

# The Music of Scandinavia

A Combined Study of Vikings, Finland, and Antti Martikainen

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## Abstract

This paper discusses Viking music and how it derives from Norse mythology and other aspects of Nordic culture. By tracing the modern musical subgenre of Viking metal and how it is geographically linked to the North, this paper uses “the North” in reference to Scandinavia. It also touches on Finnish folk literature and how it has influenced the works of many Finnish composers. In the latter portion of this paper, these final two topics will be combined in a breakdown of the compositions of Antti Martikainen, a current Finnish musical composer. This project contains many possible highlights for aspiring film score composers, and its purpose is to ignite a similar intrigue for Scandinavian music in readers.

## Introduction

When most people hear of “the Vikings,” images of rugged, ruthless, barbaric killers may come to mind. Although they were most well known for their violent invasions of foreign territories, the Vikings had a tremendously developed culture and well-organized tiers for their society. Susan M. Margeson states in *Eyewitness: Viking* that these ruthless barbarians were also great sailors and craftsmen with a “rich tradition of story-telling” (Margeson 6). When the Vikings were introduced to Christianity, it sparked many changes in their cultural traditions—including those related to music. From observing this correlation, one could in turn theorize that Viking music derives from Norse mythology and reflects other aspects of Nordic culture.

From the eighth through the eleventh centuries, the Vikings inhabited the majority of Scandinavia, a geographic region located north of Europe and directly west of Russia. Scandinavia consists of five countries: Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Finland, and Sweden. Greenland is often acknowledged as its own country, but the island itself is actually a property of Denmark. Norway, Denmark, and Sweden are often referred to as “the Nordic countries,” and these countries are where the Vikings made their homes. According to Patricia Slade Lander and Claudette Charbonneau, the researchers behind *The Land and People of Norway*, Vikings put Scandinavia on the map (Lander and Charbonneau 77). Scandinavia is undoubtedly most well known today because of Viking notoriety.

## Vikings: An Overview

Wanderlust proved central to Nordic culture and motivated the Vikings’ drive to explore. The term wanderlust literally means “a strong longing for or impulse toward wandering,” but associating it with barbaric Viking nature has often given the word a negative connotation (“Wanderlust”). As previously mentioned, the Vikings occupied Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, but they loved to sail

and explore new lands. Records show that Vikings settled in Iceland, Germany, Eastern Europe, the British Isles, and Normandy—the latter being known today as Belgium and Holland. Swedish Vikings generally sailed east in the direction of Russia and the Middle East; in contrast, Norwegian and Danish Vikings tended to travel southwest towards the British Isles and Europe (Lander and Charbonneau 79). Norwegian Vikings established colonies in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the Isle of Man. Some Norwegians also made their way to Constantinople, which is today the city of Istanbul in Turkey in the Middle East. Viking warrior Harald Hardrade served in Constantinople underneath the Byzantine emperor and later went on to become King of Norway in 1046. The terms “Norwegian” and “Viking” can be used interchangeably to describe the same group of people in medieval history. More often than not, this research will focus specifically on Norwegian Vikings because Nordic culture constitutes the majority of Viking culture.

When pondering the Vikings’ niche, raiding probably comes to mind first. The official “Age of the Vikings” began in the year 793 when Norwegian Vikings attacked the monastery at Lindisfarne, a small island off the northeast coast of England. The monks who survived this attack wrote graphic, detailed stories about it, thus launching the origin of the Vikings’ barbaric reputation (Lander and Charbonneau 81). To this day, no historian is entirely certain about why the Vikings raided. Many think the raids were associated with the polygamic customs of Viking nobles, noting that a Viking man’s status was elevated with every wife he gained. Others surmise that the Vikings raided out of a need for resources, which would be diminishing with the growing population of their home countries (Lander and Charbonneau 83). Nonetheless, most historians attribute raiding to wanderlust and the Vikings’ affinity for exploring.

The Vikings were excellent sailors and took great pride in their ships. The ninth century was a critical time for Viking explorers, as this was when the glaciers started to melt and there was more ocean to sail. Norwegians mainly sailed for trading and exploring, and in early and medieval times, Norwegians were the only Western sailors to sail beyond then-known landmarks. Vikings knew how to use the sun, stars, wind, fish, seabirds, and sometimes even wave patterns as means of navigation (Margeson 8). Erik the Red, a well-known Norwegian Viking, was the first to set foot in Greenland, while his son, Leif Ericson, was first to set foot in North America (Lander and Charbonneau 91; Margeson 6). The Vikings’ deft sailing skills could definitely fuel and perpetuate a compelling thirst for adventure.

