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# Popularizing ethno music: the first years of the Finnish Roma band Hortto Kaalo

On 9th October 2012, the radio programme information provided by the Finnish national broadcasting company Yleisradio included a grand title: ‘Hortto Kaalo was the first to popularize ethno music’.<sup>1</sup> The title was about the Finnish Roma group Hortto Kaalo (‘The Real Gypsy’) celebrating their 40-year career on the main stage of the Finnish National Theatre with a full house. Since its establishment in 1969, Hortto Kaalo had been the most visible representation of Roma and Roma culture in Finnish popular music. Despite emphasizing the elements of famous Roma bands and artists abroad in their music, they also took advantage of, and in their own words, ‘estrادized’ (i.e., transferred to the stage/*Estrada*) Finnish Roma songs.

This article aims to explore the tendencies of Roma agency in Finnish popular music and examine the first years of the career of the Finnish Roma band Hortto Kaalo. The article will provide an overview of the beginning of Hortto Kaalo’s career and discuss how their popularity relates to the Roma civil rights movement, folk music revival, and the countercultural movements in Finland at the turn of the 1970s. The sources of the article include data on Hortto Kaalo, such as written biographical texts and prior studies,<sup>2</sup> and, most importantly, biographical and life historical interviews with members of Hortto Kaalo.<sup>3</sup>

The article defines the terms ‘Roma performer’ and ‘Roma ethnic popular music’ in their Finnish context pragmatically. Conditions for fitting categories are clear: Roma performers are individuals generally recognized to have ethnic Roma background who publicly create their self-produced artist images as Roma musicians, while Roma ethnic popular music emphasizes elements from different genres, contemporary popular music, music and style of performing adapted from known popular Roma bands from the 1960–1970s (often French, Hungarian and Russian), as well as the traditional song repertoire of Fin-

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<sup>1</sup> Yleisradio 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Blomster 2010 & 2012; Forss 2019; Henriksson 2014; Hill 2014; Jalkanen & Kurkela 2003; Virtanen 2011; Åberg 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Feija Åkerlund’s interview 1985; interviews and radio programs in Finnish Literature Society: SKSÄ RN 320.2000; SKSÄ RN 102.1970; SKSÄ RN 115.1970 & SKSÄ 4.2016.

nish Roma. Important features, when compared with Finnish Roma's own song culture, are that Roma ethnic popular music in Finland is mostly accompanied by different instruments and mediated through the common channels of popular music in general: audio record publications, radio, TV, concerts, etc. As with the popularization of vocal styles in general, these aspects are significant factors of change in music performance, too.

## Background of the visibility of Roma music in Finland

The visibility of Finnish Roma in public music life in Finland was rather low until the early 1960s. The 'gypsy romanticism' that had affected European art life and the Roma population since the 18th century appeared in Finland only just in the 19th century. That was probably mostly due to Finland's relative geographical and cultural isolation, and the known examples of performing Roma musicians in the early 1900s are few.<sup>4</sup> The Roos family, with a Roma background, had their Roma band from the 1900s to the 1920s in Southwest Finland playing dance music popular in rural areas. Violinists Ferdinand 'Gaaloo' Nikkinen (1894–1971) and Aleksander 'Chaaro' Åkerlund (1893–1941) played romances in cafés and independently organized evenings, while singers Ida 'Cingardy' Blomerus (1890–1953) and Mimmi 'Dinalo Zhai' Borg (active in the 1920s) performed in restaurants. In contrast, the *Kaale* songs of Finnish Roma, traditional Roma songs that often drew inspiration from Finnish folk music, were mostly kept and sung within the Roma population.

