

“Kauhavan Polkka”--Viola Turpeinen & John Rosendahl (1928)

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Essay by Carl Rahkonen (guest post)*



John Rosendahl and Viola Terpeinen

Viola Turpeinen is probably the best-known Finnish American musician of all time. In the space of only two years (1926-28), a talented but unknown teenager from Iron River, Michigan, became a star of the piano accordion world, with an internationally recognized musical career. She had a great impact from the late 1920s to the 1950s, both in her many performances at Finn halls throughout the United States, as well as from her compositions and sound recordings.

Viola Turpeinen was born November 15, 1909, in Champion, Michigan, the oldest of three girls. Both her parents played two-row accordion and an uncle, Emil Turpeinen, was also an excellent player. Viola showed musical talent and learned to play button accordion. She was a genuine Finnish music tradition bearer learning by ear the tunes that her family members played. But the family lived across the street from the Italian American Bruno Hall, where they could regularly hear the strains of piano accordion. Viola's earliest instruction on piano accordion came from Italian Americans and she developed into an excellent player at a young age.

Viola Turpeinen's first musical collaborator was John Rosendahl, without whom she probably would have remained an obscure teenage accordionist, unknown outside the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Rosendahl was born as (Juho) Hugo Hemming Wiren on May 22, 1891 in Elimäki, Finland. He immigrated to the United States in 1908 at the age of 17. We know little about his early life here, but by 1926 he was an accomplished musician, playing violin or tenor banjo, and a comedian, who was trying to establish a performing career. John was also a hard-driven

businessman and kept careful track of his earnings and expenses as well as scrapbooks and detailed dairies of his tours.

In the summer of 1926, Rosendahl left his home in Duluth, Minnesota, to do a tour of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where he first met Viola Turpeinen. He was 35 and she was still just 16 years old. For the remainder of that summer, John played several nights a week in various Finn halls around the Upper Peninsula, many of these gigs with Viola Turpeinen.

Viola became a sensation, with her youthful beauty and virtuosic accordion technique. In teaming up with her, John became a successful event promoter, and Viola became a well-known musician in the region. They made good money for the time, playing numerous engagements for ever larger audiences. In 1927, they lived in Chicago and performed dances at regional Finn halls and other venues. Viola studied at the Accordion Institute of Chicago with Leo Piersanti and learned to play especially challenging piano accordion pieces.

In September 1927, Viola and John started a tour towards the East Coast playing gigs in Illinois, Ohio, and Massachusetts before arriving on January 3, 1928, in New York City. There was a vibrant Finnish American community there, with Finn halls in Harlem and Brooklyn, Finnish Lutheran congregations, shops, and newspapers. Soon after arriving in New York, they were hired to play dances at the socialist Finn hall in Harlem, called the *Työväentalo*, [Workers' house] or more commonly just the "5th Ave. Hall." They also played in Brooklyn and Jersey City, New Jersey.

In New York, Viola was able to study with the most renowned piano accordion teacher of the time, Pietro Deiro (1888-1954). Deiro had a large studio, led an accordion ensemble, published accordion music, and was a leading promoter of accordion players. In Viola Turpeinen, Deiro found a talented, vivacious young woman--an ideal person to develop into an accordion star.

On January 11, 1928, John and Viola recorded four selections for Columbia and were paid \$35 for each. Just over two weeks later, on January 30th, they recorded six selections with Victor, the same company used by Pietro Deiro, and were paid \$50 each. It was at that recording session that John and Viola recorded "Kauhavan-Polka."

Finns like to play and dance their polkas fast, and the 1928 recording of "Kauhavan-Polka" is a good example. The name comes from the town of Kauhava, famous for their Finnish *puukko* knives. John Rosendahl played violin and 19 year-old Viola Turpeinen piano accordion. Folklorist Jim Leary described this recording as "...among the pair's most memorable collaborations: a searing, typically fast-paced Finnish polka, with accordion and violin interweaving relentlessly as if to push one another to the border between deft articulation and

abandon; the kind of tune that reminds one that fiddlers of legend acquire their powers from the devil, and that accordionists sometimes work their instruments until the bellows pull apart.”¹

This recording is actually a polka medley, with the second tune being the best-known polka among Finnish Americans, “Karelian Boys.” It was also part of a polka medley recorded by Willy Larson for Columbia on February 17, 1930, under the title “Seurasaaren polkkia” [Society Island polkas] and later by Viljo Vesterinen in Finland and Sweden. “Karelian Boys” received its current title when Herman Sjöblom, Finnish composer, arranger, and editor for the R.E. Westerlund music company in Helsinki published it under his pseudonym “A. Salo” with the title “Karjalan poikia” [Karelian Boys] in the early 1930s.

The “Kauhavan-Polka” is Side B of the recording. Side A has a recording of “Emman valssi” [Emma waltz], but it is not the well-known minor key Emma waltz. On the record label it reads “Emman valssi (from ‘Rykmentin Saittaja)’ [Emma’s Waltz from Regimental Messenger], that may have been an operetta which was common among Finnish socialist immigrants. The well known “Emma Waltz” did not become a hit until it was recorded by Ture Ara in Finland in the Spring of 1929. In October of that same year, it was recorded in New York by Finnish American piano accordionist Antti Kosola, with Leo Kauppi singing the solo and featuring a virtuoso xylophone improvisation.

Viola Turpeinen made a second recording of the “Kauhavan-Polka” in the late 1940s on the Standard label, which they called “Kauhava in Action.” It also appears on one of her Standard-Colonial LPs in the 1950s as “Kauhava Brawl.” Viola’s playing was even better than on the 1928 recording, having become a “seasoned” player with twenty years more experience. The tempo was quite a bit faster! Viola’s husband Bill Syrjala played just a few accompanying notes on trumpet, and they were joined by a truly exceptional guitar player. This version does not include “Karelian Boys,” as on the 1928 recording.

The “Kauhavan-polka” has been recorded by several subsequent Finnish American dance bands and is still popular today. The original recording, and others like it, set the pattern for dance tunes performed in local Finnish American communities. It was culturally significant and deserved to be added to the National Recording Registry.

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¹ James Leary. “The Legacy of Viola Turpeinen.” *Finnish Americana* 8 (1990): 7.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.