

PELIMANNI = “FIDDLER” OR ANY INSTRUMENTAL FOLK MUSICIAN

In this document, “*pelimanni*” refers to fiddler music, but it can also refer to any instrumental folk music, or even songs in an instrumental style, as long as it fits the style.

Starting in the 18th century, fiddle music from Sweden began to influence Finnish folk music. In Western Finland, it replaced the archaic Kalevalic tradition of kantele and runo-singing. For this reason, the fiddle was considered “bad” because it would destroy the kantele and runo-singing tradition, and fiddle is now considered a “staple” of the Finnish *pelimanni* tradition. The word *pelimanni* descends from the Swedish word for *spelman*, or player of music. The polska was introduced to Finland from Sweden along with the fiddle.

“[Hei lumpun lumpun](#)” is a song in the style of a fiddle polska. It’s in between the styles of archaic and *pelimanni* music.

Hei lumpun lumpun

trad. Finnish

Hei lum-pun lum-pun, hei lum-pun lum-pun näil-lä fli-koil-la on i-lua kyl-lä,
5
vaik-kei meil-lä ook-kan, vaik-kei meil-lä ook-kaan kre-pu-hän-tä ha-me hi-a yl-lä.

In the 19th century, the accordion came to Finland from Russia while it was under Russian rule. The accordion was considered “bad,” modern and industrial but it was affordable for everyone and became very popular.

KAUSTINEN FIDDLE STYLE

The following section is a selection of dances and tunes that I feel represent the Finnish Kaustinen style.

After the second world war, folk music lost favor to pop music in Finland. In the 1960s, Kaustinen became a center for folk music during the folk music revival, and the Kaustinen international folk music festival started in 1969. Kaustinen became the epicenter of *pelimanni* music and has a distinct sound with harmonium and smooth fiddle bowing. Several famous Kaustinen *pelimanni* fiddlers include Konsta Jylhä, Otto Hotakainen, and Kustaa Järvinen, whose playing varies greatly stylistically. You can listen below:

Konsta Jylhä plays his [“Parempi Valssi”](#)

Otto Hotakainen plays his [“Lokakuun Polkka”](#)

Also of importance is Kustaa Järvinen, from Western Finland (Eura). His playing was influenced by clarinet player Sifferi Kivisilta. Here is a popular [polkka](#) played by him.

For me, the most distinctive Kaustinen dance is the **Siliavalssi**, which features 2 against 3 rhythm in the dance steps to the music. One example is [Marjaanan Viljamin valssi in G](#), on the next page. *Note the 3 eighth note slurred bowings that define the silia valssi rhythm!*

Note! Huom! Sheet music on the following pages is used with permission from Kaustisen Pelimanniyhdistys ry, from the sheet music collection. You can purchase the whole sheet music collection and more at the link below. **Copying and redistribution is forbidden!**

KAUSTISLAISIA PELIMANNISÄVELMIÄ:

<https://kansanmusiikkiliitto.fi/product/kaustislaisia-pelimannisavelmia-1/>

The mazurka in Finland is a very hoppy dance, which you can watch danced here ([Kulkurin](#))

Marjaanan Viljamin silia valssi

Handwritten musical score for "Marjaanan Viljamin silia valssi". The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It consists of ten staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The music features various notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as 'p' (piano) and 'w' (accents). The score includes first and second endings, indicated by '1.' and '2.' above the notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

[Masurkka](#)). Below you can find the music for the first mazurka played in the dance video. **Note! Bowings are variable and not written in the transcript. It is necessary to listen to the music to determine them.**

Kulkurin Masurkka

The first system of musical notation for 'Kulkurin Masurkka' consists of two staves in 3/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody in the upper staff begins with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5. The bass line in the lower staff starts with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G3, A3, Bb3, and C4. The system concludes with a double bar line.

The second system of musical notation begins at measure 5. The melody in the upper staff features a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5, then eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5. The bass line consists of quarter notes G3, A3, Bb3, and C4. The system includes a first ending (marked '1.') and a second ending (marked '2.').

The third system of musical notation begins at measure 10. The melody in the upper staff starts with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5, then eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5. The bass line consists of quarter notes G3, A3, Bb3, and C4. The system concludes with a double bar line.

The fourth system of musical notation begins at measure 14. The melody in the upper staff starts with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5, then eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5. The bass line consists of quarter notes G3, A3, Bb3, and C4. The system includes a first ending (marked '1.') and a second ending (marked '2.').

