

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Fiona Talkington presents
the Finnish phenomenon

VÄRTTINÄ



There's nothing like home movies to get one feeling nostalgic. On the giant screen were some children in Finnish national costume singing folk songs. The audience in Helsinki's Alexander Theatre cooed with delight. But then a huge cheer erupted as those children – now grown up – ran on to the stage. The concert was to celebrate 20 years of Värttinä.

People had travelled a long way to be there: from Canada, Hungary, Switzerland, the US, Spain and England. The Värttinä internet forum also reveals the band's worldwide appeal with messages from Argentina, Croatia, Japan, Australia. People who've caught a snippet of Värttinä's music on the radio or on a friend's tape and have been bowled over by this weird and compelling music coming from a front-line of female voices backed by guitar, fiddle, bass, accordion and percussion.

That anniversary concert was a reminder of what's great about these Finnish musicians; how they've immersed themselves in a musical and cultural tradition, how they've made it their own and how they've reinvented it in a way which is somehow understood right around the world. Twenty years ago who'd have thought that Finnish-Karelian traditional music would have had such international appeal?

Värttinä's main trademark is the strident female vocals, pinning you back in your seat with their piercing, edgy sound (although they are just as capable of being soft and hauntingly gentle too). In Karelia, part of eastern Finland and Russia, there's a

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tradition of female singing. Women dominate in the funeral and wedding laments with their emotionally charged lyrics, powered by the insistent, alliterative rhythms of the Finno-Ugric (pre-Finnish) language.

Over the last 20 years the band has had some top class musicians from the worlds of jazz, rock, experimental and folk who simply delight in bringing all their skills into play. It's like a marriage between the recognisable musical areas of the instrumental styles, and the far less common vocal sound with words in a practically unrecognisable language. That itself has its appeal: go to Värttinä concerts anywhere in the world and you'll find a devoted following which knows every word by heart, yet who may not be able to ask for a beer in a bar in Helsinki. Värttinä are still largely out there on their own as no other Finnish roots band has the same international impact as they do.

It all began in a small town in Finnish Karelia near the Russian border. Prompted by their mothers, some of the kids got

together to sing folk songs and play *kantele* (the Finnish zither). Fifteen girls singing with half a dozen lads on accordions or guitars, whistles and bass. You can hear these early days on the first albums *Värttinä* (1987) and *Musta Lindu* (1989).

As the kids grew up, many left and went their own way but a hard core of Sari and Mari Kaasinen, Janne Lappalainen and Kirsi Kähkönen built a new band from the embers. They continued to play their arrangements of traditional music but they also began to compose their own. In 1991 they released the album which was to secure their future: *Oi Dai*, which went platinum, and then came *Seleniko* which went straight to number one in the European World Music Charts. By now Värttinä was hitting the big time with their first tour of the US and sell-out concerts.

The next album *Aitara* (1994) collected more awards for its innovative approach to the ancient Finnish tradition and the band went from strength to strength.

After the hard-hitting *Kokko* of 1996 and *Vihma* two years later, and the departure of Sari Kaasinen, the renowned French producer Hughes de Courson was persuaded to work with them for their next release. The result was spectacular. *Ilmatar* was their best ever album showing a fresh and spacious approach to the music, wide range of instrumental and vocal colour which exploits all the rhythmic possibilities of the Finnish language while allowing the drama of the lyrics to come right through. In the months to come, there were significant changes to the band including the departure of bassist Pekka Lehti and singer Kirsi Kähkönen. Brilliant accordionist Markku Lepistö was already in place; original fiddler Lassi Logren returned, and the front line singers of Susan Aho, Johanna Virtanen and Mari Kaasinen had never sounded so good. Then there were whispers of a new album which was going to be unlike anything else. Could it possibly top *Ilmatar*? Well, read on.

BEST ALBUMS

1 *iki* (BMG 2003)



This album has all the essential spirit of the band's development from the earliest years. The youthful simplicity and raw tradition, the driving energy which was really developed in the middle years, and exquisite crafting all come together in passionate music-making of the highest possible quality. A *Songlines* Top of the World in #18.

2 **Aitara** (Xenophile 1994)



Allow yourself to be assaulted by the full-frontal Finnish lyrics of track one, 'Katariina' and you'll begin to get an idea of the impact the band made nearly ten years ago. It also includes the spine-tingling melancholic track 'Maamo' (Mother) and the sexy instrumental colours of 'Travuska'.



3 **Ilmatar** (BMG 2000)



According to Finnish legend Ilmatar is the goddess of air. A collection of old Karelian runo-songs and stories but also an album that will take you on a musical journey which will change you as you listen. Hughes de Courson's production allow the vocals and the instruments room to breathe. Spiky harmonies, incisive rhythms and the spell of the Finnish language come together in tracks such as 'Käppee' while the simple beauty of the lullaby 'Milja' is unsurpassed.



BEST AVOIDED

Vihma (BMG 1998)



Many feel that this is the album which launched the band into the mainstream, it somehow feels too clean, too perfect. Despite some great songs (including Albert Kuvezin of Yat-Kha guesting on a couple as well as appearances from those great fiddlers from JPP) when you hear Värttinä perform them live in concert today, they simply have more guts.



All the CDs mentioned are available in the UK from Proper or www.digelius.com

LIKE VÄRTTINÄ? THEN TRY...

✦ **Me Naiset Me Naiset**
(Kansanmusiikki-Instituutti 1995)

Yes, there are other Finnish women singers around! This group (whose name literally means 'we women') does an excellent job of bringing that raw energy sound brought to the ancient Finnish legends.



L-R Mari Kaasinen, Johanna Virtanen and Susan Aho

Tuomo Manninen