

The Estonian Singing Revolution: musematic insights

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Abstract: In the heart of ‘Singing Revolution’, Baltic nonviolent political movement in the late 1980s, there was music – songs and singing –, and rock musicians were its most critical conduit. As yet only little is known about the actual musical mechanisms by which songs affected people, expressed national identity, proposed action derived from that identity, and moved historical events. This paper focuses on one Estonian pop-rock anthem: “Koit” (Dawn, 1988), written and performed by singer-songwriter Tõnis Mägi (b. 1948). My primary analytical focus is on the social(-political), ideological and musical meanings of this song as performed, recorded and perceived sound. I will concentrate on one musematic structure in “Koit”: that of a ‘bolero snare drum’. The larger aim of my research is to integrate the discussion of music’s “sonic materiality” (its actual sounds) into discourse about culture and society.

Keywords: Singing Revolution, Estonia, Soviet Union, music semiotics, Tõnis Mägi, *Dawn*.

On 11 September 1988, an unprecedented number of Estonian people (estimates range between 20% and one third of the population) congregated in Tallinn Song Festival Grounds to express their national sentiment and collective political will through speeches, slogans, and the singing of songs. Notice of the upcoming event was spread solely by word of mouth. This was just one of many such unofficially organised gatherings taking place between 1987 and 1991 that together became known as the “Singing Revolution”,¹ a nonviolent national protest against Soviet occupation.² The Estonian Singing Revolution started shortly after Mikhail Gorbachev’s introduction of perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Union,³ and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Estonia’s restoration of independence in 1991. Sociologists studying Estonia’s late 1980s post-communist transition have called the Singing Revolution chapter “the mythological phase” of the nation’s political culture, “mythological” being distinguished from and followed by the “ideological” and “critical-rational phase” (Vihalemm et al. 1997). It was a phase dominated by charismatic leaders, and characterised by political homogeneity, involvement in mass movements (mass gatherings and

1 The first public statement to explicitly define the Estonians’ massive political awakening as a nonviolent singing movement was an editorial by Estonian journalist Heinz Valk (b. 1936). For the English translation of Valk’s historic essay, published on 17 June 1988 in the Estonian weekly cultural paper “Sirp ja Vasar” [*Sickle and Hammer*], see Šmidchens 2014: 244–245.

2 The ‘Singing Revolution’ was not solely an Estonian affair: similar processes of people congregating to protest through song also took place in Latvia and Lithuania during the same time period.

3 Šmidchen (2014: 237) summarises: “The purpose of Gorbachev’s glasnost was to restructure and strengthen the Soviet economy; open public discussion of environmental policy was allowed within this frame. In the Baltic, however, environmental issues were tied to questions of sovereignty over the country’s natural resources, and public discussion inevitably shifted [in that direction]. Gorbachev hinted that glasnost could now extend into previously censored “blank spots” of Soviet history; in the Baltic, this led to public rejection of the Soviet government’s historical legitimacy.”

rallies, boycotts, sit-ins, demonstrations, picketing, petitions, etc.) and people's emotional (not rational) dedication to the cause. During this phase common values were not yet verbally defined. Political ideologies were rarely, if ever, denoted by specific keywords; they were instead defined by suggestive quasi-mythological symbols and rituals which involved the audience *emotionally*:

“Large mass demonstrations united the participants with an emotionally high voltage. Symbols, myths and rituals had a heyday, and the function of words during the mass rallies was magical. Speeches, songs and slogans⁴ represented a collective witchcraft, the symbolic fight of a small nation against the totalitarian machinery.” (Vihalemm et al. 1997: 202)

My primary interest in the Singing Revolution lies in what Guntis Šmidchens (2014: 4), in his quintessential study of one of the last century's most dramatic geopolitical upheavals, has called “the heart of Baltic nonviolent political action in the late twentieth century”, by which is meant the songs and singing that gave the movement its name.

Despite the obvious importance of music in this bloodless but revolutionary socio-political change, there are only few academic studies so far conducted into the subject material. Moreover, previous research has invariably focused on music's sociocultural dimensions and context (e.g. Labi 2011, Waren 2012, Šmidchens 2014, Johanson [forthcoming]). Of course, those studies emphasise the importance of people *singing* together and the songs' *lyrics* are also generally addressed. Even vocal *delivery* is occasionally discussed in terms of how the sound of the lyrics, when performed – including melodic tone and register of a singing voice, as well as rhythm, rhyme, and other phonetic features of language –, “was also laden with meaning and rhetorical function” (Šmidchens 2014: 309–310). However, the actual *musical texts*, not merely sung lyrics, have either not been addressed at all, or received only cursory attention. Due to this lack of musical analysis, it has been very difficult for ethno- or sociomusicological Singing Revolution studies to properly consider links between sonic structures and their cultural meanings, uses and functions: most importantly, how those songs not only “articulated the public's ideas and feelings, but [...] also created ideas and feelings, generated political action, and shaped ideology.” (Šmidchens 2014: 254). In other words, the actual musical mechanisms by which the songs affected people and moved historical events are still virtually unknown (cf. Šmidchens 2014: 250, 253; cf. Engelhardt 2009).

⁴E.g. *Eestlane olla on uhke ja hää!* (It is proud and good to be an Estonian!), *Eesti vabaks!* (Free Estonia!), *Ükskord me võidame niikuinii!* (We shall win one day anyhow!), *Eesti tuleb tagasi!* (Estonia returns!), *Tartu rahu kehtib!* (The Tartu Peace Treaty is still valid!), *Lõpp migratsioonile!* (End migration!), *Eesti keel riigikeeleks!* (Make Estonian the state language!), etc.

