

New Finnish Music: an Interview with Juhani Vesikkala

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“Problemy muzykal'noj nauki/Music Scholarship”!

We are offering you an interview with Finnish composer Juhani Vesikkala. The conversation took place on August 26, 2017 in Helsinki, during Dr. Anton Rovner’s trip to Finland.

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Предлагаем интервью с финским композитором Юхани Весиккала. Беседа состоялась 26 августа 2017 года в Хельсинки во время поездки д-ра Антона Ровнера в Финляндию.



Could you tell me, where did you study, who were your teachers, and how did they influence you?

I started taking composition lessons when I was eleven, which was quite early compared to most colleagues. I studied composition mainly with Jovanka Trbojević for seven years, who was a Montenegrin composer living in Finland. She was one of the first composition teachers in Finland to instruct composition to children, and it was quite extraordinary at that time. Thanks to her pedagogy, I was promptly accepted to the Sibelius Academy in 2009, where my teacher was Tapio Nevanlinna. Having almost finished my bachelor’s degree studies in May 2012, I went to Graz in Austria to study on an Erasmus Exchange, where my teacher was professor Beat Furrer, occasionally complemented by composer Pierluigi Billone. While there, I also studied music theory with professor Georg Friedrich Haas and a few teachers from what seems like a distinctly Austrian school of thinking about music. I started composing electronic music and had wonderful teachers there, for example, Daniel Mayer and Klaus Hollinetz, who taught me a lot of aesthetics for electronic music and set this thought forward in me. Then, when I came back to Finland, I studied for my master’s degree with professor Veli-Matti Puumala. I also attended many master-classes during that time, with such teachers as Magnus Lindberg. Two times I studied at the Ferienkurse in Darmstadt. Among the influences I had with

these encounters with people, I could list Furrer as one of the top five living composers for me. My preference of other exemplary living composers tends to fluctuate and I tend to come across their works in concerts or online, not having met each of them. These composers would most of the time include Salvatore Sciarrino, Adriana Hölszky, Liza Lim, and again my former teacher Haas. Typically, I tend to favor individual works, regardless of who composed it and trying to see behind how the work is presented in performance.

Selecting these five examples mostly has to do with the technical side of composition, the fact that these “composer brands” even have reliably stable, fascinating compositional methods, styles, and sounding results to which I can project my own work, as well as a large output so I can look into how I could use the same or similar instrumental resources even better than they did. This kind of constant improvement is a central part of my ethics as a creative person. I remain critical towards incorporating any outside stylistic influences directly into my compositions. Regardless of my thorough and early upbringing in German Baroque music, for example, my compositions have hardly any trace of it in the choices of sounds or musical form, and neither from my interest in the Korean P’ansori tradition. I also take a critical position on parts of the compositional aesthetic and techniques venerated and taught at the Academy and I have remained a somewhat outsider in Finnish music life, which for me is a fertile position to be in. As



to my aesthetics and philosophy of composition apart from the technical necessities, the lineage starting with John Cage and continuing all the way into sound art, nonlinear narratives, improvisation and comprovisation has enthralled me for years.

How can you describe your musical style and some of its main parameters?

I have a pluralistic style and avoid sticking to a “composer brand.” All parameters, even typically nonmusical parameters such as lighting, graphic poetry complementing the music, or emotional sounds by non-vocalists, can exist as tools in my work though I prefer them to be perceived as something else than separate main or secondary parameters in the finished work. I tend to work considerably with time ranges during which a particular perceptual chain of events is hopefully evoked in the listener. The act of composing should also remain rewarding and meaningful and not only operate with what listeners probably came to hear because the motivation for such music would be unawareness and attachment to the familiar. Such fixations seem to happen especially with the consumption of music compared to other artistic products. If I notice that we need some other kind of music than what I have done earlier or what already exists, I am thus happy to use and slightly develop my compositional skills to create that music. When I say pluralistic, I do not mean that I would make use of elements of generic music that one hears in a mall, as they would be counter-functional to my goals, or that I were to compromise and use elements that do not have appeal to myself. Most of my music fits within the category of “abstract concert music.”