Since the 1960s, the Roma have become visible in a completely new fashion in the Finnish music scene, first especially as singers of the tango songs.<sup>5</sup> The tango was, according to record sales statistics from the early 1960s, one of the most popular music genres in Finland in its nativized versions, namely Finnish tango. Broadly speaking, the tango became popular because of the gravitation towards nostalgia brought about by societal changes and migration from rural to urban areas, which occurred in Finland only after World War II. In this new situation, Roma musicians became a dual symbol in the Finnish popular culture: on the one hand, a symbol of the imagined and rapidly vanishing Finnish countryside and old way of life; on the other hand, a symbol of exoticized otherness. The tango wave in Finland propelled several Roma singers into fame, to name a few:<sup>6</sup> Markus Allan (Allan Isberg, 1945–) and Taisto Tammi (Lundberg, 1945–1979),<sup>7</sup> who were known above all as tango singers, and Anneli Sari (Anneli Lundberg, 1947–).<sup>8</sup> The 1970s included the tango and schlager singer Taisto Ahlgren (1943–2008) – and the main character of this article, the Roma group Hortto Kaalo (formed 1969). The 1990s saw the second boom for Roma artists

4 Blomster 2011; Blomster & Roman 2022.

5 Djupsjöbacka 2019; Forss 2016; Padilla 2009; Palm 2019.

6 See Appendix 1: The Roma artists in the top ten of single and album sales in the 1960–1970s.

7 Blomster 2022b.

8 Jalkanen 2006.

in Finnish popular music. Key figures of this phase were singer Rainer Friman (1958–) and the Pelimannet band (est. 1993). The name Pelimannet is a humorous combination of the words *pelimanni* (folk musician) and the vernacular term *manne* for the Roma.

Alongside the dual symbolism of Roma musicians in Finland from the 1960s as mentioned earlier, other tendencies and agencies can also be observed, especially when inquiring directly with the musicians themselves. Subsequent interviews and newspaper articles featuring members of Hortto Kaalo illustrate how they perceived themselves as a revolutionary ‘barricade band’ and as providers of folksy entertainment with a so-called ‘*rillumarei*-attitude’.<sup>9</sup> This term refers to the popular genre of schlager songs and the attitude prevalent in Finnish schlager music from the post-war period of World War II until the 1970s. This internal dichotomy — being a barricade band with a *rillumarei*-attitude — serves as a general concept that highlights two contrasting themes for the group: serious socio-political commentary and light entertainment. In essence, even in their most entertaining performances, Hortto Kaalo was implicitly advocating for Roma interests, simply by virtue of their existence and their chosen mode of expression.

In the next chapter, further analysis will be conducted on various agencies by highlighting the first three perspectives or frameworks through which Hortto Kaalo becomes visible as a protagonist in its early stages: children and counterculture, folk music revival, and the Roma rights movement. After that, we will look at the self-assessment of the band members in the later years.

### **Children’s culture and counterculture, the Roma rights movement and the folk music revival**

The story of Hortto Kaalo’s origins is recorded in the archives through several consistent accounts.<sup>10</sup> According to the interview material, Marko Putkonen, who worked as a janitor at the national broadcasting company *Yleisradio*, received a call to the radio station from a listener asking for information about Roma music and musicians. Putkonen sought advice from *Mustalaislähetys* (Gypsy Mission), an evangelical Roma organization established in 1906, and obtained the contact information for the brothers Taisto Lundberg and Feija Åkerlund. In an interview given by Åkerlund in 1985, he describes how Lundberg found him “at some potato market” and informed him that “there’s this guy who’s putting together a group, and we’re supposed to play some Gypsy music.” According to Åkerlund, they had no knowledge of Roma music or bands from other countries, and to them, Roma music meant the Finnish *Kaale* songs, which are orally transmitted

9 Expression ‘*rillumarei*’ comes from the theme song of the Finnish film *Rovaniemen markkinoilla* (‘At the Rovaniemi Fair’) 1951.

10 Feija Åkerlund’s interview 16.4.1985, SKSÄ RN 320.2000, SKSÄ RN 102.1970 & SKSÄ RN 115.1970; Blomster 2010.

songs of Finnish Roma. That night, as the highlighted story tells us, the turntable was playing the record *The Gypsy and I* by the Russian Roma actor and musician Yul Brynner (1920–1985) with Armenian Aliosha Dimitrievitch. According to Åkerlund, the men immediately started to play and sing the songs by ear. As Åkerlund continued, their enthusiasm was far greater than their language skills; when they attempted to mimic Dimitrevitch's Russian, the songs were performed and recorded in gibberish.

