

What do you want with a heaven where you can't yoik? Áilluhaš' significance for the Sámi yoik.

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Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (Áilluhaš) is perhaps the most diverse Sámi artist who has ever lived, and his work with yoik had particular significance. He was very occupied with yoik, and with building respect for it, and his vision of music, poetry and visual art was holistic.

The artist Valkeapää

In 1968 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää released the record *Juoikuja* in Finland. He was one of the first to modernize the yoik by providing accompaniment for it, and he was the first to release a yoik album. He was very insistent that Sámi culture should avoid becoming a museum artifact, that it should instead continue to develop and adjust to modern society.

Putting music to yoik can create problems. The yoik can easily be locked into fixed rhythms and keys. On this first record it seems that he is singing off key—a little sharp. But he was extremely musical, so this really stems from a collision between a western tradition in which the pitch is supposed to remain fixed, and an older Sámi tradition in which even the pitch is allowed to rise a little.

He released a number of albums, including two CDs in connection with the poetry collection *The Sun, My Father*. He won a Grand Prix in Italy in 1993 for “The Bird Symphony,” a composition consisting primarily of an arrangement of birdsong and other natural sounds. The journalist Per Kristian Olsen has characterized this as one of the most bold and astonishing works in recent Nordic musical history. The yoik “Sámi eatnan duoddariid,” which he created, has been called Sámi Land’s unofficial national anthem. Valkeapää’s own personal yoik also had a beautiful melody. Jan Garbarek recorded it on an album, and it’s a bit of a historical irony that this melody was used for many years as the theme music for the radio program *På Kirkebakken* (In the Churchyard). Many people didn’t realize that the theme music for this Christian program was, in fact, a yoik.

Early on he began a collaboration with some highly skilled Finnish jazz musicians. Two of them followed him over a large swath of his career: Seppo “Baron” Paakuunainen (saxophone) and Esa Kotilainen (keyboard). They created music that was able to follow some of the freedom of the yoik, without necessarily being restricted to fixed rhythms and tempos, or fixed length or even fixed melody formulation. Eventually Valkeapää developed a form of yoiking that the scholar Harald Gaski has termed a form of “art yoik,” something that is easily recognizable as yoik, but that is also quite artistically developed.

Valkeapää often sought out children and youth and included them in his concerts. For his record *Juoigamat* he brought in a number of additional performers, and he included children on that album. One young performer was Johan Anders Bær, who, with time, has himself become an established name in yoik and has released albums of his own. Another was Åsa Simma in Sweden. She has told how she accompanied Nils-Aslak on a long concert tour when she was only nine years old, and how inspiring that was for her. When she began school again in the fall, she heard from her classmates that she was going straight to hell, and, besides, that she must be an alcoholic, because only drunkards yoiked. She was distressed, and phoned Nils-Aslak, telling him what sort of misery he had created for her. The answer he gave came to mean a lot to her: “Åsa, what do you want with a heaven where you can’t yoik?”

He performed concerts across much of the world. He was often in Japan, for instance. And in 1975 he took part in the first meeting of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, in Canada. A number of representatives there were skeptical of Sámi participation, because of their light skin color, but when Nils-Aslak performed a yoik the skepticism dissolved, and the Sámi were accepted on an equal footing with all the others.

He also broadened his perspective beyond yoik, holding several concerts with old Sámi hymns, in which he composed new lyrics for the melodies. The recording was released after his death. One of the songs, *Giitu buot attáldagain* (Thanks for all the gifts), has been included in the new Sámi hymnal, *Sálbmagirji II*.

Valkeapää’s biggest performance ever was opening the Olympic Games in Lillehammer in 1994. The Opening Ceremonies were seen by hundreds of millions of people. He made a new yoik in a very traditional style for the opening, which he later released on an album.

The trailblazer Valkeapää

On Easter Saturday in 1972 the first yoik concert was held in Kautokeino. Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was one of the organizers, and a mainstay of this tradition during its early years. The concert drew a full house. This was during a time when the interest in local culture was growing throughout the country. The time was ripe for this initiative. Since then the Easter Festival has only grown and grown; from 1995 on it has been part of the national budget. Eventually it developed into the Sámi Melody Grand Prix, which is arranged each year with categories for both traditional yoik and Sámi pop music.

Valkeapää was also involved in founding a new Sámi music company, *DAT*, after the company *Jår’gelæddji* dissolved. *DAT* has continued after his death, and has released a number of albums by many different artists.

An important aspect of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was that he brought yoik out into public space. The yoik was something that lived primarily in very intimate environments; it belonged where everybody knew each other. When a person received his or her own yoik melody, it became a musical name for that person, a sort of signature, a recognizable feature. This meant that yoik could be used in communication between people. They could yoik to each other, and they could yoik about each other.

But Nils-Aslak Valkeapää did something new. He elevated yoik to a theatrical form of expression, to an art form of concerts and albums. There had been others before him who performed yoiks in public concerts, but Nils-Aslak is one of the most important figures in the modernization and development of the yoik.

This creates a new social meaning for the yoik. In a concert it's not always that important whose yoik one is performing; the music itself becomes the focus. At the same time there is the important, underlying message that one is proud of the yoik, that the yoik is a characteristic Sámi cultural expression that has lived for hundreds of years, and that one wants it to continue to live on as a part of Sámi culture.

The poet Valkeapää

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää has written many poems where yoik is included as an important component.

spring

a spirited yoik
makes my mind bloom

From *The Sun, My Father*, translated by Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström and Harald Gaski.

The yoik is alive in my home
the happiness of children sounds there
herd-bells ring
dogs bark
the lasso hums
In my home
The fluttering edges of *gáktis*
the leggings of the Sámi girls
warm smiles

From *Trekways of the Wind*, translated by Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström and Harald Gaski.

In the blue of these tundras
I hear life's tale
in the winds rivers forests
they yoik

From Trekways of the Wind

Such poems have a meaning that goes beyond being beautiful poems. Nils-Aslak is ideologizing about the yoik, he is tying it to nature and the whole of creation. He is saying that nature's own sounds are yoik. He is also connecting yoik to joy, to children's laughter, to smiles and positive attitudes towards life, to enjoying good camaraderie. He is even claiming that yoik is life's authentic expression.

One has to understand what he is doing in the context of the prejudicial attitudes that existed at the time. He was constantly confronted with the attitude that yoik was simply drunken behavior, that yoik was ugly or that yoik was sinful. These are attitudes that had existed in Norwegian society for a long time. Professor Amund Helland published a three-volume work in 1908 about Finnmark County. Here he writes of yoiking, "When they are drunk, they tend to improvise some nonsense with grunting notes." Similar attitudes also worked their way into Sámi societies, so Nils-Aslak encountered prejudicial attitudes from his own, too.

But to this he respond with, among other things, poems that say that yoik is something positive, something one should love and be proud of. He creates another meaning for the yoik. He uses one artistic medium in the service of another. This has a strong effect.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää will long be remembered as one of the greatest artists Sámiland has ever produced.