



## REVIEW ARTICLE:

# FROM THE REAL ROMA TO IMAGINARY GYPSIES THE FINNISH ROMA MUSIC AND EARLY SCHOLARLY STUDY OF ROMA'S MUSIC

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## INTRODUCTION

The European Union has often been associated with democratic consolidation and fundamental rights. At the same time, we all have seen that there are many discriminated minorities, like the Roma people. Today the Roma, their history and culture, are a major topic of debate, discussion and evaluation all over the Europe. The Roma people are seeing minority rights, redress for past wrongs, and political representation in the government. However, The Roma having no nation state anywhere in the world, are a minority *par excellence*. The Roma are usually discriminated against wherever they live. At the same time they are often praised for their musical skills. Ethnomusicologist Carol Silverman, for example, describes this socio-political phenomenon in the Balkans: “In fact, most Balkan non-Roma do value Rom musical abilities while simultaneously discriminating against them as a people” (Silverman 1996, 237; for Austria see Hemetek 2006, 41; for Romania, Marian-Bălașa 2004; for Hungary Kovalschik 2003; for Finland Åberg 2002). This holds true everywhere in Europe Roma groups are represented in different contexts, times and places in different ways. Many of these representations have remained largely static across long periods of time while others seem more open to change. One context in which Roma representations are successfully negotiated between Roma and non-Roma is the multicultural space of music.

The literature relating the Finnish Roma, *Kale*, is complex in its diversity and quality. It ranges from stories/biographies or collections of anecdotes to disciplined and rigorous academic study and the beginnings of a socio-historical approach. All of this material has at least some interpretative value, in terms of understanding

the position and perception of the Finnish Roma, Kale. In this article, I will discuss how the similarity and difference between the music of the Finnish Roma and of the majority population are constructed in the scholarly study of Roma music. What kind of cultural similarity and difference can we find between the music of the Roma and the studies of the Roma's music-culture? I address these questions also through the fieldwork I have been doing among Roma since 1994.

## **ABOUT THE KALE AND THE TERMS “GYPSY” AND “ROMA”**

Finland has the largest and maybe the most homogeneous Roma population in the world, with the *Kale* population comprising groups of Roma who arrived through Sweden as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this group was strengthened by Russian immigrants who have merged with the Finnish *Kale* (Pulma 2006, 215). The Finnish Roma, nowadays about 10 000 in all, led the traditional way of life. There are 10 000 Roma in Finland, as well as 3000 Finnish Roma in Sweden (Markkanen 2003, 262). In this article, I will discuss the traditional songs of the Finnish Roma.

In Finland terms *Mustalainen* (which means the colour of the skin, black in English), Kale (Roma in Finnish Romani language), and Roma refer to the same group, the Finnish Roma. At the political level, there is a tendency to replace the term with negative connotations, i.e. Gypsy, with the `insiders` term Roma (see Pettan 2002, 181). The noun “Rom” or “Roma” came into Finland during the last decades of the twentieth century and is thus a brand new and not very familiar term among older Roma, especially in a traditional song context. To people in Finland it seems to have been imposed from above (and from abroad), and the attempts to popularize it came exclusively from politically involved individuals, Roma activists and intellectuals. The older word, “Mustalainen” (Gypsy in English), is still perceived as accurate, even if this use may suggest or imply negative undertones. In fact, very few Roma singers actually use the term “Roma” when referring to themselves or their traditional songs. (Åberg 2002; 2003.) They use song terms like “*mustalaislaulut*”, “*kaaleen laulut*” (Finnish Romani language) or “*meidän laulut*” (“our songs” in English). I presume that a generation will have to pass before “Rom/Roma” replaces the traditional term “Gypsy” in the common vocabulary. Since my review is based on reports of and comments from my fieldwork, I believe that my rhetoric should reflect lexical realities at hand, as well as the mental world of my informants. For this reason, I adhere to the current terminology which is largely intelligible and acceptable to the informants themselves. So, I use both terms “Roma/Gypsy” according to the context.

## **SCHOLARLY STUDY OF THE MUSIC OF THE KALE**

So far, the Finnish Roma music has been investigated only a little. As far as the music is concerned, with a few exceptions as shown by Jalkanen & Laaksonen (1972), the

Roma have not awakened the interest of researchers until recent years (Blomster 1995; 2004; 2006; Åberg 1997; 2002; 2003; 2006). Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for this lack of interpretations lies in nationalism. Nationally oriented Finnish researchers have not seen or heard any such tones in the music of the Roma that would revive the nation or support its structures. Nevertheless, the Roma have their own traditional songs or folksongs as they often identify them. These songs refer to a tradition with a communal emphasis, as the prefix *folke* already implies. The songs are mainly performed amongst the Roma themselves and nowadays mainly in Finnish, although there are some established Romani language versions.