Sounds of revolution

“It is clear that the songs of the Baltic Singing Revolution had two political functions. First, they expressed national identity, and second, they proposed action derived from that identity. Rock musicians were a critical conduit.” (Šmidchens 2014: 250)

The Singing Revolution: The miracle of the Estonian rock generation. (Rinne 2007)

In Estonia (as well as in Latvia and Lithuania), the peaceful rallies in the revolutionary process took place in the traditional cultural form (and the traditional place) of song festivals, known since the first period of the national awakening in the 19th century. “At mass meetings, thousands of people sang new songs specially written by popular composers for these events, together with the pre-war patriotic songs and the historical, patriotic repertoire of the 19th-century song festivals.” (Lauristin, Vihalemm 1997: 88) However, the *actual musical sounds* of the Estonian Singing Revolution were not choral but mainly those of pop-rock and folk/country-rock (to a lesser extent, also punk). Rock music in Estonia had previously existed somewhere between official and unofficial cultures, and had always offered refuge to people seeking a life other than that of official Soviet culture (cf. Šmidchens 2014: 222, 259). It is not surprising then that during the early Gorbachev era rock songs quickly filled every crack that opened in Soviet censorship: “[a]mong all singers, rockers could most easily and quickly adapt to changing political contexts” (Šmidchens 2014: 259), not least because “rock musicians could compose, perform, record, and broadcast new songs more quickly (and loudly) than choral composers and choirs.” (*ibid.*: 237)

The musical core of the Estonian Singing Revolution consisted of the following pop-rock songs:

- composer Alo Mattiisen’s (1961–1996) “Ei ole üksi ükski maa”⁵ (*No Country Is Alone*, 1987; lyrics by Jüri Leesment) and his pop-rock song cycle “Viis isamaalist laulu” (*Five Fatherland Songs*, 1988; lyrics by Jüri Leesment and Henno Käo) which included a rock anthem “Eestlane olen ja eestlaseks jään” (*I Am and Will Remain an Estonian*);
- the Estonian-Latvian-Lithuanian trilingual pop anthem “Ärgake, Baltimaad” (*Wake Up, Baltic Countries*, 1989; music by Boriss Rezniks, lyrics by Valdis Pavlovskis, Stasys Povilaitis, and Heldur Karmo), sung by thousands of people holding hands across Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in August 1989 along the ‘Baltic Way’ (‘Baltic Chain’), an uninterrupted human chain of nearly two million people which united the three Baltic countries from Tallinn to Vilnius, recalling the 50th anniversary of signing the Molotov-

⁵ This 1987 song is conceptually similar to *Do They Know It’s Christmas?* (Band Aid, 1984) and to *We Are the World* (USA for Africa, 1985) in that the different verses are sung by different well-known artists. In “Ei ole üksi ükski maa” the line-up consisted of thirteen Estonian pop-rock artists.

Ribbentrop pact and its secret protocol, which enabled the occupation of the Baltic countries by the Soviet Union;

- and singer-songwriter Tõnis Mägi's (b. 1948) anthemic songs "Koit" (*Dawn*, 1988; music and lyrics by Tõnis Mägi) and "Palve (Looja, hoia Maarjamaad)" (*Prayer [Creator, Protect Mary's Land]*, 1988; lyrics by Villu Kangur).

Most of these songs were pop-rock torch ballad-like sing-alongs (all joining hands and/or waving flags while singing together), the lyrics of which stressed the importance of people's feelings of togetherness and adherence to traditions, but also drew public attention to topical issues like environmental threats (e.g. 'Phosphorite War'⁶ at its peak in 1987), indifference of the authorities, and concerns about increasing Russian immigration.

In what follows, I will focus on one song that has most strongly shaped the Estonians' sense of self-identification and national awareness during and after the Singing Revolution: a pop-anthem called "Koit"⁷ (*Dawn*, 1988). It was written (both lyrics and music) and performed by singer-songwriter Tõnis Mägi (b. 1948), one of the most acclaimed pop-rock artists in Estonia to this day, who, in the 1980s, was famous all over the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite states (esp. in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia). Another reason for my focusing on "Koit" is its status as the only Singing Revolution song that transcended its original era and sociocultural context, and still functions as a symbol of Estonian national pride and identity to this day.⁸

6 'Phosphorite (Phosphate) War' was an environmental campaign against the Moscow-ordered opening of large phosphorite mines in the Virumaa District of northeastern Estonia – a project that would have poisoned an enormous region's groundwater and rivers, destroyed large areas of the countryside, and brought in thirty to forty thousand Russian immigrants.

7 To hear the original 1988 recording on YouTube go to <https://youtu.be/F3Liz2pJmBk>, or <https://youtu.be/i-6tLn6hQ7Q> (retrieved 27.05.2016). Below in this article, timecode references to musical events apply to both of those videos. To save space, references to YouTube files are hereinafter abbreviated to 'YT:' plus the file's unique 11-character identity. For example, the reference YT: F3Liz2pJmBk means <https://youtu.be/F3Liz2pJmBk>. Visiting YouTube and entering just F3Liz2pJmBk will in other words take you direct to the recording referred to in this article.

8 In the 1990s and 2000s "Koit" used to be a requested *encore* at every Tõnis Mägi concert, and occasionally he still publicly performs the song (sometimes by spontaneously stepping up on stage, most recently in 2014 at the 26th Song Celebration "Touch of time / Time of touch"; cf. YT: BTS4JvKXvMI, retrieved 28.05.2016). In the 1990s "Koit" was suggested for Estonia's own anthem. In 2009, twenty years after its creation, in a TV-show called *Estonia is Looking for a Favourite Song* ("Eesti otsib lemmiklaulu") the Estonian people actually voted this song The All-Time Favourite. The song is also arranged for a mixed (mass) choir and for a symphony orchestra and is now performed at every national song festival (a tradition founded in 1869) in Estonia. There exists a parody of "Koit", called "Toit" (*Food*), performed by Tõnis Mägi himself, which for today's audiences has proved itself quite difficult to swallow (cf. YT: ddB5EftZfEo, retrieved 28.05.2016). A musical reference to this song appears in the soundtrack of the Estonian/Latvian feature-length animated film "Leiutajateküla Lotte" (*Lotte from Gadgetville*, 2006, dir. by Heiki Ernits and Janno Põldma, original music: Sven Grünberg), during an episode (01:06:47–01:08:17) where the characters drift in a hot-air balloon towards Japan – in the direction of the rising sun (i.e the dawn).

My primary analytical focus is on the social(-political), ideological *and* musical meanings of this song as performed, recorded and perceived sound. For the limited scope of this article I will concentrate on just one musematic structure⁹ in “Koit”: that of a ‘bolero snare drum’. The larger aim of my research is to integrate the discussion of music’s “sonic materiality” (its actual sounds) into discourse about culture and society.

