

## Building a sonic image of a nation: Finnish documentary and propaganda films in the early decades of sound film

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This chapter looks into the early non-fiction filmmakers' tools for building a sonic image of Finland around the mid-twentieth century. It outlines the circumstances and tendencies in short filmmaking in Finland from the 1940s to 1950s. The approach is built from the viewpoint of my own background as an ethnomusicologically-oriented social historian — a researcher of different uses of music in an everyday life context, including music in historical advertising, and functional background music.

I am interested in three main points. Firstly, I want to find out what music was chosen for use in the short films, and what its connections are to the musical cultures and soundscapes of Finnish everyday life at the time when the films were produced. Secondly, I wish to shed light on what the filmmakers wished to convey when combining certain music with different non-musical elements (sonic and visual). Thirdly, on the one hand I want to gain an understanding of the lasting elements of the sonic image of the nation presented by the filmmakers, and on the other, of those sonic elements that are present in the films only for certain purposes or for limited times.

The history and nature of Finnish short film production has been studied in several publications (e.g. Sedergren & Kippola, 2009 and 2015; Lammi 2006; Mickwitz 1995). However, the sonic expressive means utilised have only been mentioned briefly or left out altogether in previous studies. To round out understanding of the subject, I have started analysing the short film soundtracks in their historical context. This chapter is one of the first attempts to gather initial observations and findings for this project.

My working method consisted of several phases. Firstly, I found out, from existing research and the database of the Finnish National Audiovisual Institute archives, what films had been made and which of them had been preserved. I then viewed the material extensively in order to gain an understanding of the means of expression used in short film making during the research period. After this, I chose certain films on the basis of their typicality — or atypicality — in their use of sound, judged by the general understanding that I had gained from the viewing sessions. Next, I carried out close-listening sessions of the soundtracks of the chosen films, comparing the sonic execution to the typical solutions of the time. Finally, I undertook a more detailed analysis of some scenes, tracing the decision-making process and the underlying presumptions about the listening audience of the time.

Some special chains of events occurred in the chosen time period (1940s to 1950s). These include World War II — in which Finland fought against the neighbouring Soviet Union and was allied with Nazi Germany — as well as a period of swift urbanization and rise in the standard of living after the war. Within the cinema industry, the time

period also coincides with a unique era: movie-going peaked at levels it would never reach again (Keto, 1974, 64), and also, short film making was significantly supported by the state. In 1933, the year following the introduction of sound film in Finland, a new law came into effect offering tax deductions for tickets for film presentations that included domestic short films. The short films warranting deduction had to be at least 200 meters in length and their themes regarded as educational, scientific, or depicting domestic industry and commerce. This law was intended to improve the conditions for producing short films in Finland, which it did in an effective and profound way until its repeal in 1964. This meant short films were not only made in record numbers but also experienced by a significant portion of the population (see Lammi 2006, pp. 39 – 40).

The research material for this chapter consists of samples from short films made in Finland during this time. The thousands of films made during the tax deduction era constitute an extremely valuable body of research material for historians on local industry, commerce and tourism as well as education, science and cultural life. They are useful as sources for studying the audiovisual expression at the time, and to a certain extent, different aspects of Finnish society.

The term 'non-fiction' in the opening of my text is in no way indicative of any truth-value of the content in the films. The narratives are often fictional by nature, and the events staged to a high degree; a war propaganda film may feature the camera backing ahead of a minesweeping soldier on 'a dangerous village road', and a travel film may present a 'tourist' — played by an actor — guiding the camera through the sights and experiences of a certain route or city. The 'non-fictionality' of the films is thus actualized more in their depiction of something — an event, a location, a national achievement — as 'real' and having an effect on life in Finland. The filmmakers have realized this effect by using various means of audiovisual expression. These include writing the speaker's commentary in the present tense, incorporating scenes from public places and of 'everyday people' engaged in their chores, showing an awareness of the camera, and subordinating the occasional narrative human interest elements to the principal aim and theme of the film. The characters are seldom named: they are not individuals but representatives of their place of residence, profession, or other role beyond their personal attributes. This also affects how the sonic elements are situated and mixed in the films. In short, source criticism is essential when studying this type of material.

