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# The Baltic Psalteries: Bibliographical Problems and Desiderata Revisited

Carl Rahkonen, *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*



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Carl Rahkonen

## The Baltic Psalteries: Bibliographical Problems and Desiderata Revisited

Back in the late 1960s, I fell in love with the sound of Finnish kantele, from a recording that my mother owned. I went to the local university library to find out something about that instrument, its history, music and how it was played. Do you know what I found? Very little. There was scarcely a listing in any of the music dictionaries and there were no encyclopedia entries. A search of the *Music Index* was equally unfruitful. The most valuable thing I found was a one-paragraph description in the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF). Even now, forty years later as a working music librarian, I can safely testify that bibliographically speaking the Baltic psalteries are quite obscure.

One person who took the challenge of Baltic psalterie bibliography was Dr. Stephen Reynolds, formerly at the University of Oregon. In a personal letter to me from August 18, 1983 he wrote:

My own interest began some years ago. I thought it curious that essentially the same instrument had acquired such a mystique among Finns, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, becoming a symbol of the national lyrical genius and even national identity. (–) Also I was curious about the diffusion of the instrument. But everyone I asked thought that there was simply no literature on the topic, which I took as a challenge.

In 1973 at the Second Conference on Baltic Studies in Scandinavia, Professor Reynolds, presented a paper entitled *The Baltic Psalterie: Bibliographical Problems and Desiderata*. With great tenacity, Reynolds was able to find and obtain dozens of scholarly publications on the Baltic psalteries, from several countries and in a number of different languages. In his paper, Reynolds analyzed virtually all the available research on the Baltic psalteries up to that time. These publications spanned nearly a century, and showed that the scholars worked in relative isolation; isolated by geography, language, and lack of bibliographical control. These authors were generally unaware of the work of the others. An additional problem was the deep symbolic significance of the Baltic psalteries to each of the nationalities where it is found, which tended to skew the research findings. This resulted in many competing, and sometimes conflicting theories, particularly on the age, origins, history and diffusion of the Baltic psalteries. Reynolds ended his paper with a list of desiderata, which included making a complete annotated bibliography, publishing an anthology of the most important studies, preferably in English or German translation, and holding an international congress on the Baltic psalteries.

The world has changed significantly since 1973. Now research can be instantaneously available from any location on earth through the World Wide Web. E-mail communication between scholars is just as instantaneous, leading to collaboration. For the first time in history, we have the opportunity to study such difficult and complex questions as the origins and comparative development of the instrument in all the countries where it is found. Yet there are challenges that remain, and few of Reynolds's desiderata have been met.

One that *has* been met is to have an international conference on the Baltic psalteries. In fact there have been a series of international conferences held at Tampere (1990), Vilnius (1994), Kaustinen (1997), Riga (2000) and Toronto (2004). In 2008 the Sixth Baltic Psaltery Conference returned to Kaustinen. I remember well the first conference in Tampere in 1990, which took place the *very same week* that Estonia again became an independent nation. We were all giddy.

Since 1973 there has been a large amount of research conducted by scholars within the Baltic countries, Russia, and North America. I only have time here to mention some of the more active scholars working on the Baltic psalteries and summarize some of their recent research.

### **The researchers of kantele, kannel, kankles, kokle and gusli**

Finnish research on the kantele began in earnest in the early decades of the twentieth century with Armas Otto Väisänen, who may be considered Finland's first ethnomusicologist. It continued with

Väisänen's pupil, Erkki Ala-Könni, who was one of the greatest collectors of music related folklore in the world. In the 1970s, the mantle was passed to a new generation of scholars, beginning with Timo Leisiö.

Leisiö is an expert on folk music instruments, writing a 613-page doctoral dissertation on the ancient aerophones of the Finns. He did not ignore the kantele, publishing several important articles in the 1970s. He wrote the first encyclopedia article on the kantele appearing in the *Otavan iso musiikkietosanakirja*. His more recent work has examined the kantele in connection with other ancient string instruments, particularly the lyre. A number of instruments found in archeological excavations in the 1960s in Pskov and Novgorod appeared to have characteristics of both lyres and Baltic psalteries. This archeological evidence has been the basis of a scholarly reappraisal of the early history of the Baltic psalteries in a number of recent studies, as we shall see.