The story above can surely be considered an idealized birth story, which has acquired significance partly as an afterthought assessment. However, one can also glean some key elements from the perspective of this article. As can be clearly seen, the band members, coming from various backgrounds, were actively networking and cooperating with the surrounding society and many key figures in the cultural life of Finland. This can be considered a serious uplifting force for Hortto Kaalo in general.

During the years 1970 and 1971, three significant events occurred in the career of Hortto Kaalo:

1. Members of Hortto Kaalo appeared on the album *Iso mies ja keijukainen* ('Big Man and the Fairy', 1970), an album that revolutionized the Finnish children's music scene as a part of wider youth and counter-cultural movements in Finland during the 1960s.
2. Hortto Kaalo's first single record *Miksi ovet ei aukene melle?* ('Why don't the doors open for us?' 1970) was released, and the song quickly became an anthem of the Finnish Roma Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s.
3. The band's first album *Hortto Kaalo* (1971) became the first best-selling folk/ethnic album in Finland. Instantly, Hortto Kaalo entered the cutting edge of the Finnish folk music revival.

The songs of the album *Iso mies ja keijukainen* ('Big Man and the Fairy', 1970) were originally composed for the children's program *Lastenradio* (Children's Radio) produced by *Yleisradio*. Composer Pekka Jalkanen, a student of history and musicology, was a journalist in *Lastenradio* at the time. Jalkanen had gotten to know members of the upcoming Hortto Kaalo band in his neighbourhood first in his free time, and then through joint projects. Jalkanen even was a member of Hortto Kaalo during its first years. Together with M. A. Numminen, a pioneer in the Finnish underground music scene, he was mainly responsible for the music on the record, which mixed folk, rock, and art music. Alongside the musical aspect, new perspectives on children's music were also sought in the album's lyrics. On the album, the direction of the adult gaze towards children and culture was no longer top-down, guiding, and instructive. Now, children were given their own voice, and their accounts of their own lives and expressions were listened to. An alternative method of shifting the perspective, now focusing on things from the Roma standpoint, later became evident in Hortto Kaalo's own musical activities.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Jalkanen also wrote some ground-breaking articles on Roma music in Finland: Jalkanen 1976 & 1981; Blomster 2022a.



**Photo 1:** Members of Hortto Kaalo performing at a children’s concert at the Old Student House of Helsinki University in 1970. From left to right: Feija Åkerlund (vocals), Ari Salin (guitar), Marko Putkonen (guitar), Taisto Lundberg (mandolin), Reima Nikkinen (tambourine, dance), and Pekka Jalkanen (recorder). Photo by Simo Rista. (*Helsingin kaupunginmuseo/Helsinki City Museum*).

The part played by Hortto Kaalo’s musicians on the album was recognizable. Their performances already included elements that later became familiar in Hortto Kaalo’s performances: they were fully acoustic, featuring guitars, an accordion, a violin, and a mandolin; strong singing in harmonies was embellished with alternating solos and intermittent shouts. Additionally, rhythmic singing and increasing tempos made the music catchy. The album *Iso mies ja keijukainen* embraced by the young urban culture scene in the major cities of Finland and was awarded by the Finnish Critics’ Association in 1971.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, the same year *Iso mies ja keijukainen* was released, Hortto Kaalo’s first single record *Miksi ovet ei aukene meille?* (‘Why don’t the doors open for us?’, 1970) also appeared. The song, written by the band members themselves, was radical and flamboyant in many ways. In terms of music, the song and the style of performance were far from the manners of traditional Roma songs in Finland, while at the same time, the performance was close to the popular folk/rock music styles of the 1970s. In that respect, one can argue that the message of the song was mainly directed to non-Roma audiences. But at the same time, the lyrics were very clearly addressed to both non-Romas and Romas. The

<sup>12</sup> SKSÄ 4.2016; Virtanen 2011, 153.

song included segments sung both in Finnish Romani<sup>13</sup> and Finnish, which was and still is very exceptional in the popular music of the Finnish Roma. It is noteworthy that in the song, both groups, Roma and non-Roma, were addressed not only in their own language but also with their own vocabulary and speech patterns. In the Finnish text section of the song, the idea of race is emphasized (‘Why are the doors closed to us, is it the fault of our race?’), while in the Romani language text section, the way of life and hair colour are emphasized (‘Why are the doors closed to us, is it the colour of our hair, why is there no justice, is the way that we live wrong, my brother, this I wonder’).