Sound in 1940s films is almost never completely actuality sound (recorded on location). From the 1950s on, this gradually changes, as lighter and more high-quality field recording equipment became available. Depending on the production company's

resources, a clearly audible difference between the sound quality of material drawn from published library recordings and recorded location sound remains until at least the 1960s.

By the 1940s, all music used in Finnish audiovisual productions had to be licensed. This is a feature of Finnish copyright history that helps a historian when using film as research material. Because of these archived licence documents of the Finnish music authors' organisation Teosto (formed in 1928), we have a good understanding of the sonic material used in films and television. It is therefore possible to conduct a study of the 'reception' and interpretation of different kinds of music among filmmakers in twentieth-century Finland. The process of combining data from my two sources — the Teosto archives and the National Audiovisual Institute of Finland — is currently in progress.

I have sampled two sets of films from the National Audiovisual Institute archives more extensively. The first set includes war propaganda newsreels from the Continuation War (1941 – 44), where Finland, after a short 15-month period of peace following the Winter War (1939 – 40), returned to fight against the Soviet Union in WWII, allied with Nazi Germany. The second set consists of educational films from the series *Our Culture and Us* (1938 – 52). I have also viewed other educational short films; because of my overall aim (finding sonic features of the image of Finland) there was an emphasis on travel films, presenting several locations in Finland from the 1940s to the early 1960s.

### War propaganda

The 86 publicly shown propaganda newsreels made during WWII were called *Surveys of the Armed Forces* (SoAF). These films had two aims: to evoke goodwill outside Finland; and to strengthen patriotism and trust in victory locally. Every Finnish cinema showed the newsreels, and newspapers estimated 'tens of millions' viewers around the world (Sedergren & Kippola 2009, p. 362).

The soundtracks on the *Surveys* consist of three elements: read commentary from written and carefully inspected manuscripts; rare sound effects (possibly partly from the Finnish broadcasting company Yleisradio, but also staged and taped material); and naturally, music. There is no commissioned music nor exclusive performances included on the *Survey* soundtracks. All music is taken from pre-recorded material — either Yleisradio tapes or commercially available recordings. Very few sound effects were included on the soundtracks, with the notable exception of the sounds of firearms.

Most of the music heard comes from different Finnish composers — classical orchestral repertoire and so-called 'lighter repertoire'. Some instances of lighter

orchestral music from other European composers is included, as is popular dance music where entertainment or infrequent cheerful moments are featured. The lighter orchestral music composers are not necessarily the canonical names of today, but 'lesser' composers, perhaps familiar to some viewers of the time from light music concerts, a tradition that had been fading in Finland since the beginning of the twentieth century. Not all music used in war propaganda was necessarily familiar to the majority of viewers in the movie theatres however, and symphonic repertoire certainly was not. Orchestral concerts had mainly been attended by the middle and upper classes, and the movie theatre audience included a wider spectrum of the population than the concerts did. One thing is absolutely indisputable in the Finnish war propaganda soundtracks, and that is the use of Jean Sibelius's music as one of its most defining features. The Teosto documents reveal that his work was heard nearly as much as all the other composers put together. Based on my listening sessions, I would also say that, as a rule, the instances of Sibelius's music are in longer stretches than that of other composers' music. The overall impact of this collective media experience has also extended to later media contents in a powerful way.

