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New York Finger Lakes Finns Dancing & Music

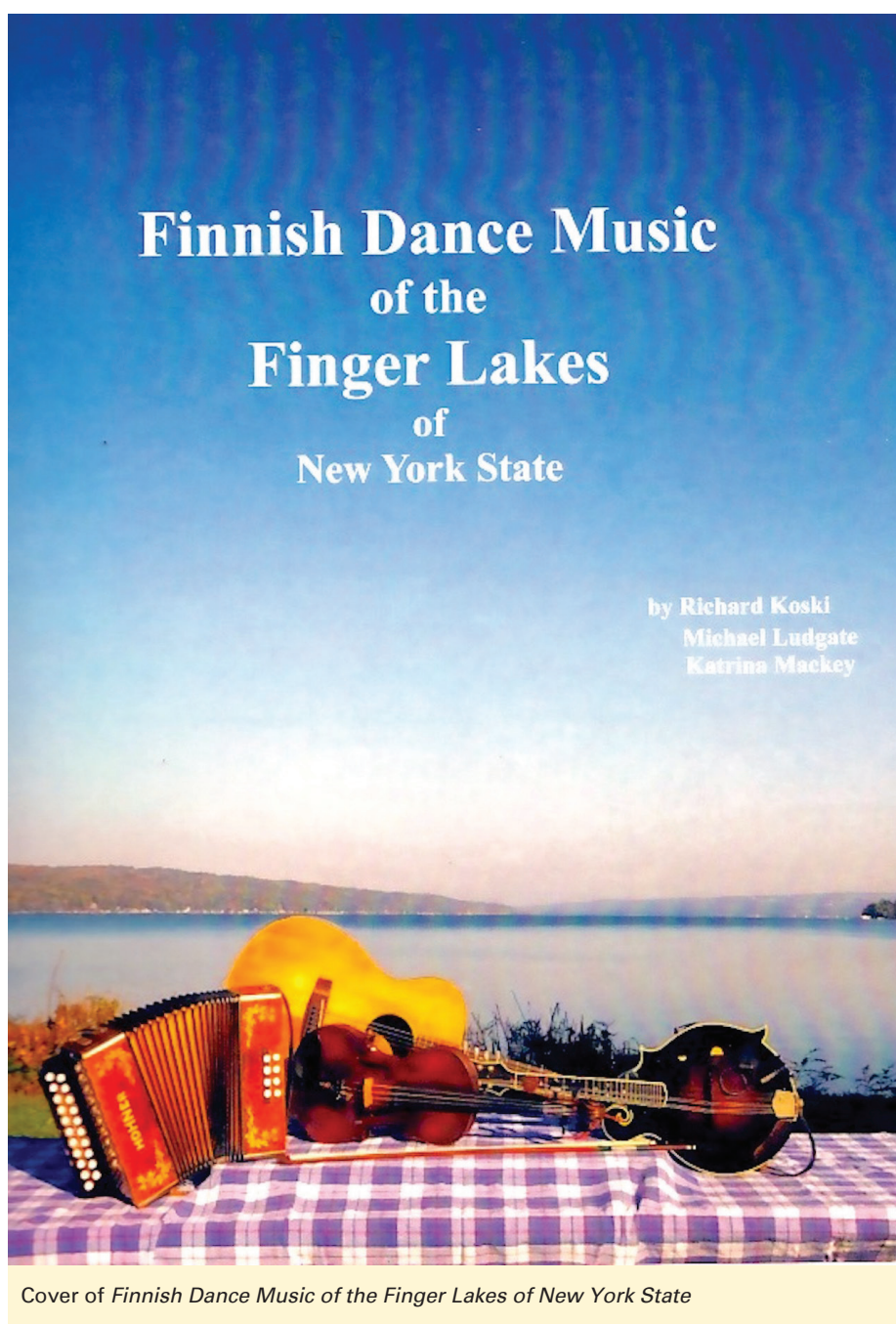
NEW BOOK OF FINNISH FIDDLE TUNES

BY NILS R. CASPERSSON

Probably the most popular Finnish fiddle tune, a *polkka* (Finnish), is *Säkkijärven polkka*, according to Finnish button accordion player and Finnish Dance Music historian and ethnographer Richard Koski. Richard writes, “Russia invaded Finland in November 1939. When the Finns beat back the Russians, the Russians left behind radio controlled mines. The Finns played *Säkkijärven polkka* over the radio about 1,500 times whereby its frequencies would confuse and defeat the Russian mines. This Winter War ended in March 1940... As a result of the peace treaty, Finland retained its sovereignty, but ceded 9% of its eastern territory to the Soviet Union.”

Richard’s new book of fiddle tunes, *Finnish Dance Music of the Finger Lakes of New York State*, includes numerous area references to the Finnish community, past and present, from the lower Finger Lakes area of Central New York. Sixty Finnish tunes with scores, chords, and often a bit of history or reflection are included. It is also a musical complement on social dance communities that highlights the significance of folk dance in the Southern Tier.

