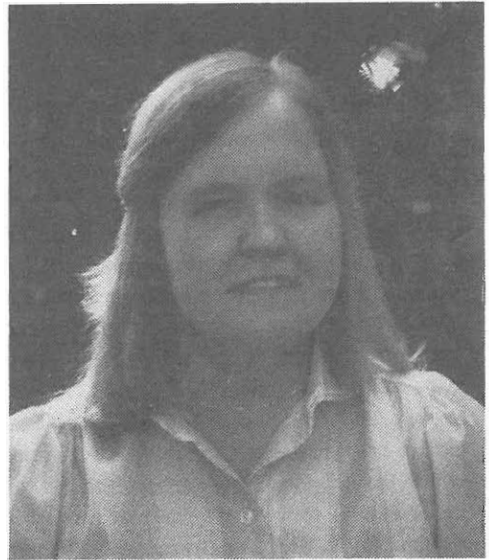


Alaine Pakkala

# THE INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC OF THE FINNISH-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION, 1880-1930



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The Finnish-American community was an environment saturated with musical experiences. The instrumental music of the Finnish-Americans, developed within the context of the immigrant community, was a reflection of the immigrants' past experiences and present circumstances. He had arrived in this country with a deep-seated nationalism, a strong folk music tradition and a sensing of the central place which music held in his life. The vital folk music culture which was the musical heritage of the Finnish immigrants became the center of the immigrants' leisure activities.

The cultural isolation and a certain social instability which characterized the immigrant communities kindled the "associative spirit" among the immigrants and led to the formation of a number of formal and informal associations and activities, based on one's religious or political views. The Finnish-American community was thus polarized into two groups, the "Church people" and the "Hall people". For the Church people,

the Finnish Lutheran Church in America and its related organizations formed the center of social life. The Hall people, individuals who were either not affiliated with any church and who were of a socialistic leaning, or individuals who in addition to minimal involvement with the Church, also attended non-church activities within the community. For these people, the focal point for cultural life was their meeting place or hall. Thus began the phenomena which Puotinen calls "the elusive quest for ethnic solidarity."<sup>2</sup>

Forces from within these two distinct groups were organized formally and informally into such associations as the temperance society, the Finnish socialist movement, selective ethnic organizations such as the Knights and Ladies of Kaleva, community halls, educational institutions, publishing houses and musical societies. These groups with their respective instrumental ensembles and their efforts to encourage the development of instrumental music among the Finn-

ish immigrants, provided the structured as well as the more informal music education within the Finnish-American community.

The attitudes toward music held by the leaders of each of these two groups, had a direct effect on the musical experiences of each segment of Finnish-American society. The music of the Church people was further defined by which specific branch of the Finnish Lutheran Church one was associated with. Of the three branches of the Finnish Lutheran Church in America, (the Laestadian, the Evangelical Lutheran National Church and the Suomi Synod), the Laestadian or Apostolic Church held the most radical belief, viewing all entertainment and social events as sin. Instrumental music was forbidden in the church services. Dancing was strictly forbidden as well as listening to music on the radio and participation in any community events not originating from the Apostolic community.

The Evangelical Lutheran National Church took a more lenient position, allowing instrumental accompaniment in their churches. The type of music which was denounced by this group was any kind that "had a beat". They also discouraged the playing of such folk instruments as the popular accordion, which was considered "the devil's lungs".

The position taken by the Suomi Synod Lutherans was very similar to that of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Once again the playing of certain folk instruments such as the accordion was forbidden. Dance music was condemned as a snare of the devil to entice people away from the path of righteousness. This belief was substantiated by the fact that the "godless" socialists liked to dance.<sup>3</sup>

The effect that the Church's views about music had on the musical experiences of the Church people can be seen in a recent survey of second-generation Finnish-Americans who lived as children in the Great Lakes region. Of those surveyed, roughly three-fourths (70 %) indicated that their families had been involved in the Finnish Lutheran Church

in America during the years in question (1880-1930). Of this 70 %, 32 % were of the Apostolic faith, 50 % were from the Suomi Synod, and only 4 % were part of the National Lutheran Church. Of those within the Apostolic group, nearly three-fourths (74 %) never participated in the local Finnish dances and over half (56 %) had no musical involvement in either the playing of instruments or attending community activities that included some form of instrumental music. Only one-fourth (26 %) of the Apostolics surveyed indicated that they had ever attended an instrumental concert, or music festival.