In addition to raiding and sailing, the Vikings are also known for their craftsmanship. Viking laymen crafted a diverse collection of objects from many different materials, ranging from wooden ships and metal weapons to woolen clothing and golden jewelry (Lander and Charbonneau 61). Craftsmen would sometimes label their objects with letters of the Old Norse alphabet, termed *runes*. These labeling techniques ranged in purpose from a craftsman putting his personal mark on the created piece to symbolizing dedication of a piece to a person or a legendary figure (Margeson 59). Vikings took great pride in their craftsman skills and the products of those labors. However, these extraordinary skills would come as a surprise to those who erroneously consider Vikings to be blood-thirsty barbarians.

### **Viking Culture**

As an important part of Viking culture, shipbuilding both distinguished Vikings from other people groups and satisfied the Viking niche. Once again exhibiting their tremendous capacity for craftsmanship, the Vikings built strong, slender, symmetrical ships, sometimes carving the heads of terrifying beasts into the stem-posts to intimidate foes. Different types of wood served different purposes in the ship-building process, but the keel of a Viking ship was commonly built of oak—the strongest known wood. As a sailing vessel, the Viking ships needed strong sails: one rectangular sail of homespun wool accompanied each ship, and leather strips were often stitched onto the sail in a diagonal pattern to strengthen the cloth (Lander and Charbonneau 86). A Viking's life at sea proved very important, and many considered their ships their second homes. Some warriors even requested to be buried in their ships (Margeson 54). As an artifact of the Viking ages of seafaring warriors, one of the best preserved Viking ships to this day is Gokstad, found in Oslo, Norway. It can carry thirty-two shields on each side and has a keel built from a single piece of oak about eighty-two feet long (Margeson 8). Clearly deserving of their reputation as one of the greatest shipbuilding cultures, the Vikings prided themselves in the craftsmanship that produced their famous warships and in the fruit of their seafaring adventures on those extraordinary vessels.



On the sociological front of class ranking, Viking culture kept these categories plain and simple. There were three main ranks, the lowest of which being the thralls, or slaves. The slaves usually did the majority of the hard labor and were often prisoners of war, but there was always an

opportunity for them to be freed. Noting the Vikings' gruesome view of slaves as mere property, slaves were often killed and buried with their owners (Margeson 28). The middle socioeconomic rank consisted of freedmen, also known as laymen, who worked as farmers, craftsmen, traders, warriors and landowners. They dressed appropriately for their labors in woolen tunics, woolen pants, leather belts, and goatskin shoes. Each belt was fastened with a metal buckle, and the ornateness of the buckle could signal the wealth of the wearer (Margeson 29). Although the majority of Viking culture consisted of these first two strata of peoples, the highest echelon of Viking leadership ruled the population. The Vikings of this highest status were the nobles. Also referred to as chieftains, this noble class ruled small areas of land, similar to the idea of a village that would be populated by laymen. Nobles would initiate the infamous Viking raids to conquer more land and gain more power. In addition to the woolen tunics and pants typical of all Norwegians, chieftains wore cloaks of dyed wool and undershirts of silk, imported from overseas (Lander and Charbonneau 89). Although simple in terms of having only three tiers of class ranking, the Viking social stratification was broad enough to allow room for expanding population and to provide laborers for cultural exploration.

The Vikings arranged what is perhaps the earliest known system of democracy. Similar to a town hall meeting, the Vikings created a forum for gathering to handle discussion-based communication. This forum was known as the Thing, or "ting," as spelled in the modern Norwegian language. During a Thing, freedmen gathered to settle disputes, make group decisions, or voice opinions about a chieftain (Margeson 28). Considered a safe setting for airing grievances, participants could speak freely without fear of any aggressive reaction. A freedman could arrange for a Thing by launching an arrow to a neighboring farm. In the case of a legal dispute, one villager was assigned to memorize the laws, and he would be designated "law man" for future Things from then on (Lander and Charbonneau 79). Each district under its own chieftain in Norway conducted its own Thing. However, after monarchies were established in the Nordic countries, there was no longer a need for a Thing (Margeson 28). Quite advanced as a communication forum for the medieval era, the Viking Thing stood out as an exemplary sociological structure for keeping the peace in a well governed society.

