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Happy 100th, Viola Turpeinen

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Abstract: On the first page of the diary, [John Rosendahl] called himself the "Fritz of the Banjo," though he was also "a red hot violinist... and famous comedian." He must have had extensive training and experience in music, since there are many short music manuscripts written out in pen and he mentions writing musical arrangements. For four weeks, he accompanied the Finnish-American performer Wäinö Ollila on the Vaudeville circuit. He met and teamed up with an accordionist named Mikkilä to play dozens of engagements in the summer of 1926. Several newspaper ads pasted into the diary read, "Mikkilä and Rosendahl ... Program of Finnish, Russian and American numbers." The engagements were generally "Iltama ja tanssi" or "Konserttija tanssi ilta" - in other words a formal concert program, followed by a dance. The concert programs contained an interesting mixture of classical, popular and folk music. Rosendahl had the ability to play violin pieces by Fritz Kreisler and Jules Massenet, often performed on the same program with Finnish-American favorites and popular music of the time. This was always followed by a dance, meaning he had a mastery of dance music repertory as well. A diary entry of August 17, [1926] says, "We left Duluth for a four weeks trip to Michigan." The entry of Aug. 26, [1926] says, "Met new playing pal, [Viola Turpeinen] 50-50 bases." This is apparently the date when John and Viola first met. He was 35 and she still just 16 years old. For the remainder of that year John and Viola played together more than five nights a week in various Finn Halls all over the Upper Peninsula and Northern Minnesota. Viola became a sensation, with her youthful beauty and virtuosic accordion technique. They made good money for the time, playing numerous engagements for ever-larger audiences.

Soon another young Finnish-American accordionist joined the "Turpeinen Orchestra." Like Viola, Sylvia Polso was born in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan - in 1911 to an iron mining family. She was a great technical player who had also toured the Finn Hall circuit of the Upper Midwest. In New York, she was another protégé of Retro Deiro. The "Viola, Sylvia and John" trio, also billed as "Viola Turpeinen &Co." toured as before and continued making recordings.

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Full text: On November 15, 2009, Viola Turpeinen would have been 100 years old. She was perhaps the most well-known Finnish-American musician of all time. There were many such entertainers in the early 20th century, such as J. Alfred Tanner, Arthur Kylander and Hiski Salomaa, but Viola was one of the first to be born in America. She had a great impact from the 1920s to the 1950s, both in her many performances at Finn Halls throughout the United States, as well as from her compositions and sound recordings.

More than 50 years after her death, Viola's legacy still lives on strongly in Finnish-American music. How much do we know about Viola Turpeinen? Unfortunately, an account of her life and music does not appear in any of the major music encyclopedias or dictionaries. Scholarly articles have been written by folklorist James Leary, and Finnish researcher Toivo Tamminen. She is mentioned in the book "A Passion for Polka" by historian Victor Greene. There have also been important newspaper articles by family friend Vienna Laine, and band music scholar Paul Niemisto. Perhaps the best biography was published as liner notes to a four-CD collection of her recorded works.

Viola Turpeinen's husband, William Syrjälä or Syralia (he used both spellings), died on April 4, 1993 in Florida, where he and Viola had lived since 1952. Many of the family papers have made their way into two separate archival collections, one at the University of Minnesota Immigration History Research Center, and the other at the Finnish American Heritage Center Archives at Finlandia University in Hancock, Michigan. I had the good fortune this past year to visit and study both collections. They provide many insights into Viola Turpeinen and
the Finnish-American musicians who performed with her.

One of the finest treasures at the Finnish American Heritage Center was a scrapbook diary of John Rosendahl, who was Viola's first professional performing partner. This diary dates from April 22, 1926 to Oct. 12, 1927, documenting the beginning of Viola Turpeinen's professional career.

On the first page of the diary, Rosendahl called himself the "Fritz of the Banjo," though he was also "a red hot violinist... and famous comedian." He must have had extensive training and experience in music, since there are many short music manuscripts written out in pen and he mentions writing musical arrangements. For four weeks, he accompanied the Finnish-American performer Wäinö Ollila on the Vaudeville circuit. He met and teamed up with an accordionist named Mikkilä to play dozens of engagements in the summer of 1926. Several newspaper ads pasted into the diary read, "Mikkilä and Rosendahl ... Program of Finnish, Russian and American numbers." The engagements were generally "Ilta ja tanssi" or "Konsertti jaa tanssi ilta" - in other words a formal concert program, followed by a dance. The concert programs contained an interesting mixture of classical, popular and folk music. Rosendahl had the ability to play violin pieces by Fritz Kreisler and Jules Massenet, often performed on the same program with Finnish-American favorites and popular music of the time. This was always followed by a dance, meaning he had a mastery of dance music repertory as well.

