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He used to get a lot of criticism for his lyrics because they weren't "typical power metal", says Tony Kakko (51), singer and band leader of SONATA ARCTICA. Thankfully, he never let that get to him.

All pics: Anne



Letters & Matters with SONATA ARCTICA

LYRICS TALK NO. 4

This text was partially translated/revised with the help of AI. Sorry if some parts sound a bit odd!

Lyrics are just decorative extras anyway – as long as the music hits hard. Right? Or maybe not? In this section, we talk about lyrics at irregular intervals. And we talk directly to the people who write them!

He can do anything except dragons. Creative literary adaptations, mysterious vibe poetry, vivid and often dark stories of his own, socially critical wake-up-call songs, and humorous silliness somewhere between genius and madness – Tony Kakko, frontman of melodic metal heavyweights SONATA ARCTICA, seems to move effortlessly through all kinds of different worlds. But apparently, he only churns all of this out because, well, he somehow has to – and suffers quite a bit in the process, if his sometimes surprising explanations are anything to go by. Shortly before the currently ongoing South American tour, the Finnish master takes plenty of time, in excellent spirits, for an in-depth deep dive into his lyrics.

Tony, Sonata Arctica is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, and you've been the main songwriter and lyricist from the very beginning. How important are lyrics to you personally compared to the music?

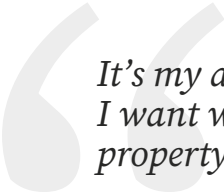
Increasingly important as I've gotten older. Back in the day, on the earlier albums, they were just something that I sang to be able to sing something. And I was pretty sure no one would pay any attention to what I'm actually singing there. But I tried to tell stories despite that. And when I got older and older, they became more and more meaningful.

Most musicians say that the music comes first and then they try to find matching lyrics. Did it ever happen for you the other way around?

I never had complete lyrics ready from the beginning. Maybe a few lines of text that I wanted to have in a song, like seeds, and I started composing the song around those lyrics. But I always had to write most lyrics afterwards. And even sometimes I had to change the original line into something slightly different because the song had taken twists and turns while I was writing the lyrics. Generally speaking it's the most painful thing for me and the hardest part of the whole process of creating music, because the music just comes – it streams out of me and it's just pure joy when I'm writing songs. It's the best thing in this profession for me personally. And every time, although I try to avoid it, I always end up in a situation where I have 10 to 12 or 13 songs and no lyrics at all. And then the following month is very exhausting.

Crazy, because unlike other bands, I think Sonata Arctica songs often work as a poem even without the music. Or sometimes you even write like little short stories. So for me it's hard to believe that they were just added to the music.

Yeah, sometimes, rarely, I had to change the song a little bit to accommodate the lyrics that I came up with, because I realized these lyrics needed this component there to make the story complete. And so then you just rewrite that tiny bit of music again. And it works.



It's my art and I can pretty much do whatever I want with it. Until eventually it becomes the property of the world.

With a lot of bands I often find myself thinking, “wow, what a great song, what an amazing melody”. And then I pay attention to the lyrics and I'm like, “oh, these are really basic”. Or the syllables don't seem to match the rhythm of the music. But with your songs, it's different. The music and the lyrics just seem to belong together. Have you developed some particular creative technique to be able to achieve this?

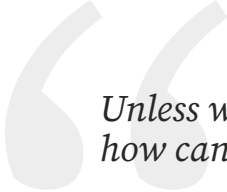
I often rewrite the lyrics many times. Like, the first is just a draft and the whole set of lyrics might change, when suddenly I realize that at some point, there is some line that starts opening a whole new story. So then I realize what this song is actually about, what it wants to be. And then I have to get rid of the old lyrics and just rewrite the whole thing. It usually takes some rounds to get the lyrics complete.

And then it's the same story again when I actually start singing the song. And I realize that I have written myself into a corner in a way that I don't have time to breathe here or there's a wrong vowel there. And then I do something, I take some poetic license and just twist the word around a little bit. I mean it's my art and I can pretty much do whatever I want with it. Until eventually it becomes the property of the world. Then it's fixed in a way. But every time we are performing the song there might be “daily editions”, and I always, of course, reserve the right to change the lyrics a little bit.