The prominence of certain composers or styles in propaganda was possibly derived from the German model, the *Wochenschau* propagandistic newsreel. The German propaganda machinery used music and sound extensively, with one of their main musical categories being orchestral classics — large symphonic sounds written by composers who were not racially 'dubious' and 'völkisch' in their composing (Chamblee, 2003). In Germany, the most important composer in this regard was Richard Wagner. As frequently as other Finnish composers' work was utilized in the newsreels, none could match Sibelius's significance and fame inside and outside of Finland. In his case, fame and appreciation were more important than the (indisputably anti-modernist) style of the composer's works, or his ancestry. For Finnish viewers of propaganda, an added positive attribute of Sibelius came from his active and visible role in the independence efforts during the late nineteenth century.

Music had several roles in the war propaganda newsreel soundtracks. They included — though often in modified forms — the roles typical of film music: creating and maintaining the defining mood of the film; creating continuity between scenes; and guiding the spectator's interpretation of what is seen and heard. In addition to these basic functions, I will present two attributes that stem from the character of war propaganda — the transformative function and the collectivizing function.

In creating the mood of war propaganda films, music sometimes bypasses the visuals as well as other sonic elements — spoken message and the sound effects. This interesting trait of war propaganda film sound is illustrated with an analysis of a scene from *SoAF 2* (1941) that follows a section where the Finnish army has been shown recapturing a Karelian village and the surroundings subsequently being cleared of possible enemy forces and mines. A Finnish soldier is filmed sweeping mines on a village road. The soldier's movements are cautious and considered. He is using a modest tool, — a stick taken from a tree — to inspect the road from side to side. The scene is clearly staged however: the camera is backing in front of the concentrating soldier on the 'dangerous' road, a setting that would have created a life-threatening situation for the cameraman had the road actually been unswept for mines.

The narration emphasizes the precision and danger involved in the work. But throughout the scene the speaker also continues to relieve the mood with humorous



Image 1: *Survey of the Armed Forces 2*, 1941: the mine-sweeping soldier proceeding carefully on the Karelian village road. © The National Audiovisual Institute, Finland.



Image 2: *Survey of the Armed Forces 2*, 1941: the third 'unhealthy bread loaf', hidden by the Russian forces on the mined road and found by the 'precise and level-headed Finnish soldier'. © The National Audiovisual Institute, Finland.

notions. These include calling the Soviet fighters by the Finnish nickname 'iivana', their mines and ambushes 'pranks', and the mines themselves 'unhealthy bread loaves'.

This kind of boyish adventure book's language is present in many Finnish propaganda films. It counterpoints the general rhetoric of the heroic, morally impeccable Finnish soldier, softening the message and creating the image of warfare as catering to the masculine craving for thrills. No sound effects are audible on the soundtrack and thus probably have not been included in this scene. Musically, however, the scene is constructed as if something — cavalry, a fleet of aeroplanes or boats — was storming victoriously towards the enemy.

The music — a symphony orchestra at full throttle playing the 'Intermezzo' from Sibelius's *Karelia Suite* — certainly undermines the suspense that is being simultaneously built, partly through the verbal message and partly through the visual information of the cautious movements of the minesweeper. This feature of propaganda film music



is recurrent and stems from the aims of the audiovisual message. No qualms about the mission, mood or determination of the Finnish troops is permissible in the genre. Even in those cases where there are subtle cues of hardship in the verbal narration, the music eschews any lamenting tones. The closest musical expression to feelings of sorrow or concern are used in a section of *Survey 29* (1942) where wounded soldiers are treated. Here, the elegiac and gentle music of Sibelius's *The Lover* is used. The music is counterbalanced throughout, however, with visual materials and verbal narration that emphasize efficiency and determination.

The transformative function of war propaganda film music is associated with the task of the filmmakers to convey the impression of meaningful action and a sense of coherence. This is especially needed when the visual material presents isolated battle scenes from the front or monotonous routine tasks. The music lends support to the verbal message in turning chaos, violence and hardship into elements of a narrative implying the Armed Forces are in command of the situation. Indeed, an important streak of this function consists of emphasizing the active, forward-looking role of the Finnish forces even when the film material — or the current war — did not convey an active image.

