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Questions of career and compassion – Finnish composer, musicologist and journalist Armas Launis in colonialist France

Helena Tyrväinen

When he settled in Nice in 1930, Armas Launis (1884–1959) became an outsider both to his native Finland and to his new home country, France. In the late 1930s this Protestant composer was working on two operas to his own libretti, whose events were situated in historical North Africa. A student of Jean Sibelius, Ilmari Krohn (Helsinki), Wilhelm Klatte (Berlin), and Waldemar von Bausnern (Weimar), Launis visited Tunisia and Morocco in 1924–27 and spent two winters in Algiers, where he made the acquaintance of two directors of the Conservatoire’s Arabic department: Edmond Nathan Yafil and Mahieddine Bachetarzi. Why did Launis chose religious subjects for his operas *Theodora* and *Jehudith*? How do North-African impulses appear in these works? The answers are based on Launis’s books *Opera and Spoken Theatre* (1915) and *In the Land of the Moors* (1927), his lecture, ‘Traits of Arabo-Moorish music’ (1928), and his correspondence with Sister Marie Béatrice, a French missionary.

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The Finn Armas Launis was exceptionally versatile: a musicologist and university teacher, composer, journalist, writer, founder and director of conservatories. The construction of a Finnish identity culture was intense during his youth, but international interaction was also lively in the Autonomous Grand-Duchy of the Russian Empire where he grew up. Finnish

musical life had already produced several internationally active and renowned figures, such as composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), Launis's teacher in music theory in the Orchestral school of the Helsinki philharmonic orchestra, and musicologist Ilmari Krohn (1867–1960), his instructor in musicology at the University of Helsinki. Already at an early stage, Launis appeared to be a cosmopolitan figure, whose circle of professional activity extended across a wide geographical and cultural area. After studies in his own country, he studied composition in the Berlin Stern Conservatory under Wilhelm Klatte (1907) and the Weimar Orchestral and Musicians' School (1908–1909) under Waldemar Baussnern. His doctoral dissertation in musicology was about Estonian-Finnish traditional tunes (*Über Art, Entstehung und verbreitung der estnisch-finnischen Runenmelodien*, 1910), but his earlier collection of Lappish *joiku* tunes (*Lappische Juoigos-Melodien*, 1908) is considered especially valuable; he collected material for it while doing fieldwork among this aboriginal population living in the northern parts of Finland and Scandinavia. This article examines the issue of Orientalism as discussed by Edward Said (1978) in Launis's journalism, musicological works, as well as compositions.

In 1930, after having being a successful figure in Finnish national culture, Launis settled permanently in Nice where he died in 1959. Thanks to his contributions to writing for the Finnish press, his ties with his native country were never completely severed, and Finnish diplomatic representation continued to work for his benefit in France. Nevertheless, it appears that Launis largely lost the support of his original identity culture, while at the same time gaining freedom from its obligations. He remained a marginal figure in his new home country, France. The aim here is to examine the channels Launis's creativity took in such circumstances, what the identity positions were that nurtured his actions, and what boundaries his cultural allegiances led him to establish. More specifically, his evolving interest in the North-African Orient shall be explored.

Through his own activities and over a long period of time, Launis became knowledgeable about the Orient. His travel book *Murjaanien maassa* (In the Land of the Moors, 1927), his university trial lecture, 'Piiroteitä maurilais-arabialaisesta musiikista' (Traits of Arabo-Moorish Music, 1928), and his operas *Theodora* (1934–1939) and *Jehudith* (1940) are evidence of his learning. Are Edward Said's observations valid criticism for

Launis: that Orientalism as a European and also French current of ideas is an imperialist Western tradition, a style of domination and of excluding the East from the West?

Before answering, let me point out that through his Finnish origins, Launis was part of Russian imperial culture, while also representing its margins. Moreover, this versatile man illustrates how professional engagement in specific modes of culture inevitably implies an adaptation to viewpoints shaped by previous actors and traditions. Research on Launis has to confront the challenge of demonstrating the nature of Launis's own commitment.