Your music is not easy to categorize, which is a very good thing. But if we want to consider it power metal then your lyrics stand out a lot because you have so many songs about everyday life, love stories, environmental themes and so on. And even when it's a little bit fantasy-based then it's a totally different approach from most

other bands. Did you always want to make something different or is it just something that happens naturally to you when you start writing?

I grew up listening to a totally different kind of music like QUEEN, and they didn't have too many swords and knights and dragons there. This was never my thing and so I rather introduced my own kind of thing instead, and I got a lot of criticism for the lyrics in the early days. It was apparently something new for a lot of fans and that's why we don't really fit neatly in the power metal box. But we sort of function as a gateway drug if you will, into metal music in general. Some people fell in love with our band because they found something relatable, something that touched them. And now they're listening to black metal, because they went deeper and deeper and it was like an evolution. That's why I feel validated knowing that we have a role in the metal scene in a way. Although we are not the most metal band at all and we never claimed to be.



*Unless what you write touches something within you,
how can you even imagine touching anyone else?*

You mentioned QUEEN, so would you consider them or any other artist as an idol or role model in terms of lyric writing?

No, no, I'm not sure if I have any such thing. I just do my own stuff and try to find things that touch me in some way. Because fundamentally I think unless what you write touches something within you, how can you even imagine touching anyone else? Even if it's just pure imagination. Even if it's not from your own world. It must be like writing a really beautiful sad movie and you have a tear rolling down your cheek, and you are like "wow, this is gonna touch someone deeply".

So what stands out besides the topics is your language and style. It's very versatile, and it can be super silly sometimes and super sophisticated and mysterious other times. Do you aim for a particular style of writing or what matters to you in terms of the form of your lyrics?

I don't really have any kind of pattern or some kind of form that I try to fit in when I write lyrics. I just try to write something that comes out. And sometimes, while writing, I start with total gibberish, so it's just like, stupid, stupid, stupid. But I realize that while rewriting there might be a bit of that goofiness there that I want to keep in the song because it feels justified somehow. And we are not the most serious band in that sense. We take it seriously, but we can goof around sometimes. And often it might be something that catches your ear when you are listening. Like "Huh? What did he sing there?" Then you actually listen to the whole song and you might actually like it.

Do you feel that your style has developed over the 30 years of your music career?

Certainly, I've become more aware and sure of what I'm doing now that I've made my living from it for all these years. We might be bigger if we were more into business and if my songwriting was more focused in a way and not spread all over the place and if we were aiming to please a certain target group. But I've never really thought consciously about how I write lyrics and I still don't do it. But I still don't want to hand it over to someone else, I absolutely want to do it myself, because I feel I'm the only right person to do that as well.

The messages of the lyrics have definitely changed a bit. Especially when I've sort of become a little bit environmentally concerned, which coincided with having a family, I started realizing that it would be very nice to have a planet left for the kids to live on and continue this human journey here. So this kind of thing has become a bigger part. But I'm trying to avoid preaching too much. It's a fine line to walk. Trying to make people think, maybe, rather than trying to force them into something.

Speaking of environmental issues, let's take a look at the song "Closer To An Animal." The overall message of the song seems pretty clear: we should stop destroying our planet out of greed. But I'm wondering how you intended to portray the animal side of us. In the chorus, it comes across to me as if being wild, primal, and driven by instinct is something negative, because we don't think in moral terms and only care about ourselves. But then, in the spoken passage at the end, you say, "I need to get closer to my inner animal." There, it seems more positive, because it's about distancing ourselves from the human way of thinking that is destroying this planet. Is that ambiguity intentional?

It's more like a hope in the beginning of the song. Like I hope we are getting closer to an animal, because humans are the only animals that knowingly destroy this planet – the only place where we can live so far. We are acting in ways that make that happen despite knowing that it's happening.

So in the chorus, you're already referring to the conclusion that comes later?

Yeah, pretty much. To something that I hope will happen. In an encouraging way, like telling a child "you're doing really, really well", although he or she is not doing really, really well at all. Encouraging people to move in the right direction.

Recently I talked to another singer about the question of whether we as individuals can make a difference to the future, and he was very pessimistic. So what's your take on that?