The Hall people, both the socialists and non-socialists, came with the same musical baggage as the Church people. However, the suspicion in the minds of the religious leaders which limited the musical experiences of the Church people was not a factor in the Hall peoples' attitude toward music. The Finnish socialists saw music as a friend, not as a foe as did some of the Church leaders. Music became an "ideological tool"<sup>4</sup> which was used to further the cause of socialism. Because of the general attitude concerning music held by the socialist and non-socialist Hall people, these Finnish-Americans were more involved in the musical life of the community than were the Church people. This fact is shown in the afore mentioned survey of second generation Finnish-Americans. Of those surveyed, over one-fourth (29 %) indicated that they had no religious affiliation and that they attended community events associated with the local halls (both socialist and non-socialist halls) or that they had a religious affiliation but also attended the events at the community halls. Of these, 84 % participated in the local Finnish dances, sponsored in large part by the socialists. Almost half of this percentage attended dances on a weekly basis. This compares to a figure of only 27 % of the Church people who attended any of the dances in their communities. Only 19 % of the Hall people had had no involvement in the musical experiences of the community, whether as a player or as an audience,

*No. 8 Schottische*

An example of popular Finnish dance music played by Finnish-American community bands; this schottische was taken from the Cornett in B Band Folio.

compared to 30 % of the Church people surveyed.

The attitude regarding music which was held by each of these two major segments of the Finnish-American population - the Church people and the Hall people - is reflected in the musical experiences provided by and for their respective memberships. The instrumental music within the Church itself was very limited. Within the two radical Lutheran groups, this music consisted of piano or organ accompaniment of congregational singing. This was in addition to the other musical activities of the church - vocal ensembles such as mixed choirs, children's choirs, and ladies' or girls' choirs. The only instrumental ensembles ever mentioned in the church histories, from around the turn of the century, are the mandolin or guitar choirs. These groups, made up mainly of children, were established "to bring the young people, to take part in various religious and social activities provided by the church. The

mandolins and guitars provided a chordal accompaniment as the instrumentalists and additional vocalists sang gospel songs of a lighter vein than the usual somber church hymns. One of the Lutheran pastors who consistently had a mandolin choir in the churches which he pastored was the Reverend Hugo Hillila of the Suomi Synod. Sometimes his ensemble was quite large as was for example, the mandolin-guitar choir he established at his church in Ispeming, Michigan. This ensemble totaled eighty members, including additional singers.<sup>6</sup>

Although the participation in instrumental music within the church proper was limited, there were organizations which grew up out of the church community, or were church supported, which did provide fertile soil for the development of instrumental music among the Finnish-Americans. These were the temperance societies, from which the "soittokunta" or brass band tradition sprang up.



Mandolin Choir of Rev. Hugo Hillila in Guinn Michigan, 1919. (Photo courtesy of R.E. Hillila)

These brass bands, begun in the late 1880's were small (eight to fifteen members) and were made up mainly of self-taught musicians. With a few exceptions, the bands were initially all male ensembles. At first, the conductor was chosen from among the founding members, and he usually had had little if any formal training. The bands began to look to Finland for their conductors once the group had been established or to other Finnish-Americans who had had musical training in the military bands of Finland. As the brass bands began to develop, the instrumentation was expanded to include woodwinds, and later, stringed instruments. Because of the instability of a local population due to changes in employment opportunities, the instrumentation of the band often changed frequently. Having taught themselves to read music, these dock workers, miners, and farmers looked to the band as an entertainment and diversion from every-day life. Like the temperance societies, the bands promoted a disciplined, structured life-style and provided an avenue for social advance-

ment and respectability within the community. Repertoire usually included folk melodies of Finland, church songs, temperance society songs and some transcriptions of classical pieces.

One of the most well-known of the temperance bands in the Great Lakes region was the Louhi Band established in 1900 by members of the Voiton Lippu Temperance Society of Monessen, in western Pennsylvania. By 1917 the band membership had grown to forty-four<sup>7</sup> and its music library expanded until it contained 1500 compositions.<sup>8</sup> During its forty years of existence, the Louhi Band had many conductors, all except one being of Finnish origin. Perhaps the most famous of these was the well-known Finnish-American conductor George E. Wahlstrom.

In 1920, the thirty-eight member Louhi Band made a concert tour of Finland giving thirty concerts during their three month stay. Two concerts were performed at the National Theatre in Helsinki and those in attendance included the President of Fin-

land and the composer Jean Sibelius.<sup>9</sup> Returning to the United States, this band continued to be a vital part of the musical life of the Finnish-American community in Western Pennsylvania until it was disbanded in the 1940's.