The function of music in the SoAFs that I have called 'collectivizing' underlines the noble cause of fighting. It places the activities of fighting and persevering beyond individuals, on and off screen. This is in no way unique in propaganda music: the uplifting and rousing sounds, mostly produced collaboratively by an ensemble of musicians (solo performances are infrequent), aspire to ring with national consciousness. In the case of Finland, the use of collective musical utterances also aims to reverse or at least relieve the concern brought about by the evident imbalance of a miniature state fighting a superpower. When it comes to using Sibelius especially, the symphonic music also acts to inject historical significance to the fight, with the use of a large orchestral sound and pieces known (at least to upper- and middle-class viewers) for their significant role during the time of Finland's efforts in seceding from Russia around the turn of the century. In my view, this is one important factor in the frequent use of a symphony orchestra sound in Finnish war propaganda: the sound directly implies a social act of a large number of musicians / citizens, working together for a shared goal (cf. e.g. van Leeuwen 1999, pp. 72 – 79).

In the case of Sibelius, and particularly his symphonies, the films also established (temporary) recognizable tropes such as efficiency, perseverance, home front motivation, and gentleness. It was typical for the third symphony, for example, to



be combined with scenes of the munition industry or similar tangible war efforts. Another example is the tone poem *The Oceanides* being used in scenes depicting sea transport, the navy, or other conceivable contexts such as the watery chaos resulting from the Finnish troops blowing up a dam in order to drive the enemy out of a village (*Survey 26*, 1941).

Sibelius apparently gave permission not only to use any and all of his work in the war propaganda, but to use it for free. The permission itself does not seem to have been documented in print, but the constant use of his music was, and in a detailed way — it is these archival documents that I am relying upon in my research. However, no financial transactions resulting from the propaganda use took place between Sibelius and Teosto. Before and after the war, this was not the case: it was and is very hard to gain permission to use Sibelius' symphonies alongside moving images, and a fee is always required. (Kilpiö 2017.)

#### Our Culture and Us: a cultural representation of Finland

Several series of films about Finnish artists, musicians, scientists, and writers were produced during the tax deductions era. In what follows I will draw examples from the first of the 'genre', *Our Culture and Us* — a series of films initiated in 1938 by the folklore scholar Martti Haavio and social scientist Lauri Aadolf Puntila for the Finnish Cultural Foundation (Sedergren & Kippola, 2009, pp. 192 – 4, p. 196). The idea was to exhibit to Finns the literature, art and science of their own country and so these films were not made for promoting Finland outside the country.

The nearly 20 episodes of the series present cultural, historical, industrial, and geographical features of the country. Not all the episodes have been preserved, so for this analysis I have only been able to choose from those films with sound that are still available. They constitute a selection of artists and scientists, and areas such as geology or chemistry, and show people in their working environments and, sometimes, during their leisure time. Each episode is focused on a specific 'advanced' feature of the Finnish culture. Some of the films from 1940s onwards contain sections with on-location sound.

One sonic characteristic of the decade after WWII is the significant use of several trusted (mostly male) voices as narrators. The *Our Culture and Us* series presents a typical example of the abundant use of a narrator's reassuring input on the soundtracks. The narrator would be audible almost throughout the film, providing the spectator with an interpretation of all the events on screen. Foremost of the 'national narrators' was Carl-

Erik Creutz, whose voice, with his slightly Swedish-speaking accent, was omnipresent in Finnish audiovisual products, from newsreels to sports films to the national public broadcasting company — Yleisradio's productions. This feature is close to what Bjørn Sørenssen wrote about Norwegian films in his article 'The Voice of Reconstruction: the Norwegian postwar newsreel' (Sørenssen, 1996).