The song’s lyrics can be read as a clear statement on the cultural change that the Roma population faced, as did the whole of Finnish society, after World War II, especially in the form of urbanization and industrialization, which brought about the loss of traditional professions. While the song’s message in Finnish is a tight and precise ethnopolitical statement, the same thing is expressed more poetically and veiledly in Romani. The song describes in Finnish Romani the Roma life as life on the move, symbolizing the carts as a vehicle travelling between past and present (‘The wagon travels on the road to the future, wheels turning towards the past, carrying on a sombre tune, my gaze on the road ahead’).

To summarize, this song succinctly encapsulated the Roma perspective, brilliantly addressing the agenda and objectives of the Roma civil rights movement.<sup>14</sup> It symbolizes the concrete reality: the majority population’s deplorable attitude towards them resulted in actual closed doors. In retrospect, the ‘door’ has proven to be an excellent metaphor for discussing Roma rights. It is continuously used in new contexts, such as in media and research, to symbolize cultural boundaries.

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13 I would like to thank Miritza Lundberg and Feija Åkerlund for their assistance in translating the Romani language text passages.

14 Roma movements and ethnopolitical debate in Finland: see Pulma 2006 and Stenroos 2019; in Europe, see Selling 2020.



**Photo 2:** Hortto Kaalo with members of the Hungarian Balógh Roma band performing at Hotel Torn restaurant in Helsinki in 1971. From left: three members of the Hungarian Balógh band (violin, cymbal, double bass), Taisto Lundberg (vocals, mandolin), Anneli Sari (Lundberg; vocals, dance), Feija Åkerlund (vocals, guitar), Pekka Jalkanen (guitar), and Marko Putkonen (vocals, guitar). Photo by Simo Rista. (*Helsingin kaupunginmuseo/Helsinki City Museum*)

The third significant uplifting force in the first years of Hortto Kaalo was their connections with the international folk music revival in the 1960s and 1970s. The model for the folk music revival in Finland especially came from Hungary, although the same agenda was becoming relevant in the neighbouring countries of Estonia and Sweden. The folk music revival in the popular music scene promoted the music of Roma and other minorities in Finland and other countries alike.<sup>15</sup> In the Finnish music scene, as told by Feija Åkerlund himself (1985), artists emphasizing their cultural heritage also included Marion Rung of Jewish ancestry, as well as Nils-Aslak Valkeapää and Jaakko Gauriloff, who were both of Sámi ancestry.

The international folk music revival emphasized Roma's own cultural identity, which can also be heard in Hortto Kaalo's musical choices. This is clearly audible, for example from their first LP record *Hortto Kaalo* (1971), in the adaptation of Finnish traditional Roma i.e. *Kaale* songs into Hortto Kaalo's repertoire. In that respect, two songs, featured on the

<sup>15</sup> On the connections between Roma music and civil rights movements: in Hungary, see Kovalcsik 2003 and Lange 1997; in Sweden, see Caldaras 2014.

album *Hortto Kaalo*, *Kuulehan sinä impi* ('Oh, you maiden, hear me') and *Saksilla näillä rilla-reilla* ('With these carts'), are also good examples of that. Briefly, it can also be mentioned that Hortto Kaalo systematically aimed to incorporate Finnish and so-called "international Roma music" (emic term) into their musical fusion by utilizing various scales.



