

# Contrabassoon into the solo spotlight

*Lewis Lipnick from the National Symphony of Washington describes how Kalevi Aho's new Contrabassoon Concerto provides the underdog contrabassoon with an opportunity to finally spread its wings and take flight into the solo spotlight.*

Ever since I had the privilege of performing the world premiere of **Gunther Schuller's** *Concerto for Contrabassoon and Orchestra* with **Mstislav Rostropovich** and the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC in 1979, I had been searching for another composer who could write an even more ambitious work for solo contrabassoon and orchestra. The idea of a concerto for the contrabassoon was quite controversial back in 1979, as it was the first work of its kind ever to be composed. Since then, as the contrabassoonist of the National Symphony, I have had the opportunity to perform many contemporary works by living composers. Although the majority of these works had contrabassoon parts, very few displayed any innovative or challenging use of the "contra". In fact, when I spoke to many of these composers about a contrabassoon concerto, they either thought the idea to be crazy or professed ignorance of the instrument's capabilities.

It was not until a few years ago, when we in the National Symphony performed **Kalevi Aho's** *Symphony No. 9 for Trombone and Orchestra* with **Christian Lindberg** as soloist and **Osmo Vänskä** guest conducting, that I discovered a composer who I felt would be able to write another major work for solo contrabassoon and orchestra. From the first rehearsal with the soloist, I realized that Aho was not afraid to take the trombone, another misunderstood instrument, far, far beyond its previously established limits. In fact, the solo part of that work challenges both the trombone and the performer to do things that most other musicians would believe impossible. However, in the hands of a great virtuoso like Lindberg, and a masterful conductor like Vänskä, the work was a huge success with both audience and orchestra, and showed that the trombone is just as capable a solo instrument as any other. I immediately contacted Mr. Aho, and asked him if he would be interested in composing a concerto for contrabassoon that pushed the contrabassoon past its established limits, as he had done with

his work for trombone and orchestra. He was most receptive to this idea, and so I decided to personally commission his *Concerto for Contrabassoon and Orchestra* that I will premiere with **Andrew Litton** conducting the Bergen Philharmonic in February, 2006.

But as the old adage says "be careful what you wish for", I was not completely prepared for what Aho had in mind for my instrument. Although we were in contact via email during the time that he was working on the piece, the impact of my first seeing the solo part was heart stopping. Yes, I had asked Kalevi to push the limits of the instrument, but did that mean taking the contrabassoon a full octave over its range? In fact, there is one passage in the last movement that pushes the contra up to the sounding high "C" of the solo bassoon at the very beginning of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. This note is considered a stretch even

for the regular bassoon (which is based an octave higher than the contra). To my knowledge, this note has never before been played on any contrabassoon. But whether through luck or destiny, the American bassoon manufacturer Fox Products, in cooperation with **Arlen Fast**, contrabassoonist of the New York Philharmonic is now offering a newly redesigned instrument, named the Fox/Fast system contrabassoon. Mr. Fast, like most other contrabassoonists, felt that the contra was acoustically deficient, and spent several years of research and experiments in an attempt to "fix" these problems. So with **Chip Owen** at Fox, they began building these unique instruments. Along with fixing most of the previous "bad notes", they discovered that they had essentially expanded the contra's high range by at least an additional octave. This was not the original intention of the Fast System, but it has turned out, at least in my case, to be a lifesaver. Now, with my new Fox/Fast contrabassoon, I can play all of the extreme high passages Aho has written that would have been impossible to perform on any other contrabassoon. At the time of writing (late May 2005), there are only six of these special instruments in existence, with a seventh soon to be manufactured (out of several thousand contrabassoons around the world). By pushing the limits of the contrabassoon, it is hoped that the Aho concerto will lead to other manufacturers designing and building instruments that will also rise to the challenges presented by this new work.

In spite of these difficulties presented to the soloist, the Aho Contrabassoon Concerto is an absolutely beautiful piece of music. From the opening mournful pianissimo monologue for the solo contra in its lowest register (accompanied by only a very soft bass drum roll) that soon moves up into the extreme highest range, the first movement makes it perfectly clear to the listener that the contrabassoon can sing as well as rumble. Then through the mercurial second movement scherzo with its dazzling technical passages and into the slower third movement that recalls all of the previous musical material, ending with a beautiful soft passage for the contra. The Aho Contrabassoon Concerto is a musical journey that takes both performers and listeners from our darkest hours through a wild ride and vivid dances, finally coming to rest on a note of resignation and hope. Like the other magnificent works of Kalevi Aho, this is more than just a beautifully written piece of music. It provides the underdog contrabassoon with an opportunity to finally spread its wings and take flight into the solo spotlight.



Lewis Lipnick (Photo: Claire Newman-Williams)