The polkka in Finland is also a very hoppy dance, and a favorite is called [Kaustisen Polkka](#), from the Kaustinen region. Sheet music used with permission from Kaustisen Pelimanniyhdistys ry from KAUSTISLAISIA PELIMANNISÄVELMIÄ: <https://kansanmusiikkiliitto.fi/product/kaustislaisia-pelimannisavelmia-1/>

Kaustisen polkka

Alkuun mentäessä viimeinen tahti

Sometimes in Finnish music, there is a stemma voice (second voice), similar to folk music in Sweden. Here is a polska with a stemma voice (the stemma is under copyright and the sheet music can be purchased [here](#)).

Polska från Tenala is from the western part of Finland. It's a popular "jam" tune played at sessions.

Polska från Tenala

trad efter F.F. Westin

The musical score for 'Polska från Tenala' is written in 3/4 time and consists of four staves of music. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score includes a stemma voice, indicated by a '3' under a triplet of notes in the first staff. The second staff contains two first endings, labeled '1.' and '2.', with a '3' under a triplet of notes. The third and fourth staves continue the melody. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Lastly, the schottische is a very popular couple dance that is moderate in tempo. Listen to [Hultiahon sottiisi](#) to get a sense of the feel of a sottiisi (Schottische), which came from Germany to Finland in the 19th century. It is a very similar dance to the Reinlander, common in Norway and Denmark (Jouko).

The *Jenkka* is a jumpy dance that developed in Finland from the schottis in the early 20th century. It became popular in dance halls after World War II, or maybe even earlier. Finland also has an international fashion dance "letkajenkka" that spread around the globe in 1960-70's (Jouko).

Hultiahon sottiisi



PELIMANNI IMPROVISATION ETUDE

Jouko Kyhälä, lecturer of folk music and harmonica at Sibelius Academy in Finland, has developed a “polska grammar method,” where a polska or any other folk dance can be improvised by a musician. He breaks down the polska into its basic dance rhythm and the skeleton of the melody, and then the player can use those to improvise a completely new polska. The following exercise was developed based on Jouko’s method and was developed with his guidance.

Exercise #1:

Pelimanni Polska Etude

based on polska 122

Allegretto

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 3/4 time. The first staff contains a melody of 12 notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C#4. The second staff starts with a '7' above the first measure and contains a melody of 12 notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C#4. Both staves end with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Step 1: Play through the melody skeleton above many times until you can play it by heart from memory. **Note:** Do the root melody notes reveal all the essential points of the melody?

Step 2: Play polska rhythm with skeleton melody notes listed below. Ending rhythm is used for the last bar of a phrase i.e. at the end of each line above.

Step 3: Improvise a polska using the rhythm and the skeleton melody notes as a reference. **Note!** It helps to listen to many, many polska examples to get an ear for playing polskas!

Polska Rhythm Skeleton

The image shows a single staff of musical notation in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 3/4 time. It is divided into three sections: 'Rhythm A' (4 measures), 'Rhythm B' (4 measures), and 'Ending Rhythm' (2 measures). Each section contains rhythmic notation represented by 'x' marks on a staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The 'Ending Rhythm' section ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Additional Rhythms to try:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 3/4 time. The first staff is labeled 'Rhythm C' and contains rhythmic notation represented by 'x' marks on a staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The second staff is labeled 'Rhythm D' and contains rhythmic notation represented by 'x' marks on a staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. Both staves end with a double bar line and repeat dots.

MODERN

Finnish folk music continues to evolve as a living tradition. Modern folk musicians continue to arrange and be inspired by historic archaic and *pelimanni* music. There are many incredible musicians active in the Finnish folk music scene today writing new folk music. Some examples of bands to listen to are: Tsuumi Sound System, Frigg, JPP, and Juuri & Juuri on major streaming platforms.

Kantele: [Maija Kauhanen](#) ; [Pauliina Syrjälä](#)

Flutes: [Kristiina Ilmonen](#) also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-Qw9NinpSI>

Accordion: [Maria Kalaniemi](#) ; [Teija Niku](#)

Violin: [Tero Hyväluoma](#) ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aK1oZUolku4>

One important thing to note about Finnish folk music is that the tunes are universally played everywhere nowadays, and are not stylistically different by town (like in Norway and Sweden). Individual style is more important than regional style. It's important to know the roots of the music before you break the rules stylistically! Kaustinen style is the most famous style since the late 1960s in Finland and recently was awarded as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, hundreds of years ago, folk music style varied by village before modernization, much like in Norway and Sweden.

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These interviews are in my home archive.

Materials from Pauliina Syrjälä’s “History of Finnish Folk Music” course offered by Sibelius Academy

Material learned in Jouko Kyhälä’s “Playing for Dancers” course offered at Sibelius Academy (learned aurally)