Photo 3: The cover of the album *Hortto Kaalo* (1971)

### Self-assessment in later years

The turbulent years of Hortto Kaalo's career continued until the mid-1970s. The gold-selling albums *Hortto Kaalo* ('Real Gypsy', 1971) and *Hai Hortto Kaalot* ('Hai, you real gypsies!', 1972) were followed by *Kättä päälle ja käsiraha* ('The Deal and Deposit Done', 1973). *Kättä päälle ja käsiraha* marked a culmination of producers gaining more impact over the group's records. Feija Åkerlund himself says: "Regardless of us, the pro-

ducers came to make a mess, then suddenly we do this LP, based on schlager... it broke our image a lot.” The group Hortto Kaalo stopped performing actively at the end of the 1970s. During the next decade, the group members concentrated on their other projects. Putkonen trained to become an opera singer, Åkerlund tended to his second-hand business, raised horses, and gave guitar lessons. In the 1990s, the members of Hortto Kaalo made a major contribution to the launch of the *Porvoo International Gypsy Music Festival* in 1995 (later renamed the *Roma Music Festival*).

Late interviews have shown how members of Hortto Kaalo have viewed the past not only through nostalgia but also with self-irony.<sup>16</sup> It is particularly interesting how the story behind the name Hortto Kaalo is recounted in several interviews, 40 years after its inception. According to multiple sources, the name ‘Real Gypsy’ was intended as a tribute to the old, traditional Roma ways. Interestingly, another reason given in the interviews is that the name was meant as an ironic joke. According to the members’ retrospection, they were not seen as “Hortto Kaalo”, traditional Roma, in the Roma community at the time because of their ‘motley background’. In his interview with the newspaper *Hämeen Sanomat* (7.12.2012), one of the founding members of the band, Feija Åkerlund, said that he believed the group was mostly popular among the general population even at its peak. “If I were to say now that during those 40 years there were a hundred gypsies at our gigs, that’s fifty too many,” Åkerlund stated. According to him, the group’s popularity among Roma was concentrated among ‘boulevard gypsies’, urbanized individuals who ‘worked as city and state officials’, while most Roma were more interested in tango and religious music. In an interview from 1985, Åkerlund also discusses the reasons for the small Roma audience. He presumes that the venues the group preferred, such as restaurants and concert halls, were culturally foreign to Roma audiences. Even their repertoire was not always to the liking of ‘the good old gypsies’, who found the international Roma music influences strange.

## Afterword

In this article, I have discussed the origins of the Finnish Roma band Hortto Kaalo and their role in ‘popularizing ethno music’ in 1970s Finland. I have placed Hortto Kaalo in the context of a changing society and the development of popular music in Finland, as well as the Roma civil rights movement, folk music revival, and countercultural activities. In the short article, there has not been the opportunity to delve into these aspects in more detail. I hope these matters will be the subject of analysis by other researchers in the years to come.

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16 Feija Åkerlund’s interview 1985; Putkonen 2014; *Turkulainen* 14.3.2013.

While many aspects, especially the actively taken role in the Roma civil rights movement in Finland, might have seemed ‘quite a planned thing’ (as was stated by Feija Åkerlund), there appears to have been many more or less coincidences about all that happened simultaneously. After all, the actual reasons for the popularity of Roma music and Hortto Kaalo at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s in Finland may lie in the artists themselves: their talented professionalism and ability to react to their surroundings.

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## APPENDIX

**Appendix 1:** The Roma artists in the top ten of single and album sales in 1960–1970’s (Gronow etc. 2005, 110–111, 139–141)

Taisto Tammi	Tango merellä	single	July	1963
Taisto Tammi	Tango merellä	single	August	1963
Taisto Tammi	Tango merellä	single	September	1963
Taisto Tammi	Tango merellä	single	December	1963
Markus Allan	Liljankukka	single	February	1964
Anneli Sari	Liian nuori rakkauteen	single	June	1964
Anneli Sari	Liian nuori rakkauteen	single	July	1964
Taisto Ahlgren	Pettäjän tie	single	July	1972
Taisto Ahlgren	Pettäjän tie	single	August	1972
Taisto Ahlgren	Pettäjän tie	single	November	1972
Hortto Kaalo	Hortto Kaalo	LP	August	1972
Taisto Ahlgren	Pettäjän tie	single	January	1973
Taisto Ahlgren	Pettäjän tie	single	February	1973
Taisto Ahlgren	Pettäjän tie	single	March	1973
Hortto Kaalo	Hortto Kaalo	LP	February	1973