It so happens that my music from about 2010 onwards lies close to the kind of German tradition of instrumental, noise-oriented abstract concert music where Helmut Lachenmann is regarded a central figure. I took my first steps, new at the Sibelius Academy and slightly discouraged by my slightly monolithic environment in Finland. Still, I formed my new style of noises independently, while I only superficially knew about what was being composed in the German-influenced circles though closely started to follow it, and paradoxically was not even aware of Lachenmann’s work at first. Almost all my work also deals with degrees of perceptual saturation, crowding or overload, sometimes in the same way that I have later found out Raphael Cendo and Brian Ferneyhough doing in their music. If you would like to know about my adherence to

national styles, I would position myself outside them. Former strongholds of national style have been crumbling down in Europe and in the States such that trying to discern national influences in Western and many East Asian colleagues of my age has finally become meaningless.

When I give fixed instructions about sounds and time, that is, when writing my scores, there tend to be complex noises and harmonies, although I often see harmony and timbre intertwining, as in the case of multiphonics. I used to be more fixated on pitch and harmony in my teenage years, partly due to my background in singing early music, and partly because my teacher at the time advised me not to compose noises yet. Later I have understood that a typically Western obsession with emotionally laden harmonies is useful in only a few cases of new music, and in the rest of the cases it is for reasons of nostalgia and cannot bring new and urgently needed experiences to new audiences. In my recent works, harmony may enjoy a mediocre place in my work hierarchy when composing and a small or only temporary place in the sounding result.

I am a proponent of modular composing and have not found much use for prominent gradual variations or motivic processes. For me they would constitute a linear narrative form that is difficult to break and can sometimes be a patronizing or forceful way of leading the listener through time, and that doesn’t leave mental room to project other sonic paths into the future. Linear narrative is a feature of most music in strict variation suites or sonata form, whereas for my present style it is best to offer several feasible options to the listener. In my lecture-workshop “Comprovising with the concert setting – uncertainties and etiquette as open form” in St. Petersburg in 2016 I also touched on the aspects in which non-linear narrative goes surprisingly well with improvisation.

My compositional pluralism means that each of my pieces can have a different concept, function, thematic or instrumental set-up, a set of compositional techniques, and can sound considerably different from the previous one. This is because I do not rely on a single audience or demographic in composing the music I have the urge to compose. From composition to the next, I often have completely different instruments, and I would have a completely different concept for each piece. My concepts have taken the form of acoustic music, electronic music, staged music,

music with improvisation, or I have asked for improvised elements and combine them with composed elements. The latter case is called “comprovisation,” which has been a branch of my composing since 2014.

I have had such music performed in St. Petersburg, where I have had two feature concerts in 2016 and 2017 invited by the Experimental Sound Gallery on Pushkinskaya 10. The works are “Remote desires worth missing out” (2016) for voice, harp and double bass, “consensus” (2016) for voice, guitar, piano, violin and cello, and “atem◁metaLL Meantime Interlude” (2013), not a comprovisation but a piece for two loudspeakers that inhabits an otherwise interesting role in the concert etiquette. It is played as a surprise between any two performances when the stage is being reorganized and includes sounds of chairs moving, among others.

My comprovisation “Variations on Commitment” (2016) has vocalists moving around a circle of notestands, producing sounds based on which instruction score is on the notestand they see at any given time. Its timing is heavily improvised and the overlapping vocal sounds sometimes obstruct the perception of its underlying Shakespearean lyrics. It should be conducted from the middle, and this concept somewhat evokes the setting of choral singing in Shakespeare’s time. It is also crucial that the lyrics are universal enough to still have implications on us.

There is also a similar work “The Vicious Circle” (2014), an ensemble comprovisation in a card game setting, where musical instructions are given like cards in a game and the situation is filmed real-time from above so the audience can read the instructions.

I have tried my hand at composing installation pieces, though I did not have the chance of getting them performed yet – it takes effort and the right conditions to curate a meaningful installation – meaningful in the sense that it is not right away a museum piece, but instead placed in a venue where one typically does not expect installations to be. I have a concept for an installation at a library where no music is imposed on visitors, yet those willing can have a deeper connection with the installation by listening on headphones and being live performers for several sensors on the library shelves. I also have works that I call “field improvisation recordings” where I have improvised while recording, and would later write

down the recording, so that it becomes a piece. These works have immense emphasis on the sounds themselves. My formal choices in them are nonlinear, since I typically reorder the structure of the recording. In these cases the piece has remained electronic and no transcription has been feasible to do, also because there is no standard notation for those sounds. For some reason, I do not question the validity of a “tape” piece that only has identifiable instrumental sounds that are not processed and could as well be a live recording of an improvisation session. The improvisation gets compressed and I try to present its elements in their ideal form and order. It is not self-evidently a composition nor an improvisation. It also differs from a comprovisation because there were hardly any instructions originally limiting the improvisation. “The Engendered Voice” (2015) and “Déploration parisienne” (2015) are works using this method, and coincidentally their titles also deal with selectivity – in the first case about our notions of gendered sounds, and in the second about how organized violence has to be condemned but in those places familiar to us it becomes easier to vocally condemn than in places we do not know. These field improvisation recordings have been a useful experiment for my creativity, and it is something many people must have done before me.