Book on travels in the Maghreb countries

Between 1924 and 1927 Launis visited Tunisia and Morocco and spent two winters in Algiers. On arriving in North Africa, he does not seem to have been aware of the cruelties exercised by the colonial power on the local populations, and he seems to have been devoid of any thorough knowledge of the music in the area. In August 1925, he wrote to Krohn from Saint Jean-de-Luz, in South-Western France: "Most likely, we shall settle in Algiers, on the African side, for the winter time, so as not to be cold." It may well be that, for Launis, adventure was a more important motive for his Maghreb stays than musicology. While he reports enthusiastically his observations and encounters with the local populations in his travel book, he also expresses his admiration of the French for having established Western civilization, an infrastructure and peace in the area. Thanks to his Finnish university studies in Greek and Roman literature, his numerous accounts of historical monuments from the Roman era are full of interest. Nevertheless, in his portrayal, the Orient does not exclusively appear monolithic or a mere nurturing ground for Western civilization, but he extensively discusses the various cultures in the area and even the clashes between different parts of the population.

His relatively few descriptions of local musical practices are clearly aimed at the layman. Launis himself correctly but inconsistently refers to a local wind instrument by sometimes using the name *ghaita* and sometimes *raita*, suggesting that his book was compiled from his press articles written at different times. There are remarkably respectful accounts of the legendary masters of the Arabo-Moorish musical tradition: Ménémeche, Sfindja, and the director of the Arabic department of Algiers' Conservatoire, Edmond

Nathan Yafil, whose Jewish birth Launis points out. Launis came to know personally both Yafil and his successor in the Conservatory, the reputed 'Caruso of the desert', tenor singer Mahieddine Bachetarzi, after whom the National Theatre of Algeria is named today. In one of his press articles Launis mentions Bachetarzi's Turkish origins.

There is a picture of Bachetarzi in Launis's Maghreb book, and pictures taken in Nice in 1933 on the occasion of a meeting there as well as two letters from the Algerian singer are preserved in Launis's archives in Helsinki. In his *Mémoires*, Bachetarzi himself recounts, including small errors (italized in the following quotation), this encounter in Nice where he arrived in connection with the tour of his El-Moutribia ensemble.

In Nice I met again the Finnish composer and musicologist Armas LAUNIS who had stayed in Algiers *from 1923 to 1926*. He continued there his research on Arab music undertaken *in all Oriental countries*, research for which YAFIL had been helpful.

He had settled in Nice with his family after the first performance of an opera of his had taken place *in this city*. He was kind enough to put me in contact with an impresario who signed a contract with us for 6 concerts to be given in Helsinki in 1934.

The remaining documents speak of equality, cordiality and mutual respect.

University trial lecture

In 1928 Launis applied for the position of music teacher at the University of Helsinki. Surprisingly, given the Finnish context, he chose as the subject of his trial lecture, 'Traits of Arabo-Moorish music'. His predecessor, the Finnish conductor Robert Kajanus, who was now one of the search committee members, was deeply immersed in the national-romantic ideology that was not uncommon in the newly independent Republic of Finland. To Kajanus, Launis's research trip to Northern Africa had been of little or no relevance at all for the evolution of art music: it was merely an ethnographical curiosity ("ett etnografiskt musik-kuriosum"). Launis was not chosen for the position, perhaps one of the reasons why he moved to Nice two years later.

From the trial lecture, it can be discovered that in his basic argument and even the details of his presentation, Launis leaned heavily on an article entitled 'La musique arabe

dans le Maghreb', published in 1922 in the *Encyclopédie de Lavignac* by the Frenchman Jules Rouanet, who had also worked with Yafil. It is regrettable that Launis himself makes no mention of his debt to Rouanet. On the other hand, how important a scientific contribution do we expect from a Westerner with poor competence in the Arabic language after spending just two winters in Algeria? Moreover, it is not clear what his purpose was in applying for the university music teacher's post. After all, it was not an academic research position. In practice Launis had already abandoned his research career for composition.

