

# The People, its Will and its Best

## *The Music Policy of the Finnish Broadcasting Company in the 1950's<sup>1</sup>*

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The music supply of the Finnish Broadcasting Company, Yleisradio (henceforth mostly referred to as the YLE, although that abbreviation was not used in the 1950's), went through a profound change in the early 1960's. Pressures from the surrounding reality, together with expanding technical opportunities, jointly conducted the development to an essential increase of light music. On the symbolic level it signified the defeat of "symphony" to "jazz", which words had become name tags for "serious" and "light" music. In concrete fact there was only a relative change in music supply: Classical music did not decrease but increased – but the supply of light music increased more.

The music supply of the YLE was like the front soldier's food portion in Väinö Linna's novel *The Unknown Soldier*: The essential was not that somebody could prove by figures on paper that theoretically you could not be hungry/want more entertainment, if the soldier's stomach/the listener's ears told that there was miserably little of the yearned delicacy.

In the Finnish Broadcasting Company, as in many other radio companies of the same sort, there was a long battle between the propriety conventions of the cultured middle class or elite – and the general public's (or perhaps one could say the crowd's) improper tendency to like "trash".

"Knowledgeable gentlemen were amazingly well acquainted with the radio's light programmes", the YLE programme meeting wondered in 1951.<sup>2</sup> It was not for the cultured and educated class to be familiar with the entertainment favoured by the man of the street.

It was most often the YLE's music policy that made citizens grab their pens or typewriters. If their message took a more colourful shape, the letter often was signed by "one for many" or the like. More moderate contentions usually bore the author's signature or at least his or her radio licence number. The radio send too much "symphony" and too little "popular" music, especially Finnish language hit songs, was the usual complaint.

Programme Director Jussi Koskiluoma, who cherished public service radio's traditional educational spirit, in Autumn 1949 replied to two men from Pori that there actually was 20-30 minutes of "popular dance music programme" every Saturday before the evening news, and that as often as every single week there was a quarter of an hour of swing music. But "the question of domestic hit songs is a difficult one, as that kind of music is rather inferior and cheap. We are trying to keep that sort of music in our programmes and choose the best of it." One of the methods for searching quality was to arrange a competition between ten "best"

hit writers and let the listeners vote the winner.<sup>3</sup>

The programme meeting marvelled at the result and deeply shocked uttered its contempt for popular culture: "OOH YES! LISTEN TO THAT! THAAAT'S THE WAY! OH DEAR!" A miserable presentation, the writer and Chief of Radio Theatre condemned. Were they really compositions made by ten different persons, no single personal nuance in any of them, the Chief Engineer analyzed. You do not understand the mentality of the Finnish people, we have not received one single letter to criticize the programme, the Chief of Music Section replied.<sup>4</sup> What can you do when people don't show good judgement, was left between the lines.

The entertainment editor Antero Alpolo estimated Programme Director Koskiluoma to be a personality in the arts, for whom entertainment meant nothing and who was most entertained by the Radio Symphony Orchestra.<sup>5</sup> The letter writing public, however, often was of the opinion that in the programmes of the Finnish Broadcasting Company one should sing Finnish hit songs and folk tunes and not too much rhythm music in foreign languages.

"There is no need whatsoever for horrible modern jazz and other noise, it is atonal, drum beating of madmen", a listener voiced his opinion. "When one puts the radio on, what is one obliged to hear – knocking, whooping, kicking, knocking, sort of negro whining without an end", a mother complained, being concerned for the children's ear for music. "No ear splitting negro music and nothing too difficult, but mediocre", a "many ordinary listeners" wrote.<sup>6</sup> "Negro jazz" and the blonde Nordic accordion player were an impossible combination to even think of outside the circle

of musicians. But only a few years later the mop topped youth musician inherited the role of the yelling screamer.