Were any of your orchestral compositions performed?

Yes, and quite early on. One of my teenage works was performed and awarded the first prize in a composition competition in 2007 and it is for a chamber orchestra of strings and woodwind soloists. The Sibelius Academy can afford a workshop with a one of the local professional large orchestras, so I have had as the culmination of my studies the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra play a workshop on a work of mine in 2016, in which I present a texturally repetitive idea with overlapping harmonies and perceptual windows, and also built on some ideas from my teacher Haas. Before that, I had organized a reading session for another movement of the same work with an orchestra made of instrumental students. I hope to have my orchestral suite finished and performed in full sometime. Experiences with orchestras are becoming rare, which is why I have wanted to find a novel way even in composing for such a traditional institution. It is indeed interesting to think of a composer’s style and orchestral works

separately because the large orchestra makes for such extreme conditions for composing.

As a side note on orchestral aesthetics, between those nine years my aesthetic for orchestral composing had changed considerably. There seldom are any pure aesthetics in my music, largely because the themes that I find and derive from human life seldom go by a crystalline state of reduction, isolation, or simplification. I do appreciate composers when they select a pure aesthetic though, as in some soundscapes and minimalisms, where often idealized forms of sound are used, and they serve another function. By pure aesthetics, I mean the combinations of musical attributes that are typically categorised under one label. I do not intend my music to have a strict compositional aesthetics, to sound like minimalism, saturism, the Helsinki school, the Graz school, New Complexity, Noise Art or any other label which people can instantly mentally recall after hearing a few sample works. These labels have essentially been the working ground of the composers who have made it useful to establish those labels. To elaborate on this, I like to think that most of my stylistic choices are intentional and that a stylistic choice in composition does not follow from another stylistic choice. Music functions with another logic in that sense. It is not like every texture built on soft and continuous raspy noises has to be performed in a concert hall, or has to include development into some perceptually different category, or eventually has to alternate with a different texture, for example. With individual pieces, however, compositional choices will influence each other.

All my music has combined elements and many ideas interacting together. The ideas either combine in my general concept and my compositional stages working on the piece, or the finished work has distinct passages that have differing aesthetics. When I was using the mass of an orchestra, I combined vowel formant regions with tetrachords that are categorized by their density profile, or there was a spectral chord that transposes and becomes a warped spectrum in the process, and that chord was always reinforced by a specific percussion instrument or a noise which has a high core frequency that also follows throughout that process. Orchestral music provided enough mass for these spectral methods which found their way into my “Suite for Orchestra” (2014). I can blur the line between live electronics and live playing,

leaving many audience members puzzled for an extended time, which became the central passage in “boxes, open/close” (2014 / 2016) for alto flute, piano and 8-channel electronics.

Yesterday you had a microtonal piece for bassoon, which was performed by Johnny Reinhard. Do you write microtonal music regularly? What is your experience with microtonal music? Do you compose it regularly or only occasionally? What kind of tunings or temperaments do you use?

My bassoon piece “Avalokiteśvara” bears resemblance to the obvious virtuoso repertoire such as Luciano Berio’s Sequenzas, but its virtuosity lies in not only the precision of microtones and multiphonics, it lies in the mental ability of making distinct and dispersed musical materials meet. It is thus one of the most difficult pieces a bassoonist can encounter in the repertoire. I use microtones more and more. I started with the violin-guitar duo piece “Colo Cordatura” (2010) using microtonal deviations or embellishments that rely on their context, and in earnest in 2012, when I worked on “Ciaccona con variazioni” for a guitar with frets for quarter-tones. That work was conceived as an etude for a course on microtonality. By 2012 I had started using microtones in almost all of my composing whenever the instruments have that precision. When I need these pitches, especially when writing for instruments with entirely flexible pitch, it is not something that I think of or use as some microscopic intervals necessarily. I tend to favor the ambivalent harmonic intervals such as 250 cents. They become part of the grammar for me. So there I treat them just as I treat any pitches, and I typically develop a pitch strategy only after I have done many other compositional choices for the piece. “Avalokiteśvara” is an exception because I knew the technicalities of the instrument thoroughly, having played the bassoon on and off for over ten years, and also because the 8th-octave tuning system was proposed by the performer.

