Indiana University of Pennsylvania

From the SelectedWorks of Carl Rahkonen

August, 2013

Wilho Saari: The Tale Behind the Talent

Carl Rahkonen, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/carl-rahkonen/15/
Wilho Saari Jr. was born into a family of kantele players on July 7, 1932 in Naselle, Washington, a community noted for its significant Finnish American population.

Saari is an abbreviation of the old family name, Leppäsaari, who trace their origins to the village of Halsua, in the Perho River Valley of Finland. This area of Finland is particularly noted for kantele playing. Wilho's grandfather Matti Leppäsaari (1867-1898) was the son of Anna Liisa Kalliokoski (1842-1891) who was the daughter of Kreeta Haapasalo (1813-1893), perhaps the most renowned kantele player ever in Finland. That makes Wilho Jr. a fifth-generation kantele player, directly related to some of the greatest kantele players of Finland.

Wilho Jr. grew up in a strong musical environment. His father would play the kantele almost every night after work. Wilho began studying piano at age 9 and became quite proficient, particularly for church services at their local Assemblies of God Church. He also learned to play trumpet, baritone horn and bass in high school.

After graduating from high school almost all the men in Naselle would start working in the lumber industry. Wilho said that he milked cows for two years and then at a church camp met a music group from the Glad Tidings Bible Institute of Santa Cruz, California and decided that he should go to college for one year to see what it was all about. He started there in September 1952 and later continued his education at the Northwest Bible College in Seattle, earning a bachelor's degree in sacred music in 1956.

That same year Wilho's future wife, Kaisa, who was born in Kuopio and lived in Jyväskylä, came to visit in Naselle for nine months to improve her spoken English. Her former nanny was part of the Wirkkala family.

She meet Wilho when he came home on vacation from college. In April 1957 Wilho, who was going to school in Seattle, decided to write a letter to that girl from Finland; that started an exchange of letters that led to their engagement in May, and marriage in June. Kaisa had to go back to Finland in July because she needed to come with a permanent visa. She was able to return in November 1957.

Wilho studied two more years at Seattle Pacific College to earn a second bachelor's degree and his teaching credentials in 1958. His first teaching job was in Brooklyn, Washington in a school of 90 students. Then he taught for six years in Seattle while his wife Kaisa attended university. She graduated with bachelor's and master's degrees in Spanish and became a teacher of Spanish, German and Finnish. They both taught for three years at a mission school in Liberia, after which they returned to Naselle, where Wilho taught for 23 years at the Naselle Youth Camp (a juvenile prison) until he retired in 1992.

He enjoyed teaching at the Youth Camp, since when the students learned their limitations they were "as good as gold."

Wilho Jr. did not start playing kantele until he was 50 years old! His father's kantele was there in his home, unplayed for 14 years after his father died. Kantele playing was "his father's thing."

As Wilho approached his 50th birthday in 1982, he began to think about trying to play the kantele. With a lifetime of hearing his father and other relatives play, he had good role models from which to develop his own style. His father had also picked up a kantele method book by Paul Salminen, showing how to play in concert style.

His father and other relatives all played in the traditional Perho River Valley style, with the shortest string closest to the player. Wilho decided instead to play with longest string closest, as was shown in the Salminen method. His sister, May Adair, started to play kantele a few years later and she
plays as their father did with the shortest string closest. Wilho can also play the large kantele with the shortest string closest, as he demonstrates in his concerts, and he has even composed some tunes to be played that way, but for the majority of his repertory he prefers the longest string closest.

With the longest string closest, it makes large chords easier to play with the left hand. It also changes the nature of runs and ornaments can be played, because these will generally be descending in pitch, rather than ascending.

Even though he plays with the longest string closest, his hand positions are the same as traditional Perho River Valley players. His fingers are perpendicular to the strings and he plucks with his fingertips producing a sound that is strong and bright. His overall sound is virtually identical to that of Perho River Valley kantele players.

As with all kantele players who have taught themselves to play, the finer aspects of Wilho's playing are unique. He plays melody with his right hand and accompaniment with his left hand. Part of Wilho's style can be traced back to his piano playing. He plays bass notes with his left thumb and chords with the other fingers of his left hand. He mentions that he can reach a full two octaves with his left hand alone. On the piano he can barely reach a tenth.

Unlike traditional Perho River Valley players, he uses the damping board of the kantele, he says, as often as a pianist would release the pedal. He also plays some tunes with the damping board down, giving what he calls a "plucking effect" which emphasizes the attack and shortens the decay of each note.

