

COLIN'S COLUMN

Ateş Orga, Festival Wanderer – 2.

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Pärnu in Estonia, a Baltic resort on an inlet of the Gulf of Riga, is one of those places you read about in other people's biographies. It's temperate, lush, beautiful. In Soviet times, David Oistrakh and Shostakovich would go there to spend their summers – "the nearest thing to western tolerance and understanding." In his dacha Oistrakh would host *ad hoc* performances with students. There, in 1973, Paavo Järvi, ten years old, met Shostakovich. Reflecting those music-making days of another era, Paavo and his father, the legendary Neeme (who studied in Leningrad with Mravinsky and Rabinovich), founded the Pärnu Music Festival in 2010. "At the beginning", Paavo recalls, "my goal was to nurture Estonian talent by bringing in as many international artists as possible, so that young Estonian musicians would have the chance to play with top colleagues from around the world and develop their musical careers. Now I realise that our goal has actually been achieved and we have top class Estonian talent welcoming back their colleagues, for genuine musical reunions." A state-of-the-art glass-fronted 900-seater concert hall opened in 2002 doubles up as a conference centre and social hub.

Subject to Covid-19 restrictions – spaced players, separate stands, reduced orchestral forces – the management succeeded in presenting a full albeit re-imagined programme, one of the few European festivals to do so this summer, catering for both 'live' (physically distanced) and online audiences.

Addicted to the Festival's TV channel for a week yielded a diverse range of encounters – from Beethoven 250 to contemporary Estonian masterworks, veterans to newcomers, the Järvi clan (in many capacities) ensuring a guiding, supportive family presence.

Paavo's Beethoven is habitually clear-cut, detailed but unfussy. Resisting 'epic' gestures or invasive personal statements, he lets the music speak for itself, generating its own voltage. His Concerto accompaniments are as discreet or dramatic as his soloists, cushioning their personalities. It's quite an art. The opening and last-but-one concerts illustrated this well. Pedigree and pleasure plentifully in evidence, Kalle Randalu, a disciple of Vlassenko in his Moscow youth, favoured a lightweight approach to the C-major Concerto (fingered *glissando*, short cadenza), classically sprung in emphasis, the demeanour convivially youthful, coquettish even, emotions running deeper than surface impression – the Largo (July 16, Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, 6.5.4.3.2, antiphonal violins). Contrastingly, Olli Mustonen in the 1807 keyboard arrangement of the Violin Concerto (initiated by Clementi who, I've often thought, must have had some hand in the transcription) played like a composer possessed, almost improvisationally, throwing caution to the winds, taking risks at the quieter end of the dynamic spectrum even if the hall's Steinway, muffled and lacking body at times, didn't always respond (22nd, Estonian Festival Orchestra). More than many a starry recording around, this was a performance that compelled attention, all parties relishing the tension and re-focused context, having a ball. Plummeting into B-flat (recalling/anticipating, bringing home, the same key-drop, transposed, of the Third Piano Concerto at this structural point), the first movement cadenza, hard-stick war-drums bestowing Napoleonic connotations, dazzled, Mustonen's distinctive playing style and body language contributing to the spectacle.

Paavo does a particular kind of classical and romantic repertory especially well. Beethoven First Symphony – emphasising dynamics and woodwind *harmonie* (the bane of critics in 1800) to the advantage of the Finale, bars 194^{ff} gaining an expressive persona absent from his Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen video a decade ago (16th). Mendelssohn's precociously inspired First Symphony – a connoisseur reading, the first movement driving onwards with fiery character and grandly judged balance, the *tutti*s gritty and strong, everyone committed (19th, EFO). The Andante soared, mature and lyrical, its emotions hard to imagine from a fifteen-year-old. Likewise the Trio of the Minuet, timpani, stripped of body, briefly ominous. A tremendous Finale, learnedness dispatched with Mozartian grace, theatre with panache. World-class. For a first encore Sibelius's Andante Festivo, his father's favourite Paavo told us, strings in luscious form, phrasing impeccably vocal, enunciated and breathed. Beauty incarnate.

