

From *The Roanoke Times*, May 13, 2004:

In the Finnish fashion

Guest soprano Anne-Louise Klaus and the Blacksburg Community Strings will perform "Luonnotar" this weekend.

By Gina Ferolino-Beasley

BLACKSBURG - Experience a concert with a Finnish flair this weekend as an orchestra with a Finnish conductor performs a Finnish piece of music sung in the Finnish language by a soprano whose husband is, you guessed it, Finnish.

The orchestra is the Blacksburg Community Strings; the conductor, Ake-Eric Renqvist. They will present their annual spring concert Friday at the Newport Recreation Center and Saturday at Virginia Tech's Squires Student Center. Admission is free. Both performances begin at 7:30 p.m. "The Daughter of Nature" will feature the music of Sibelius, Villa-Lobos, Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Lully and Grieg. Special guest soprano Anne-Louise Klaus will perform three pieces, including Sibelius' "Luonnotar."

Klaus discovered "Luonnotar" at a music store in Finland. She translated and learned the piece for a competition in Boston, where she lives with her Finnish husband, Heikki Topi.

"Luonnotar" is a tone poem that tells a creation story. The daughter of nature, Luonnotar, is unhappy in the wide, empty space. She descends onto the water, where she lives for 700 years. A duck lands on her knee, builds a nest and begins to brood. She becomes uncomfortable, jerks her knee and an egg breaks, spilling out the sky, horizon, stars, moon, sun and clouds.

The text is difficult to translate from the Finnish language, Renqvist said. Klaus, however, has a specific interest in Finnish repertoire.

"There's a lot of art song out there that isn't done very much because the language is often seen as an obstacle," she said. "I like languages, so I started doing some Finnish songs."

The 10-minute piece also is difficult to sing. "It has all kinds of half steps and steps and strange note sequences," Klaus said. "It paints the action. It starts very softly with this movement that could seem to be the water or this daughter of the air who's flying. If you use your imagination, you can hear the story happening."

Klaus will sing "Luonnotar" in the Finnish language. The printed program includes the English translation.

The Blacksburg Community Strings, a 21-piece orchestra formed five years ago, usually performs original music. In this concert, the orchestra will play an abridged version of "Luonnotar." John Howell, the orchestra's vice president, took the full-orchestra version and arranged it specifically for the small string orchestra. "He is very clever," Renqvist said. "I like his work. It is perfect for our group."

Besides conducting, Renqvist teaches string instruments to 28 students ranging in age from 4 to 65. He moved to the United States from Finland in 1995, after retiring from the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. He and his wife, Helen, now live in Newport, her hometown.

Klaus earned a master's degree in music and vocal performance at Indiana University. She was born in Switzerland and moved to the United States at age 3. Her family moved to Blacksburg when she was 8. Her father, Martin Klaus, is a math professor at Virginia Tech; her mother, Silvia, works with the YMCA's international programs.

The Klaus-Renqvist connection began when Helen Renqvist and Silvia Klaus taught English as a second language in Blacksburg. They discovered a commonality: Both had Finnish men in their families. Additionally, Helen Renqvist's cousin is Martin and Silvia Klaus' neighbor, and so they all socialize when Anne-Louise Klaus and Topi are in town.

After Klaus learned "Luonnotar" for competition, she became ill with laryngitis and could not perform. "I started thinking about who else might be interested," she said. "I approached Mr. Renqvist about it, and he seemed open to the idea." She sent him a resume and compact disc, and the project was begun.

Klaus is building her career as a performer while teaching voice at a private middle and high school. "I audition whenever possible. I enjoy different styles of music, but I'm focusing more on the opera because that brings the characterization and on-stage aspects to it," she said.

She most recently performed as Despina in "Cosi fan tutte" with the New York Opera Studio and as Lucy in "The Telephone" with Opera by the Bay in Massachusetts.

Klaus also performs as a recitalist. She has performed for the Boston Chapter of the Finlandia Foundation and on the Cathedral Recital Series at St. Paul's Cathedral in Buffalo, N.Y. This month, she will perform Haydn's "Missa in tempore belli" with the Boston Boy Choir.

At age 5, Klaus started singing in a church choir and later studied recorder. She began playing the clarinet at age 11 and continued throughout her undergraduate years at the College of William and Mary, where she earned a bachelor's degree in music and math.

Klaus has performed for various Finnish groups in the Boston area. "There are a lot of Finns and families of Finnish descent here," she said. "A lot of them came at the turn of the 20th century, and their offspring are now in their 70s and 80s, keeping the culture alive."