



## Queen of the woodwinds in fine fettle

*A lot of solo music for the clarinet is being composed right now in Finland and increasingly heard abroad. This article presents some highlights of recent Finnish clarinet music.*

Works with an instrumental soloist are often inspired by a particular player. This applies especially to such less common solo instruments as the clarinet. Finnish clarinet wizard **Kari Kriikku** has won fame worldwide for his virtuosic performance of such works as the *Clarinet Concerto* by **Kimmo Hakola**. **Richard Stoltzman**, one of the best-known American soloists, has performed the *Clarinet Concerto* he commissioned from **Einojuhani Rautavaara** dozens of times already, and music by many other composers has found its way into the repertoire of clarinetists frequently heard on the concert platform. And there is more in the pipeline: the most eagerly-awaited work in this category is probably the concerto by **Kalevi Aho** to be premiered in April 2006 by star Swedish clarinetist **Martin Fröst**. (Incidentally, the clarinetist in the premiere of the *Clarinet Quintet* (1998) by Aho was an artist better known as a conductor, **Osmo Vänskä!**)

**Bernhard Henrik Crusell** (1770–1838), a Finnish clarinetist and composer who played in the Hofkapelle in Stockholm, was naturally the best interpreter of his own works. Along with items by Weber and Spohr, the concertos, quartets and smaller-scale pieces by Crusell (such as the *Air suédois varié for clarinet and piano/orchestra*) are among the basic early Romantic clarinet repertoire. After Crusell, a century passed before any Finnish composer singled out the clarinet as a soloist. Then in 1924 **Aarre Merikanto** composed his Concerto for Violin, Clarinet, French Horn and String Sextet that shared the first prize in a competition held by Schott and hence came to be known as the *Schott Concerto*. Dating from 1954 are the *Three Fantasies* for clarinet and piano by **Erik Bergman**. This starkly expressive piece is the first known attempt at dodecaphony in the history of Finnish music. The Merikanto and the Berg-

man works were both premiered abroad; at that time, the few professional clarinetists in Finland were still concentrating on orchestral playing and more traditional repertoire.

At his debut concert in 1970, clarinetist **Martin Fagerlund** premiered the *Sonetto* for clarinet and piano by Einojuhani Rautavaara and the expansive *Discantus II* for solo clarinet by **Paavo Heininen**. The series of *Discantus* works by Heininen explores, like certain other works of the 1960s, the polyphonic potential of woodwind instruments. *Discantus I* (1965), for alto flute, was in fact composed for the pioneer of modern wind playing, the Italian **Severino Gazzelloni**. The challenges of *Discantus II* include not only virtuosity in the traditional sense but also such novel clarinet techniques as multiphonic sounds. The result is not, however, an aggressive experiment in timbre in the manner of the Darmstadt school but a work that sings almost throughout. The multiphonics, at times aggressive and at others gentle, temper the melodic growth.

### NEW GENERATION OF PLAYERS

The career of Martin Fagerlund was unfortunately cut short, but the 1970s saw the emergence of a generation of Finnish clarinetists prepared to accept the challenge of contemporary music. Leading this band of pioneers was possibly **Kullervo Kojo**, whose playing has been the source of inspiration for many a new Finnish clarinet work for some thirty years already. In 1978 he premiered two works now favourites with many clarinetists: **Esa-Pekka Salonen's** *Nachtlieder* for clarinet and piano somewhat in the manner of Alban Berg, and **Herman Reichberger's** *KV622 II bis* for clarinet and tape. The latter is named after the Köchel number of Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* and its program-

matic content is the dream of a clarinetist who has been desperately practising the Mozart work all day. The tape has futuristic computer timbres and Mozart allusions and the clarinet part presents a wide selection of new performing techniques: multiphonics creating a dream-like, distorted mood, frullato, rattling of the finger-plates and playing with the mouthpiece only.

Doing most to promote Finnish clarinet music has been Kari Kriikku. Since his debut concert in 1984, at which he premiered the *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* by **Eero Hämeenniemi**, his career has risen steadily, making him one of the most illustrious clarinetists in repertoire both traditional and contemporary. Over the past couple of decades Finnish clarinet playing has in other respects, too, risen to international standard. Players are no longer afraid of contemporary works, and premieres have ceased to be the exclusive domain of a couple of pioneers. Finnish composers have established partnerships with numerous first-rate clarinetists with an interest in the music of today.

