

From Finnish swing enthusiasts to international vocal group:

HARMONY SISTERS IN EUROPE 1942-48

"3 real sisters singing in 10 Languages: American Hits – French Chansons – Finnish Folksongs" is the letterhead on their stationery from 1942. In a photo dating back to WWII the three beauties are dressed in white crêpe dresses with golden epaulets on shoulders. The letterhead was designed for a career in the United States and was still used in 1992 by the bandleader, soprano Raija Valtonen, during her last stay in Helsinki in Hotelli Tornio.

However, the American dream about a career in the entertainment business never came through for the Harmony Sisters (1934-54). Making their breakthrough through the radio (Finnish Broadcasting Company, Yleisradio). They were the first Finnish vocal group, three sisters from the city of Kotka, Vera, Maire and Raija, were the sensation of their time. They were the first professional female entertainers in Finland singing with soft modern microphone tone. During their formative years the swing music loving girls performed only in English, until they met their new conductor in Vyborg in 1937, an emigrant musician, George de Codzinsky, from St. Petersburg.

As a result of this there was a vocal trio with a versatile program and who was rocketed to fame by hits like *Sataman Valot* (Harbour lights) (1937), *Purppurapurjeet* (Red sails in the sunset) (1939) and a tango *Pieni Sydän* (1939). Mr. Godzinsky's arranging skill made the angel-like and skillful vocal group change from one language to another and master the whole scale of entertainment from Wiener waltzes to folk songs, from ballads to popular hits.

A good proof of this is this excellent record anthology, with collection rarities, in which the cosmopolitan Harmony Sisters sing international popular music in five languages in Sweden and Germany on Telefunken, His Master's Voice and Cupol labels during the years from 1942 to 1948. Its unique material has been received from a collector, Jens Holm, from the city of Vaasa, as a result of his inexhaustible work both in Sweden and Germany.

"A rich gene pool is the best guarantee for success" was Mr. Godzinsky's opinion about the talented sisters, whose father was Karelian and mother a descendant of Norwegian saw mill workers in Kotka. Vera Enroth-Valtonen (1914-97) was born in Pähkinälinna, by the shores of lake Ladoga, Maire Ojanen (born Valtonen) (1916-95) in Dubrovka close to St. Petersburg and the youngest Raija Valtonen (1918-1997) in Tornio while fleeing from the Russian revolution. Already at a young age the girls became child-stars of the Salvation Army in Kotka where they performed together with their religious mother Ester Valtonen (born Adolfsen) to the less fortunate. The American talking pictures in 1930s with swing, jazz and dream entertainment of Hollywood took the sisters to the world of *Cheek to Cheek* and *Begin the Beguine* at the same time as American sister trios like Andrew Sisters and Boswell Sisters.

The fame of the charming and talented female trio quickly reached abroad; in 1938 they were offered a concert in China-Variété in Stockholm. The start of WWII cut their plans short, but the participation on the entertainment tours on the front made the Harmony Sisters a myth; *Kodin Kynttilät* (When it's lamp lighting time in the valley) (1942) ja *Sulle salaisuuden kertoa mä voisin* (1942) the sound of the sisters echoed from Karelian backwoods to the soldier's evening programs and to the radio broadcasts to the front.

Their international career started when Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio) sent Harmony Sisters on three separate tours to Germany during years 1942-43; contract with Telefunken, performances in radio and military hospitals as Geschwister Valtonen took them to Vienna, Bukarest, Warsaw and Riga with colorful and international group of artists. Vera, Maire and Raija had a lot of songs with adaptations made by George de Codzinsky, like swing and music by Jewish composers, of which performing was officially forbidden.

Also their colleagues were Dutch, Czech and Italian musicians and band leaders, such as Benny de Weille, whose dance orchestra accompanied Geschwister Waltonen on a record recorded in Berlin, the first song on this CD, foxtrot *Ich hab' dich und Du hast mich* (1942). In a seaman foxtrot *Hein Mück* (1943) the orchestra is lead by Jewish born Willy Mattes, who after the war cooperated with Harmony Sisters as the conductor of Danish Radio under name of Charlie Wildman.

Trips to Germany always passed through Sweden, where they had a growing number of radio performances, among others. By 1943 leaving Germany behind definitively, they performed in China-varieté and in Liseberg, Gothenburg. From the following year is the swing fox *Mister Five-By-Five* (1943) recorded with Thore Ehrling orchestra. To the post war era belong real findings made with the same orchestra, slow fox *Farväll* and waltz *Quire, Vire, Vin* (1946).

In his childhood home in Ingermanland father Adolf Valtonen knew Russian and had played balalaika. Record's unique find is a *Ryskt folkvisepotpourri 1-2 (Potpourri of Russian folk songs 1-2)* recorded in Sweden 1947 by Harmony Sisters in Russian. Also some Finnish folk songs adapted by Mr. George de Godzinsky, *Tre finska folkvisor* (Three Finnish folksongs) and to Nordic region from Hungary stranded tune *Mustalainen*, popular already in early 1900s, are a fine ensemble.

The collapse of the Finnish recording industry after the war and the law forbidding dancing until the year 1948 made the Harmony Sisters after years of performing finally to move to Sweden, to the great dance halls' and big orchestras' Stockholm in 1947. The contract started the following year with Cupol record company, amusement park tours and radio performances lifted them quickly to among the best known stars in Sweden.

A unique track from the record Harmony Sisters in Europe is also Mikael Nyberg's religious song, O, huru ljuvliga (1947) sung by Damkvartetten Angela, Konvaljens avsked (*Kielon jäähyväiset*) was their biggest success, a waltz from the beginning of the century with about 100 000 records sold, of which the sisters only received 50 Swedish kronas each, according to the recording contract.

Fascinating and seldom heard Harmony Sisters are the international evergreens accompanied by Sven Arefeldt's orchestra, Victor Young's *Gyllene ringar (Golden earrings)* and a chanson by Frenchman Charles Trenet, *Blå hav (La Mer)*, both are from the year 1948. A huge success *Kodin kynttilät* will be heard on the record in Swedish with the name *När ljusen tändas därhemma* (1947) among many other classics. Conductor and a good friend William Lind with his orchestra accompanies among others *Liebestraum* by Litz, which is sung in English and named *Dream of Love*.

Harmony Sisters in Europe 1942-48 tells a story of young Finnish female artists with ages from 25 to 35-years in the world darkened by the WWII bringing charm, joy and light to peoples' lives, wherever they sang. Vera, Maire and Raija Valtonen's angel like voices, their optimism and professionalism built a bridge towards the future.

Harmony Sisters in Europe is also charming example of European female entertainment history; it ends to year 1948, to the time, when the long waited offer from the U.S. was finally received. However, the mothers of small children did not want to make the journey anymore, and The Harmony Sisters stayed on the old continent, to the benefit of us all.

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