For Jussi Koskiluoma the domestic hit songs were miserable, and foreign non-classical music alien. As the radio in Winter 1951 broadcast *The Nordic Radio Ball*, the Programme Director heard "the same modern howling in all countries". He wanted to know what the quality was in Finland compared to the other Nordic countries. The Chief of Music Section was obliged to refer to secondary sources: "They say" that it was lower. Thank God, he continued, because he disliked the "American" style that had become popular in Sweden. Later in Autumn Koskiluoma happened to hear "horrible jazz" in a play for the youth. They liked it, the editor objected. Further Koskiluoma was horror stricken when listening to *A Summer Bunch of Tunes* on a Sunday morning: "They were playing records like the ones in the Lumberjack Radio. A policy to play light music is all right, but there is a limit."<sup>7</sup>

After a sports quiz for the youth in 1951 Koskiluoma was astonished once more: "It seemed a bit strange that the questions were about American jazz. Do they recognize such things?" The Swedish language colleague confirmed that they did know the music, as well as he did the time Koskiluoma failed to understand the name of the jazz programme *Disc Jockey Jump*. Those who listen, understand, the Swedish language Programme Director Ragnar Ölander explained.<sup>8</sup>

If we only had just once a week an hour of hit songs and they would not all the time play foreign art music, a school boy suggested. Those who "in their elegance cannot listen to hit songs, may then turn off their receivers and sink into their self-satis-

faction”, he formulated a not so uncommon impression of those who listened to classical music.<sup>9</sup>

Occasionally even friends of classical music protested. Changes in the programme schedule in Autumn 1949 provoked a composer and music journalist to criticize the YLE in a newspaper, and Koskiluoma rushed to emphasize how “it is our unhappy lot here in the radio to seek a kind of a median strip between different wishes”. To a Swedish speaking Baroness he offered a detailed explanation of the reasons that prevented the radio from broadcasting symphony concerts via all stations in the best listening hours. And to his friend the Bishop of Tampere Diocese, who had indicated a wish for more “elevating” music in the evening broadcast, Koskiluoma revealed in 1955 that “we already have so much serious music in our programme that we are close to a listeners’ rebellion”.<sup>10</sup>

Art music had to be protected against these rebels and at the same time repel their demands that the radio should play “bad” music, that is domestic hit songs.

A lady from Karkkila received a reply from the Programme Director...

... that decent Finnish records simply do not exist. The Radio’s record archives has every single recording of Finnish music. However, we do not want to play the worst material, as it ruins our listeners’ musical taste. Of this material we say that by quality it is “in the yard of the shoemaker’s daughter”, according to the known hit song of this sort.<sup>11</sup>

A man from Savukoski was instructed by Koskiluoma:

What comes to – as you think – playing too much symphonies, one must note that many listeners stick a symphony label on all music that is new and sounds unfamiliar. And generally the very word

symphony seems to upset some. Let us notice, however, that symphonic music contains much that has acquired popularity not different from that of hit songs.<sup>12</sup>

The Programme Guide interviewed a carpenter from Ylistaro who had an opinion of his own:

It is said that one learns to understand symphonies if one stubbornly listens to them for ten years. Maybe I have not had enough guts as I have not in twenty years learned to digest that kind of music.<sup>13</sup>

The remark on “symphony” being a general label for classical music was correct. In the same manner “jazz” had become a rather wide general concept for such outlandish rhythm music that the user of the label neither understood nor accepted.

The YLE Record Department had the whole Finnish recording stock, Koskiluoma emphasized. In 1949 the YLE had about 7000 records, while in Sweden the Radiotjänst already owned 60 000. In 1955 the number of records at the YLE had grown up to 14 000. The Chief of the Department remarked in an interview that new records were purchased as far as there were means and to the extent the foreign currency regulation permitted. He said that the records were used with consideration and that the radio had been able to favour high class music in the request programmes.<sup>14</sup>

Defending the YLE against a verbal attack of a listener, Koskiluoma said that they could not use all Finnish records because even light music had to fulfill certain “reasonable” quality demands. He let count how many times certain good enough hit songs had been played on the radio in 1954. The result was that such popular artists as Tapio Rautavaara, Eero Väre, Erkki Junkkarinen, The Skipper Quartet, Olavi Virta and Henry Theel had had 34-54 runs. In other words, a performance by Henry

Theel had been heard on the radio approximately once a week and one by Erkki Junkkarinen in two weeks out of three. The Programme Director felt that this was quite a lot.<sup>15</sup> The listener may have disagreed.

