

SAMULI KORKALAINEN

Interdisciplinary Approaches to the History of Lutheran Church Music in Finland

Lectio praecursoria

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When I was just a child in the 1980s, my family participated in the Divine Services held at Nilsjä Church in Eastern Finland. I was astonished at the sound of the organ and the intensity of congregational singing. There was one melody that I liked the most: the *Sanctus* (“Holy, holy, holy”), an uplifting tune with beautiful melodic curves. Little Samppa, as my family called me, did not know that this 150-year-old melody had been used only in Finland, nor that most of the other liturgical melodies represented a common medieval European tradition. Indeed, I understood very little about the centuries-old tradition of congregational singing that I was joining when I sang my favourite melody so enthusiastically, with my child’s voice, in the midst of my local congregation. I thus experienced congregational singing locally, even though the phenomenon was truly transnational.

In nineteenth-century Finland and Ingria, most Lutheran parishioners stayed in their home parishes throughout their lives. Consequently, they experienced the changes in congregational singing locally. The ideas that influenced that tradition, however, often came from far away and flowed from place to place. In my dissertation, I used the concept of translocality to analyse networks and contacts between individual agents and regions across parochial, municipal, and regional borders. Translocality can be understood as such a broad concept that it could also include a transnational perspective. However, due to the unique geographical and political context of nineteenth-century Finland and Ingria, I considered it useful to make a distinction between translocality and transnationalism. The first refers to connections between Finland and Ingria, which were historically and culturally bound together in many ways but were clearly distinct regions. The translocal view also helped me to outline connections between towns, especially Saint Petersburg and

Helsinki, or even within the borders of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. The transnational point of view, on the other hand, was a useful tool for studying flows between different countries and empires.

EHRSTRÖM'S "FINNISH MASS" AS AN EXAMPLE OF TRANSLOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

One of the first key figures in the process of standardising congregational singing and liturgical melodies in nineteenth-century Finland was Fredrik August Ehrström (1801–1850). He was the first person in over one hundred years to publish a collection of liturgical melodies in Finnish; the previous work was from 1702. Ehrström's collection was titled *Suomalainen Messu* ("Finnish Mass"), and it was meant for the simple instrument, called the psalmodikon (*virsikannel* in Finnish). Little Samppa's favourite *Sanctus* appeared for the first time in Ehrström's Mass.

This simple collection of liturgical melodies, only thirty-one pages, opened up a wide range of perspectives for my research. Firstly, Fredrik August Ehrström is a typical example of the people whom I studied in my dissertation. He was born to a Swedish-speaking family, but learned to speak Finnish as well. In the late 1820s he lived in Saint Petersburg, and from 1833 onwards in Helsinki, where he was known as a composer and singing teacher. In 1840, Ehrström was appointed to the position of the Organist of Helsinki. Just before that, he had spent a year in Uppsala, Sweden, to study organ-playing. He thus had connections to both East and West, both of which he was influenced by.

Ehrström also conducted liturgical singing rehearsals for students of theology. Indeed, the teaching of future pastors was most likely one reason that he published his collection. Unlike many other similar collections, Ehrström's included notations for the parts sung by the liturgist, not only the parts sung by the churchwarden (*lukkari* in Finnish, *klockare* in Swedish) or congregation.

In the Preface of the Finnish Mass, Ehrström stated that the Mass should be sung so that it would awake people's devotional emotions. This is a small reference to the impact of the aesthetics of the Romantic philosophy, with which I have dealt widely in my dissertation. However, Ehrström observed that the Mass was not sung in this way in Finnish parishes at the time. He thus joined the criticism that many other members of the upper classes made regarding the poor level of congregational singing.

In Ehrström's opinion, many "wrong and excessive ornaments" should have been eliminated, but it was difficult because the "Massmen" (*messumiehet*) did not receive any proper training in singing liturgical music. It is difficult to say whether the "Massmen" referred to pastors or churchwardens – or even the whole congregation. Nevertheless, in the latter part of the century, four churchwarden-organist schools

were founded in Finland, pastors' musical training was developed at the university, and singing, even in four parts, was taught to parishioners in many Finnish and Ingrian parishes.

According to Ehrström, the melodies of his collection were mostly based on Johann Christian Friedrich Hæffner's (1759–1833) Mass, published in Sweden in 1817; according to my analysis, three melodies were based on Hæffner and Olof Åhlström's (1756–1835) collection from 1799. Most of the melodies were very similar to these Swedish predecessors; there were only small changes due to language differences. The only dissimilarity was that the Salutation was in a major key, which was typical in the Finnish tradition according to hand-written chorale books. The liturgical melodies in Ehrström's Mass thus embody all three levels of my research; from a transnational perspective, most of the melodies originated in the pan-European tradition, while the ways in which they flowed here in Finland was a translocal process, and there was a local colour as well.

All of these perspectives were clearly seen in the melody of the *Sanctus*, which had been little Samppa's favourite 150 years later in Nilsjä. According to my study, Ehrström compiled the *Sanctus* from three different melodies. The beginning was adopted from a melody used in Saint Petersburg, but not as such; Ehrström borrowed the three first phrases, but changed their order and modified the rhythm. After this, the melody continued tolerably according to Hæffner and Åhlström's 1799 collection. Elements of the rest of the melody, except the very last phrase, were taken from Abbé Vogler's (1749–1814) *Hosanna*, which was already a well-known song at that time in Finland and Ingria. The very last phrase of the *Sanctus* seems to have been composed by Ehrström himself.