Another example of a temperance society band, this one in a small town setting, is the Pohjan Kaiku Band of Crystal Falls, southwest of Marquette in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. There are indications that the band was organized prior to 1900 and was reorganized in 1906 by some of the original members. This band follows the pattern seen in other Finnish-American bands of not only functioning as a performance group, but being an actual organization which had a major part in the leadership of the social life of the community. The records include bi-laws, voting in of new members, and the election of officers (chairman, secretary, treasurer, sergeant at arms and policeman).<sup>10</sup>

In addition to fostering the growth of

the soittokunta such as the Louhi Band and the Pohjan Kaiku Band, the temperance societies also contributed to the development of instrumental music among the Church people in another way. This was by the sponsoring of music festivals and music competitions. Beginning in 1898, song and music festivals and contests were held in connection with the annual temperance society retreats. It was believed that adding this feature would encourage greater attendance at the retreats and fill a need in the lives of those immigrants who missed the music festivals they had attended in Finland.<sup>11</sup> At the first music contest, held in Republic, Michigan, several choirs came but only the local Finnish orchestra participated. (It should be noted that the terms "orchestra" and "band" seem to have been often used interchangeably, as the instrumentation of a given group might change often).

In the following years, the location of the annual festival was changed in order to allow choirs and bands from other areas to partici-



Louhi Band, Monessen, Pennsylvania, circa 1904; *Amerikan Albumi*, (Brooklyn: Kustantaja Suomalainen Kansalliskirjakauppa, 1904), p. 126.



The Marquette Finnish Band, Marquette, Michigan, organized in 1909.

pate. Later festivals were held in Fairport, Ohio (1899), Ispheming, Michigan (1903), Ironwood, Michigan (1905) and in Monessen, Pennsylvania (1908). At the annual retreat in Negaume, Michigan, 1912, no music contests were held. Instead the prize money was donated to the various musical ensembles participating in the festival to help pay for traveling expenses.

Information is not available as to how many years the temperance society-sponsored music festivals were held. However, during the sixteen years of the 1897-1912 period, these festivals provided a unique encouragement for the growth of instrumental music within the religious sector of the Finnish-American community.

In addition to this instrumental activity among the Church people, a rich instrumental music tradition grew up among the Hall culture as well. Puotinen<sup>12</sup> states that the hall culture met several needs of the Finnish immigrants by providing a focal point for leisure time activities, by being an avenue of ethnic solidarity through friendships with other Finns, by preserving Finnish language and culture, and providing an outlet for political and religious radicalism. Music was an integral part of the attempts to meet these needs. For the Hall people - both socialist and non-socialist - the local Finnish hall became the center for three major musical experiences: community and socialist bands, concert tours by prominent Finnish-American soloists and local Finnish dances.

The first workingman's society, the Imatra Society was formed in 1890 in Brooklyn, New York. By 1912 a national body of Finnish-American socialists had formed a Federation which had a membership of over 15,500.<sup>13</sup> Although not every local socialist club had its own band, there were many which did develop bands as a part of their activities. Because of the fact that many of the socialist bands were established in the early 1920's, they tended to develop into balanced ensembles more quickly than the pioneering temperance bands of the

pre-1900 period. More of the musicians had previous musical training, and in general, women were included more often than in these earlier ensembles. The repertoire of the socialist bands included socialist songs, usually in a march style, Finnish folk songs, and more popular American band music such as "The Little Giant Step March".<sup>14</sup>

Like the temperance societies the socialist clubs held regular festivals, one being the Kesajuhla or midsummer festival. These gatherings usually included speeches by labor leaders, plays and music performed by bands and choirs. These festivals were first organized much later than the temperance retreats, and in the Minnesota area, for example, the first annual Mesabi Range Summer Festival occurred in 1929.

The same band tradition which flourished within the temperance societies and in the socialist clubs also became deeply ingrained in the musical life of the non-affiliated Hall people. A 1921 article states that there were almost one hundred Finnish-American bands in existence at that time.<sup>15</sup> Being a member of a Finnish band was also a thing of pride and a means of social elevation. In a rather humorous article, a former bandman writes:

Belonging to a band was as much a necessity as the decoration of one's home with Catholic pictures of the Savior and with merchant's calenders . . . . The highest aspiration of a well, honorable, patriotic young man was to become a member of a band . . . . The young ladies . . . considered it a great honor to be escorted by a young man attired in a red uniform with gold braid.<sup>16</sup>

In support of this suggestion that being a member of a band was a honor, it may be noted that among the few photographs which a family might have, there was sure to be a picture of a son or husband in a band uniform, holding his instrument.