Medieval Norwegian culture had a liberating feminist outlook on society. A Viking woman had the authority to own property and to choose her own husband—and possibly divorce him if she was unsatisfied. In Viking families, with the men usually overseas, the wives managed the homes and the farms. They made clothes for the family, raised the children, and tended to the crops. Many

ancient Viking runes praised women for their handiwork and housekeeping feats (Margeson 30). The medieval Norwegian laws distinguished between laymen and slaves, but never between men and women (Lander and Charbonneau 79). While other medieval cultures prioritized the men and left women posing as inferior beings, Viking culture regarded women as men's equals. Today, Norway has had an Equal Status Act since 1978 (Lander and Charbonneau 79). Rooted in gender equality, the structure of society of medieval Norway still serves as a template for succeeding societies thousands of years later.

The majority of everyday Viking life revolved around their dwelling places. In the Nordic countries, these abodes were typically built of wooden planks with floors of stamped earth and roofs of sod for insulation. When Viking families settled in foreign lands, however, they adapted to different construction customs. Since hardy lumber was scarce in Greenland, Iceland, and other North Atlantic islands, houses there were built of stone or dug out of the ground like caves (Margeson 32). The fireplace was located in the center of the "main hall," or living room, and a small opening in the roof was positioned directly above the fireplace as a "smoke hole." As the heart of the living room, the warmth of the fireplace established every Viking home. Surrounding the fireplace were wooden benches for dwellers to dine on or rest on during the day. At night these benches were laden with cushions to provide comfort for sleeping. Wealthier households had other articles of furniture, such as bed frames and chairs, and some richer families even had storage chests for their valuables. These chests were locked with keys, and Viking wives carried these keys on their belts as a display of responsibility and dignity (Lander and Charbonneau 79; Margeson 33). Epitomizing the complexity of Viking culture as a whole, Viking homes served as the main model of Viking life.

While viewing life on Earth as important, Vikings viewed the afterlife equally so. When a Viking warrior passed on, he was buried in his warship with all his earthly treasures, which became known as "grave goods." These items ranged from weapons, jewelry, and family heirlooms to treasures crafted specifically for the burial. Even slaves and pets were slain and laid to rest with their Viking master (Margeson 54). A Viking peasant was also buried with grave goods and his favorite weapon or brooch—as it was believed the dead would need these possessions in their second life. The funeral process itself, although varied from time to time, was usually very elaborate. All terminated with official burials, in which the ship was covered with mounds of dirt or set alight by flaming torches. Legend has it that the burning ships were launched out to sea, but historical proof of this still has not been found. After the burial, it was customary of Viking family members to erect memorial

stones anywhere on the land in commemoration of their dead. Nevertheless, as the Vikings settled in foreign lands, they started adopting the customs of the new colonies. For example, those who settled in England adopted the English burial custom of gravestones (Margeson 57). The Vikings would integrate their old customs with this new custom by carving runes into the gravestones. While retaining their own values, Vikings also incorporated new cultural elements into their heavenly homegoing practices.

### **Norse Mythology and Folklore**

The ancient Norwegians practiced polytheism, worshiping many different divine beings. Old Norse myths describe the gods and goddesses as having their own individual personalities, much like their mortal subjects (Margeson 52). There were three gods that Vikings considered their chief gods: Odin, Thor, and Frey. Odin was mainly the god of war, but also had many other supernatural powers, establishing him as the chief god of Norse mythology. Thor was the god of thunder, all brawn and no brains. Frey was one of many gods of fertility. Among other gods and goddesses are Odin's wife



Frigg, queen of the gods and mother of Thor; Frey's sister Freyja, a goddess of fertility and love; Loki (also spelled Loke), god of mischief and also half devil; and Balder, Thor's half brother and a god of beauty, light, and purity (Lander and Charbonneau 85). The Vikings erected temples of worship in dedication to these divine beings. They also worshiped in designated places outdoors, one example being the waterfall in Iceland named Godafoss, literally meaning "waterfall of the gods" (Margeson 53). Legend says the

Valkyries, warrior women who rode flying horses, would search the battlefields for fallen Vikings to bring their souls to Valhalla, essentially the Norse version of heaven. Half of these deceased warriors went to be in Odin's great battle hall while the other half went to be with Freyja. Despite this presumed unity for some warriors with gods in the afterlife, a great battle was prophesied to transpire between evil earthly beings and the gods: Ragnarök. Myths surrounding Ragnarök reflect Viking qualities such as courage, valor, the will to fight, etc., conveying the essence of Ragnarök's meaning, the "doom of the gods" (Margeson 51). As with many great religious systems of belief, Norse mythology results in apocalyptic conflicts between good and evil as well as supernatural and earthly forces.



