

Estonian Folk Song and Singing Culture Researcher Ingrid Rüütel 90

On 3 November folklorist Ingrid Rüütel celebrated her 90th birthday. During her scholarly career of over 60 years she has conducted versatile and fruitful research on Estonian folk music. She has applied her skills to further the Estonian folklore movement and to support the sustainability of local communities. At present Ingrid is actively continuing her work in her area of specialisation as a researcher *emerita* of the Estonian Literary Museum.

The focus of her scholarly work has been the effort to conceptualise and reveal the nature of folk culture, thereby valorising both Estonian national and regional identities.

Beginning in 1959, when Ingrid Rüütel started working in the folklore department of the Literary Museum, she has remained true to her scholarly vocation and the calling of a music researcher. As a student of Herbert Tamperere she has furthered Tampere's work in systematising Estonian folksongs according to their musical characteristics and connecting them with the functional, regional and ethnic context of the songs.

Ingrid has published many research articles about both Estonian and Finno-Ugric folk music as well as popular scientific writings about folk culture. The various layers of her lifework are represented in the voluminous article collection "Remaining Oneself while Changing" [Muutudes endaks jääda] (2010). The theme that persists throughout the book is identity – the axis around which both a person's self-image and the image of their ethnicity are built. Almost all of the 39 articles (from the years 1964–2010) are connected with ethnic culture, folk music and identity. The bibliography of her works from the years 1956–2005 contains 573 entries and is in need of significant supplementation.



Photograph by Alar Madisson, 2025.

One of Ingrid Rüütel's new research directions has been a typology of runo-tunes using methods of computer analysis (in cooperation with computer engineer Koit Haugas). Due to the paucity of distinguishable musical characteristics, the typology of runotunes and the (re)construction of their genesis had not previously been successful. It is not easy to group older tunes, because they have many similar elements, with mixing and interweaving, thus forming a thicket rather than a tune-tree.

According to her new system Rüütel has typologized many data sets, for example, she has compiled "The Typology and Styles of Votic Folk Music" (1977), "Typology of Mustjala runotunes" (1980), "One-line Wedding Song Tunes in the General Context of Estonian Runo-songs" (1996). The principles of typologising tunes are discussed in several studies: "A Method for Distinguishing Melody Types and Establishing Typological Groups" (1990, with Koit Haugas), "Some results of computerized comparative analysis of the Balto-Finnic runotunes" (1999) and "Musical Typology of Estonian Runo-verse Folksongs" (2006). Based on the database initiated by Rüütel and Haugas, the folklore archive is developing a folktunes database for public and research use.

Ingrid Rüütel has made a significant contribution to the study of the history of the development of Estonian folk music in the context of ethnic relations, the reconstruction of which has been complicated due to the lack of older sources. These are the topics of the dissertations, equivalent to a doctoral degree: “The Shaping of the More Recent Estonian Folk Songs” (1969, published 2012), and “Estonian Folk Music Layers in the Context of Ethnic Relations” (in Russian, 1996 and English, 1998). These studies make an important contribution to research on the ethnic history of Estonian and Baltic-Finnic peoples, as well as more generally to the study of the history of singing.

Ingrid has collected folklore throughout Estonia, particularly in Kihnu, Saaremaa and Muhu. In scholarly venues she has published source materials (transcriptions, sound and video recordings) based on her own collections and the materials of the folklore archive; these impart theoretical knowledge and are suitable for practical use. One example is “Newer Estonian singing games” I, II (1980, 1983). Her collections were a significant supplement to the Kihnu volumes of the series *Vana Kannel* (Ottillie Kõiva, Ingrid Rüütel 1997, 2003). In collaboration with Silje Kapper, a thorough overview, “Kihnu Dances”, was published in 2015.

The role of the folklore movement in Estonia is reflected in the article “Folk music in today’s society” (2004); an article based on a questionnaire organised among participants in the Baltica folklore festival entitled “Traditional Music in Estonian Today” (2008) and the monograph “Folk Culture in Estonia – for Whom and What for” I, II (2005, 2006) co-authored with Ene-Margit Tiit.

Ingrid has also researched folk culture in other regions of Estonia, for example “The Layers of Setu Folk Songs and Their Ethnocultural Context” (1988), “Women in Kihnu Culture” (2013), “Folk Customs and Beliefs” (2010) and many more.

In 1969 Ingrid Rüütel established a folk music research sector at the folklore department (initially in the function of a sound archive), and in 1978 a folk music sector at the Estonian Language and Literature Institute of the Academy of Sciences (acting as its head 1978–2002), which in 2000 was reorganised as the ethnomusicology department of the Estonian Literary Museum. At that time a series of scholarly publications in folk music was established, entitled “*Ars Musica Popularis*” (17 issues 1980–2005) and the regional selection of songs “Our Voices Join Together” (2 issues, 1997, 2001).

While working as a senior researcher in the Estonian Literary Museum’s Estonian Folklore Archive, Ingrid Rüütel has compiled five scholarly CD/DVD collections in the series “Sound Recordings from the Estonian Folklore Archive” on the folk music of Saaremaa, Muhumaa, Pärnumaa, Virumaa and Viljandimaa; a sixth collection on Võrumaa is forthcoming. The collections are supplemented by scholarly overviews of the published material along with

transcriptions from the series “What the Footprints Hold”, initiated by Ingrid Rüütel.

As a researcher of folk music and sector head Ingrid Rüütel has made a strong contribution to the continuation of the tradition of research on folk music, teaching and motivating the younger generation during a time in which folk music as a specialty was not taught in Estonian institutions of higher education and there were no opportunities to study abroad. She has maintained contact with the research world as the long-time chairwoman of the Estonian national committee of the International Council on Traditional Music (ICTM), introducing Estonian research, most recently in the article “Ethnomusicology here and elsewhere” (2022). Already before the age of computers she organised a “database” – the creation of a catalogue of folk tunes classified according to parishes, which is still sought after today.

Ingrid has also been a leader and organiser of the Estonian national folklore movement, contributing her scholarly competence and authority to their activities. In 1988 she was a founding member of the Estonian Folklore Society; initiator, in 1989, of the first international folklore festival Baltica; founding member of the Estonian Folk Culture Foundation in 1991; one of the founders of the Estonian Folklore Council; patron of the current Mooste folk music arrangements festival “Mooste Elohelü”.

Her devoted work has spanned scholarly activities and organisation of the folklore movement, collecting the folklore of Estonian and kin peoples, research and publication of source materials both in scholarly and popular format, bringing older folk culture into today’s society and supporting the sustainability of communities connected with folk culture. It is in part due to her contribution that Kihnu traditional culture was entered in the UNESCO list of oral and intangible heritage in 2003.

Colleagues