Some points in Launis's lecture, however, diverge from Rouanet and are particularly illuminating. Firstly, Launis does not adopt Rouanet's very racist ideas on the Arab turn of mind. Secondly, while he does state that the tonal system of Arabic music has been borrowed from the West, he does not repeat Rouanet's belief that the Oriental *maqams* can be traced back to the ancient Greek modes. Launis's discussion may imply a concern for the actual conflicting Finnish interpretations of the Greek modes, or he may have had more specific reasons. However, he seems to be imparting knowledge he had acquired personally about Algeria's Arabo-Moorish music.

In June 2011 in the Algerian city of Tlemcen I had the opportunity to speak about Launis's trial lecture before Maghrebian specialists. Two of Launis's misunderstandings were brought up. Launis maintained that the third mode of Arabo-Moorish music, 'er-remel', imitates the fluctuations of the sand, the fourth mode imitates the cock's crow, the sorrowful seventh mode is suited to funerals, the eighth imitates the bray of the donkey, the twelfth is sweet, the thirteenth imitates the sound of the dromedary. However, according to the Koran, there is no worse noise than the donkey's bray. The Algerian musicologist Youssef Touaïbia suggested that, while in Algeria, Launis heard not the word donkey (in French *âne*), but mule (*mule*), which not only denotes 'the mule', but even a certain bird appreciated for its exceptionally beautiful singing. Thus, Launis would have been told that the eighth mode imitates not the bray of the donkey, but a very beautiful birdsong. According to Touaïbia, the thirteenth mode, unlike Launis's statement, imitates the song of the dromedary drivers (*hida*), not the sound of the dromedary

We do not need to take Launis's somewhat inadequately expressed interest in the symbolic aspect of the Arabo-Moorish music as superficiality or indolence. It was that very

interest that had previously motivated him to understand the symbolic system of the Lappish *joiku* tunes. He even makes use of *joikus* in the music of his opera *Aslak Hetta* (from 1922), whose events take place in Lapland.

Operas Theodora and Jehudith

Was it his natural inclination to penetrate the symbolic side of persons and cultures that made Launis feel more richly rewarded in composing operas than in practising musicology? With his eleven opera projects, whose libretti he wrote himself and which he regarded as being as great an achievement as his music, Launis became the most prolific Finnish opera composer of his time. In working on his doctoral dissertation in St. Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire, Launis even studied operatic scores. In April 1911, in a postcard from Paris, Launis wrote to his former teacher Krohn that he had attended “operatic performances diligently” and now intended to continue this activity in London. Before Launis, only three operas had been written in the Finnish language, and Finland had no theatre with regular opera performances. The productions of Launis’s Finnish-language operas *Seitsemän veljestä* (The Seven Brothers, 1913) and *Kullervo* (1917), both on national subject matter, were events of national importance. In 1915 Launis expressed his ideas about opera in his book *Ooppera ja puhenäytelmä* (Opera and spoken theatre).

Launis would not have been a professional opera composer had he not wondered to himself, even in France, “Who will my performers be? Who is going to listen to me?”. In the 1930s and already living in Nice, he planned two operas whose events took place on the southern shore of the Mediterranean during the Roman era. Like *Aslak Hetta*, both librettos deal with the meeting of religions, a viewpoint expressed in his North-African travel book.

Since Launis’s opera *Theodora* from 1934–1939 remained unfinished and gave way to *Jehudith*, we may ask if *Theodora*’s starting point finally seemed to the composer to be too documentary-like and too historical, hence undramatic. *Theodora* is a young woman of noble Greek birth who has adopted Christianity. She lives in the third century in the ancient city of Hadrumetum, on which the present-day Tunisian town Sousse stands, and she dies a martyr’s death. According to the libretto, *Theodora*, who also has Bedouin friends, is buried

in the catacombs of Hadrumetum. It is an historical fact that the organization of the 'Pères blancs' (White Fathers), more officially called Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique (the Society of Missionaries of Africa), founded in 1868 by Mgr Charles Lavigerie, the archbishop of Algeria, had carried out archaeological excavations in Sousse – Hadrumetum in the late 19th century. The principles of the organisation were to speak the language of the local population, to eat its food and to dress in the local way; hence the name White Fathers. In Launis's libretto access to Theodora's time is gained through the dream of an aged guardian of the Hadrumetum catacombs, a former White Father, who in his youth had participated in the excavations. In his book on the Hadrumetum catacombs (*Les Catacombes africains: Sousse-Hadrumète*, 1922), Monseigneur Leynaud, successor of Lavigerie as the archbishop of Algeria, mentions a vault of a wealthy Greek woman called Theodora; it seems evident that Launis drew inspiration from this book or actually visited Theodora's grave himself.