Richard Koski of Trumansburg, New York, is a tradition bearer from a traditional music family, who was selected as the Finlandia Foundation Performer of the Year 2005. In 2018, he was recognized as a master artist by the New York State Council on the Arts. and in 2021, he received the Artist Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts in the Folk and Traditional Arts category.



Cover of *Finnish Dance Music of the Finger Lakes of New York State*



Toivo band members: Richard Koski, button accordion; Jason Koski, mandolin; Stefan Senders, banjo; Jim Reidy, guitar; Harley Campbell, upright bass; and Annie Campbell, snare drum. All photos courtesy of the author.

Richard started playing music with his father in 1970, learning the old Finnish tunes. The older style two-row diatonic (8-note octave scale) button accordion was commonly used by Richard's grandfather's generation, and that is the instrument Richard selected to play. His father, William Koski, an accordion player, was a second generation Finn, who also learned from his father.

Finland was governed by Sweden for almost 700 years from 1150 until 1809, when Russia invaded Finland and it became part of the Russian Empire. In 1917, Finland gained its independence from Russia and Sweden. Finnish emigrants started settling in the New York Finger Lakes area beginning in 1910. Most of the Finns who moved into that area did not come directly from Finland, but were immigrants living in other areas of America, where there were clusters of Finnish populations, including the Upper Peninsula of Michigan,

Wisconsin, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and New York City. Many wanted to become independent on their own farmland, and land was available and affordable in the Finger Lakes region.

Richard explained,

Finns soon established their own churches, meeting and dance halls, cooperative farm and grocery stores, and celebrated traditional events. Dances were held in houses with the furniture pushed aside and someone was usually available to furnish music on accordion or fiddle. Fifth generation Finns continue to live in the area.

The dance music that came to America from Finland in the late 1800s and early 1900s was mainly *polkkas*, schottisches, waltzes, mazurkas, and some special dances such as the Raatikoon. Hambos were

danced especially among the Swedish-speaking Finns. Some of the Finnish dance music had influences and roots in Sweden. Western Finland has a large Swedish-speaking and cultural population, while there are more Russian musical influences in the eastern part of Finland.

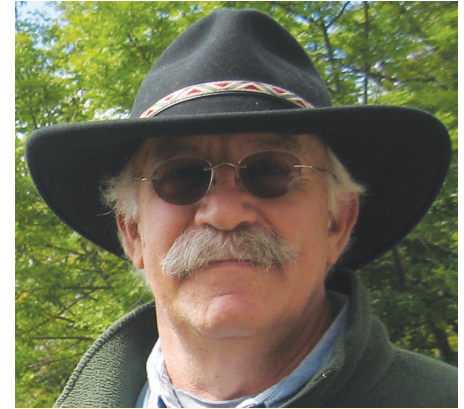
Richard and his 6-piece string band, Toivo (Finnish, *hope*), have performed regularly since 2005, for social dances and concerts throughout the Finger Lakes region and the Great Lakes area. Their concerts are open to the general public and are an eclectic mix of honky-tonk country, blues, swing, Tex-Mex, two-steps, tangos, waltzes, cheek-to-cheek, and Finnish social dance music. A second group, Metku, of which Richard is a member, plays strictly Finnish fiddle tunes and dances.

"As the only upstate region in New York State where a large number of Finnish immigrants settled, this is a unique area,"



Richard Koski plays a brown Hohner button accordion from the 1930s.

“Nothing is wrong with change,” explained Richard. “But it is important to keep the traditions also. Toivo and Metkus’ musical efforts are working! More people learning about the Finnish music and dance is valuable to the community.” ▼



Nils R. Caspersson is a retired New York State teacher with a background in folk arts studies, particularly Swedish/Scandinavian. He also writes for *Nordstjernen*, a Swedish-American newsmagazine from New York City. Nils is also a New York Foundation for the Arts Rural & Traditional Arts Fellow '24. Photo courtesy of the author.

noted Ristiina Wigg, Finger Lakes Finns secretary. She explained:

Historical and cultural activities are at the core of our community celebrations. Finn Hall, established in Van Etten, functioned as a community center with a stage for visiting and local musicians and

performers, a kitchen where meals and refreshments were served, and a large room for dances. Into the 1950s, local Finns held regular weekly dances in the Finn Hall and in local Granges. During our September 2019, 2022, and 2023 dances, the Trumansburg band, Toivo, played some of the same tunes.

For Toivo’s band schedule or to purchase *Finnish Dance Music of the Finger Lakes of New York State*, by Richard Koski, Michael Ludgate, and Katrina Mackey (published 2024 by Brook Road Music, Trumansburg, NY), contact rkoski89@gmail.com. For information about Finger Lakes Finns, contact rl6wigg@aol.com.

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