I think so too. It should come from the governments, it should be political, the whole thing. All the nations should just decide that this is the way it should be. Global warming is like there's a huge asteroid coming towards the earth right now and we need to join forces to sort of steer it away.

Tony at [Epic Fest](#) in Roskilde, Denmark, during a show celebrating the band's 30th anniversary





*Human beings can be smart, but people are stupid.
The masses are dumb.*

But it's absurd anyway: If you put the whole history of planet Earth into one day, the dinosaurs were here for 52 minutes or something like that. And then after that, there were like 20 minutes of calm when the mammals were forming, and we humans have been around for the last six seconds of the whole thing. The recorded history of 5,000 years is like 0.1 seconds of that time. So we have no meaning, basically, when it comes to Earth. It's an amazing thing if we reach 10 seconds. And human beings can be smart, but people are stupid. The masses are dumb, we can only hope that the people we have voted into power have the will to make things right.

There is a very interesting second version of this song where you transfer the whole thing to a personal relationship, partly using the same words, but partly not...

That's the original version of this song, by the way. It was a slow ballad, kind of a LANA DEL REY-type thing. Yeah, I think this would fit her so well. Often, the starting point of any song is a ballad, writing beautiful melodies and chord progressions. It's just easier with the piano.

Oh, then how did you come up with this totally different version after the original ballad?

It was sort of growing and growing, coexisting. By the time I had finished that ballad, I realized that we needed to have a speedy song for the beginning of the album, so I worked on something more energetic. And I felt this one also needed different lyrics, so slowly it became something with a more general meaning. And then I asked the other guys which version we should have on the album, and they wanted to have the faster one. And I was like "Why do we even have to choose? Why can't we have both of them there?" I think they both work really well and they deserve to have a life. And I added "Closure To An Animal" as a subtitle to the slow version, so I implied it was closing the loop in a way. I think that was a very smart move. (laughs) But I love both of those versions of the song.

Okay, so the song you chose for today is "I Have A Right". Not exactly my personal favorite but a very popular hit! It's about children's rights and needs and you wrote it when you first became a father. Was it an intentional decision from the start to take the perspective of one particular child and let them speak for themselves instead of being more abstract or general?

When I wrote that song, the album was almost finished. I had some time on my hands and just started playing around and this just came to mind: "I have a right to be heard, to be seen, to be loved, to be free ..." (*sings*). That was the starting point of the whole thing. And it was very easy to build the lyrics around that basic thought. I'm sure there are many other directions you might go as well, but for me, at that moment in time and in my life there was no other way than to direct it to parents, and it was obvious that the rest of the song also had to be from this first-person perspective. But it's not based on my own life. My parents split up when I was like 9 or 10 years old, but my dad is the nicest guy. I just love him. At one point I talked to him and I was like "Have you ever listened to the lyrics? You know, this is not about you. Don't worry about it!" I wanted to make sure he wouldn't think it's about him. It is not a personal song in that way. Just trying to wake people up. This song has resonated with so many people and it's been used by a lot of teachers and cha-

rity projects to sort of get the message through. And I think it's, in that sense, a very valuable song.

In the second verse, it goes “but I will never teach my son embittered history”. Is this the child now talking about his own son, about the third generation, so to speak?

Yeah. When we are doing this song live, I'm showing the different perspectives, sort of talking to my dad up there while I'm the child, and then my own kids are down here. Right. So that's the dynamic there.

That's the only way we can make a change – to have the younger generation there taking care of things and driving us in the right direction.

To wrap this up: Do you think to a certain degree a generational conflict is necessary for humanity to progress, to develop?

Yes, absolutely. You know, as long as the old, deeply rooted and rigid people are brought down from their positions of power and replaced by the young folks who are actually going to be living on this planet for the next 50 years or whatever. They are the ones who actually care about the future of this planet more than the old people do, especially some sick individuals who are just all about themselves. So that's the only way we can make a change – to have the younger generation there taking care of things and driving us in the right direction. Of course, the experience of the smart older people needs to stay there. But we need to be careful who we choose to lead us.

OK, so “I Have A Right” might be kinda obvious, but has a very strong message, though. Is there another song where you'd say you're really proud of the lyrics?