The libretto of *Jehudith* dates from 1937. Launis used as his starting point the notes made by Clemens Brentano about the German Catholic Sister Anna Katarina Emmerich's visions of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt at the moment King Herod ordered the massacre of male children. In his introductory text Launis referred to his own experiences — including musical ones — among the people of the desert. The events take place on the frontier between Syria and Egypt at the beginning of the Christian era. The Jehudith of the title is a young Jewish woman from Bethlehem. She had dreamed of giving birth to the Messiah, but has been captured by the leader of a Bedouin tribe, Simron, who marries her. Simron's mother Hagar (Haagar) hates all Jews, including her daughter-in-law, and has therefore inoculated her little grandson Dismas with a seemingly mortal leprosy. The Holy Family seeks escape from the Roman soldiers in the camp of Simron, the Bedouin robber. Jehudith saves the infant Jesus from the soldiers, despite the greedy aims of her husband and mother-in-law. Her own son is then miraculously cured. This evokes in the hardened Simron such an immense feeling of gratitude that his cold marriage with Jehudith is filled with love. However, the young Bedouin Gesmas loves Jehudith passionately and in a jealous fit causes her death.

Did Launis rely on a line of thought similar to the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns in explaining his choice of a biblical story for *Samson et Dalila*? According to Saint-

Saëns, the local legends of a country were incomprehensible beyond its frontiers. Such an interpretation of Launis is insufficient: Saint-Saëns was an atheist, but Launis was not. In fact, the Finnish composer invested an extraordinary ecumenical message in his drama, given that at the moment of its ultimate resolution a reference is made by Jehudith to Ishmael, the son of Abraham, the patriarch of the Christians, the Jews and the Muslims. Some of the Jews consider Ishmael their forefather, but the Islamic tradition too sees in him a prophet and a forefather of the northern Arabs. In the Bible, God promised Abraham that he would be the progenitor of a great people. But when Abraham's wife, Sarah, failed to become pregnant, Sarah's Egyptian slave Hagar bore Abraham a son, Ishmael. Sarah and Abraham then took Ishmael for their own son and heir, and with the approval of her husband, Sarah deceitfully expelled Hagar. In Launis's opera, Jehudith, prior to her death, tells the Virgin Mary that before her son Dismas fell ill, she had "in her proud folly" envisioned an important mission for him: as a descendant of Ishmael's brave sons, but also of Hagar and Sarah, Dismas would become a conciliator, who would abolish the Roman power from the abode of the two races. At the moment of her death Jehudith has a terrible prophetic vision: on either side of the crucified Christ, she sees Gesmas and Dismas each hanging on his own cross. Her son is thus the "good thief" of the Bible who says to Jesus: "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

It is obvious that some of the characters in *Jehudith*, while portrayed with insight and compassion, have been adjusted to the stereotypes of operatic traditions. There is the young, impulsive, passionate lover rooted in the present: Gesmas, a tenor; there is the aged, bitter, cruel woman inclined to magical thinking: Hagar, a mezzosoprano; there is the young, prophetic, piously inclined Jewish woman: Jehudith, a soprano. Clearly, a hierarchy of values is stated. It would be erroneous, however, to conclude that in *Jehudith*, the portrayal of the Roman era and the birth of Christianity simply served to define European ethnocentricity as the ideological reference. In 1939, a letter written to Launis by Sister Marie Béatrice, a French missionary working in Heliopolis, Egypt, supports the interpretation that the Roman setting gave Launis an opportunity to establish the needed aesthetic aura around current cultural problems. She wrote to the Protestant composer:

What you told me in 1935 is true, paganism has made frightening progress in Europe; there is an attempt to de-christianize the nations.

She went on to express her own view:

The Pope has condemned these monstrous mistakes, but the dictators are blinded by their pride to such an extent that they only surrender to strength; that is, at the moment of their death when they need to settle their accounts with their Master.