The first known Finnish band in the immigrant community was the Finnish Band in Calumet, Michigan, organized in 1886 and directed by Henry Haapanen.<sup>17</sup> "Band fever"

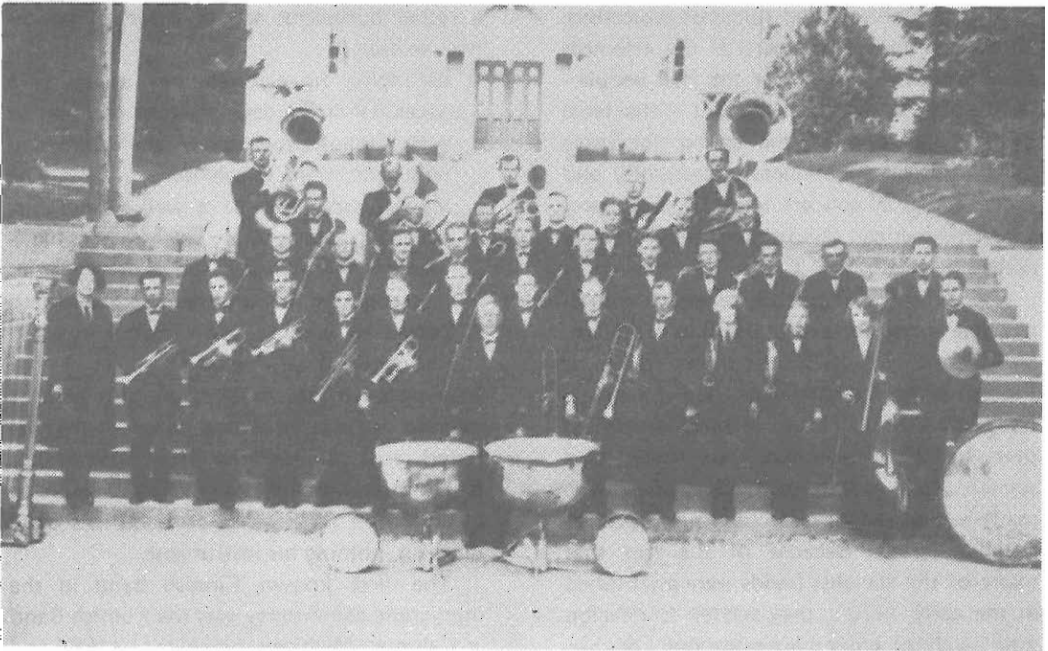
quickly spread and in later years was responsible for the formation of numerous Finnish-American bands in most of the Finnish-American communities in the Great Lakes states.

Such bandsmen as Nikolai Miettunen, Arthur Kitti, Kalle Luoma, R.A. Lake and J.F. Jacobson became prominent leaders in the Finnish-American band movement, significantly encouraging the growth of instrumental music among the Finnish immigrants. The repertoire of these community bands falls into three basic categories: classical transcriptions such as "Violin Romanza" by Mozart and "Potpourri from Verdi's opera, 'Masquerade Ball' "; Finnish folk music such as "Kesäillan Walssi" (Summer-night Waltz) by Merikanto, and popular Finnish dance pieces such as schottisches, waltzes and polkas; and finally, standard American band music from that era such as Carl Fisher's Band Journal.<sup>18</sup>

One of the best known Finnish community bands was the Humina Band of Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio. This Finnish-American community east of Cleveland was a major center of

Finnish-American life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the Humina Band, organized in 1894 by John Ronberg was one of the earliest permanent Finnish-American bands to become active in the musical life of the Finnish-American community. Originally, the band was composed of local Finns, many of whom worked on the docks in the harbor, and who became involved in the band as a form of entertainment and relaxation. Many of these men were self-taught musicians and were led for a short time by an amateur American musician whose name has not been recorded.<sup>19</sup> The band later invited J.F. Jacobson to become the director, a position which he held from 1897 until 1917. This bandsman is a good example of the calibre of leadership which molded the musical life of the community, and provided a musical education for the Finnish-Americans.

The membership of the Humina Band followed a pattern which was often repeated in other Finnish-American musical groups; the original band members were, mainly, self-taught working men who had an interest



The Humina Band of Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, in Oulu, Finland during their concert tour in 1927.