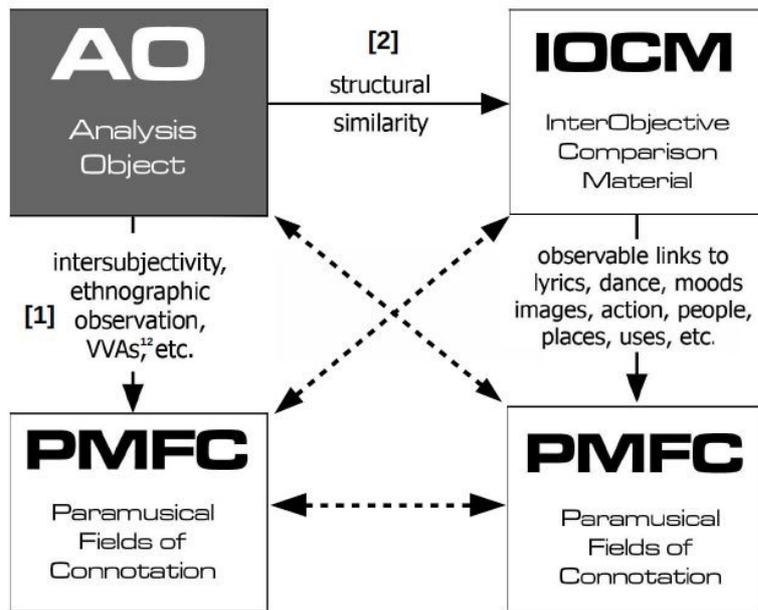
Theoretical position

To investigate, how and which ideas, feelings, attitudes, identities and ideologies were mediated *and* generated through actual musical sounds (see the end of Introduction), the methodological approach that I have found most useful is Philip Tagg’s semiotic music analysis; especially, given my focus on ‘bolero snare drum’ in this article, his musematic analysis of ABBA’s mega-hit *Fernando* (2016¹⁰) – a carefully considered account of *music*’s meanings in relation to historical-social-political-cultural contexts where that music is created, performed, used, and experienced. Such an approach considers both ‘notatable’ (e.g. melody, harmony) and ‘non-notatable’ parameters of musical expression (e.g. timbre, vocal persona, aural staging), as well as both construction-based (poietic) and perception-based (aesthetic) perspectives to account for significant aspects of musical meaning. Tagg’s framework to elucidate musical meaning has been recognised by many popular music scholars (Middleton 1990, Walser 1993); however, as yet there has been little sustained application of his ideas.

9 ‘Musematic structure’ (or, a ‘museme’) is a musical structure (see below) carrying meaning that could be either musical or paramusical (a.k.a., extramusical, i.e. semiotically related to a particular musical discourse without being structurally intrinsic to that discourse). ‘Musical structure’ is here defined according to Philip Tagg and Bob Clarida (2003: 94): “Although a musical structure may have objective characteristics quantifiable in terms of acoustic physics, our understanding of musical structure here is cultural, i.e. as an identifiable part of a musical continuum that may be referred to or designated in either constructional or receptional terms. Although a musical structure may or may not have a ready name, we posit that it must be not only audible but also identifiable and (at least approximately) repeatable by members of the same music-making community, and that it must be recognisable as having the same or similar function when it is heard by members of the same community of listeners, even though many members of that community may be not be conscious of either the structure or its effect (if any).” The meaningful musical structures (i.e. musemes), “could be almost anything. [...] a turn of melodic phrase, a riff, a sonority, a rhythmic pattern, a harmonic sequence or type of chord, a particular use of particular instruments, of vocal timbre, of acoustic space, any of which could be presented at a particular speed in a particular register at a particular level of intensity and so on.” (Tagg 2013: 230).

10 ABBA’s song *Fernando* was recorded in 1975 and released in 1976. Tagg published his first analysis of the song in 1979 in a Danish musicology journal (Tagg, Philip: “Analyse af Abbas “Fernando””. *Dansk Musiktidskrift* 3, 1979, pp. 124–156), and produced an English version of that article in 1981. A radically rewritten version of that analysis (hence: 2nd edition) was published as a book *Fernando the Flute* in 1991 (Liverpool: Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool). In 2000 the third edition was published by the Mass Media Music Scholars’ Press in New York, and an audiovisual analysis published online: *Fernando: The Film of the Book of the Music*, covering chapters 1–2 from the 2000 book, http://tagg.org/Clips/HTML5/Fernando00-04_VP8.webm. In 2016 Tagg returned to refine his analysis which will be published as the fourth edition of *Fernando the Flute*. I am most grateful to him for granting me access to and engaging me in discussions of the preliminary drafts of the 2016 manuscript.

Figure 1. The black box of musical meaning (cf. Tagg 2013: 238)



To put it in a nutshell, musematic analysis allows for the identification of the relations between sonic structures and their cultural meanings “on the basis of two types of demonstrable consistency: [1] interobjective or intertextual, in the sense that the same or similar musical structure [...] are used in different works by different musicians belonging to the same basic music culture; [2] the same or similar paramusical phenomena are linked by different individuals, belonging to the same basic music culture, to the same or similar musical structures.” (Tagg 2004: 2) Musematic analysis is therefore based on two procedures (see Fig. 1): we can test and demonstrate the existence of semantic fields linked to a musical structure in an analysis object (AO) by establishing [1] a *shared similarity of response* to music between several human *subjects* (those shared, hence intersubjective, responses indicating particular semantic fields connected to particular sets of musical sound in particular cultural contexts are called *paramusical fields of connotation*, or PMFC for short); and by establishing [2] a *shared similarity of structure* between an analysis object (AO) and at least one *other* musical object (the ‘other music’ containing musical-structural resemblance to the AO is called *interobjective comparison material* or IOCM for short). That ‘other music’ is semiotically related to its own paramusical field of connotations which, on condition that a correct

and accurate¹¹ music-structural link between the original AO and an IOCM has been established, can be expected to be relevant to and informative of the original AO as well.