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By 1927 they were living in New York City (Harlem) and were hired as the regular band for the 5th Ave. Finn Hall, where they played at least three nights a week. They played many other engagements up and down the East Coast and always an annual tour of the Upper Midwest. According to a newspaper ad, Viola also played one night a week in Atlantic City, proving that she played for a wider, more general audience. By January 1928, she and John were making recordings on the Victor label.

A newspaper clipping from July 12, 1928 with the title, "Gifted Artist to Give Concert Wednesday" stated that Viola studied with Lee Piersantis of the Accordion Institute in Chicago and also with Retro Deiro in New York. Deiro was one of the best known accordionists of the time. He published literally hundreds of sheet music books and methods, and taught so many students that he formed his own accordion orchestra. He showcased his best students, so Viola became a featured star in some of Deiro's concerts.

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John Rosendahl died on January 18, 1932 as the result of an accident. Sylvia Polso started playing on her own for a more "American" audience under the stage name "Sylvia Reed."

Viola Turpeinen would go on with a new partner, both personally and professionally, William Syrjälä.

Bill Syrjälä was born on March 31, 1898 in Vesivehmaa, Asikkala (near Lahti) Finland. His family emigrated to Cloquet, Minnesota in 1904, where Bill grew up. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen on February 13, 1924 and studied music at Valparaiso University in Indiana. Bill was a very versatile musician who played violin, trumpet (cornet) and drums as well. He returned to Cloquet, where he taught music, played in the city band, and reportedly heard Viola Turpeinen play for the first time. He might have been related to the most popular Finnish musician of that era, Georg Malmstén, since his mother's name was Olga Malmstén.

By the early 1930s, Syrjälä was a professional musician in New York. He was a member of the musician's union
local 802 and played on recording sessions with Hiski Salomaa. He had a real gift for arranging and composing music, copyrighting his earliest pieces during this time.

Bill and Viola were married in March 6, 1933 and on June 9 a full-page newspaper congratulation appeared, which was signed by nearly 200 people. As both had done for years, they played regularly at the 5th Ave. Hall and toured as the "Viola Turpeinen Syrjälä Orchestra." Viola played accordion and Bill played violin, trumpet or drums as needed. They both sang, as can be heard on some of the recordings they made. From the music in the archival collections we discover that they performed a surprisingly wide variety of music, certainly Finnish and Finnish-American tunes, but also classical music, standard American popular tunes, Scandinavian tunes, and other ethnic American tunes. They performed mostly dance genres: polkas, schottisches (jenkkas), waltzes, foxtrots (humppas) and tangos, but also concert pieces and songs.

In 1952 Viola and Bill moved to Lake Worth, Florida and lived in the "house that polkas built." They continued to perform music at the local Kenttä Hall and kept in correspondence with fans around the country, for example by sending out "Turpeinen Orchestra" Christmas cards each year. Bill also worked in real estate.

Viola became ill from cancer and passed away on December 26, 1958 at the age of 49, ending a remarkable career. Bill continued to be active in music, performing frequently in ensembles with other musicians, playing in the Palm Beach Jr. College Orchestra, and organizing an annual concert for the Finnish Workers Education Club. The F.W.E. concerts featured a mixture of classical, folk and popular music performed by soloists, choir, and orchestra. As had been the pattern for decades, the conceit was always followed by a dance.

After Viola's passing, Bill continued to compose lots of music. I counted more than 80 original manuscript compositions in the archival collections, mostly just lead sheets, but many with more developed arrangements. Some have proper titles like "Irene," "Tango from Durango" and "Golden Years, Golden Days," but many just have the date he composed that piece. His compositions may yet be his greatest legacy.

When Viola died, she was cremated and Bill kept her ashes in the original unopened box for nearly 35 years. After he died in 1993 they were laid to rest together in Shell Lake, Wisconsin. The grave maker shows Viola's name, both spellings of Bill's last name, as well as images of an accordion and violin.

Though we tend to think of Viola Turpeinen and those who performed with her as Finnish-American folk musicians from the Upper Midwest, the archival evidence shows that they were highly trained professionals who could read and write music well. They were active members of the musician's union capable of playing a wide variety of music in a multitude of venues and earning their livelihoods from music. Their legacy lives on in much of the Finnish-American music we play today.

Editor's note: Carl Rahkonen is a music librarian and professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. For this article, he referenced writings by James P. Leary, Toivo Tamminen, Victor Greene, Vienna Laine and Paul Niemistö.

Sidebar

In the mid 1990s, a group of fans sought to have Viola Turpeinen commemorated on a postage stamp. Their request was denied by the USPS. - Image courtesy Paul Niemistö

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