Although worship of Old Norse gods is no longer common practice, Norwegians take pride in this heritage and have named many modern landmarks after the gods and other aspects of Norse mythology. For instance, some oil rigs in Norway are named after Odin, Frigg, Valhalla, Heimdall, and Sleipner (Lander and Charbonneau 88). Even impacting international culture, Norse gods inspired the current names of days of the week: Odin, also known as Woden, for Wodensday or Wednesday; Thor for Thorsday or Thursday; and Frey for Freyday or Friday (Lander and Charbonneau 84). Some Viking mortals took the names of gods for themselves and their children, such as Thor, Odin, Loki, and Freya (Lander and Charbonneau 85). Seeing the lasting impact of Norse mythology upon modern Norwegian and other global culture clearly testifies to the broad influence of this religious belief system.

### Song and Dance

The Vikings loved to hold big feasts and banquets, during which stories were told and music was played. The main instruments of Viking times were the harp, the lyre, and a flute made from sheep's bone. They often retold stories of great Viking warriors before them. The Vikings also loved to sing, and the most talented singers would perform at feasts. Kings had their own poets, called "scalds," and these scalds would improvise poems about the king's great feats in battle (Margeson 50). The Vikings would sing about Norse legends and about the daily life of a Viking, and many of these songs are still popular today. One popular version of the "Song of the Vikings" is known as "Þat mælti mín móðir" or "My Mother Told Me." Traditionally sung in Old Norse, the lyrics talk about the life of a typical Viking warrior (Kaspersen):

Old Norse:	English:
<i>Þat mælti mín móðir, at mér skyldi kaupa fley ok fagar árar, fara á brott með víkingum, standa upp í stafni, stýra dýrum knerri, halda svá til hafnar hoggva mann ok annan, hoggva mann ok annan</i>	<i>My mother told me Someday I would buy Galley with good oars Sail to distant shores Stand up on the prow Noble barque I steer Steady course to the haven Hew many foe-men Hew many foe-men</i>
( <a href="#">Peyton Parrish: My Mother Told Me</a> )	( <a href="#">AC Valhalla Song: My Mother Told Me</a> )

Conveying daily life and legend through song is an age-old tradition in Viking culture that has transferred into modern culture.

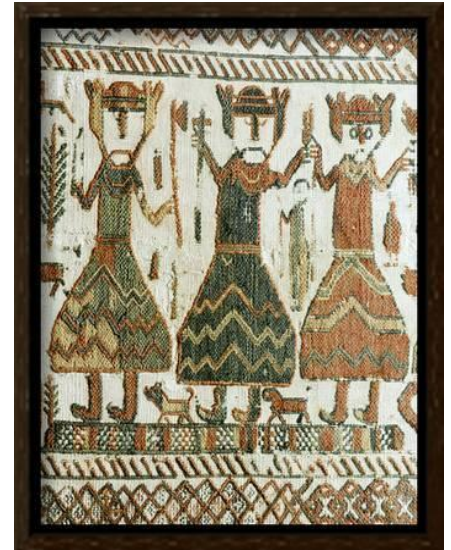
Dancing was also common as a leisure activity in Viking times. Some types of dancing were more organized and played part in religious ceremonies. An example of this leisure-centered dance can be found [here](#) in this modern tourist-attraction performance. Other dances were more wild and spontaneous, involving screeching and leaping around (Margeson 50). From battles to religion to seasonal festivals, Viking dances were inspired by and incorporated into many aspects of life.

