

The Pioneers of Soundscape in Finnish Music Education: Listening to Liisa Tenkku and Ellen Urho

By Olli-Taavetti Kankkunen

The history of soundscape education in Finland may be traced to the early 1960s and the pioneering work of Liisa Tenkku and Ellen Urho. These two pioneers, introduced in this paper, brought new and refreshing winds to the field of music education, from research in music education, psychology and the modern music of their time.

In the autumn of 1963 at Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu (the Helsinki Finnish Co-Educational School), Tenkku's original intention was to only prepare her pupils for listening to contemporary music. At the same time, she happened to include nearly all of the most essential working methods and ideas: sound games, movement, recording the performance and a graphic score – which was later refined with Ellen Urho. These

lessons may be considered not only the origins of soundscape teaching in Finnish schools, but also important for music education, more generally in Finland. Now sound itself and active listening of sounds had become, in a new way, the starting point of music teaching. Music pedagogue Tenkku, Lic. Phil. (b.1918) tells a lively tale about one of the most *unforgettable* music lessons of her career:

I drummed with my fingers and began: "Now, when it's autumn, everybody remembers the feeling when it rains." Straightaway, all the pupils joined me instinctively with their hands. "But at the same time, it's blowing, isn't it? Yes, but over there is coming a huge cloud!" After we had recorded this performance – rain, wind, thunder and lightning – I continued: "How do we picture those sounds?" Well, the pupils acted spontaneously to draw it on the blackboard, and there we had the very first graphical score, suggested and done visibly by these children – and just by accident!

With her pupils, Tenkku initiated new soundscape worlds. In time, these were connected to illustrations and stories, which guided holistic presentations and performances. This process also led to the discovery and use of graphical scores, which was a small revolution in Finnish music education, normally based on traditional notation.

Besides music education, Liisa Tenkku also studied the history of visual arts, which guided her thinking about the common essence of all arts, the basic concepts of time (duration), space (acoustics), shape (form), power (dynamics) and colour (tone quality). These insights came to fruition in Holland by the end of the 1950s, where

she participated in a pantomime course. The first task was to draw "The Imagination" on a blackboard. This affected her as a shock, a eureka moment: "My personal experience was like I was a key touched for the very first time, a lovely feeling that I am open minded and can do different things and synthesize them. All the arts belong together".

In 1949 and 1950, Tenkku worked as an assistant teacher and accompanist in America in a progressive school nearby Harvard

University. Afterwards, music suddenly appeared in a new way, as a liberating and expressive subject. In the year 1959, Liisa Tenkku obtained an LP-record "Poème Electronique" (1958) for electronic tape by Edgard Varèse. The fact that all concrete and vocal sounds from human voices to church bells were transforming electrically, carried Tenkku into a new sound world. The music of Varèse, which raises noise and timbre as equal to pitch, was the first impulse to be familiar with new music and its notation.

Ellen Urho – collaborator and co-author

Music pedagogue, Ellen Urho, M.A. (b. 1920) had already become acquainted with the music of Varèse in the year 1960, when she was admitted to the master course of Eric Ericsson in Stockholm. "Pelagon" by Hungarian Zoltán Gaál was rehearsed there, which with its allusive, graphic notation demands creative participation: "Like a new world had opened! When tone colour was now 'discovered' again, could music education be founded on it?"

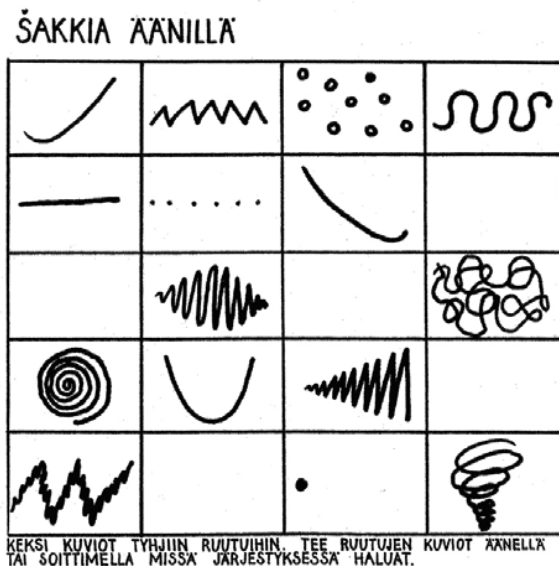
Urho tells how at that time related ideas began to appear in papers in I.S.M.E. conferences (International Society for Music Education). These presentations indicated how to create soundscapes in a class-



Ellen Urho and Liisa Tenkku (right) with some of their teaching equipment.
Aamulehti 17.6.1971

room, but there were no actual demonstrations. On the other hand, Urho remembers a week at the Salzburg's Mozarteum, in the castle Mittersill. During the course, music and arts teachers, actors, dancers and artists had to improvise an entire Oriental opera based on just a text and a few scales.