## VARIED SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

One of the most fruitful of these composer-clarinetist partnerships has been that between Kimmo Hakola and Kari Kriikku. Kriikku has premiered Hakola's *Capriole* (1993) for bass clarinet and cello, the solo works *loco* (1995) and *Diamond Street* (1999), the *Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet* (1997) and the *Clarinet Concerto* (2001). The most characteristic feature of Hakola's clarinet works is the combination of modern concert music with elements borrowed from Eastern Europe. Klezmer and Balkan folk music are the first such elements to spring to mind. The listener will, however, search in vain for traces of authentic ethnic music, since all the motifs are drawn from the composer's own imagination and associations: "I threw myself into the stream and sought my own Horas and Sirbas," says Hakola. Another inherent feature is the notation. For most contemporary composers, the score with its precise instructions is a document saying how the composer wants the piece to be played. Hakola, by contrast, seems partly to have reverted to the pre-Romantic practice of indicating what is to be played but not how. In the score of *Diamond Street* for solo clarinet, for example, he has marked only the pitches and rhythms, relying on the player's ability to decide the right tempos, dynamics, phrasing and articulation. The music of Hakola is, for the clarinetist, also an excellent opportunity to improvise with glissandos, frullato, singing into the instrument and other means of colouring the sound in ways seldom heard in classical clarinet playing.

**Herman Rechberger** also mixes Modernism with ethnic sounds in his clarinet concerto



Herman Rechberger



Mikko Heiniö



Kai Nieminen



Paavo Heininen

*Alovlar* (2001), but his underlying principles are quite different from Hakola's. A man who has travelled the world, Rechberger has first-hand experience of the music of Azerbaijan. *Alovlar* uses the scales of traditional Azerbaijan music and other authentic stylistic features. The ensemble consists of a clarinet and string orchestra, plus a concertante string quartet and a frame drum. Although the clarinet is the leading solo instrument, the other soloists still have plenty to say. The second of the three movements is dominated by a viola solo that imitates a kemancha spike-fiddle. The dominant rhythmic motif of the third movement is assigned to a frame drum. In the clarinet part the composer wants the soloist to use Oriental techniques, some of which are marked precisely in the score. The solo cadenza is left for the soloist to improvise. The Oriental touch sounds very authentic, once again demonstrating Rechberger's versatility and adaptability.

Another composer with a considerable output for the clarinet is **Kai Nieminen**. His earliest works for the instrument date from the first half of the 1980s; *Autumn Sonnet* for clarinet and piano, and *Winter Sonnet* for clarinet and cello examine the relationship between sound and silence, and quiet multiphonic notes. Many of his works have a literary reference. The clarinet concerto *Through Shadows I Can Hear Ancient Voices* (2002) was inspired by the novel *Notturmo Indiano* by **Antonio Tabucchi**, and each movement is equipped with a literary, nocturnal motto. Himself a guitarist, Nieminen shuns aggressive gestures and thick instrumentation; the mood of the concerto is, even at its most virtuosic, airy and intimate. One of the main elements of the work is the tear motif, a sequence of four falling chords inherited from the Baroque. This is also heard on the clarinet – with polyphonic multiphonics! Nieminen's concerto has three movements proper and two cadenzas, the first

improvised by the soloist and the second a written-out dialogue between the percussionists and the clarinetists.

One of the finest Finnish chamber works of recent years involving a clarinet is **Mikko Heiniö's** *Treno della notte* for clarinet, cello and piano (2000). The composer says of his work: "I wanted to write a long, fairly fast-moving composition proceeding without a break in which the moods are dream-like, nocturnal. May 'Treno della notte', the term for a night train in Italian, be a tribute to my much-admired **Federico Fellini** and **Marcello Mastroianni**, who in the film *Città della donne* (City of Women) falls asleep on a train and is led by a representative of the stronger sex along the most fantastic paths. During a journey lasting a good 17 minutes the listener has time to proceed through 12 connected carriages: the composition has five calm, melodic sequences and four rhythmically dashing dances. It begins with an *Introduzione*, has a *Transito* in the middle and ends with a *Coda*."

In addition to its nocturnal shades, the Heiniö work is of sizzling virtuosity, hot Latin rhythms and glowing, sustained melody. The clarinetist plays both a normal B flat instrument and a bass clarinet, thus enriching the timbral scale even further. Heiniö does not expect the clarinetist to improvise or to master novel techniques, but otherwise the clarinet part is as challenging as many a concerto. Maybe he, too, will one day compose a concerto for the instrument he calls the "Queen of the woodwinds"? Let us hope so.

The works described here are but a small selection from the broad range of Finnish clarinet music. Many other composers have also produced notable music for the instrument. **Jukka Tiensuu's** clarinet concerto *Puro* is already a contemporary classic. **Magnus Lindberg** has likewise composed widely for the clarinet – and for Kari Kriikku, of course. The refined clarinet works of Modernist **Hannu Pohjannoro** are also frequently performed both in Finland and abroad. Finnish clarinet music is not only characterised by quality and quantity but by a diversity of style as well. In addition to ethnic influences there is the playful neoclassicism of **Pekka Kostianen** (*Sonata for Clarinet and Piano*, 1978), and the robust Modernism of **Veli-Matti Puumala** (*Basfortel* for bass clarinet, piano and electronics, 1993). Finnish clarinet music has never had it so good!

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