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# Estonian rhapsody

The tiny Baltic republic of Estonia (pop. 1.5m) has produced an amazing number of composers this century. And there are still more to come. By Martin Anderson

The music of Estonia has made more inroads into our listening than that of almost any other area in the former Soviet bloc.

Arvo Pärt is one of the most widely performed of living composers; the next big event is a festival centred on his music at the Royal Academy of Music on 28-31 March next year.

A series of ECM CDs bids fair to make the thrillingly primitive music of Veljo Tormis as familiar as Pärt's, whose *Berliner Requiem* and *I Am the True Vine* are scheduled for release on a Harmonia Mundi disc, also in the spring. We had two choruses from "the father of Estonian music", the turn-of-the-century Rudolf Tobias, at this year's Proms. And a second CD cycle of Eduard Tubin, Estonia's greatest symphonist, has just been launched by the Finnish label Alba.

It works both ways: the Estonians have to catch up with what has been happening in the West, and Tallinn's week-long Nydd festival (it means "Now" in Estonian), which has recently ended, presented an exciting blend of contemporary music, home-grown and imported. Tallinn may not seem the obvious place to head for in the dark days of November, particularly when moving from one concert hall to the next means inching forward on treacherously icy pavements. Though, almost of necessity, festivals of contemporary music often display a dismal amount of nonsense tucked in among the discoveries, the rubbish quotient of Nydd '99 was remarkably low.

Nydd '99, the sixth festival since it was founded in 1991, was book-ended with British elements: the Swingle Singers in the opening

concert, in a touchstone of musical modernism, Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia* (its Estonian première) and two orchestral pieces by Mark-Anthony Turnage in the closing event. York Höller, perhaps the most consistently impressive of German modernists, gave two talks and was treated to a sparkling recital of his chamber music by the Reval Ensemble - who afterwards thanked the delighted composer for stretching their techniques. The Ensemble Court-circuit flew in from Paris with a heady bouquet culled from the gardens of IRCAM: Tristan Murail's *La Barque Mystique* and the expansive *Vortex Temporum* by the late Gérard Grisey.

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*Nydd '99's zenith came at a church concert, with that religious mysticism Arvo Pärt has made synonymous with Estonian music*

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It was the Estonians who impressed the most. The new Violin Concerto of Erkki-Sven Tuur (born 1959), with the big-toned Isabelle van Keulen as soloist, displayed the engaging symphonic minimalism that is typical of Estonia, with snippets of tunes dancing their way towards a relatively clear harmonic goal; it was prefaced in that opening gig by the first performance of *Thawing*, an orchestral fantasy by the even-younger Helena Tulve.

Tulve's idiom is colder than Tuur's, with something of the formal elegance and emotional reserve of her northern neighbour, the Finn Kaija Saariaho, whose turn in the spotlight came later on in the week,

when the virtuoso Finnish Avanti! chamber orchestra brought a programme of four recent pieces straight in from Britain's Huddersfield Festival.

The good humour which is a notable element of Estonian music bubbled to the surface in the first performance of Raimo Kangro's opera *The Heart* - a witty two-acter about an unscrupulous doctor who experiments with his patients (among them a pianist with 16 fingers), and who gets his come-uppance in a surprisingly jolly stage massacre. Everyone involved - orchestra, conductor, even the front-of-house old ladies selling programmes - was wearing green

clinical masks and gowns; the conductor, Paul Magi, began conducting the chirruping dance rhythms of the score with a scalpel. And - in a touch of financial resourcefulness which will astonish arts fund-raisers in Britain - the production of the opera was underwritten by a hospital, one whose administrators obviously have a black sense of humour.

The high point of Nydd '99 came at its still, calm centre: a concert under the massive medieval dome of St Nicholas's church in Tallinn's gorgeous Old Town. It breathed the religious mysticism that Pärt has made synonymous with Estonian music, with music by Pärt himself and fellow mystics from nearby

lands - the Russians Alexander Knaifel and Viktor Suslin, the Georgian Giya Kancheli and the Ukrainian Galina Grigorieva, all of them performed by the early-music ensemble, Hortus Musicus, conducted by one of Estonia's most impressive musical phenomena, the violinist, flautist, lecturer and writer (and much else) Andres Mustonen.

Two of the works were premières: a moving new arrangement of Pärt's *The Beatitudes*, beautifully sung (in English) by the Old Town Choir, their delicate textures taken up in the dramatic coda by the huge sounds of the St Nicholas organ; and Grigorieva's *On Leaving*, for a flute-rich instrumental ensemble - an exquisite meditation in which central Asia meets the Middle Ages.

It is now time to hear the best of this music further west.

Kangro's *The Heart* ought to be translated into English to allow it a life on stage over here - it is not often that opera audiences get a chance to laugh out loud. Tuur's Violin Concerto would be a roaring success at the Proms. And Paul Goodwin's attempts to revitalise the repertoire of the Academy of Ancient Music (he has been commissioning new pieces from composers such as John Tavener) suggest that he would be delighted to discover Grigorieva's *On Leaving* - I certainly was.

*Information on the Royal Academy of Music's Estonian series 'Pärt in Profile' is available online at [www.ram.ac.uk](http://www.ram.ac.uk) or from 0171-873 7300 (programme booklet available from mid-January).*

*Alba Records are distributed in the UK by One for You in Cambridge (01223 504620; fax 01223 413360)*

## EESTI RAPSOODIA

/.../ Hea huumor, mis on silmatorkav element eesti muusikas, jõudis kuulajateni Raimo Kangro ooperi “Süda” esietendusel. See on vaimukas kahevaatuseline ooper südametust doktorist, kes eksperimenteerib patsientidega, (nende hulgas on ka 16-sõrmeline pianist) ja saab oma tasu üllatavalt lõbusas veresaunas laval. Kõik etendusega seotud inimesed – orkester, dirigent, isegi kavu müüvad vanemad daamid – kandsid rohelisi haigla maske ja riideid. Dirigent Paul Mägi alustas laksatavate tantsurütmide dirigeerimist skalpelliga. Ja veel – finantsiline nutikus, mis hämmastaks briti kunstifondide toetajaid – ooperilavastust sponsoreerib haigla, kelle juhtid omavad ilmselt musta huumorimeelt. /.../ Kangro “Süda” tuleks tõlkida inglise keelde, sest ei juhtu just sageli, et ooperipublikule antakse võimalus naerda täiel hääl.

– Martin Anderson, “Estonian rhapsody”, *The Independent* 17.Xii 1999 (London)