What kind of microtones do you use? Have you used just intonation?

I have never used just intonation or Pythagorean tuning. Even those times when I have intentionally used partials of a fundamental, I have not constructed a 7-note or 12-note scale out of them. I mostly use equal temperaments, such as the 31-tone scale or the 72-tone scale, which I have used quite a lot, but again not in a chromatic sense. I would take a scale in 72-tuning and I would be using only some of the available pitches so that the perception

does not become too dense or that of a scale that someone could fixate to. In this piece for bassoon, “Avalokiteśvara,” I use the 8th-octave system devised by Johnny Reinhard, featuring up to 128 close approximations of partials per octave in non-equal divisions. Whether or not this work seems like using a form of just intonation or not then becomes a matter of terminology. The scale used proceeds up to the 255th partial in the overtone series, and I made even more approximations by choosing a fundamental pitch B natural, rather than the A for which Reinhard had developed all the microtonal fingerings. Occasionally I also use spectral elements in my music especially when they are inherent to the sound itself, so that I would make approximations of multiphonic chords into spectral partials and quite conventionally map them into the 24-system or the 72-system. The perception and notation of multiphonic sounds is the topic of my master’s thesis “Multiphonics of the Grand Piano” from 2016. I still continue my research, with one upcoming project involving piano construction.

My work for ensemble, “Marginalia” (2015), is my only work in 72-EDO tuning, the smallest interval being twelfth-tones, and I soon found such a high precision with an ensemble of live performers of string instruments to be unnecessary and impractical. My composition “náníshkad” (2014) for the Fokker organ in Amsterdam makes use of 31-EDO tuning.

I am also planning to write microtonal etudes for different instruments. A lot of my sounds can be very multidimensional, so in addition to complexity or reflectivity in terms of pitch it will likely be also about degrees of the noises idiomatic to that particular instrument.

Why did you call your piece “Avalokiteshvara”? Were you influenced by Buddhism?

Avalokiteshvara is the compassionate form of a Buddha, the one with the many hands to serve humanity. So the concept behind the work is derived from the statues. For example, I saw some versions of this form in Vietnam last year, and that is where I got the visual influence for the piece. Figures with this concept have dozens of hands, enabling the enlightened being to help humanity in the best way. In my conceptual mind, the hands also result in multiplicity of pitches and virtuosic precision on the bassoon. I first started sketching for the piece in the park around the iconic lake in Hanoi to practice nonattachment from my

environment as it was Christmas Eve in most of the Western world. As my work on the composition progressed, part of the music was influenced by short lines temporarily chosen from the Lotus Sutra that I left outside the finished work. This work is rooted in Buddhist influences from the start and I think my whole work ethic as a composer has been unconsciously informed by the kind of philosophy that also exists in Western Buddhism, or Engaged Buddhism. It took me until around 2014 to become conscious of that connection.

Do you often incorporate some philosophical or spiritual ideas or any other extra-musical influences into your music?

There is a part of my musical output which has spiritual meanings, some of it has social meanings, while some of it simply has word play in its title. I have tried to incorporate Japanese Buddhist-Shinto ideas about spirits and souls in “Exorcist for the perplexed mind” (2015) when using the hichiriki, an essentially Japanese wind instrument that has been described as having spiritual qualities.

I have limited interest in theoretical philosophy yet I see myself as an artist who is also an empirical thinker. Lately, socially urgent themes have found their way to my titles, such as in “Walkthrough” (2015) for three actors, electronic sound, lights and video, my prompt critique reacting to the organised street violence by police forces in the United States. I have personally experienced slight misuse of police force in Austria as a foreigner, so there are points of contact to my work, and the #BlackLivesMatter discussion still goes on today. Regardless of this specific instance, this kind of critique has to do with any country that has any kind of bodies of violence misusing their trust or policing victimless crimes. Even those of my pieces that have no lyrics can engage in societal undertones, such as movements from my orchestral suite, “Delusional Occidents” (2014–2015) and “flashbacklash” (2016) about the surge in immigration-based and orientalist discussion in Europe.

There also is an ongoing thematic of the acute reshaping around gender and sexuality, where I have given titles such as “Remote desires worth missing out” (2016) for three compromising musicians, or “Zweier Lasterkatalog / Catalog of mutual vices” (2017) for the two traditionally “dirty” instruments, accordion and saxophone, among others.