### **The Influence of Christianity**

Inevitably as Viking exploration touched many shores on which Christianity had been founded, this monotheistic religion began influencing the Viking belief system. Christianity started to influence Viking royals in the late 10th century, or the 900s, when they began supporting missionaries from England and Germany who came to visit the Nordic lands. Viewing Christianity as a means by which to strengthen their power, some Viking traders pretended to convert in order to receive trade benefits, wearing the Christian cross in order to travel freely through Christian lands (Lander and Charbonneau 98; Margeson 63). However, the Vikings who settled in Christian countries usually experienced genuine conversion (Lander and Charbonneau 98). The Danes converted first in the 960s, but the Norwegians remained faithful to their old gods for another two hundred years. Norway's conversion to Christianity "was accompanied by much bloodshed, more so than in any other Scandinavian country" (Lander and Charbonneau 98). Commencing his reign in the late 940s, Haakon Fairhair, also known as "Haakon the Good," was the first Christian chieftain of Norway. Although he made no efforts towards the conversion of his district, Haakon the Good was a well-liked chieftain (Lander and Charbonneau 99). The next Christian ruler of Norway after Haakon the Good was Olav Trygvason. Olav conducted raids against England all throughout the 980s and 990s until finally accepting Christianity. He became head chieftain of Norway in 995 and used harsh methods of forcing his subjects to convert to Christianity. He burned the temples of the Norse gods and tortured or killed anyone who refused to convert (Lander and Charbonneau 100). He built the first Christian church in Norway in a village called Moster. He died in a battle in the year 1000. After him came another Olav, Olav Haraldsson. Olav II, as he was called, set out to convert Norway by many of the same methods Olav I used. He threatened to get violent if his subjects refused to convert (Lander & Charbonneau 101). Olav conquered all of Norway in late 1015, taking back the land from the Earls of Lade. Olav II became the first true Christian king of all Norway in 1020, but soon the old chieftains began to rebel against Olav II, causing him to flee to Russia, where he was later killed (Lander and Charbonneau 101, 102). Five years after Olav's death, his eleven-year-old son Magnus

was set to rule in his place. “Magnus the Good” ruled peacefully until 1047, and it was then that Christianity became the country-wide religion (Lander and Charbonneau 103). Sweden was the last Nordic country to convert to Christianity in the late 1000s.

The Viking arts were not as much influenced by the new religion as were the moral and ethical sides, but there were several small factors that came with Christianity to alter these aspects of Viking culture. Church bells, which later became important in Viking music, rang to call people to services and also to keep bad spirits away. Church leaders banned wild dancing as they found it “demonic.” After the coming of Christianity, Viking craftsmen started depicting scenes from the Bible in their works. A woven tapestry from Skog Church in Sweden depicts what could be either Norse gods or Christian saints, but no one can be certain about the interpretation (Margeson 63). Although the musical influence of Christianity on Vikings proved minimal, a greater impact on personal morals and communal ethics derived from the incorporation of Christian values into Viking culture.



### **Viking Metal**

Much like medieval Viking music, Viking metal expresses a unique form of the “metal” musical genre that is truly specific to and reflective of Viking culture. Viking metal is defined as “a genre of heavy metal featuring lyrical and visual themes focused on the Vikings, and influenced by black metal, folk-metal and Nordic traditional music” (“Viking-metal”). The subgenre of Viking metal is very closely related to black metal, so much so that one cannot be discussed without mentioning the other in some way. Black metal and Viking metal are both particular to the Arctic region of the world, namely Scandinavia. The subgenre of black metal was developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with its defining characteristics being pagan themes, “lifeless” imagery, and constant references to the North such as frost and ice (Sellheim). Viking metal came about in the late 1980s when the northern themes of black metal were combined with elements of Norse mythology and legends of Viking great Viking warriors. In addition to the varied themes, Viking metal often contains less vocal shredding than black metal does (Sellheim). Some Viking metal lyrics even come from Scaldic literature, more specifically, literature written by Viking rulers’ personal poets, or “scalds” (Sellheim). Blending both lyrical and visual themes, Viking metal essentially entails black

metal while transcending the genre by adding Viking-themed elements.

