

Juhani Nuorvala: a portrait

Nuorvala's voice, one of Finland's most original, has always stood out from the Finnish mainstream. His music pounds with the rhythms of American minimalism and 1980s pop and presents microtonality as well as finely spun melodies.

My first encounter with the music of **Juhani Nuorvala** (b. 1961), not long after arriving in Finland, was through his first major CD release on the BIS label, "What's A Nice Chord Like You Doing In A Piece Like This?" His irreverence stood out amid the general seriousness of Finnish music, and I thought, "I have to meet this guy." Not long after I did. **John Adams** was in Helsinki conducting his own works, and Nuorvala was the only other composer interested enough to attend the rehearsals. I sat next to him (he had scores) and thus got to know one of Finland's great iconoclasts.

Juhani Nuorvala has always stood out from the Finnish mainstream. Since Sibelius, this Nordic outpost has fixed its gaze on the Germanic tradition. Nuorvala, with his more Gallic orientation – classicist rather than expressionist – followed a markedly different path from the beginning, from Helsinki to New York via Paris and back. His works are emphatically and unapologetically urban, corporeal, rather than metaphysical. Forsaking the pulseless flow of modernism for kinetic beat, his music pounds with the rhythms of American minimalism and 1980s pop.

Microtonality and balletic rhythm

This isn't to say he has no connection with Finnish tradition. For one, the Romantic obsession with nature, and its accompanying loss of ego, finds a corollary in Nuorvala's love of house music, the dissolution of self into the writhing mass of the dance floor. And nature found its way into his music in a very concrete way, through

his adoption of just intonation, untempered harmonies derived from the natural overtone series, as his main musical language from 1995. As to complexity, it's there in spades, but you won't hear it as such. His music, rather than alienating the listener with its strangeness, invites us in.

Case in point is *Boost*, a breathless, ecstasy-fueled nocturnal joy ride for cello and synthesizer, which is released this summer on the Alba label. The cello weaves a delirious microtonal melody over rushing sixteenth-note patterns from the very 80s-sounding synth, stopping only briefly to rhapsodize before tearing off into the night again. *Boost* displays a convergence of several tendencies in Nuorvala's chamber music – balletic rhythm, microtonality, and finely spun melody – which have been on display since the start, from works like the pithy, conversational *Five Pieces* (1994) for flute and clarinet, also on the forthcoming Alba CD, to the rhapsodic, lyrical almost Dvořák-like *String Quartet No. 2* (1997).

Flirting with the orchestra

If ensemble and electronic works form the backbone of Nuorvala's output, he does flirt periodically with the orchestra, seeking a path into its idiom that accords with his sound concept. *Notturmo urbano* (1996) is a bona fide classic of the Finnish orchestral repertoire, with performances by every orchestra in the country. A miniature *Rite of Spring* for the urban night owl set, its infectious rhythms and extrovert atmosphere made it an instant hit. The *Clarinet Concerto* (1998), though, is where Nuorvala's interests truly converge. Where the *Notturmo* is a con-

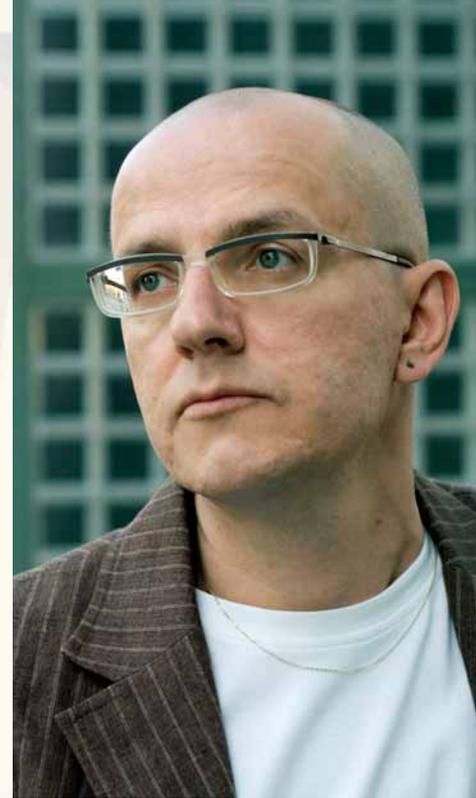


Photo: Sanna Vuorjoki / Music Finland

temporary riff on Stravinskyian primitivism, the concerto transgressed by bringing techno music into the concert hall – much to the surprise and delight of its first audience. It is also Nuorvala's first orchestral work using just intonation, which colors both the orchestral writing as well as the twirling, virtuosic solo part.

Nuorvala's orchestral output broke new ground with the premiere in May 2014 of *Sep-timalia*, his first piece for large orchestra in over two decades, by the Finnish Radio Symphony and **Santtu-Matias Rouvali**. Though the title sounds like a Roman festival – and the piece is indeed a wild, ecstatic bacchanalia – the composer explains it as "the apotheosis of the natural seventh", the overtone that colors the music's sound world. It is the first Finnish orchestral work fully in just intonation, and Nuorvala resorted to some impressive solutions to produce the specific intervals he wants, retuning the entire string body, and including four valveless natural horns in the brass section for their pure intonation. The music is mosaic-like, kaleidoscopic, with its sliding microtonal chorales and lines hocketing around the ensemble in joyous euphony, and it was one of the highlights of the symphony season.

Juhani Nuorvala is a vanguard member of what one could call the New Diversity in Finnish music, a flowering of contradictory, complementary aesthetics at the turn of the millennium that is breathing a new vitality into the country's once-monolithic music scene. One suspects that his voice, one of Finland's most original, will continue to reach giddy new heights as he dances through his second half-century.

Matthew Whittall