Listening to avant-garde music was the first spark to set fire to the idea of using it in music education. While new compositions were source materials, pedagogical literature (e.g. Paynter & Aston 1970) and foreign school books containing graphic figures were studies. Murray Schafer's publications (see 1965; 1967; 1969; 1970) and ideas were also known to Urho and Tenkku.



Chess with Sounds, *The Blue Music Box*, page 61

The Twittering-Machine Project

The objective of one project was to produce a new type of music book series for comprehensive schools in Finland. The preliminary title: *Vihreä Viserryskone –projekti* (The Twittering Machine Project), illustrates the main features of the methods used, which were visual imagery, sound and musical instruments. This teaching program produced five books, ranging from preschool through the fourth grade of the comprehensive school. Each part has a student's book, a record and/or cassette, and a teacher's manual, in which both goals and instructions for singing, playing, movement, listening and discovering are included together with tips for teaching conversation and integration. The books are richly illustrated with reproductions of master paintings connected to the contents of the books. Teacher's manuals were published, too.

Vihreä Viserryskone (1972), (The Green Twittering-Machine), for Preschool and First Grade

Songs and exercises for active listening are included in practical teaching, for instance: how the aims of teaching timbre will be actualized when sounds are invented, collected, selected, imitated and combined together. This book contains up to 51 folk melodies from various countries – it was the “international education” of its time.

1 In the English brochure (1976) this book was called *The Red Hurdy-Gurdy*.

2 In the English brochure (1979) this book was called *The Yellow Bells*.

Sininen Soittorasias (1974), (The Blue Music Box), for the Second Grade

The book guides students to notation through play and discovery. The goals for teaching symbols are divided into two sections, old and new notation. The basic ideas are phrasing and the form of music.

Punainen Posetiivi (1976), (The Red Barrel Organ¹), for the Third Grade
Familiarity with composers is developed by listening to both new and traditional music.

Keltainen Kellopele (1977), (The Yellow Glockenspiel²), for the Fourth Grade

The reading of notation proceeds from new towards the traditional.

Sinivihreä Soittorasias (1979), (The Turquoise Musical Box), for the mixed First and Second Grades

This book is a combination of the green and blue books (above).

Additional Finnish folksongs and traditional play songs are included.

During their project, Tenkku and Urho became aware that they had a coherent methodology. Their experimental program for elementary grades, which corresponds to the child's musical development, was a new way in guiding children to experience music. It was based on the actual information furnished by research in music education all over the world. It was not only activation, or inspiration for creativity and musical games, but a logical method designed to progress systematically through the whole of comprehensive schools in Finland (Urho 2000).

The Discovery Method

Because tone quality, the starting point of this new music teaching method, arose as a basis for music education, the method was called Green Twittering-Machine. It was also named: *Sointivärikasvatus* (Timbre Education). By this name, Tenkku and Urho tried to highlight differences between their intention and that of the traditional music education starting from rhythm or melody.

Tenkku and Urho used the concept “Soundscape” to describe graphic scores, sound-made-visible, and performance, which depicts a certain milieu, situation or feeling with sounds. Because the term, as they launched it in music education, meant only one type of musical discovery, the limited meaning of this concept did not justify calling the method *Soundscape Education*. In Finland, this term, taken from R. Murray Schafer, has been used to represent (for instance) music teaching in sound workshops. Its practical meaning, *sound teaching*, is misleading according to Tenkku because it may wrongly refer to: e.g. acoustics, sound engineering, sound design, soundscape design or even voice training:

In music education there is no need for separate sound teaching, because in addition to tones, sound itself is a part of music. The sound per se can be whatever; sounds of the environment, including nature, speaking... all these are accepted materials of music.

In their summer interviews of 2008, Liisa Tenkku and Ellen Urho discussed what their method would be called today. They stated that although many of the 20th century methods were named after their developers (e.g. Dalcroze, Orff and Kodaly), it is better to rethink and stress the foundations of the method. They suggest this method be called *The Discovery Method*, since it includes the most essential ideas as follows:

1. *Total Expression*. This way of working, using all senses simultaneously, is the principal idea behind all teaching.
2. *Creative Problem Solving*. The child learns skills and critical musicality in active and goal-oriented action. Music-making is interplay of thinking, feeling and action.



Making a "sounding tapestry" with sounds, movement and expressions. *Aamulehti* 17.6.1971

3. *Methodological Continuance*. All materials are designed and coordinated to progress systematically in affective, cognitive, and psycho-motor areas of development. The skills and concepts are learned concretely, through experience.

4. *Comprehensive Music Education*. Both new and traditional music, including its notation, leads concurrently to high standards of education.

In addition to writing music books for comprehensive schools, the writers began to create a new didactic for music education. The results of this work were published by name *Musiikin didaktiikka* (Linnankivi, Tenkku & Urho 1981; 1994) (The Didactics of Music Education). This was the very first coherent proposal for such a branch of music education study in Finland. In this book, sound/tone is characterized as a basic concept of didactics for music education. From the qualities of sound, namely: space, duration, pitch, loudness and timbre, are deduced from other main musical concepts (tone quality, rhythm, melody, harmony and dynamics) (Linnankivi, Tenkku & Urho 1994).