The intersubjective PMFC-s can be accessed through [1] ethnographic observations of audience demographic and behaviour (involving such factors as the listening mode, listening venue, listener activity and cultural location or ‘scene’; see Tagg 2013: 199); [2] considering the paramusical concomitants defining the act of musical communication, i.e., affecting the meaning of the music with which they co-occur (title and lyrics, story, images, written descriptions like liner notes, programme notes, reviews and opinions, gesture, dance, movement, action, etc; see Tagg 2013: 270); and [3] reception tests which, through the mediation of words,¹² offer insights into what listeners see, feel, imagine or otherwise associate to when hearing a particular piece or extract of music (see Tagg 2013: 200, ff). For the analysis presented below, I have made use of all the listed means, including reception tests, to document the relative consistency of listener reactions and to test my own initial hunches about the social, ideological and musical meanings of “Koit”. However, for the limited scope of this article I have decided to focus on the interobjective analytic procedure to demonstrate how studies of culture and society can benefit from semiotic analysis of music’s “sonic materiality”.

Bolero snare drum’s paramusical field of connotation in Tõnis Mägi’s “Koit”

“As a piece of music, [“Koit”] is rather simplistic. Plus, of course, the hypnotic bolero rhythm and drum, which grows and grows.” (Tõnis Mägi, in Jõgeda 2009)

Tõnis Mägi composed, recorded and sang the lead vocals of “Koit” (*Dawn*) in Tallinn in 1988. There were members of his own rock-band in the recording studio, plus a professional mixed choir of Estonian Radio (conducted by a well-known choral conductor Ants Üleoja). The song reached a mass radio audience within a matter of days.

“The song went to the people instantaneously. Wherever we sang it, the people already knew the words by heart. I don’t know how that’s possible. It hadn’t been published on a record. Was the text published in a newspaper somewhere? I don’t know. It happened as if by itself. It simply went, and that’s how it started spinning.

11 In making sense of semantic fields linked to a musical structure it is crucial to accurately identify the sonic signifier that gives rise to particular signifieds. Thereby, as we will also see below, it is not enough to consider just tonal, temporal, rhythmic, registral and timbral factors of a musical structure under analysis, but also the museme’s placement in acoustic space in relation to other sounds, and its role inside or outside the accompanimental museme stack (i.e. a compound of simultaneously occurring musical sounds).

12 The ‘VVAs’ in Figure 1 stand for ‘verbal-visual associations’ as responses to music, expressed in words and/or (verbalised) images.

The sang it, they stood up when they sang, and people were saying that this was a new anthem or something like that. They began to call it the hymn of the new era of freedom; many people said this.” (Mägi in Rinne 2008: 273- 274)

As a pop-anthem, “Koit” is indeed quite a simple piece of music, especially if one only examines the score. In terms of harmony, it is basically a three-chord-song in which the tonic is the chord heard the most (alongside ii7 and V^{(7)(sus4)}, and only fleetingly also IV). It lacks any harmonic development or change, not even the ‘truck driver’s gear change’,¹³ an almost obligatory device in other songs of this genre and era. With its overall duration of five minutes, the song’s linear form consists of an instrumental introduction, a solo intro (or verse) and six refrains that progress in a huge *crescendo*. In the accompaniment, different timbres are added one by one as the song proceeds: “Koit” starts with a distant (i.e. mixed at low volume and with reverb) solo snare drum’s rhythmic ostinato (sharply marked *ratatatat*-pattern, see Fig. 2) in a slow *Moderato* tempo (♩=60) in 4/4 time.¹⁴

Figure 2. Solo snare drum’s rhythmic pattern in Tõnis Mägi’s “Koit” (1988)



At 00:14 a (synthesised) French horn enters with its easily flowing signal-like melody; shortly after that, at 00:17, the (synthesised) strings join the snare drum’s ostinato pattern in a consonant harmonic stasis (no change from tonic pedal point for 45 seconds), and at 00:34 Mägi starts to sing (see the full lyrics in Appendix). The mixed choir joins the lead singer and “orchestra” at 01:44 (in refrain 2); timpani are first heard at 03:18; trumpets (from 03:59 on) and cymbals (from 03:51 on) mark the beginning of a “grand finale” (also slightly slower in tempo), and finally tubular bells join the performing forces at 04:21. In other words, instead of adopting a standard pattern in the linear ordering of musical episodes in popular song (strophic, verse–refrain, chorus–bridge; see Tagg 2013: 395–401), “Koit” is organised as a gradual build-up in sound and volume, thus creating the impression that could be described as forces coming from a distance and moving closer and closer

13 ‘The truck driver’s gear change’ is an easily recognised type of wholesale episodic key change in popular music which occurs near the end of a song, shifting upwards by some relatively small pitch increment – usually by one semitone or whole tone, but occasionally by other intervals (cf. tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TruckDriversGearChange, retrieved 28.05.2016). The label suggests a comparison between the described musical device and a tired, overworked truck driver performing an unartistic, mechanical function. It is a device also commonly used in Eurovision songs to this day “to crank up listener involvement by literally taking the song to new heights and signalling an imminent end to the performance.” (Tagg 2013: 414)

14 The snare drum starts out as one of the ‘main players’ among the recording’s foreground figures, but later becomes part of the general accompanimental environment (‘scenery’) which contains various elements, and against which the lead vocalist’s statements stand out as foreground.

while gradually growing in numbers. The effect is similar to Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* (1928). So much so, in fact, that I could borrow Philip Tagg's comment on Ravel's *Boléro* to aptly describe Mägi's piece: its "overall processual interest derives from one long, single, unidirectional timbral, registral and dynamic 'increase' that spans the entire piece." (Tagg 2016: 99)

The song begins with the words "It's time again to straighten your back / and cast off the rags of a slave. / So that everything once created / could be born again. / It's dawn...". In the 1988 context of the nation building not yet complete and the political processes dragging on, "Koit" captured public sentiment and expressed a determination to move as a nation, adamantly, towards the goal of political liberty. In Šmidchens' eloquent rewording of the lyrics:

"The road to liberty still lay ahead, long, seemingly endless, but dawn glimmering on the [hill]tops beckoned and energised the traveller to take one more step, and another one, toward the distant goal. [...] Step by step, Estonians were moving toward liberty; their measure of time was on a mythical, not an earthly scale. As they walked along, they could imagine that alongside them walked "the giant" – Estonia's national hero Kalevipoeg, his hand freed from the stone where it was fastened at the end of the 1857 national epic." (Šmidchens 2014: 257–259)

The content and sentiment of "Koit's" lyrics is characteristic of all the pop-rock songs iconic of the Singing Revolution (listed in "The sounds of revolution" subchapter). However, in terms of the music's "sonic materiality" (its actual sounds), there are several important aspects setting "Koit" apart from the other songs iconic of that cause and era.