Occasionally, I will stumble upon interesting words in different languages, and I find that some combinations of them make the whole carry more meaning. It is not that the piece has to be listened to in the way as suggested by its title. I give a general topic or an abstract poetic title to each piece, and I let the listeners be free to perceive what they like in the music.

My influences from outside music tend to remain hidden or abstract, especially with my recent emphasis on instrumental music.

Could you tell me about the society for composers in Finland of which you are a member? What kind of activities does this society engage in, and what is your part in this society? You have your music performed there. Do you do any of the organizing?

There are actually two composers' societies I am part of. One of them is for the established composers, the Society of Finnish Composers, which I joined a few years ago. I am not part of the board of this society, yet I participate in its meetings. This year I have written an article about new choral notation, which was published on our website. This society is a good chance to meet with colleagues – we have regular meetings, and we discuss aesthetic issues and issues about composers' working habits. The second society is called Korvat Auki (Ears Open) and it is not only intended for composers, but for anybody interested in listening to, performing or promoting new music. However, it is attended mostly by young composers. It started around 1977 founded by the most notable Finnish musicians as part of the Sibelius Academy, which itself still does not provide an extra-academic group for its composition students. So, many of the members of this society pursue composition studies at the Sibelius Academy. Now I am the vice chairperson of this society after doing a range of tasks and being secretary. I founded our blog in 2016 to revive discussion about new music in Finnish media, have been vocal about composers' societal issues in general, have performed in our improvisation-oriented Korvat Auki Ensemble, and functioned as one of the curators for our intermedial concert production during Musica Nova Helsinki 2015.

This year there will be even more concerts than we typically organize, since it is the 40 years anniversary of our society. We have been applying for grants, though receiving grants has been difficult for us in Finland. Part of the reason is

that we have been viewed as an intermediary stage between being students and professionals. Our body of members is very mixed, consisting both of professionals and young composers, who have not written much music. Additionally, there are non-composer new music enthusiasts. What unites us is that we have this need to have our music performed and heard, and that music by the way often has formats or ideas not accepted by many venues or schools of aesthetic, and we also need to have a dialogue between ourselves. I would say, there are intriguing events to experience this season because of our anniversary.

Do you have your music performed in other countries besides Finland?

I would estimate that half of the performances of my music take place in Finland, and the other half is performed in other countries – in Europe, in the United States and in Japan. When living in Finland, Central Europe has always been an obvious direction in my musical performing activities since I was 11 years old. As a composer, I try to establish more musical contacts in East Asia, for instance, because I know colleagues there, and have lately traveled quite extensively there. I made some recent contacts when I was in Hong Kong, which has a musical scene although most funding is given for conventional classical music, and in Hanoi, Vietnam, where I am especially interested in their unique musical instruments, some of which I brought back and use in my improvisation performances. It is good to have confluence with different musical cultures and to find common ground between new music and different geographical musical traditions.

This far my only work explicitly composed for a non-Western instrument is “Exorcist for the Perplexed Mind” (2015) for hichiriki and fixed sound media (so called “tape” electronics). It has been performed in the appropriate venues for both Japanese traditional music and electronic music, in Tokyo, and at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany. There is more to expect because I am currently working on a composition with almost free instrumentation that can and should include some non-Western instruments. The kinds of non-Western instruments I especially appreciate are those with agility in vibratos and glissandos, as well as noisy methods of playing. In my thoughts of bringing my music, inevitably Western music, to such countries with long musical traditions of their own, I have remained on the careful side and

still try to learn as much as possible about those cultures in which I think I have something original and musically wide-ranging to contribute.

What are your plans in regard to composing new music or having performances of your compositions in the upcoming future?

In 2018, I will have a multimedia composition bearing the working title of “Togetherness” performed by the Ensemble Garage from Cologne, Germany. I am currently working on its video material, and the piece will also include theatrical action on stage by the four musicians. One layer is made of personality roles that each of the performers are given in their choices of sounds and speaking contours.

The main concept is about the ways in which people can be connected with or driven apart from each other, and the sound and visual impulses will reflect this, for instance by being synchronous for a while. Put simply, the music is about the simple types of relations that sound sources can have with other sound sources. The underlying sounds and compositional techniques are will be complex, because what ultimately matters is how the concept

is perceived as coexisting with the sounds and visuals and how each of them is interesting and functional in its own right.

The musicians for the ensemble are specialists in stage music, which means that they will improvise on their instruments on stage on a high level – they are virtuosic at that. This composition also has modules with social themes matching with the video recording, electronics and performance by musicians from the ensemble. Of all the performances planned for 2018, it is my biggest work in progress.

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