In the first half of the 1950's the records purchased by the YLE were chosen by a committee which primarily consisted of representants of the Record Department and the Music Department and in which the opinion of the serious music people weighed most. According to the entertainment editor Antero Alpolo who himself used light music in his programmes, it was the Chief of Music Department that usually was the first to make a statement on the record played, and the others accompanied. In the late fifties Alpolo was a permanent member of the committee, representing the entertainment, and even experts from outside the YLE were accepted. Records were given one to ten points, and they had to get a certain score in order to be purchased. The score also was decisive as to in which context the record could be played. With low points it could be played only as a request, not by editorial initiative. It was due to the dominance of art music in the committee that minimal points were given to a number of hit records that in retrospect were of importance. This situation was changed only in the era of the Melody Radio from 1963 on.<sup>16</sup>

The programme *Saturday's Requests* (which is still running) was a miniature model of the YLE's music policy. The programme started with lighter classical music from *Für Elise* to *The Moonlight Sonata* and from *The Swan Lake* to *The Pearlfishers*. Then the music changed into smooth entertainment from Strauss' waltzes to Mantovani's Strings. But only the last 10-15 minutes of the request hour made even the youth to move to the receiver, because that was one of the week's few op-

portunities to hear some of the hit favourites of the day.

The core of the transition was revealed by the correspondence between Programme Director Koskiluoma and a vice notary and a more mature restaurant musician from Turku in the early 1960's.<sup>17</sup> The vice notary had become agitated by some music that had been played at noon in the light current affairs programme *What One Should Know Today* (later *The Tray of the Day*):

Is it really so that such garbage and inferior surrogate music must be promoted by the enormous advertising power of the radio, and thus lower the level of our more simple population's musical taste, which, already as it is, has been spoiled by hit songs and noisy rock to the extent that the said lower people nomore recognises as music nothing else but hit songs and shaky dancing, jazz included, especially in the form that one most often must hear it on the radio – improvising in rock and roll rhythm.

Is the musical culture of our people and our youth elevated by presentations of domestic "female whiners" or by praising Louis Armstrong who "bellows like a swine in a slaughterhouse", the vice notary asked. He admitted that the YLE "was obliged also to be an entertainment factory", but required that "the quality of entertainment programmes does not harm or endanger the radio's aspirations to reach its cultural purposes".

Koskiluoma defended the entertainment editors who "were obliged" to deal with light programmes and light music. "But that does not happen without control, warnings in advance and reproaches afterwards", he pointed out. Even dubious music had its fans and they could not be totally neglected.

Partly because of his son's jazz hobby Koskiluoma had in ten years time started to

accept genres of music in a bit broader scale. He allowed jazz to be included in the musical basic education by referring to negro spirituals that he knew to be the roots of Armstrong's music – and Caribbean folk music made familiar by Harry Belafonte. He had also been influenced by the son's piano teacher's advice to play and listen to Bach in order to understand jazz.

The Programme Director had the most severe troubles with Finnish hit lyrics – foreign ones were more tolerable to him, probably because their similar banality did not sound so bad as the language was alien. Anyway, Koskiluoma was confident that by being selective with domestic hits the YLE raised their standard: "the manufacturers know that any trash does not get through".

In the Programme Director's mind the YLE still had the teacher's role, one which legitimized even the entertaining material – and the whole YLE in the end:

Maybe the YLE after all can be regarded as a promotor of musical culture. By broadcasting light music with some selectivity the radio can make the youth listen to even other kind of music and make progress. If the radio totally turns its back to the musical taste of the crowd, the crowd may turn its back to the radio and the radio might lose its chances to spread better music.