Launis's ideas strongly echo those Cardinal Lavignerie expressed in his pastoral letter from 1883, quoting Pope Gregory VII who in the late 11th Century in a letter written to the Moslem prince Ebu-Zeïr thanks the prince for his protection of his Christian subjects. Pope Gregory writes:

You and us, we owe each other this charity in a special way althemore since we believe in and confess the same God be it in different ways, and since we praise and honour Him every day as the creator of the Centuries and of the Providence in this world.

Launis apparently wanted to move the hearts of his contemporaries through the touch of sacredness, but *Jehudith* has never been brought to the stage. It remains to be studied if, in his relation to French culture, Launis eventually conceived of himself as another representative of Otherness and identified with the North-African aboriginal populations. As for his view of North Africa, from the very beginning Launis manifested an interest in the area's multiculturalism, a point of view nurtured by his research activity. His ambitious industry as a pioneer of Finnish opera also opened up his original sphere of national culture.

The ideology of the modern created identities through mechanisms of contrast or opposition — it was about the self and the other. However, Launis's orientalism is not above all classifying or exclusive. A researcher's identity together with that of a Protestant believer helped him transcend the symbolic borders of Finnish nationalism and a certain French orientalist discourse.

Uran ja myötätunnon kysymyksiä — Suomalainen säveltäjä, musiikkitieteilijä ja lehtimies Armas Launis kolonialistisessa Ranskassa (tiivistelmä).

Kun Armas Launis (1884–1959) asettui vuonna 1930 pysyvästi Nizzaan, hänen osakseen tuli ulkopuolinen asema suhteessa synnyinmaahan Suomeen ja uuteen kotimaahan Ranskaan. Tällä protestanttisella säveltäjällä oli 1930-luvun lopulla työn alla kaksi oopperaa omiin librettoihin, joiden tapahtumat sijoittuivat historialliseen Pohjois-Afrikkaan. Helsingissä Jean Sibeliuksen ja Ilmari Krohnin, Berliinissä Wilhelm Klatten ja Weimarissa Waldemar von Bausnernin johdolla opiskellut Launis vieraili vuosina 1924–1927 Tunisiassa ja Marokossa ja vietti kaksi talvea Algerissa, missä hän tutustui kahteen paikallisen konservatorion arabialaisen musiikin osaston johtajaan: Edmond Nathan Yafiliin ja Mahieddine Bachetarziin. Miksi Launis valitsi uskonnollisen aiheen oopperoihinsa *Theodora* ja *Jehudith?* Miten pohjoisafrikkalaiset vaikutteet ilmenevät näissä teoksissa? Artikkelin vastaukset perustuvat Launin kirjoihin *Ooppera ja puhenäytelmä* (1915) ja *Murjaanien maassa* (1927), hänen yliopistolliseen koeluentoonsa 'Piirteitä maurilais-arabialaisesta musiikista' (1928) ja hänen kirjeenvaihtoonsa sisar Marie Béatricen, ranskalaisen lähetystyöntekijän kanssa.

Helena Tyrväinen on musiikkitieteilijä ja suomalais-ranskalaisiin musiikkisuhteisiin erikoistunut tutkija Helsingin yliopistossa. Hän on esitellyt tämän artikkelin aiempia versioita International Musicological Societyn kongressissa 'Musics, Cultures, Identities' (Rooma, heinäkuu 2012) ja kollokviossa 'The Middle East and North Africa at Crossroads – Changes in the Past, Present and Future' (Tampere, elokuu 2012). Vuosina 2009 ja 2011 Helena Tyrväinen esitelmöi Launiksista Algerissa ja Tlemcenissä järjestetyissä konferensseissa Algerian Centre National de Recherches Préhistoriques, Anthropologiques et Historiques -tutkimuslaitoksen kutsumana. Hän piti vuonna 2010 samasta aiheesta vierailuluennon Tunisin Institut Supérieur de Musiquessa kyseisen tutkimuslaitoksen kutsumana, Suomen Tunisian suurlähetystön ja suurlähettiläs Laura Reinilän tuella.