Firstly, unlike the other iconic songs, "Koit" is not exactly a sing-along. In fact, it is hardly convenient to sing at all. The lead vocal part is rather declamatory, with lots of hiatuses between phrases, and placed largely well above the comfort range of the soloist's mid register (original key: D-flat major). As a result, the strain of Mägi's reaching the high pitches appropriately provides a sense of sincere effort, release of pent-up tension, urgency¹⁵ – all relevant to "Koit's" message.

Secondly, the rock-band in "Koit" does not exactly sound like 'rock'. Nor does it feature the 'metallic', 'cold war' synthesiser sound common in the (Soviet) Estonian pop-rock of that era. Instead, Mägi makes his synthesiser sound like a 'grandiose' classical symphony orchestra – a sound that carries connotations like 'big', 'official', 'serious', 'high production values', etc. Furthermore, instead of the full drumkit sound of a rock-band, we hear a single snare drum

15 Similar to, for example, Bruce Springsteen's recordings of *Born in the U.S.A* (1984) and *War* (1986).

throughout “Koit” (plus timpani, cymbals, and tubular bells entering one by one as the song proceeds).

That snare drum’s specific sharply marked *ratatata*-rhythmic pattern (see Fig. 2) which persists throughout the entire song, with only very slight rhythmic variations here and there, once again closely relates “Koit” to Ravel’s *Boléro*.¹⁶ (In addition there is a similarity in their overall processual scheme and increasing dynamic-timbral profile, and in choice of instrumentation: snare drum, symphony orchestra.) One obvious question here is “Why *Boléro*?”. In popular consciousness, ‘bolero’ is most likely related to and evocative of ‘Spain/Hispanic’ – at least for non-Hispanophones (like Estonians). Given that “Koit” became a symbol of *Estonian* national pride and identity, what has ‘bolero’¹⁷ – something seemingly foreign to ‘Estonia’ – got to do with all the Estonia(n)-ness which Mägi’s song stood for and which it to this day stands for in Estonian ears? This question leads us to the semiotics of bolero snare drum, musematically analysed by Philip Tagg in his study of ABBA’s 1975 mega-hit *Fernando*.

As Tagg (2016: 98, ff) indicates, there are more crucial connotative descriptors to the bolero snare drum than ‘Spain/Hispanic’ – even in the case of Ravel’s *Boléro*. First of all, intrinsic to the bolero-like *ratatata* types of rhythmic repetitions is a sense of forwards movement, a propulsive, teleological character. In Mägi’s “Koit” as a musical whole, it is largely this *ratatata*-ostinato that propels movement with force and precision, even though the ‘bolero drum’ is hardly an up-front ingredient in the mix but rather an integral part of the background accompaniment, first to the French horn melody and then the vocal line. The ostinato aspect adds a sense of insistence and unstopability to this propulsion. Therefore: ‘insistent’, ‘persistent’, ‘unstoppable’ (hence: ‘powerful’) could be more relevant connotative descriptors than ‘Spain/Hispanic’ for *Boléro*-type snare patterns in general (Tagg 2016: 102). In “Koit”, these connotative descriptors are further reinforced by the song’s dynamic and timbral profile: the solo drum starts *piano pianissimo*, mixed with slight reverb that acoustically enlarges the impression of space, and it proceeds through a gradual *crescendo* to *forte fortissimo* with the rest of the performing forces entering as the music unfolds, creating the overall sense of ‘gradually coming closer-and-closer in larger-and-larger numbers’ – like some sort of irrefutable *force majeure*.

16 Ravel’s *Boléro* has also proved to be the IOCM most frequently related to “Koit” by my students and colleagues, regardless of the fact that Mägi’s “Koit” is a duple-meter, not a triple-meter piece of music like that of Ravel’s, nor that compared to Ravel’s elegant sophisticated dance (originally conceived as a ballet piece), “Koit” is rather a down-to-earth procession (see below in the main text).

17 Although Ravel’s *Boléro* (initially called: *Fandango*) is musically different from boleros of the genre of Spanish/Hispanic (Latin American) popular dance-music, in this article I use the words ‘bolero’ and ‘*Boléro*’ as synonyms when referring to that marked underlying rhythmic pattern in question.

Secondly, the snare drum sound itself carries certain connotations.

“The snare drum is a loud, easily portable instrument whose sound, when played with sticks rather than brushes or the hand, has both body (mid register) and, more notably, a strong, sharp, crisp attack that is reinforced and extended by the vibrating wires of the instrument’s snare device. The fact that this sort of sound pierces ambient noise and can be heard over a considerable distance makes the snare drum ideal for military situations where concerted, synchronised movement is the order of the day, when troops need to move forward in an orderly manner, in the same direction, at the same time, ‘as one man’ and, preferably, with a common purpose, be it on parade or marching into battle.” (Tagg 2016: 102–103)

In his latest edition of *Fernando*-analysis (Tagg 2016), where the discussion on ‘distant bolero drums’-museme is immeasurably more elaborated than in the previous editions (see footnote 10), Tagg has argued for the snare’s connection to ‘military’, ‘olden times’, ‘dramatic’ and ‘momentous things’. I will next discuss these in detail, as well as provide references to ‘other musics’ (IOCM) that have significant structural and/or connotative relevance to the semiotics of “Koit”.

The snare drum’s ‘military’ connection should need no explanation. Snare drums have traditionally (historically, i.e. in ‘olden times’) been used in military situations like the drilling of troops, as well as in military rituals like parading at a tattoo. In fact, snares also feature in music for (mass-event) sports, especially when it comes to an impressive public display of strength and order, as in a parade (for an IOCM listen to the 1984 *Olympic Fanfare and Theme* by John Williams with its ‘bolero snares’ starting at 00:49¹⁸). What seems to be a likely reason for the striking similarities between music for sports and for the military is that essential to success (victory) in both are ‘concerted effort’ (energy, synchrony and coordination) and ‘physical prowess’ (including force) (Tagg 2016: 103).