If Koskiluoma's concessions were a part of the Teacher-YLE's defence strategy in a changing environment, his interlocutor finally yielded not to objectivise his own ways and means of thinking and admitted that there were differences between generations:

Maybe at my age, as a long time admirer of beautiful and romantic music, I cannot change my opinions to fit the modern trends, and that very thing is a clear piece

of evidence on the power that influences have upon us. Therefore, is there any reason to wonder why the modern youth has fallen for jazz. They are living the age of jazz in the current of mass opinion.

The battle for the YLE's music policy was basically a battle between different cultural domains. It was a battle about the criteria and right to define the good and the acceptable. The YLE was naturally only one of the fronts, but as an evening pastime it was in close contact with the cinema (for example popular Finnish "bush comedies") and entertainments and amusements and dances in Youth Society Houses and Labour Halls. Mutatis mutandis the same battle went on in the Arts sections of newspapers<sup>18</sup>.

When in the film *Hei rillumarei* (the manuscript of which was by Reino Helismaa, one of the figureheads of Finnish "trash culture") the stage and film comedian and musician Esa Pakarinen was dressed in tailcoat and made to attend a concert in the "conserve eatery" to mock "culture", it was the YLE that was mocked as well, because even the radio was an institution where the more conscious vanguard believed that it knew "the people's" well better than "the people" itself.

In Summer 1958 the pirate station Radio Mercur went on the air in Öresund Straits that separates the Danish Zealand from southern Sweden, sending to a potential audience of more than two million listeners. In Spring 1961 another pirate, Radio Nord, laid anchor in the Baltic Sea just outside Swedish territorial waters as close to Stockholm as possible. Its signal could be caught also in western and southern Finland.

The maintenance of the pirate ships from the continent was prevented by new legislation, and the stations had to be closed down. But the broadcasting companies of Sweden and Finland got a remain-

der of things not being as they used to be: With their light music and new touch on programming the pirate stations had been liked by the listeners. In Sweden the monopoly radio filled its daytime pauses with light music and entertainment and later on set up a third channel, P3.

The actions of the Swedish Radio were observed at the YLE. The YLE Chief Engineer Paavo Arni visited Stockholm in Spring 1961 and reported that Radio Nord had a good touch and that the public broadcasting companies had made severe errors. The pirate came close to people, it had found "a type of reporter and announcer that does not sound like making a speech to an audience in the Fair Ground but talking to a single person or a small family". Arni deliberated upon the question of the Scandinavian broadcasting model being potentially undemocratic: "The audience is stuffed with ready made programmes, and no choice is left." On the one hand the programme makers might think that a light parallel programme would ruin "the cultural efforts" by tempting the audience to leave the "nobler" programmes. Arni himself did not believe that "a light programme of our own would be the very evil to lead us from all good and educational".<sup>19</sup>

Scrutinies were made on the financing of extended programming, with advertising as a seriously considered alternative. At one phase discussions took place between the YLE and its commercial tenant, Mainos-TV, on the possibility that the latter would take care of programme slots financed by advertising also in the radio the same way it already did in television.

For different reasons, the most important of which probably is connected with the fates of the State Broadcasting Committee and the proposal for a new Broadcasting Act in a situation when the Parliament was

dissolved, plans of commercial radio broadcasts had to be pushed aside. But in May 2nd, 1963 at six o'clock in the morning the listeners could witness the result of what was left of the plans for a commercial radio channel: the Melody Radio – without advertisements. It filled the former daytime pauses with light music and easy talk; now the radio programme was started at six o'clock in the morning and closed at midnight. With the launch of the Melody radio, the 1950's music policy of the Finnish Broadcasting Company came to an end.

In Sweden it has been suggested that as the radio started its parallel channel in 1955, the Melody Radio put an end in that country to the idealistic/paternalistic broadcasting ideology that was the basis for the dominant All-European public service idea.<sup>20</sup> The Swedish radio was dominated by a spirit of popular education with roots in the popular movements that made the owners of the broadcasting company. But in the 1950's the old spirit was challenged by a growing professionalism in radio journalism.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of Finland I suggest that the spirit of the radio in the 1950's was determined by representants of a "cultured middle class". This interpretation seems to fit even Sweden, although differing in the nuance that in that country the pro popular education Social Democracy had a stronger position than in Finland.