A closer analysis is presented in episode number 10 (*Kalevala* 1949). The film is definitely one of the most pronouncedly nationalistic in the series, and is scripted by Haavio and Puntila. It features the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* (a work of epic poetry compiled from national folklore and mythology in 1835 by Elias Lönnrot) and its impact on the arts in Finland and around the world. The film opens with a long sequence of nature shots from the 'runo country' of Karelia. It explicitly connects the inspired 'runolahjainen yksilö' (an individual with endowment in poetry) with the Finnish countryside through narration:

The poetry in our national epic *Kalevala* was sung by common men and women. Nature, in its beauty and magnificence, has inspired poem-making with its wonders, as have adventures on open waters and in endless wild territories experienced or heard by the singers. From these experiences, in a moment of inspiration, the individual with endowment in poetry produced a poem that has travelled from mouth to mouth.

The narration celebrates these individuals not as gifted personalities — that role is reserved for contemporary artists and scientists — but mainly as preservers of a tradition, inspired by nature. No visual material of runo singers is combined with this narration: the film presents images of a stately pine forest and a wide, swirling torrent, matched musically with Sibelius's *Karelia Suite*. The choice of composer and work is self-explanatory: the inspiration for the suite (originally incidental music) was known to have come from the culture and nature of the Karelia district. The runo singers and tradition bearers are here brought out to the spectator as an invisible outcome of the local natural conditions — or perhaps even as a 'spirit of the Finnish nation' that cannot be separated from its source of inspiration. This continuum from nature to oral tradition is then linked to contemporary artists and writers via the *Kalevala* epic since they are shown, and verbally described as creating significant art that is based on the poems and characters in *Kalevala*.

The sonic image of the nation in this film is the most high-brow of the series. The speaker's tone is ceremonial throughout the film: the chosen social distance from the

spectators is one of an assembly hall orator. The music proceeds with a narrative and justification of its own. This is intentional and expressed verbally at the end: ‘. . . the music of Sibelius, which we have had the chance to enjoy throughout the film’. Perhaps the most interesting detail in the sonic structure of the film is an omission. Runo singing — the origin of Kalevala poetry — had been recorded from the earliest times of sound recording technology. This happened from 1905 onwards, when the first recording devices to be used in Finland were introduced by the Finnish Literature Society. The writers of the film script, Martti Haavio and Lauri A. Puntila, were very well aware of the archives of the Society; Haavio was the Society’s director. There is, however, no trace of runo material on the soundtrack. The runo singers on the recordings naturally would not have been those who inspired the compilation of the epic in 1835. However, this oral tradition as a whole is given no voice, and the runo singers are only visible on film as statues created by the ‘best of the sculptors’ in



Image 3: *Our Culture and Us part 10 (Kalevala)*: nature scenes are shown and the Karelia Suite by Sibelius played when presenting the role of the vernacular runo artists. © The National Audiovisual Institute, Finland.



Image 4: *Our Culture and Us part 10 (Kalevala)*: sculptor, professor Väinö Aaltonen using his skills to create 'lasting beauty' inspired by Kalevala. © The National Audiovisual Institute, Finland.

Finland. In addition to the authoritarian voice of the narrator, the soundtrack features — and later in the film, also verbally foregrounds — Sibelius's *Karelia Suite*. Using the nationally important composer's music (titled and themed suitably) is not surprising, but the dominance of the music in the soundtrack is. The runo singers are largely absent from the visual material of the film, and entirely so from the soundtrack.

Since these omissions are conscious choices made by the filmmakers, it is worthwhile considering their meanings and implications. My interpretation is twofold. Firstly, the filmmakers viewed the singers as simply tradition bearers: rather than being portrayed as artists and individuals in their own right, they are seen more or less as 'faceless' carriers of tradition, from the alien era of oral culture. Secondly, since the nationalistic project had been (and continued to be in the 1940s) very tightly associated with written culture, passing over the oral tradition as mere raw material for the veritable artists of the day was a conceivable, even natural, choice. Those constructing national epics had been, in Keith Bosley's oft-cited words, 'concerned less with fidelity to sources than with the validation of a national culture' (Lefevere 1998, p. 79). With its expressive

choices, the film carries on validating Finnish national culture, which is especially clear when the treatment of sonic materials is analysed.