Heikki Laitinen, former director the Folk Music Institute at Kaustinen, and Professor of Finnish Folk Music at Sibelius Academy published numerous articles, mostly in the journal *Kansanmusiikki* [Folkmusic], on various kantele playing styles. My own doctoral dissertation came from research conducted in the early 1980s, and examined the kantele as a myth, a symbol, and a musical instrument, including how it was built and played. Hannu Saha is one of the most outstanding players of the kantele in its oldest and traditional styles. With Laitinen he authored a playing method for the 5-string kantele, and later he wrote a more substantial study on the 10-string kantele. Saha was the first Finn to defend a doctoral dissertation on a

kantele topic in 1996, centered around the traditional playing found in the Perho River Valley region. Annikki Smolander-Hauvonen's dissertation from 1998 looked at Paul Salminen's development of the concert kantele and its playing in the first half of the twentieth century. Musical instrument studies of Rauno Nieminen and Jyrkki Pölkki have also been significant. The *Kanteleliitto*, a society dedicated to the promotion of the Finnish kantele was founded in 1978 and publishes the quarterly journal *Kantele* that has included many important articles.

The most prominent researcher on the Estonian kannel has been Igor Tõnurist. He wrote a thesis in 1969 *On the Problem of the Origin of the Gusli and Kantele*. Tõnurist, himself an expert kannel player, has published a number of important studies. Perhaps the most important of which was an article that compared the kannel between the Vepsian and Setu regions. He showed how the structural differences between these kannels, whether or not they have a *laba*, or blade, was dependent on its playing style. A more recent study of his examined the newer forms of the kannel in Estonia and neighboring countries. A significant article with the Estonian kannel at its center was written by the Estonian-American Ain Haas and published in the *Journal of Baltic Studies*. Haas analyzed the previous research from many sources and showed the connection between the early Baltic psalteries and ancient lyres as an interactive and flexible process of invention.

The Latvian kokle has figured prominently in several of the books of Iriša Priedite, a researcher at the Latvian Ethnographic Museum as an expert on traditional musical instruments. In recent years the most active kokle researcher has been Valdis

Muktupavels. Like Saha and Tõnurist, Muktupavels is an proficient player of the kokle. His doctoral dissertation, while not specifically on the kokle, is very important since he analyses all the previous Latvian scholarly literature, producing a fine historiography. He has published a number of important articles, for example on kokle playing in the *Journal of Baltic Studies*, and on history of Latvian musical instruments. He has these and many other articles available on his personal website, making them widely and easily available.

The most active researcher on the Lithuanian kankles has been Romuldas Apanavicius. An expert on the ancient musical instruments the Balts, the topic of his doctoral dissertation, he has published dozens of studies in a wide number of scholarly venues, in Lithuanian, Russian, and English. This included co-authoring a book on ancient kankles playing styles. He hosted the 1994 Baltic psaltery conference and edited a book of summaries of the papers from that meeting. Perhaps his most significant contribution to kankles research has been his multi-page website on the topic. Unfortunately the site has been down for at least the past three years.

The Finnish scholar Kari Dahlblom has been the leading researcher on the Karelian kannel. He published a playing method for the chromatic version of the Karelian kannel, and wrote a book analyzing all the available obscure research studies published in Russian. He had a direct connection with the best Karelian kannel players, such as Maxsim Gavrillov and Erik Rautio. Other Karelian scholars involved in Baltic psaltery research have included Victor Gudkov and Irina Semikova. The state-sponsored kannel ensemble still exists, though

greatly reduced in numbers of players. The Petrozavodsk Conservatory sponsors a number of smaller ensembles. A professional popular-folk group called *Myllärit* [The Millers] features the five-string kannel and they have toured extensively in North America.

Only one form of the Russian gusli is directly related to the Baltic psalteries, that is the wing-shaped version, or *gusli krilovidnie*. The modern Russian research begins with the work of Konstantin Vertkov, famous for his Atlas of Musical Instruments from the Soviet Union. Vertkov published a significant article describing the differences in the various types of Russian gusli. Another active scholar in this area has been Vladimir Povetkin, who has studied the early forms of the gusli, taking into consideration the archeological findings from Novgorod. Anatolij Mehnetschov, an ethnographic filmmaker from St. Peterburg, filmed dozens of living *gusli krilovidnie* players from the Novgorod region in the 1960s and 70s, showing their distinctive playing styles. His films are virtually unknown in the West. Nikolai Zhoukov and Vladimir Maraev, two scholars associated with the Russian Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg, have done research on the oldest forms of the gusli by actually building these types of instruments without power tools. They have had a website up on their work for about ten years. Perhaps the finest scholar on the gusli outside of Russia is the previously mentioned Kari Dahlblom. He has a mastery of the Russian scholarly literature and has personally studied museum examples.