There are many reasons for the differentiation of the Roma traditional song culture. First of all, Roma have usually maintained a certain distance from the white folk because they have not wanted, or for practical reasons sometimes even not have been able to, identify with the basic values of the host population (Kopsa-Schön 1996, 69). There has been an attempt to keep the relationship with the predominant population purely financial (Grönfors 1981). As professional singing was not a part of the heritage of the present, older generation of Roma singers, the songs were only performed amongst insiders. On the other hand, the traditional songs, as well as the Romani language, have had covert functions. Although the language is mainly of cultural political importance at the moment, it is still also a code language. Furthermore, customs and traditions may also be said to have contributed to the survival of the songs. This is the case for example when only persons of mature age have been considered to master the songs in their right form. Influences from the outside, often absorbed by the young, are still strongly opposed. In this sense, it is also a question of the minorities' instinct for self preservation. Such emotional, partially negative attitudes cast a shadow over the Roma research in Finland. Especially protected have been the traditional customs and the language, the cultural political value of which is no doubt rather significant at the present. The Finnish Roma research has concentrated mainly on Roma folk customs (e.g. cleanliness) as well as on their symbolic interpretations (see Grönfors 1981; Kopsa-Schön 1996; Markkanen 2003; Viljanen-Saira 1979).

Another reason why there has been no systematic research of Roma folk music (Roma songs) in Finland is that the Roma in Finland have not had any popularised music since 1960s. Basically the music has "lived" only among the Roma themselves, like in Czech and in Slovakia where the authentic "Gypsy" music has been practically unknown outside the "Gypsy" community (Davidova 1991, 31). However, the political recognition of the traditional music of the Roma in Finland has led to a broader acceptance by the majority, and the Roma minority is striving for this very goal.

## EARLY HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS

Gypsy music became a Western subject of reflection during the last half of the nineteenth century, at a time when nationalism, exoticism, and Romanticism combined to

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exert a re-evaluative influence on the way music was conceived. Franz Liszt was the first to consider Gypsy music as a European topic of discourse in his book *The Gypsy in Music* (Malvinni 2004, x). For Liszt, Gypsy music represented the holy grail of what Western composers had sought for centuries: the achievement of pure musicality, combined with a depth of emotion (the natural expression of the Gypsies' misfortune). According to Liszt, when the Gypsy fiddler improvised on a tone, he was able to produce the kind of music that synthesized the rational and the irrational, technical competence and depth of feeling. But in what way was this romantic idea constructed in Finland?

It is clear that the early descriptions of the Roma music in Finland are over-enamoured by its exotic nature, and the Gypsy researchers have often found it expedient that Gypsies share a specific ethnicity. The nostalgia for the freedom of life on the road has always been self evident in the descriptions of contemporary Roma music (Malvinni 2004, 207), especially in the traditional Roma songs context. The message comes down to this: the Roma are a persecuted, oppressed minority which expresses its pain directly in music. Gypsy music is natural, down-to-earth, and non-artificial. Kristfrid Canander, one of the earliest folklorists inspired by the Roma people in Finland, wrote in 1780:

“They have songs or ditties, composed in their own languages, mostly solo and greatly resembling Russian songs. They sing these airs while travelling or while drunk and in merry mood, and dance gypsy dances, which are very amusing to watch.” (Canander in his Study on Gypsies, 1780.)

In these early theories and descriptions of “Gypsy music” there has been articulated a range of abstract assumptions coloured by romanticism, ideas about Gypsy language, ritual and rite, and the freedom of life. For these early researchers, the Roma culture is quite closed and for them, Gypsies are ‘an ethnic whole’ who have maintained the singleness of their race for hundreds of years. However, Canander demonstrates the importance of Russian and other indigenous communities influence to the Roma music of Finland. Many of the songs have indeed Russian melodic and lyrical characteristics.

A hundred years after Canander, J. R. Aspelin wrote in 1894 in *Uusi Suometar* – at that time a popular Finnish newspaper – the following:

“As we know, the Gypsies of Eastern Europe, for example in Russia and in Hungary, earn most of their income from dance music and singing. It almost appears as if the Finns' harsh, merciless treatment of the Gypsies has banished those happy aspects from their behaviour. At least there are very few traces of them left among Finnish Gypsies” (see Laaksonen 1972).

It is probable that J. R. Aspelin was thinking of the Russian or Hungarian Gypsy music, which was sweeping over the world at that time. Compared with the Salon music of the educated circles, the modest folk songs of the Finnish Roma

perhaps did not seem exotic enough (Laaksonen 1972). For Aspelin Finnish Roma songs, like Finnish folk songs, are for the most part sad and plaintive tones. This differs from Liszt's understanding of Gypsy music: that gypsy music marks a pure virtuosic and expressive musicality combined with a depth of emotion (see Malvinni 2004).