Ashtabula Shipyard Band, 1919; Teppo Jalakkainen, front, right, conductor.

in music. Gradually as the band developed and grew, and as replacements were needed for the older members who retired from the band, younger, more well trained musicians were added. Many of these musicians had received excellent training from Jacobson who was one of the first directors to organize a program of beginning class instruction for children from twelve to sixteen years of age. The band also provided a nucleus of musicians who often formed smaller ensembles and performed independently at local events. An example of a smaller ensemble made up of some of the Humina Band members was the Ashtabula Shipyard Band. In addition to local performances, the Humina Band made numerous concert tours, extending its influence in other Finnish-American communities, non-Finnish areas, and abroad as well. The latter was accomplished when the band traveled to Finland in 1927.

As a leader in the musical life of the community, the Humina Band served to heighten the musical interests within the Finnish-American community and also helped to develop the musical talents of many

young Finnish-American musicians. Several of those who began their musical career with the Humina Band went on to become professional musicians or music educators.

As has been discussed, the Finnish-Americans demonstrated an enthusiasm for involvement in the musical experiences within the community, the Church people to a more limited degree than the Hall People. For the Church people, the major instrumental experiences involved the soittokunta or brass band tradition which grew up out of the temperance movement. The freedom of the Hall people to enjoy a greater variety of musical experiences - especially the folk aspects of Finnish music - led to a wide range of musical opportunities. For the Hall people - both the socialist and non-socialist elements - the local hall became the center of three major musical experiences: concerts by community and socialist bands, performances by prominent Finnish and Finnish-American soloists and weekly, well-attended Finnish dances.

Regardless of one's religious or political affiliation, the Finnish-American's participa-

tion in the instrumental musical life of their communities - especially in the Finnish band movement and music festivals provided by various groups within the community - became a unique expression of nationalism and an avenue of encouraging their cultural cohesiveness. As well, music served as an ideological tool to enhance the cause of the respective organizations. Though expressed through different means, the varied musical culture of the Finnish-Americans gives evidence of their enthusiasm for instrumental music, and their desire to make it a central part of their lives.

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17. Although there may have been Finnish bands in Astoria, Oregon in the 1870's, this was the first community band in the Great Lakes region; *Liikemiesten Suomimatka*, p. 19.
18. Information concerning the repertoire of the community bands can be obtained from four band folios housed in the Finnish-American Historical Archives located at Suomi College in Hancock, Michigan. These four volumes titled: *Cornett in Ess*, *Cornett in B*, *Tenorhorn in B*, and *Tenorbasun*, are divided into two parts; the first section of fifty-five pieces are apparently the original music which was written in Finland, while the second section of fifty songs were copied between the years 1905 and 1913 in the Glassport, Pennsylvania area.
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## Amerikansuomalaisesta soitinmusiikista

Amerikansuomalainen yhteisö on musiikillisten kokemusten kyllästävä ympäristö. Amerikansuomalainen instrumenttimusiikki oli heijastusta siirtolaisten menneistä kokemuksista ja nykyisistä olosuhteista. Siirtolaisella oli Amerikkaan saapuaan syvälle juurtunut kansallistunne ja vahva musiikkiperinne, josta käsin hän tiedosti musiikin keskeisen aseman elämässään. Elävästä kansanmusiikkikulttuurista, joka oli suomalaisen siirtolaisen musiikkiperintö, tulikin hänen vapaa-ajan toimintojensa keskus.

Amerikansuomalainen yhteisö oli jakaantunut

kahteen ryhmään: "kirkollisiin" ja "haali-ihmisiin". Organisaatiot, jotka syntyivät näistä kahdesta ryhmästä, edistivät merkittävästi instrumenttimusiikin harrastusta ja mahdollistivat runsaan ja menestyvän instrumenttimusiikin syntymisen amerikansuomalaisten keskuuteen.

Amerikansuomalaisten osallistumisesta yhteisöjensä musiikkielämään - varsinkin torvisoittokuntiin ja erilaisiin musiikkijuhliin - tuli ainutlaatuinen kansallistunteen ilmaus ja keino siirtolaisten kulttuurillisen yhteenkuuluvuuden lujittumiseen. Eri tavoilla ilmaistuna amerikansuomalainen musiikkikulttuuri antaa todisteen heidän innostaan soitinmusiikin harrastukseen ja heidän halustaan tehdä siitä elämänsä keskeinen osa.