The Faces of Väinämöinen – the Kantele as a Symbol: Artistic Postgraduate Study

The kantele is a Finnish zither. The symbolic values of the kantele are strong. The instrument is seen as feminine, quiet, and a historical relic. This has a crucial effect on the image of kantele players as artists as well as the interest audiences have in kantele music. The research project is cross-disciplinary, and therefore it studies the theme through artistic methods. Symbolism is discussed through music and dance, images and texts. The illustrations are featured in the five visual concerts. The written work comes in the form of an art book, which approaches the theme using images and words.

Can you play rock on the kantele? Does the electric kantele exist? Why do you play the kantele? These are three questions that almost inevitably are asked of every kantele player in Finland. These are also the questions that direct the artistic research of my postgraduate studies in the Sibelius Academy. When abroad, there is only one question: What is a kantele?

A kantele is a zither-type instrument, traditionally played in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Karelia and Russia. According to estimates, its history goes back 2,000 years. Currently, the instrument comes in many forms, ranging from the archaic with only a few strings to the chromatic concert instrument and the electric kantele with up to 39 strings. The instrument has many names: kannel in Estonian, kokle in Latvian, kanklės in Lithuanian and gusli in Russian.

In Finland, the kantele has served as a powerful national symbol, particularly in the 19th century. It helped Finnish-language culture gain status at a time when Swedish was the official language of culture. Traditionally, the Swedes do not have kantele, and that made the instrument suitable symbol of the Finnish culture. The ideal of the time was a beautiful, moral, modest, religious, ancient and virtuous culture. The kantele represented these values in various contexts, for example, pictures and stories, and it has retained this image. The kantele is still viewed as a beautiful, quiet and delicate archaic instrument with a fairly limited scope and with little to offer in terms of modern musical expression.

My artistic postgraduate degree will comprise five multi-disciplinary concerts, in which I have been playing the electric kantele. The choice of the electric instrument is mainly artistic and aesthetic, but maybe a bit provocative, too. I compose and perform the music using improvisation. The team also includes a dancer-choreographer and a graphic designer-photographer. Why this collaboration? The purpose of my project is to explore and expose through artistic methods the symbolic values of the kantele. As a kantele player, I am not free from the narrow images linked with the kantele, and therefore I find it crucial to actively analyse my artistic identity. My aim is not to break down the prevailing images of the kantele, or to change or criticise them. Rather my goal is to become aware of them, so that I can consciously choose to exploit them or disregard them in my work. One of the methods I employ is creating new types of images of the kantele. The images are based on classical pictures, paintings and persons related to the kantele. The main work in
the project is entitled Väinämöisen kasvot – The Faces of Väinämöinen. It is a photographic collage, comprising 144 portraits of players of the kantele and related instruments. The work is composed so as to form the face of Väinämöinen as depicted in Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s (1865-1931) famous painting Väinämöinen’s departure (1896-1906), an image well known to all Finns. A sage, shaman and player of the kantele, Väinämöinen is the hero of the Finnish national Epic, The Kalevala. The photographic work portrays the diversity of contemporary kantele players in relation to the one-sidedness of the kantele’s prevailing image. I have designed the visual projects, too. The fundamental ideas of the visual works have been results of the process of my studies.

Another imagery-related method is based on theatre and role play. I have selected some ten famous and significant kantele players over the course of history, of whom exist paintings and photographs. We will produce new photographs, in which I have been made up to look like these players. In terms of my personal artistic identity, it has been very interesting to assume the roles of different kantele players and see myself in their character. It has also been fruitful and liberating to subsequently detach myself from the roles, to take off the mask, to seek my own identity as a kantele player.

In the Sibelius Academy, the written part of the doctoral thesis may also be artistic, and it is not required to include a scientific examination of the subject. The written part of my doctoral thesis will be a photographic book comprising photographs produced for the project, photos from concerts, and writings on the subject. Some of the photos are given here as examples. I consider the development of the methodology of artistic research a crucial part of my postgraduate degree.
**Ulla Katajavuori**
Ulla Katajavuori (1909-2001) was a well-known kantele artist. This photo is based on a photo of Ulla Katajavuori, but here I take the role of Ulla.

**Ulla Katajavuori**
In the process of taking photographs we used methods of theatre and role play. Using masks and costumes was a very powerful experience and an interesting way to explore the themes.

**Verso, Third concert in the Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki**
In the concert performances, theatre techniques were used. This concert was held 2005 in the Finnish Literature Society, where the manuscripts of the Kalevala are.
Mens Sauna
The kantele has become a feminine instrument, although in the old tradition it was played by men. In this photo we have gathered some masculine and Finnish national objects together – vodka, rye bread, knife, beer, sauna (and me).

(All Photos by Ilari Ikaalko)