

# The First Musician

By Lafcadio Hearn

*In the ancient runes of the Finns, the runes of the Kalewala, is related the creation of the world from the yolk of an egg, and of the heavens from the shell of the egg; also the origin of Iron and the birth of Steel and the beginning of Music . . . . Now the first musician was no other than Wainamoinen; and the first kantele, triple-stringed, was made by him from the resonant wood of the fir, and from the bones of a giant pike, as is told in the Twenty-second Rune. Out of the fir-tree was formed the body of the kantele; out of the teeth of the pike-fish were the screws wrought; and the strings were made of hairs from the black mane of the steed of Hiisi the magician,—from the shining mane of the stallion of Hiisi, the herder of wolves and bears. . . .”*

So the instrument was completed, the kantele was prepared; and the aged and valiant Wainamoinen bade the old men to play upon it, and to sing the runes of old.

And they sang, but wearily, as winds in mountain wastes; and their voices trembled frostily, and the instrument rebelled against the touch of their feeble fingers.

Then the ancient and valiant Wainamoinen commanded the young men to sing. But their fingers became cramped upon the strings, and the sounds called forth were sorrowful, and the instrument rebelled against their touch. Joy answered not unto joy, song responded not unto song.

Then the ancient and valiant Wainamoinen sent the kantele to the wizard people who dwelt in the wastes of ice, to the people of Pohjola, to the Witch of Pohjola.

And the Witch sang, and the witch-virgins with her; the wizards also, and the children of the wizards. But joy answered not unto joy; song responded not unto song. And the kantele shrieked beneath the touch of their fingers, shrieked like one who, fearing greatly in the blackness of the night, feeleth invisible hands upon him.

Then spake an aged man who had seen more than two hundred winters,—an ancient man aroused by the shrieking of the kantele from his slumber within the recess of the hearth “Cease! cease! for the sounds which ye utter make anguish in my brain, the noises which ye make do chill the marrow within my bones. Let the instrument be cast into the waters, or returned forthwith unto him who wrought it.”

Then from the strings of the kantele issued sweet sounds, and the sounds shaped themselves into words, and the kantele answered with its voice, praying: “Cast me not into the deep, but return me rather unto him who wrought me; for in the hands of my creator I will give forth sounds of joy, I will utter sounds of harmonious sweetness.”

So they took back the kantele unto Wainamoinen, who had wrought it.

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And the ancient and valiant Wainamoinen washed his thumbs; he purified his fingers; he seated himself by the sea upon the Stone of Joy, upon the Hillock of Silver, even at the summit of the Hill of Gold; and he took the instrument within his hands, and lifted up his voice, saying:

“Let him that hath never heard the strong joy of runes, the sweet sound of instruments, the sound of music, come hither and hear!

And the ancient Wainamoinen began to sing. Limpid his voice as the voice of running water, deep and clear, mighty and beautiful.

Lightly his fingers ran over the strings of the kantele; and the kantele sang in answer,—sang weirdly, sang wondrously, sang throbbingly, like the throats of a thousand birds. And its joy answered unto the joy of the singer; its song responded unto Wainamoinen's song.

All the living creatures of the forest, all the living creatures of air, drew nigh unto the rune-singer, gathered themselves about the mighty chanter, that they might hear the suavity of his voice, that they might taste the sweetness of his song.

The gray wolves came from their lurking-places in the vast marshes; the bears deserted their dwellings under the roots of the firs, within the hollows of the giant pines; and they clambered over the hedges in their way, they broke down the obstacles before them. And the wolves mounted upon the heights, the bears upon the trees, while Wainamoinen called Joy into the world, while Wainamoinen sang his wondrous song.

The lord of the forest, also, the old man of the black beard,—Knippana, king of the joyous woods; and all the followers of Tapio, god of wild creatures, came forth to hear, and were visible. Even the wife of the forest king, the goddess of savage beasts, the mistress of Tapiola, donned her raiment of red, and put on her azure stockings, and ascended a hollow birch that she might lend ear to the songs of the god.

All animals of the woods, all birds of the air, hurried to hear the marvellous art of the musician, hastened to taste the sweetness of his song.

The eagle descended from the clouds; the falcon clave the airs; the white gulls rose from the far sea-marshes, the swans from the clear deeps of running water; the swift lark, the quick finch, the comely linnet, came to perch upon the shoulders of the god.

The Sun, bright virgin of the sky,—the Sun, rich in her splendors,—and the fair-shining Moon, had paused in their paths; the first upon the luminous vault of heaven, the other upon the end of a long cloud. There were they weaving their subtle tissues of light,—weaving with shuttle of gold, carding with carding-comb of silver. Suddenly they heard the unknown voice of song,—the voice, mighty and sweet, of the rune-singer. And the shuttle of gold escaped from their hands, and the carding-comb of silver slipped from their fingers, and the threads of their tissue were broken.

All animals living in the waters, all the thousand-finned fishes of the deep, came to hear the voice of Wainamoinen, came to taste the sweetness of his song.

Swiftly came the salmon and the trout, the pikes also and the sea-dogs; all the great fishes and all the little fishes swam toward the shore, and remained as nigh as they might remain, and lifted their heads to listen.

And Ahto, monarch of waters,—Ahto, ancient as the ocean, and bearded with water-weeds,—arose upon his great water-lily above the waves.

The fertile wife of the sea-god was combing her hair with a comb of gold, and she heard the voice of the singer. And the comb fell from her hands trembling of pleasure seized her, torture of desire came upon her to hear, so that she arose from the green abyss and approached the shore. There, leaning with her bosom upon the rock, she listened to the sounds of the kantele, mingling with the voice of Wainamoinen,—so tender the sounds, so sweet the song!

All the heroes wept; the hardest of hearts were softened; there were none of all having never wept before who did not weep then.

The youths wept; the old men wept; the strong men wept; the virgins wept; the little infants wept; even Wainamoinen also felt the source of his own tears rising to overflow.

And soon his tears began to fall, outnumbering the wild berries of the hills, the heads of the swallows, the eggs of the fowls.

They streamed upon his cheeks; and from his cheeks they fell upon his knees, and from his knees they dropped upon his feet, and from his feet they rolled into the dust.

And his tear-drops passed through his six garments of wool, his six girdles of gold, his seven robes of blue, his eight tunics all thickly woven.

And the tears of Wainamoinen flowed as a river, and became a river, and poured themselves to the shores of the sea, and precipitated themselves from the shores into the deeps of the abyss, into the region of black sands.

There did they blossom; there were they transformed into pearls,—pearls destined for the crowns of kings, for the eternal joy of noblest heroes.

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And the aged Wainamoinen cried out “O youths, O daughters of illustrious race! is there none among ye who will go to gather up my tears from the deeps of the ocean, from the region of black sand?”

But the youths and the elders answered, saying: “There is none among us willing to go to gather up thy tears from the deeps of the ocean, from the region of black sand.”

Then a seamew, a seamew with plumage of blue, dipped her beak into the cold waves; and she gathered the pearls, and she gathered the tears, of Wainamoinen from the deeps of the ocean, from the region of black sand.