The snare drum’s ‘military’ connection in “Koit” is not of the ‘violent merciless evil destruction’ type like that heard in, for example, in Gustav Holst’s “Mars, the Bringer of War” from *The Planets* suite (1914–1916). The ominous character of Holst’s “Mars” relies heavily on tonal, timbral and registral factors: on the accentuated tritonal or semitonal sonorities (plus the irregularly repeated *ffff* ‘horror’ chords at the end), and on the insistent, loud and overpowering military rhythm beaten out on timpani and tapped out *fortissimo* by *col legno* strings, all in an asymmetric 5/4 march (Tagg 2016: 100). There is no such tonal-timbral-registral-metric threat or danger in Mägi’s “Koit”; in addition, the snare drum is never loud or overpowering in the mix (or in the listener’s head).

18 YT: YWdOFgDQIn0, retrieved 27.05.2016.

However, as in Holst's case the bolero-patterns in "Koit" relate to "forces, literal or metaphorical, marching with determination towards a common goal" (Tagg 2016: 103).

'Olden times' can be considered another relevant connotative descriptor of a snare drum sound, and not only in the sense of military history. As public sound, snare drums were also used in olden times by town criers (in Western Europe) to draw the attention of citizens on the street to whatever urgent announcements needed to be heard.¹⁹ In those cases, snare drums offered an alternative to bugles, trumpets, fanfares or other kinds of brass-instrument signals; in fact, both types of instrument — snares and 'signal horns'— could have been used in combination, as indeed they are in "Koit" (the snare and a horn with signal-like gestures are heard near the start of the song at 00:14–00:33, and both snare and trumpets occur from 04:26 to the end).²⁰ The 'olden times' connotation is also well supported by the lyrics of "Koit" which contain old Estonian words and phrases characteristic of the poetic language of the time of Estonia's first national awakening in the 19th century (like "heita endalt orjarüü" / *cast off the rags of a slave*, "kuninglik loit" / *majestic blaze*, "prij on taevapiir" / *free is the sky's bright edge*, "priiuse hõim" / *freedom's clan*, plus a reference to the 1857 national epic "Kalevipoeg": "Näe on kaljust käe kätte saanud hiid" / *Look, the great giant has freed his hand from stone*). Furthermore, the combination of snare drums with some sort of brass signal or fanfare befits occasions that rise above the usual everyday humdrum: it connotes 'festive, ceremonial occasions', 'momentous things', etc. This means that the public announcement made in Mägi's "Koit" is no banal or simple announcement, but rather a proclamation and simultaneously a call to duty (if not to arms).

The snare drum as public sound can also be heard in the dramatic cues used to signal that something really dramatic or thrillingly (not necessarily threateningly) dangerous is about to take place, as in the drum rolls heard before acrobatic circus stunts. Their function is to draw attention to whatever the dramatic occasion happens to be, to send a signal saying "straighten up, get ready, something big is about to start". Once again, that is a connotation relevant to "Koit". But there is more to snare

¹⁹ See, e.g. <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/video/town-crier-mr-serus-playing-sneer-drum-on-street-people-news-footage/514394315>, retrieved 07.11.2016.

²⁰ The combination of snares and trumpets in John Williams's *Olympic Fanfares* (especially from 02:50 on, YT: YWdOFgDQIn0) makes a similar impact.

drums than merely functioning as an episodic marker (cf. Tagg 2013: 516) in cueing something ‘dramatic’.

Bolero-like underlying snare drum rhythm patterns can also be heard, for obvious reasons, in military-style pop ballads (e.g. Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler’s *The Ballad of the Green Berets* from 1966; or an Estonian popular soldier song “Laul kaugest kodust” / *Song about the Faraway Home* from a Soviet Estonian 1968 war drama “Inimesed sõdurisinelis” / *Men in Soldier’s Overcoats*; not to mention the many pioneer songs popular in the Soviet era, e.g. *Hymn of the World Federation of Democratic Youth*,²¹ etc.²²), and, for reasons *not* so obvious,²³ in big operatic “separation-anxiety” pop-ballads. To be more precise about the latter: the snare drum bolero-patterns abound in a special type of dramatic and fateful love song performed in slow *alla marcia* time. The lyrics of those pop-ballads are mostly about hopeless, unrequited or forsaken love; for example, Gilbert Bécaud’s *Et Maintenant* (1961), or Roy Orbison’s *It’s Over* (1964) and *Running Scared* (1961), or an Estonian ballad “Unustuse jõel” / *On the River of Oblivion* (Joala, 1972²⁴). In these dramatic ballads, the ‘bolero snare’ museme takes on a connotation of ‘(the march of) Fate’ or ‘Destiny’. Whether it is of affirmative or negative variation (cf. Knights 2004: 380) depends on the museme’s placement and role in acoustic space in relation to other sounds, and on a type of vocal delivery. For example, a noteworthy difference between Bécaud’s *Et maintenant* and both Orbison’s songs, on the one hand, and Joala’s *On the River of Oblivion*, on the other, is that Bécaud’s and Orbison’s personas are not on the same side with the *Boléro*-like march figure, while Joala’s persona is – and so is Mägi’s in “Koit”. Unlike Joala and Mägi, Bécaud and Orbison are fighting a losing battle against the inexorable march of an implacably cruel Fate (cf. Tagg 2016: 107): “Bécaud is wondering where to go and what to do now that his love has definitely left (*‘Et maintenant, que vais-je faire?’*), while Orbison, apart from running scared, is inexorably left alone with ‘silent days and silent tears’ now

21 A.k.a. *The Hymn of Democratic Youth of the World* (“Гимн демократической молодёжи мира” in Russian, “Noorte sõpruslaul” in Estonian, “Världsungdoms sången” in Swedish, etc.): music by Anatoli Novikov, lyrics by Lev Oschanin, 1947. YT: ahhDvkK4AXs (retrieved 29.05.2016); arranged for Swedish left-wing “rock cabaret” band *Röda Kapellet* (1972–76) by Philip Tagg: <http://tagg.org/audio/Kapellet/Varldsungdom.mp3> (retrieved 29.05.2016) (snare at 00:34).