In the case of Britain and the BBC, D.L. LeMahieu has formulated the same basic idea this way:

In its early years, the BBC broadcast a flattering version of middle-class culture that quickly transformed a new technology into an agent of enlightenment and social respectability. Yet middle-class cultural paternalism, like its aristocratic ante-

cedents, could never completely divorce itself from the groups it sought to control and claimed to serve.<sup>22</sup>

In Britain, already in the 1930's, the public started to listen to continental radio stations such as Radio Luxembourg, which offered light programmes in English for English listeners. The BBC was obliged to try and

make itself more tempting for the part of the population (primarily working class) that listened to continental radio stations. "The BBC, committed to uplifting tastes, provided listeners with information and entertainment that assured the Corporation would not dwell self-righteously on the margins of British life", LeMahieu writes.<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

1. The article is based on material from my book *Aikansa oloinen. Yleisradion historia 1949-1996* [Alike its Times. A History of the Finnish Broadcasting Company, 1949-1996]. WSOY 1996.
2. Addition to programme meeting minutes 4.1.1952. YLE H1:4 ELKA.
3. Two men from Pori to the YLE, and Jussi Koskiluoma to them, 19.9.1949. YLE F2:5 ELKA.
4. Programme meeting minutes 3.11.1949. YLE H1:3 ELKA.
5. Antero Alpolo, *Viihdevuosien vilinässä. Radiokauteni ensimmäinen puoliaika 1945-1960*, p.232.
6. A listener from Helsinki 13.3.1953, "One who for herself and for other concerned old fashioned mothers wishes an improvement in music programmes" from Tampere 4.6.1955, and "With greetings many ordinary listeners" without date (1956). YLE F2:7 ELKA.
7. Programme meeting minutes 11.1., 7.6. and 5.7.1951. YLE H1:3 ELKA.
8. Minutes of the programme meeting, 11.1.1951, 4.1.1952 and 24.1.1952. YLE H1:3-4 ELKA.
9. A listener from Iisvesi to the Programme Council, 26.2.1949. YLE F2:5 ELKA.
10. Jussi Koskiluoma to the Composer, 7.10.1949, to the Baroness, 23.11.1949 and to the Bishop, 3.11.1955. YLE F2:5 ELKA.
11. Jussi Koskiluoma to the Lady from Karkkila, 10.12.1952. YLE F2:6 ELKA.
12. Jussi Koskiluoma to the man from Savukoski, 11.3.1952. YLE F2:6 ELKA.
13. Radiokuuntelija 31/1956, p.8.
14. Radiokuuntelija 48a/1948, p.21 and 6/1955, p.4; A memo of the Record Department on lack of space in the department, 28.7.1949. YLE M1:1 ELKA.
15. Jussi Koskiluoma to a listener from Piikkiö, 4.2.1955. YLE F2:7 ELKA.
16. Alpolo 1988, pp. 251-253.
17. The man from Turku to the Chief of the YLE Music Department, 22.12.1960 and to Jussi Koskiluoma, 16.1. and 28.2.1961, as well as Koskiluoma to the man, 12.1. and 8.2.1961. YLE F2:8 ELKA.
18. Cf. Merja Hurri, *Kulttuuriosasto. Symboliset taistelut, sukupolvikonfliktit ja sananvapaus viiden pääkaupunkilehden kulttuuri-toimituksissa 1945-80*. Tampere 1993.
19. Paavo Arni's memo 10.5.1961 on Radio Nord and its teachings to us. YLE 2295-2302. ELKA.
20. Karin Nordberg, Radion som folkbildare – en forskningsbeskrivning. In *Radion i kulturbygget*. Umeå 1990, p.71.
21. Nordberg 1990.
22. D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy. Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars*. Clarendon Press – Oxford 1988, p.273.
23. LeMahieu 1988, pp.273-292 (cit. pp.291-292).