



Esa Pietilä

– modern music with room for improvisation

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Esa Pietilä (b. 1964) is the very epitome of the player-composer – a rarity in contemporary Finnish music. Not only does he often play the solo tenor sax in works of his own; he also gives their performers freedom and responsibility in the form of improvisation. One reason for this is his background in jazz. In 2016, one of Finland's finest representatives of modern free jazz, he was the recipient of the number-one prize, the Yrjö, awarded to a Finnish jazz musician. He has been the tenor sax soloist in his own solo concertos and with the main line-ups led by him, such as Liberty Ship founded in 2012.

The emphasis in Pietilä's work in the present decade has shifted towards modern art music. He had already listened to lots of modern classical music and composed some works of his own when a recording of Lutosławski's third symphony conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen finally prompted him to steer his own composition in the direction of modern art music. He has not forsaken jazz and free improvisation, but his musician profile has changed and his main focus is now on composing. Meanwhile, he has also become more versatile as a musician, performing new works for sax by other composers, too; Kalevi Aho and Eero Hämeenniemi are among those who have composed a concerto for him.

Modernistic roughness and timbral richness

Free improvisation has provided Pietilä with a natural bridge from jazz to art music. His idiom

is coloured by a modernistic roughness of timbre and harmony along with vibrant multi-level rhythms. His world of sound is often enriched by extended performing techniques. Counterbalancing his spikiness there may often also be more sensitive, even lyrical moments, such as in the closing section of *Blazing Flames* (2018) for tenor sax and string quartet.

One of Pietilä's weightiest works is *Graffiti Play* (2012), conducted at its premiere by Esa-Pekka Salonen. The solo part is assigned to a jazz trio, alongside which the large chamber orchestra creates rich worlds of timbre. *Asterion* for saxophone and octet (2014) has a similar, multi-timbre mode of expression but in a more chamber music-like context.

Pietilä has many interesting works in the pipeline. One is a double concerto for violin and tenor sax he has written for himself and a violinist renowned for his powers of improvisation, Pekka Kuusisto. The idea was to create a sister work for the Ligeti Violin Concerto, so that the two could perhaps be performed in the same concert.

Improvisation as a tool

The compositions by Esa Pietilä frequently incorporate an element of improvisation. It may be part of the initial process, a means of seeking and shaping the material, but is most obvious in works with a solo tenor sax. Passages for other instruments may nevertheless include various degrees of improvisation. Then again, he may in some of his works write the parts out note by

note, as in *Three Strides of Light* (2017) for piano. There is also very little improvisation in *Brisk* (2017), a duo for cello and marimba.

Though musicians with a traditional classical training seldom have much experience of improvisation, Pietilä has not encountered any problems in the performance of his works, especially if the players are given precise instructions. On the contrary: it has been a liberating experience for many. In *Uirapuru* (2016) for tenor sax and male choir, for example, the choir paints colourful, playful sound pictures inspired by the Amazon rainforest and the Uirapuru bird in an exultant happening vein.

The degree of improvisation varies from one Pietilä work to another. Sections may at times be totally free, and at others he may make verbal requests or suggestions. Then again, the improvisation may be restricted to specific notes or melodies, or to motivic variation. He may allow the performers liberties such as in Lutosławski's aleatory, though even then the sound does not resemble or imitate that of the great Polish master.

The transitions from improvisation to precise notation tend to be seamless and carefully calculated rather than sharp. Hence it is often difficult for the listener to decide whether a passage was improvised or notated, and when the transition actually took place. This gives Esa Pietilä's works a strong narrative feel and dramatic drive.

Kimmo Korhonen