22 See also Tagg’s discussion of *The Little Drummer Boy* (Kathrine K. Davis, 1941) in Tagg 2016: 112–117.

23 Except for the fact that the Spanish/Hispanic bolero as a genre of popular dance-music is related to sensual romance: “Love in its multiple variations, both affirmative and negative, is the predominant (although not the only) theme of the bolero, and it is considered to be the most popular romantic rhythm of the twentieth century in Spanish America.” (Knights 2004: 380) Nevertheless, the underlying rhythm in Spanish boleros is not realised by a snare drum played with sticks.

24 Performed by Jaak Joala (1950–2014), “Unustuse jõel” (1972, music: Arne Oit, lyrics: Heldur Karmo) can be heard at YT: RVh1SJuvioI; the lyrics in Estonian and English can be found at <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/unustuse-j%C3%B5el-river-oblivion.html> (both retrieved 27.05.2016). The verses of “Unustuse jõel” are set in minor key, refrains in major key; the bolero snare patterns are heard only in the refrain (at 01:01–01:30 and from 02:21 to the end; notice also a ‘drum roll’ at 02:17 cueing in the final repeat of “his” Fate-on-my-side proclamation).

that ‘It’s Over’.” (Tagg 2000: 42) Joala’s love relationship has passed into oblivion in “his” lover’s head, but “he” is finding it hard to believe the love story is really over; that’s why “he” proclaims – in the major-key refrains (verses are in the minor key), with the *Boléro* figure of Fate on his side: “Even on the river of oblivion time will eventually create a bridge and bring you back to me again”.²⁵

Although Mägi’s “Koit” is not a fateful story of dramatic love, it is definitely a story of Fate, of Destiny. Unlike Bécaud and Orbison, Mägi is not wondering where to go and what to do: he knows which path needs to be taken and how to go about it, as well as how to literally nudge his audience’s conscience (♩♩♩ ♪, see Fig. 2). “Koit” communicates a quasi-religious sense of belonging and common purpose; it is more of a ritual procession rather than a simple march – an impression supported by the lyrics (‘faith leads us forward’, ‘a heavenly beam accompanies us’, ‘sacred is this land’) and reinforced by the aural staging of the mixed choir entering at 01:44 with sopranos highlighted above the lower voices (thus creating an impression of an angelic choir up in heaven, validating Mägi’s persona), and the tolling of bells in the “grand finale”.²⁶ However, rather than a connotative descriptor of snare drum, the ‘religious’/‘quasi-religious’ connotation seems to be relevant for the whole of “Koit”, of which the ‘bolero drum pattern’ forms a part (cf. also Vangélis’s *1492 Conquest of Paradise* theme which as a musical whole creates a similar effect).

To summarise: it’s entirely reasonable to expect the ‘bolero drum’ museme in “Koit” to connote something insistent, persistent and unstoppable; something well-organised, disciplined, powerful, ready for battle (as in military or sports events); something tightly connected to olden times (i.e. the historical consciousness, supported by the lyrics); something dramatic, fateful and inexorable – a story bigger than life, a story of Fate/Destiny where Mägi and we are “on Fate’s side”; and something momentous which has an air of festivity, of ceremony, or of a quasi-religious ritual. In addition, the ‘bolero drum’ also participates in connoting proclamation, an ‘all-on-board’ call to duty that appeals to everyone’s conscience, effectively demanding immediate attention and thus getting the urgent announcement through. “Koit’s” lyrics conveniently have it all: ‘persistence’ (‘with unified mind [and] power we can do it all’, ‘ahead is the only road, the road to liberty, there can be no other’, ‘there’s only one step left, one short step’), ‘military/sports’ (‘straighten your

25 Francesco Sartori’s *Con te partirò / Time To Say Goodbye* (1995), best known as performed by Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman (1996) creates a similar ‘Fate-on-our-side’-effect. In *Con te partirò* the ‘bolero snare’ is also heard only in the refrains as in “Unustuse jõel”. For ‘dramatic’ bolero snare patterns in verses only, not in the refrains, listen for example to English rock band Muse’s rock-opera-meets-james-bond track *Supremacy* (2013, snares at 00:54).

26 With its full orchestral sound boosted by the tolling of bells, “Koit’s” grand finale brings to mind, for example, the finale of Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* (“The Great Gate of Kiev”; orchestrated by Maurice Ravel in 1922), and Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture* (1880).

back’, ‘break it all down’, ‘let’s hold out the hands, let’s join forces’, ‘let’s go together’, ‘power’, ‘victory’), ‘olden times’ (‘rags of a slave’, ‘freedom’s clan’, ‘the great giant has freed his hand from stone’), ‘dramatic/fateful’ (‘it’s time again’, ‘everything once created could be born again’, ‘the ice has cracked’, ‘soon you’ll see Estonia free’), ‘quasi-religious ritual’ (‘faith leads us forward’, ‘a heavenly beam accompanies us’, ‘sacred is this land’). In this way the ‘bolero snare’ seems an entirely appropriate “foreign” sonic structure in a song composed for the purposes of the Estonian Singing Revolution. However, even though there are no paramusical concomitants to connect ‘bolero’ to ‘Hispanic’ or ‘quasi-Hispanic’ in “Koit”, the song is musically connected to *Maurice Ravel’s Boléro*, as explained above. That significant Ravel-connection can be understood in terms of “connotative semiotics”²⁷ (Eco 1976: 55) taking place in popular consciousness. In other words: “Koit’s” ‘bolero’ signifies ‘Ravel’s *Boléro*’ which – beyond ‘Spain/Hispanic’ – signifies ‘classical’ (‘important’, ‘serious’), (‘high-)culture’, ‘Western Europe’ / ‘Western World’. “Koit’s” use of a full mixed choir, as well as an overall impression of acoustic space, carefully crafted by recording engineers in the studio, characteristic of large venues considered culturally sacred (e.g. a sacred natural place, a cathedral, state concert hall), further support this analysis.²⁸ After all, as a piece of music, “Koit” *did* transcend its original era, and it has become a sort of (appropriated) ‘classic’ in Estonia.

Final matters

One aim of this ‘bolero snare drum’ analysis was to demonstrate how detailed and precise musematic meaning can be (cf. Tagg 2013: 480). But what does it all say about the historical-social-political-cultural context where “Koit” was created, performed, used, and experienced?