Oh, that's very difficult. *(thinks)* Maybe “Take One Breath”. That's a song about transhumanism and how we are slowly turning into robots and partially machines, because that's the only way we can ever imagine evolving beyond this planet. If we are fortunate enough to outlive this planet. We will have to turn into something more durable. Which we've already started doing, by 3D-printing human bits and pieces. So, in that sense, if our brain can survive, one day we might be able to live forever or to transfer our minds into machines. This is science fiction, of course, but so were so many other things, like this video call would have been when I was a kid. Everything is progressing so fast, and I'm not sure why I chose this particular song right now, but I'm very proud of it. It just, you know, seems to have a special meaning for me in many ways. There's a baby crying on that song, and it's my second-born son. That was when he had just come home from the hospital.

And the first thing you said was: “Welcome home, I need you for a recording?”

Not the very first thing, haha. But my wife is singing on that song. And I was holding him, and he started crying and I remember I was like “Oh, please cry a little bit more”. It just fits perfectly with that idea. Talking about transhumanism and then having the most innocent thing in the world there, a tiny baby, a complete human, nothing artificial about him. And then, how we human beings should evolve into something totally different.

This song is not the first one of yours dealing with technology. In fact, it's no secret that you suffer from “weballergy” and often are a bit sceptical about new technologies. But in this song, it seems you have a rather hopeful or positive view of the future of technology.

I hope humanity will survive and we will be able to conquer the whole galaxy – and hopefully not encounter any other civilization along the way.

Yeah, definitely. Because if we entertain the idea of leaving this planet one day and surviving, we are on the right path in that sense. And of course I hope humanity will survive and we will be able to conquer the whole galaxy – and hopefully not encounter any other civilization along the way. Because then we would be wiped out. Or they would be, because we are human beings.

Okay, so that's a song you're proud of. Now is there a song where you don't like the lyrics anymore, that you now wish you could rephrase somehow?

I'm sure there are a lot of them. At least a lot of songs that have tiny bits that I don't like and would like to change, that feel like mistakes almost. But the whole concept of the lyrics... hm, maybe "Silver Tongue". It's a nice song in a way. But I never felt at home with the lyrics, in a way. It just feels weird.

We just touched on the topic of technology a little bit. Have you ever used AI to help you write lyrics in any way?

Only to find information about something. It's very easy to get a summary of the subject and then you can dig deeper from there. I think AI saves you the time of going to a library and reading quite a few books. But I never use it to create songs. That's something I love to do, so why would I give it away to some other thing? AI can do the dishes or wash my clothes or clean the house, whatever. Anything that I don't necessarily like doing. But I think art should remain human.

Can it be a useful tool just for revision or for correcting mistakes?

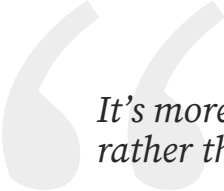
Sure, but I have never used it even for that. I "use" human beings for that. Because if you put your lyrics into an AI tool, you are giving them away and teaching the AI. This is something that makes me nervous and I'm very much against it.

SONATA ARCTICA
from left to right:
Tommy Portimo (dr.),
Elias Viljanen (g.),
Tony Kakko (v.),
Henrik Klingenberg (k.),
Pasi Kauppinen (b.)



Which topics would you still like to write about? Do you already have any ideas for the future or can you already reveal some of the topics on the next album, which is in the making, as far as I know?

Yeah, the lyrics are more or less ready, but I'm going to revise and reread them during the upcoming Latin American tour, and maybe rewrite some of them. There's going to be another Caleb Saga song on there and I think it's fucking great. I love that song.



It's more important to write songs that are generally acceptable rather than those that divide people.

But topics in general... I think I've covered just about everything I can think of right now. Or dare. I try to avoid political subjects to a certain extent, because they're always controversial. Although it's a very important tool for artists to sort of make an impact, make a difference. And we are influencers in a way, because if we write the right song, it can change the world. There's one song on the new album that is about politics in a way, but I'm not sure if it's going to be a bonus track or whatever. But it's rather general. I think it's more important to write songs that are generally acceptable rather than those that divide people. The world doesn't need that kind of thing right now.

Anne

www.burnyourears.de/team/anne
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