Wilho is a master of variation, seldom playing the same phrase the same way. He varies his chord patterns, arpeggios, rhythms and ornaments. In this way his playing comes alive and is always interesting and beautiful.

Wilho also began to play both the 5and the 10-string kanteles in the early 1990s. He received a 10-string kantele as a gift when he retired in 1992, built by his daughter's husband Greg Nelson, who also began teaching students at the Youth Camp to build 5-string kanteles in wood shop. Soon they held a 5-string kantele playing class at the Youth Camp, which the students enjoyed as much as playing guitar. As with the concert kantele, Wilho taught himself to play with a combination of studying existing playing methods, experimentation, and his own musical instincts. He plays the small kanteles with the shortest string closest and uses the plucking technique, rather than the chordal strumming technique, with traditional finger patterns.

Wilho has a very large repertory of tunes. He taught himself to play tunes on the kantele that he already knew from his rich musical environment, including church hymns, folk songs, and various popular and folk tunes from around the world. He knows many Finnish tunes, some of which can be traced back to his father and other family members.

When he performs, he tailors the pieces he plays to his audience. That way the audience can relate directly to his kantele playing. He gives many kantele performances every year, usually to smaller audiences at weddings, funerals, rest homes, local festivals, church services, and community events. He has also performed in large concerts with hundreds in attendance, such as at the annual Finn Fest USA and the National Folk Festival. The larger concerts typically end with the song, "Mun kanteleeni," composed by his great-great-grandmother Kreeta Haapasalo and sung by his wife Kaisa.

A strange thing happened when Wilho Saari began to play kantele. Not only did he become a master player of the instrument, but almost from the beginning he began composing pieces for the kantele. As of the end of 2012 this has amounted to more than 3,000 unique individual tunes.
In 2012 alone he composed 412 tunes, more than one every day. Between the start of this year and March 18, 2013, he composed an additional 104 tunes!

Wilho has placed all his tunes in chronological order into binders, by year and number. He gives titles to many of his tunes, which were inspired by people, places and events. He has composed tunes for weddings, for funerals, for his grandchildren, other relatives and friends, for anniversaries and vacations, historical events, political debates, even football games. Frequently the tune titles are both in Finnish and English and sometimes he makes puns with the titles in Finnish. For example his tune "Porti Puuroa" (Pot of porridge), is a pun on potpourri, and his tune "Linnun Lento" (Flight of the bird), he composed for the wedding of his cousin named "Birdie."

Most of Wilho's compositions are for 36-string kantele, but he has also composed for 5- and 10-string kantele. In the first six months after he received his 10string kantele, he had already composed 90 tunes for it! The vast majority of Wilho's compositions are short, many no more than 12 or 16 measures. But they are fully developed tunes, typically with an A and B phrase, each repeated. Unlike the traditional Perho River Valley repertory, few of Wilho's tunes could be considered dance tunes. His compositions are mostly in the style of songs, church music and folk music. Many of them have an overtly Finnish sound and others sound more American. As folk music, these tunes are universal.

Wilho has received significant honors as a tradition bearer of his Finnish heritage. These have included the Governor's Arts and Heritage Award from the State of Washington in 2005, the Scandinavian Heritage Award of the Niskanen Foundation in 2006, and he was one of only ten recipients in 2006 of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) National Heritage Fellowship, the highest honor for folk and traditional arts in the United States. The latest award that Wilho received was from the Finnish-American Historical Society of the West in 2011, called the "Sauna Bucket Award." In 2011, Wilho was recognized by the Finlandia Foundation as the "Performer of the Year." During his term as Performer of the Year he did 15 programs for Finnish American audiences in all parts of the United States.

Wilho has also been greatly involved in teaching kantele. His own daughter, Karen Nelson is a fine kantele player and his grandchildren have also taken up the instrument. He has taught at kantele workshops, and coached the Livakat kantele ensemble in Portland, Oregon since 1999. Wilho was one of the leaders of the largest kantele ensemble ever assembled in North America at the 2011 FinnFest in San Diego. His teaching and performing have been an inspiration to kantele players around the world, but his most lasting legacy will undoubtedly be with his compositions.

Editor's note: This article is based on a presentation the author gave at the Seventh International Baltic Psaltery Symposium in March 2013 in Viljandi, Estonia.

Word count: 1798
Copyright Finlandia University Aug 2013