### **The Music of Finland**

Any discussion of the music of Finland must begin with a breakdown of Finnish literature. In fact, Finland owes a majority of her culture to her writers and scholars, as they played a significant role in Finland's struggle to attain nationhood. Because of this, books are a convenience item in Finland, being sold everywhere from coffee shops to railroad stations (Lander and Charbonneau 151). In the early nineteenth century a man named Elias Lönnrot made a hobby out of collecting Finnish folk songs. He made many perilous journeys across the country to collect as many folk songs as he could. He even went as far as having people sing these songs, so he could transcribe them. He "edited the songs he collected, putting together themes, characters and incidents to form a whole, and called it the *Kalevala*" (Lander and Charbonneau 152, 153). The *Kalevala* was published in 1835, when Lönnrot was thirty-three years old, and has become known as Finland's epic poem. *Kalevala* tells of a conflict between two people groups: the Pohjola and the Kalevala. The leader of the Kalevala people is an old, wise magician named Väinämöinen who is famous for his singing. Other characters include the mighty smith Ilmarinen, the flirtatious Lemminkainen, and the complicated and very troubled Kullervo. Due to the main conflict of the epic, the land of Kalevala is "full of hostile powers," but there is surprisingly not a lot of combat as magic is the weapon of choice (Lander and Charbonneau 153). In many ways, the *Kalevala* resembles the Finnish peoples' quest for freedom. It had a huge impact on Finland and also on the rest of the world. Several Finnish songwriters and musical composers based their works on the *Kalevala*, and American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow copied the meter of the *Kalevala* in his "Song of Hiawatha" (Lander and Charbonneau 153). Even Jean Sibelius, the most popular Finnish composer of the romantic musical period, drew inspiration from *Kalevala* for his "Kullervo Symphony," composed in 1892 (Lander and Charbonneau 162). Steeped in rich literary tradition, the music of Finland left a huge impact on the international field of music.

Vocal music proves central to Finland's music traditions. The Finnish discovered music before they discovered instruments, so for many years their main form of music was singing. Finland holds an annual international music festival, which thousands of musicians and music appreciators attend. The folk instrument of Finland is the kantele, a stringed instrument that resembles a zither, and



it is often performed during these festivals. A kantele usually has anywhere between eight and twelve strings, but some have up to thirty-six. It is usually played by women.

### **Antti Martikainen**

Combining the two main topics of Viking music and Finnish music, these two types of music come together underneath the belt of one neoclassical composer named Antti Martikainen. Born in Finland, Martikainen has dabbled in both Viking metal and Finnish folk music. On his website, he describes his compositions as “very melodic, strongly harmonic, rhythmic and simple yet very diverse” (Martikainen). Although he composes across a wide range of different musical genres, a plethora of his compositions pertain directly to Viking culture and legend. “Rise to Asgard,” “To Valhalla!” and “Oceangate” are some of the compositions that Martikainen has officially dubbed “Viking music.” Some titles contain references to the northern region that is Scandinavia, such as “Throne of the North” or “[Northern Steel](#).” Others contain references to Viking virtues and everyday life, such as “Wolfheart” or “Mead Hall Mayhem.” Martikainen also follows his own Finnish heritage with his epic folk metal composition, “[Kalevala](#).” One can conjecture that this epic folk metal piece is modeled after Finland’s great epic poem of the same name. The official YouTube audio of this composition is divided into chapters, much like how *Kalevala* is divided into cantos. There are nine chapters in Martikainen’s composition, the first one being “The Birth” and the last one being “Eternal Bliss.” Each chapter resembles its title through the storytelling qualities of the music. Rising action, climax, and falling action are woven into the piece by means of the dynamics, rhythms, and articulation.

### **Conclusion**

Drawing on a breadth of cultural elements that range from homeland and travel to history and folklore, the music of the Nordic countries derives from highly diverse sources, imbuing it with rich layers of theme and character. From its origin in medieval times, the culture of the Vikings developed relative to their geography, while sociological features of class structure led to specialization in trades. Ultimately, music pervaded all these aspects of the culture. The more modern musical compositions of Antti Martikainen both reflect the legacy of Viking culture and sustain the future of it by thematically memorializing ethics and high points as well as taboos and tragedies.

Finland’s sphere of folk music interweaves seamlessly with its literary collection and

strengthens the backbone of the country's exuberant heritage. As its grand example from the epic genre of literature, the relevance and influence of the *Kalevala* to Finland's history proves vast and integral. Many native Finns—among them Martikainen and other musicians and poets alike—gain creative inspiration, actual content, and ethnic pride from Finland's great epic. Transcending its era of origin and the pages upon which it was penned, the *Kalevala* merits the exclusive title of an epic, but arguably surpasses others in being so influential on the international field of music.

As with all developing cultures, music accompanies all aspects of life—from birth and death to marriage and childhood to trades and triumph. Most notably about these Scandinavian cultures, the music was consistent across differing social strata, meaning music unified everyone from the lowest slave to the highest king. Music was—and still is—both a source of expression and unification.

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