In Finnish short films of the late 1940s and 1950s, the frequent use of Sibelius's compositions continues. There are differences, however: those works by Sibelius that are used in *Our Culture and Us* series are not the symphonies used in war propaganda, but smaller compositions and pieces originally composed for the stage. Compared with the war-time films, this means a move back to the pre-war practice of using chamber music pieces and incidental music, and leaving the symphonies to be heard in live performances in concert halls and, of course, from recordings. During peace, the sonic representation of the Finnish nation thus did not require as dramatic and urgent sonic action as using the majestic symphonies of the towering figure of Finnish music: that was reserved for war-time purposes.

The sonic image presented in the *Our Culture and Us* series is also typical of Finnish travel films of the 1940s and 1950s. Sound effects and location sounds are rarely present, Sibelius's ever-present incidental music and a narrator (generally with a formal, even ceremonial public announcer tone) are the recurrent choices for the soundtrack. The influence of the introduction of television into daily life in Finland in the late 1950s, however, is audible in film documentary and especially in films that have commercial significance, such as travel films.

The sonic expression in television, especially advertising, differed from theatre productions in several ways: the loudspeakers were now smaller and thus created a less impressive sound. During the early years, in the late 1950s, television programming was mostly carried out live. Television advertising was costly compared to cinema advertising, and the production processes were hectic. This led to extensive use of two music content providers: 1) small (often jazzy) combos working or long hours with little time for rehearsals, and 2) catalogue/library music collections. Television was also the hot new medium, spreading quickly to Finnish homes. The smaller sound production and quicker pace of television content gradually started seeping into other Finnish audiovisual material of the early 1960s. This is most often audible in films whose content gives reason for advertisement-type expression: travel films, presentations of industries or services, consumer practices such as savings accounts in banks, etc.

## Conclusion

The use of music and sound to construct an image of Finland has gone through several phases of which the first significant one was war-time propaganda. The need to create

a favourable image of Finland as a western civilization was urgent, since the goodwill and perhaps also the help of some other western nations was at stake. Another crucial function of music and sound was to reassure Finns of the historic significance and shared task of the noble fight. By the final stages of the Continuation War (in 1944 and 1945), voices emerged questioning whether or not it was justified to continue the offensive beyond the old Finnish-Russian border and whether Germany was the best possible choice for comrade-in-arms. All these factors contributed to the main features of soundtrack design for propaganda purposes. Using Jean Sibelius's works extensively has been and remains a hallmark feature in audiovisually representing Finnish nationalism. War propaganda took advantage of the composer's fame and associated goodwill by the practice of using mainly his works for a large symphony orchestra to parallel the social unit of the symphony orchestra on the soundtrack with the Finnish people in the audience. The tone of the Armed Forces newsreels speaker was kept relatively friendly and inclusive (to Finns) — in contrast to the German *Wochenschau* newsreels, where the speakers used a more military-sounding tone.

The second significant phase in constructing the soundtracks can be heard in the reconstruction era, from 1945 to the end of the 1950s. This era features several narrators whose voices built trust about the progress of Finnish society. This era again normalizes a more diverse spectrum of musics: Sibelius's incidental music, chamber music, and light popular classics — but also, little by little, jazz and other popular music genres.

From the introduction of television in Finland at the very end of 1950s, different kinds of influences find their way to the soundtracks. The visual rhythm develops towards quicker cuts and swift changes between shot types. This visual development also affects the tone and pacing of the narration, that evolves with the help of advances in recording technology, bringing the total auditory experience closer to the short and snappy expression of television (see also Kilpiö 2005, pp. 164 – 7, p. 314).

The Finnish professional audiovisual scene, being small but very receptive to new technologies and trends, constitutes a good case study for finding out how sonic expression in non-fiction film has developed during the last 80 years. More detailed research, preferably with a comparative take from several countries, would be welcome to gain a better understanding of the developments and trends in the professional production of documentaries and short films.

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