Hear with Your Eyes – See with Your Ears

One of the basic intuitions behind this method is that music education is basically grounded on auditory perception. Music education, as a whole, is education towards active listening. Listening as a skill is emphasized right from the start. Sounds and voices are heard and experienced simultaneously with movement and/or visually with pictures, symbols or graphics.

The Discovery Method was a protest in its time to music teaching, which began from drawing a staff and a G clef. The easiest way to start an introduction to reading and marking of notation is a simple form of graphic notation, which, in fact, means a reversion to early times of notation. When music teaching, in this particular way, travels through the history of notation, modern music will be a natural thing for the children.

Let's Play with the Sounds

Creativity, achieved in learning by doing, is not mentioned in the list of objectives, as it is so integral to the contents of the entire material. Creative activities, which are always present during the learning process, mean creating discovery projects using various sound materials in composing and tone painting. In such a creative approach, it is important that the children can create their own

music. It is also really important to record and listen to the compositions because it opens the children's ears to hearing details within tone quality.

In the 1960s Liisa Tenkku designed the so called *preparatory action*, consisting of project-type *sound games*. Their objective is to train the children in listening, toward understanding the sound world of the music they are going to hear next. Sound game, *sound colour game*, *graphic score* and *sound composition* are different names for total expression, where music is made visible or visible music audible. It is music making in a broad sense, because it nearly always includes drawing and/or paintings, inventive moving and working with music materials, sound and silence.

Contemporary Critical Voices

Tenkku and Urho had great enthusiasm and a strong vision that the current system of music education could be changed. Their method was successful and warmly welcomed in several pilot schools and many international conferences. The developers gave courses to inspired teachers during school holidays, but soon the series of their books vanished from book markets. What actually happened?

According to the Method developers, the time was not ready for their ideas in the 1970s. On the contrary, teachers and parents criticised their books: music books without "real and correct musical notes" were not accepted and the rhythmical accompaniments were not considered suitable for school children. Ellen Urho recalls that so called territorial thinking was quite strong within art subjects, and that is why the total expression and pictures of paintings by great masters as illustrations irritated many people:

They even wrote in newspapers and asked why we start the teaching like this: there is no real singing and we don't give the musical staff to children. The G-clef on the staff was "the holy cow!"

Afterwards, it is easy to realize that the revolutionary ideas were misunderstood or adopted in fragments, which led to stereotyped use of the method. Attention was paid to secondary matters. For instance, the authors used, with good intentions, colourings which



Lecturer Liisa Tenkku guiding children to add movement to musical elements. *Aamulehti* 27.6.1973

followed the titles of the books. Perhaps their red colour and comics' style were ahead of their time. The Method also had to give way to "new waves" and "emphases" in music education. The interviewees' commentaries indicate three possible reasons why The Method was gradually pushed to the background:

1. Centricity of the teacher. This method requires an enthusiastic and competent teacher, who is a charismatic and creative leader. The role of the teacher can also be seen differently (e.g. teacher as a coach, if he or she doesn't want to be in the centre of the teaching situation).

One has to pay attention to the personality of a student teacher and to the ability to encourage pupils. This must be recognized within entrance examinations for new students. Guidance towards a student's personal freedom and expression has to begin during studies.

2. Modern art music. Actually, people were not interested in contemporary classical music.

Any method or music genre, which is given as an alternative for the dominating and powerful pop music, is in trouble when the decibels are rolling in full swing.

3. Listening. This essential, methodological emphasis on listening is more and more difficult to carry out when the general ability of children to concentrate on listening seems to be becoming weaker.

It is for this reason we should now teach active listening. Silence is the right starting point. It is very important to find the very first experience or moment of stopping to listen. After that you can hear a dog running in the snow.

The Pioneers' Relations with Soundscape

In the 1960s, Finnish music education was not generally interested in sonic environment, but as early as in 1967 Liisa Tenkku proposed that an introduction to sound material and especially to tone quality should be included in the music curriculum.

Tenkku and Urho used and experimented with sound materials and graphic scores at school with the children. Then they systematically collected and formulated their ideas in books. This makes them the "soundscape pioneers" in Finnish music education. Their joint pedagogical ideas, creativity, improvisation, total expression and communication are topical issues of today. When we refer to their Discovery Method and to the historical circumstances in which they created it, we can consider them to be at the avant-garde of music education.

Ellen describes the music educator's relationship with the sonic environment as follows:

When I am sitting outside and listening to all those sounds I hear, I write a sound score. Then I take that to my next music lesson and tell the students: "Let's make what I have heard!" Thus, sounds I hear are transferred into visible form, and then this is implemented into music. As music educators with a keen ear, we listen sensitively to every sound and the whole sonic environment. At the same time we can be composers creating something new.

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Photo: Olli-Taavetti Kankkunen

Tenkku & Urho in summer 2008.

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