When this melody was next published in Johan Vilhelm Murman's (1830–1892) Mass in 1856, the last phrase was modified. Murman apparently recognised Ehrström's use of the *Sanctus* of Hæffner and Åhlström, because he took the form of the melody for the last phrase directly from it, although from a different place. Murman amended some other small changes in the melody as well. His modified version was taken as such into all of the collections of liturgical melodies by Johan August Gottlieb Hylander (1831–1896), and was still used almost in that form in the 1980s in Nilsjä Church.

Ehrström's original plan was to publish his collection in Western stave notation with organ accompaniment. However, he was eventually convinced of the expediency and simplicity of a string instrument called the psalmodikon and, therefore, the collection was notated in *sifferskrift* numerical notation. The idea was that anybody should be able to easily learn the melodies, without further musical training. As was typical at that time, the Preface also included measurements for making a psalmodikon and instructions on how to use it. Together with Bror Nils Hagelin's (1796–1840) chorale book *Wirsi Kantele*, also published in 1837, Ehrström's collection started a sequence of different musical collections with *sifferskrift* numerical

notation in Finland. As a result, the psalmodikon became a very popular and widespread instrument both in Finland and Ingria.

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY FUTURE OF CHURCH MUSIC HISTORY IN FINLAND

The history of music has long been written as the inevitable success of national art music culture. Many studies here in Finland and elsewhere have emphasised the long national continuity that extends from the second half of the nineteenth century to the present day. Along with – and based on – this support of the national canon, the aim has also been to demonstrate the value of Western art music.

To some extent, a similar orientation has limited research on the history of church music in Finland. Although many high-quality studies have been carried out, there are still blind spots, one of the most significant of which has been the perspective of the nineteenth century. The reason for this has presumably been that the incoherent congregational singing of the time, as well as the scarcity and simplicity of liturgical melodies in nineteenth-century Finland, did not meet the standards that were later set, nor the style and level that was later achieved. Sometimes, the problem has been that the whole corpus of church music has been considered first and foremost as an art form rather than as liturgical or congregational practice.

Over the past decades, however, a different kind of research has come into existence. Especially in the area of the history of organ music, composers who have been left out of the canon have now been highlighted. In my dissertation I aimed to expand the research horizon even more, and for that reason I chose an interdisciplinary approach.

We need to adopt a new stance if we want to keep the research of church music history in Finland alive. Only a few people seem to be interested in it now, at least if we consider the publications from the twenty-first century. This public defence is actually a rare occasion; the last doctoral dissertation on the history of Lutheran church music in Finland was published here at the Sibelius Academy in 2008. The last to take place at the Åbo Akademi University in Turku was in 2005. At the University of Helsinki, there have been two doctoral dissertations (in 2004 and 2016) about the recent history of church music, but if we want to include at least the first part of the twentieth century, the last such dissertation is from 2009. Therefore, in its own genre, my dissertation is the first example in twelve years.

What is the reason for such lack of research? Firstly, I think that there is at least one easily acceptable reason: the variety of different research interests in church music has clearly broadened. Nowadays there are, for instance, many interesting volumes on present-day congregational practices, church musicians' identity, and music in non-Western cultures. History *per se* is thus not the only interesting area of

study in the field, as it seemed to be for a long time. Secondly, another reason might be that the church music practices in Finland and other countries – and in different denominations – have become increasingly numerous. In comparison with that, the congregational singing and organ-playing of previous centuries might seem a narrow and even uninteresting field of study. Finally, a third reason could be that potential scholars might easily think that everything has already been studied satisfactorily; that there is nothing new to explore.

My dissertation proves this last reason, at least, to be wrong. Everything has not been studied, even though there is not much new material to explore. Rather, this is a matter of the theoretical framework used; that is, the theories, research perspectives, key concepts, and level of interdisciplinarity. Nowadays we understand that the narrative given by the primary sources – *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, “how things actually were” – is only the surface, under which there are many meanings, experiences, mental and social processes, emotions, et cetera. These research interests are reachable with various theories, mostly embraced from other scientific disciplines. The research of church music today needs not only a knowledge of practical theology but also psychology, sociology, anthropology, and ritual studies, to name only a few.

I am deeply aware that my dissertation could have reached even deeper levels of understanding if my eyes had opened earlier to all of the possibilities I have just mentioned. However, by combining different disciplines and using different theoretical concepts, I have been able to demonstrate in a new way how the Lutheran Church was not a separate section of society, nor were Finland and Ingria isolated from pan-European ideas and movements. In my dissertation, the intellectual historical background is handled more broadly and deeply by outlining the common philosophical, theological, cultural, and political atmosphere of the time. Through this approach, a deeper understanding of the motives of people active in the process of standardising congregational singing was achieved.

In the future, I am ready and eager to continue my research on Finnish and Ingrian church music; however, I admit it would be great to have other scholars doing it with me. Even though we are living in financially challenging times, it is essential that the scientific research of church music continues at the Sibelius Academy, alongside artistic research, given the central role of the university and the enormous historical significance of the field. I would also hope to work towards the resurgence of research on church music at other Finnish universities. I am convinced that with new perspectives, theories, and approaches, new generations of church musicians, theologians, anthropologists, and historians can find their own research interests and may then dive, for instance, into the exploration of nineteenth-century church music.

I am sure that even today there are children who are astonished at the sound of the organ and the intensity of congregational singing in Finnish churches. These children might have their favourite melodies; perhaps it is the *Sanctus*, perhaps a

hymn. Some day in the future, our descendants may be interested in where these melodies came from, what they meant to people who sang them, or what their place in liturgical practice was. Multitudinous treasures are waiting for the enthusiastic scholars of church music, and I can tell you: they are worth finding.