The North American versions of the Baltic psalteries have also received some scholarly attention. Joyce Hakala, a folk musician and

researcher from Minneapolis, published a book on the kantele players of North America titled *Memento of Finland*. It is perhaps the most extensive of any study available on the kantele. Christina Jaremko completed a master's thesis at UCLA on the Latvian kokle and Lithuanian kankles in the United States. To find this thesis, you need to look under her married name at the time, Niles. The Estonian-American research engineer Andres Peekna has done extensive research on the building and acoustics of small Estonian-American kannels. Ain Haas and I wrote the Estonian American chapter in the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, which has the North American kannel tradition at its core. Haas and Peekna are both fine builders and players of the small carved Estonian kannels.

### Problems and solutions

It took years for the Baltic psalteries to make their way to general music reference works. The first significant encyclopedia articles in English on the kantele and gusli appeared in the 1980 edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, written by the renowned Swedish musicologist Ernst Emsheimer. These articles were the place where I began my own research, and I had the great honor of completely revising them for the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the *New Grove*, published in 2001. An unpublished paper by retired Latvian-American engineer Konstantins Dravnieks, is one of the best general studies on the Baltic psalteries. His mechanical drawings and illustrations of these instruments are particularly excellent, and have been reproduced in a number of other publications. The previously mentioned article by Ain Haas, though starting with the Estonian

kannel, is the finest and most widely available articles to date on the early history of the Baltic psalteries.

Perhaps the best general comparison of the Baltic psalteries was written by the Russian scholar Ilya Tëmkin, and published in the *Galpin Society Journal*. Tëmkin, an evolutionary biologist and expert gusli player, used a computer program that looks for similar characteristics in biological organisms to compare the structures of the oldest forms of various Baltic psalteries. The Finnish kanteles came out at one end of the spectrum, sharing the most characteristics with some Karelian and Estonian models. The Latvian and Lithuanian varieties were more toward the other end of the spectrum.

Taken as a whole, recent Baltic psaltery research shows a continuing interest in the early history and dissemination of the instrument, spurred on especially by the archeological findings. There have been some fine studies on the modernized versions of the instruments, though a lot more needs to be done in this area, especially comparative studies showing the vastly different ways the instrument developed in various regions. Playing styles have also received some attention, with some fine analytical studies and numerous playing methods.

In spite of the great advances in Baltic psaltery research over the past 35 years, there are still some significant challenges. Much of this research is still very hard to obtain. Some of it remains unpublished, for example significant works by Stephen Reynolds, Konstantins Dravnieks, and Kari Dahlblom. Even when research is published, it may be difficult to obtain, being found only in a handful of libraries in the countries where it was

published. These works have been shared largely through personal contacts, such as at the international Baltic psaltery conferences or from scholars who collect this research such as Stephen Reynolds.

There is a continuing problem with languages. Very few scholars have mastery of *all* the languages of Baltic psaltery research, typically Finnish, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and English. Even the best language scholar I ever knew, Felix Oinas, didn't read *all* these languages. I fully understand and deeply support the need to build research literature in local languages. At the same time, it is equally important to have at least summaries of this research available in the current *lingua franca*, to have maximum value internationally.

The Internet offers only a partial solution to these bibliographical problems. Certainly it has brought the world closer together. In preparation for this paper, I wrote e-mails to many of the authors of these studies, and within 24 hours received replies from *all* of them with the information I requested. The World Wide Web is a marvelous tool for making research available anywhere in the world, but it has only what the scholars themselves have put there. One outstanding example is Valdis Muktupavels, who has made most of his research available on his personal website. The worst problem of the World Wide Web is that it is *ephemeral*, it changes from day to day, indeed from hour to hour. A significant web site, such as the kankles site of Romualdis Apanavicius, may simply disappear. I maintain a personal *kantele* website, in part because I got occasional e-mail requests for my doctoral dissertation, mostly from Finland. Recently my university switched over to a new

World Wide Web server, which threatened years of work building these web pages. If I leave the university or die, my web site would last less than a month. The most permanent preservation medium still remains *published* materials that are distributed to the largest number of libraries possible.

With these things in mind, I end by returning to Reynolds's list of desiderata. I, like Reynolds, believe that there should be a bibliography of Baltic psalter research. This is still necessary, even in the digital age, because there needs to be a record of those studies in all languages that are little known or unpublished, that don't show up in the standard database indexes or the World Wide Web, and may only be known to a handful of other researchers. With the modest beginning I have made, I commit to maintain such a bibliography on my kantele site, hoping that someday it might be published and find a more permanent form. Finally there should be an anthology published of the most important studies, preferably with English summaries or translations. If this is published as a book through an academic press, which typically have modest press runs of about 500 copies, it will find its way to enough libraries that these scholarly studies will be available and preserved for future researchers. Not coincidentally, these are the same desiderata outlined by Steven Reynolds 35 years ago. I hope that in our time they can be fulfilled.

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