Let us return to sociologists studying the Estonian late 1980s post-communist transition who are rather inclined to call the Singing Revolution a process of Estonia’s return to the Western World (see, for example, the title of Lauristin et al. 1997). Rosengren and Weibull (1997: 4) regard the transition period also as an ‘opening to the West’ or ‘going West’. They write: “a main source of this strong motivation has been the will to rejoin the Western world, regarded as a civilization different from the Byzantine civilization dominating parts of Eastern Europe.” (*ibid.*) “Return”, however, might not be an entirely justified choice of words here, at least not without further specification. To put the argument in simple terms, it is not about ‘arrival after temporary absence or removal’, but

²⁷ According to Eco (1976: 55), “there is a connotative semiotics when there is a semiotics whose expression plane is another semiotics”.

²⁸ Hypothetically, Mägi could have made his “Koit” sound ‘rock’, for example like Jeff Beck’s *Bolero* (1966; YT: Vuj5toLeyY8), but he did not.

rather a ‘resurfacing’. In fact, the above-referenced Lauristin et al. 1997 research into the Estonians’ fundamental values, world-views, individually held opinions and attitudes before and after the Singing Revolution results in a finding which beckons given specification:

“As a matter of fact, Estonians seem to have been characterized by a Western value structure even before the Singing Revolution. [...] Even though the Soviet Republic of Estonia had been under Moscow’s sway for decades, the basic value structure of Estonia’s population had not.” (Rosengren and Weibull 1997: 299)

The music of the Singing Revolution proves the point. After all, one function of all those newly-composed pop-rock songs was to assert that this nation “had a rich heritage of language, culture, and history, and that [it was] tied to an ancestral homeland.” (Šmidchens 2014: 251–252) In compositional terms, it was relatively easy for songwriters to build a bridge between the heritage of the Estonia’s 19th-century national awakening and the politics of the late 1980s (cf. Šmidchens 2014: 239) by quoting melodies of well-known 19th-century patriotic songs, or by quoting the lyrics of those well-known 19th-century songs but giving them new contemporary referents,²⁹ or simply by using words and phrases characteristic of the old Estonian poetic language (e.g. Mägi in “Koit”). But Mägi’s “Koit” went *musically* a step further. The meanings of the *actual musical sounds* in “Koit” are not tied to a national-ethnic place (Estonia) or its historical times (19th century, or, the late 1980s); the *musical* meanings of “Koit” should be understandable to anyone familiar with Western music culture, even without understanding the lyrics sung in Estonian. Hence my conclusion: in the political climate of 1988, Tõnis Mägi’s “Koit” *musically* lifted Estonia and Estonia(n)-ness, our national matters, to a qualitatively different level – it did not so much return Estonia to the Western world, as it musically asserted that we had never really left the Western World.

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²⁹ See, for example, Šmidchens’ (2014: 240–242) account on Alo Mattiisen’s “Mingem üles mägedele (Peatage Lasnamäe!)” (*Go High Up atop the Hills [Stop Lasnamäe!]*) from the song-cycle *Five Fatherland Songs*. In short: in the original 19th-century song “Mingem üles mägedele”, one went high up atop the hills to exclaim “You are beautiful, oh homeland!”; in Mattiisen’s song, one goes high up atop the hills to witness “an “ulcer” on the natural landscape: the ugly, mass-produced apartment highrises in Tallinn’s suburbs. These city districts, named after “hills”, as indicated by the suffix *-mäe* [...], gave the song a new referent. Immigrants, not Estonians, had preferred access to apartments in these new buildings, and thus the districts around them turned into islands of Soviet culture. The song’s declaration that “Lasna Hill must stop now!” called for a stop to the Soviet government’s plans to increase immigration.” (Šmidchens: 240–41)

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(2) *Mingem üles mägedele (Peatage Lasnamäe!) (Go High Up atop the Hills [Stop Lasnamäe!])*. YT: E9UtHCCRPKs, 08:49–13:08.

(3) *Sind surmani (You, Until Death)*. YT: E9UtHCCRPKs, 13:14–17:58.

(4) *Isamaa ilu hoieldes (Guarding the Fatherland's Beauty)*. YT: E9UtHCCRPKs, 18:01–22:57.

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APPENDIX. Lyrics of Tõnis Mägi's "Koit" (Dawn, 1988) in Estonian and English.

00:00 Instrumental intro

00:34	Verse	On jälle aeg selg sirgu lüüa ja heita endalt orjarüü. Et loomishoos, kõik loodu koos võiks sündida kui uuesti...	It's time again to straighten your back and cast off the rags of a slave. So that everything once created could be born again...
01:07	Refrain 1	On koit, kuninglik loit, valguse võit äratab maa. Pii on taevapiir. Esimene kiir langemas me maale.	It's dawn, majestic blaze, victory of light awakens the land. Free is the sky's bright edge. The very first ray falling on our land.
01:40	Refrain 2	Hõik, murrame kõik, et vabana saaks hingata taas. Näe, on murdunud jää. Ulatagem käed. Ühendagem väed.	The call – break it all down, so we could breathe again as free people. Look! – The ice has cracked! Let's hold out the hands. Let's join forces.
02:13	Refrain 3	Nõul, ühisel nõul, ühisel jõul me suudame kõik. Ees on ainus tee, vabaduse tee. Teist ei olla saagi.	With mind, unified mind, unified power, we can do it all. Ahead is the only road, the road to liberty. There can be no other,
02:46	Refrain 4	Võim. Valguse võim, priiuse hõim, läheme koos. Huulil rõõmuhüüd, näe on kaljust käe kätte saanud hiid...	Power. The power of light, freedom's clan, let us go together. A cry of joy on our lips. Look! The great giant has freed his hand from stone...
03:18	Refrain 5	Usk edasi viib, taevane kiir saatmas on meid. Nii, on võiduni jäänud veel üks samm. Lühikene samm, samm.	Faith leads us forward, a heavenly beam is accompanying us. And so, to victory, there's only one step left. One short step, step.
03:50	Refrain 6	Maa, Isade maa, on püha see maa, mis vabaks nüüd saab. Laul, me võidu laul, kõlama see jääb. Peagi vaba Eestit sa näed!	Land, our Fathers' land, sacred is this land that now will become free. Song, our victory song, it shall ring on. Soon you'll see Estonia free!