At the turn of the century, a well-known scholar of Finnish "Gypsy life", Arthur Thesleff noted – rebelling against exotic Romanticism – that the Gypsies of his time no longer really performed songs, dances or music. Since the 1960 there has been a small but growing interest in Roma music. Some of the interest has arisen from the perspective of Roma politics. There has been a significant growth of interest in minority ethnic groups in Europe, particularly concerning their interaction with the "indigenous population". The identification of Roma as such a minority has led to a greater understanding of Roma culture, including "Gypsy music". However, the romantic ideas about "Gypsiness" remain stunningly present in the marketing of music as Roma music.

### **“DARK SINGERS” – MARKETING ROMA ARTISTS AS ENVOYS OF NOSTALGIA**

Nowadays there are several CD's on Roma's traditional music, some TV-documentaries, theatrical performances about Roma musicians etc. However, media texts and descriptions about Roma musicians still brilliantly situate all of the main transnational cultural markers of the Roma to their music: 1) travelling, 2) highly ornate vocal style in songs that deal with the pain of separation and persecution, 3) the sound of authentic folk tradition, 4) exotic sound and voice, 5) natural music, which is close to the earthly element, and absolutely non-artificial.

Music unifies a group and separates different groups from each other. It gives a clear sign of difference, being different from the main population. Music also unites Roma people to the majority. The uniqueness of the dance music performed by Roma was apparent in how the interviewees spoke about the way of performance ("melancholic", "emotional", "passionate"), song themes ("reserved lyrics") and certain music styles (tango, waltz, and popular songs). In the actual performance situations ethnicity was also emphasised by dress ("gypsy style") and by performing certain popular Roma-theme songs, like *Mustalaisviulu* (Romany violin) or *Kultaiset korvareenkaat* (Golden earrings; 1947 with Marlene Dietrich as a self-fashioned gypsy). These lyrics contain the fairly typical "us" versus "them" dichotomy. In film music theory, the music serves as an emotional repository or the image, which is usually privileged in terms of the meaning of the film.

Also the dressing of the performers had an important role in the expression of the ethnic identity – dressing like the "white" majority tells about lost gypsiness. It is also important to notice that even though Roma women rarely perform as dance singers, they are a visual part of dance halls contexts. The colourful and bright costumes of the females construct ethnic dimensions also for the artist.

The media texts of popular music show how the concepts ‘tradition’ or ‘traditional’ touch certain customs and behavioural norms and at the same time emphasise otherness, vitality of the culture that differs from the majority population. The Roma artists are aware of the changes in the attitudes of the majority population, and Roma artists can be marketed as an entity of music and culture. Like a boomerang, the main population stereotypes are returned to the majority as an image of stereotype identity of the Roma people and the “Gypsy music”. Thus I assume that the Roma identity is largely a cultural and social construction by both Roma and *Kaafe* (main population). This is something that I call ping-pong -theory. Bringing certain cultural features to the foreground creates secondary meanings to the music. The nostalgia for the freedom of life on the road is the vortex for marketing Roma artists: “It was my destiny to sing,” as one artist told me. When I asked where the dark singing tone comes from, he answered: “It’s because of our life, you see,” “That is why we like to sing tangos. It is the deep sea of moods”. Finnish Roma singers – like Liszt earlier (Malvinni 2004, 208) – describe their musical ability, sound and voice as a dynamic relation between expressive and natural. In this sense we can use the term or concept *micromusics*. Mark Slobin (1992) defines the micromusics of styles that people create conterminously with super culture. They articulate something different from the dominant style, and they consciously construct their difference in music. Or as David Malvinni (2004, 212) puts it: “Because of the marginalization of the Roma, there are many ways of imagining construction of Gypsiness”. This is the same thing that holds true in the media texts about the Finnish Roma musicians. Gypsiness can be defined as a set of ideas, both real and imagined, about Roma. Its most common topics are the road, the journey, the fire and the outdoors; sensual, natural feeling of life.

## FINALLY

If we compare the narratives and descriptions about Finnish Roma music produced by the majority population with the narratives of the Roma about themselves, we notice that the cultural separation between Roma and non-Roma, especially when it comes to music, is based on ‘images of opposing systems’. In order to package something as “Gypsy” or “Roma music”, it seems that the producers still rely on the age-old stereotypes of Gypsiness. Commercialism draws its basic image of the Gypsy from the one formalized by Liszt. And if there exists a desire for cultural escape in Finnish society, musical Romaness or Gypsiness still certainly fulfills such a need.

(Proof read by the editor.)

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**FT Kai Åberg on perinnesäätien tutkimuksen dosentti Joensuun yliopistossa. Katsaus perustuu esitelmään, jonka hän piti Tukholman yliopistossa järjestetyssä konferenssissa "Stockholm International Conference on the Discrimination and Persecution of Roma, Sinti and Travellers", Stockholm Universitet, Sweden 5.–7. March 2009.**