

Book Review | Leena Lampinen

## **Wildhymn and Hymnplay: Expanding the Concept of Hymn through Artistic Research**

**Rintamäki, Sirkku (2023) *Villivirrestä Virsileikkiin: virren luomisesta luovaan virteen* [‘From Wild Hymns to Hymnplay: From Hymn Creation to the Creative Hymn’]. Helsinki: Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. (<https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-329-307-6>)**

In her doctoral thesis titled as *From Wild Hymns to Hymnplay: From Hymn Creation to the Creative Hymn*, Sirkku Rintamäki asks: How can practice-based artistic research be used to expand the definition of hymn? How can the perspectives of play, touch, embodiment, spatiality and intersubjectivity enrich the performance and understanding of hymns? How can hymns be created in a collaborative manner?

In this study, Rintamäki’s experiences of the artistic demonstration of proficiency, the compositions and musical practices that were part of her doctoral degree, the written and audio-visual documents of different artistic components and participants’ written feedback are in dialogue with literature dealing with hymnology and research discussing touch, spatiality and play. She employs mixt writing – an application of Jan Baeten’s mixt method – as her tool to explore the nature of hymn, the process of hymn creation and the creative performance of hymns. Mixed writing combines creative, poetic writing with critical, analytical academic writing. Another research method that Rintamäki mentions is sensitivity, which she defines as being open and opening oneself to what is still unknown.

In the second chapter of her thesis, Rintamäki reflects the essence, the roles and the influence of hymn, and presents a manifest: hymn belongs to everyone. Recognising the challenges of the changing society, she asks several interesting questions: Does hymn still belong to everyone and (why) should it do so? Do all hymns need to belong to everyone?

What is the function of hymn? Is the hymn tradition going to vanish? Who can define what a hymn is? How could hymns be communal, touching, creative, surprising, music that enables encounters with the Holy? Is hymn a hymn only after being accepted as part of an official hymnal? What is not a hymn? Rintamäki goes through various definitions of hymn and formulates her own thoughts as follows: 'I think that hymn is a hymn if it opens towards the Holy and towards people and if it is intended as a hymn.'

There are three concepts that are central to this study, namely hymnspace, wildhymn and hymnplay, all created by Rintamäki. Hymnspace (*virsitila* in Finnish) refers to the moment when a hymn is performed as well as to the process of creating new hymns. Rintamäki states that when a hymn is born, it comes into existence as a space and in a space that is and has been. Each time a hymn is performed a new space is created, connecting the participants and their individual experiences to the flow of hymn that is always sounding somewhere. Hymnspace is a shared creative space providing a possibility for play. In this work, the notion of play is central to the analysis of hymn creation and performance since, according to Rintamäki, play is compelling and touching and allows people to participate.

With the concept of wildhymn (*villivirsi* in Finnish) Rintamäki wants to expand the definition of hymn. She states that in her own wild hymn compositions, the 'wildness' is often connected to the performance of hymns, containing elements close to improvisation; it is not about easiness but exploration of different influences and flow. Melodies, harmonies and performance bring along surprises. Wildhymn can also be understood as a space for creating hymns, a space that allows freedom and intuitiveness. The thesis includes several notated wildhymn -compositions for readers to explore.

Hymnplay (*virsoleikki* in Finnish) was Rintamäki's answer to her own question of how, in practice, to create hymn in a communal way. Hymnplay is a combination of hymns, improvisation, movement, interaction and play, to mention just some of the elements. It was originally introduced as one of the components of Rintamäki's artistic demonstration of proficiency. Links to several video clips of that event are provided in the thesis. Rintamäki states that she found three reasons for her desire to explore hymn: boring hymn, fading hymn and future hymn. She wanted to make hymn flow, be alive and touch. Hymnplay is one example of her open and curious attitude towards hymn and its performance, while it may also be seen as challenging more traditional conceptions of hymn.

Language used in this thesis is rich, and different styles of writing bring variety. However, if not familiar with the topic beforehand, one may need a couple of readings in order to

properly dive into Rintamäki's hymn world. Overall, this study is a new and refreshing approach to hymn as it deals with play, embodiment, sensitivity and spatiality, as well as artistic research – viewpoints that are not commonly applied to hymnology. Hopefully, at some point, it will be available also in other language(s) than Finnish.