On the Estonian front, Arvo Pärt was necessarily on hand (the canonic *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* for bell and strings, 16th). But the Festival's featured composer was Lepo Sumera (1950-2000), Tallinn/Moscow trained: a powerful voice of imagination, curiosity and sophisticated technical ability, someone who broke down barriers. From 1988 to 1992, during the so-called Singing Revolution of the Baltic States, he was Estonia's Minister of Culture – exemplar of a time and place when cultural appointees were cultured men. The Third of his six Symphonies (1988), in four movements, convinces at many levels, with the capacity to weave spells and wander provocative regions of mind and fantasy. Its hypnotic, unexpected ending brought to mind something Sumera said shortly before his death: "You never know what the next moment will bring. And very often the next moment – ah, but isn't this what inspiration is all about!". Paavo's disciplined, rehearsed way with the music, along with alacrity of response, secured a performance to impress. In the Larghetto Finale, his grasp of "quasi *senza* metrum" through "quasi *con* metrum" was a finely crafted lesson in how to get this composer's time-world to speak rather than slumber (22nd & 23rd, EFO).

The late three-movement Cello Concerto (1998-99) should be in every cellist's repertory. It's superbly magnificent, Sumera opening up a panorama of peaks and passions, retrospection and ripple, arguments and arias. "The gradual change of different musical landscapes – textures, their slow fusion or 'dissolution' in each other is a way of musical thinking ... the spinning of musical atoms – the notes – around their nuclei – harmonies and melodies." An extravagantly orchestrated canvas, each player in the solo spotlight one way or the other. Theodor Sink's stratospheric performance (from memory) astonished, from solo outset through cadenzas to manic Finale. I'd go a long way to hear him again. Surely one of the greats to come. Paavo, who does his reading and homework meticulously, leaving no room for error, must have been well-pleased, his orchestra rising fearlessly to whatever the challenge (19th, EFO).

Other Estonians sent other messages. Tõnu Kõrvits, whose seventeen-minute triptych *To the Moonlight* received its premiere in the composer's presence (19th). The Estonian Music Information Centre – which promotes the country's composers with a funding, fullness and rigour unheard of in Britain – sums up Kõrvit's style as "poetic and visionary, hypnotic journeys through the landscapes of nature and folk tradition, human soul and subconscious ... subtle harmonic colours, polyphony and heterophony, refined orchestral texture, Estonian folk song as an exhaustible source, reflections of exotic cultures." Melodic expanses, diatonic roads, a Sibelian sweep of sound and incident as geologically/regionally referenced as it is spiritually and sensually under-currented, a richly sonorous orchestral palette, binds the new work poetically.

Erkki-Sven Tüür studied privately with Sumera, transitioning from progressive rock, minimalism and Xenakis to latter day symphonist. "My work as a composer is entirely concerned with the relationship between emotional and intellectual energy and the ways in which they can be channelled, accumulated, dissipated and re-accumulated. My pieces are abstract dramas in sound, with characters and an extremely dynamic chain of events; they unfold in a space that is constantly shifting, expanding and contracting." His Second Violin Concerto, 'Angel's Share' (2018), comes with a descriptive note: "The term 'angel's share' is used for the evaporated 2% of liquid per year when whiskey is ageing in a wooden barrel, therefore letting go of some of the unpleasant tastes of raw whiskey replacing it with noble hints of the oak barrel. I like to think that people also, during their personalities maturing, could lose a certain portion of not the best in them. Hopefully with the help of our guarding angels...". Murmurs of idea, rhythm and association freewheel in fertile gear, energy to the fore, soloist and chamber forces (percussion, strings) driven hard. Cutting an impression of a pre-Raphaelite Norse maiden, Triin Ruubel, concertmaster of the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and co-leader of the EFO, gave an outstanding account. Popular in Pärnu, she's the sort of supportive player you want to have, sure of her place in the score, technically commanding, making music, the imparting of experience and knowledge, at the heart of her priorities, always ready to listen. Her dedication couldn't be faulted (17th, Järvi Academy Sinfonietta). Nor the way of her conductor and Festival colleague, the South African violist Xandi van Dijk, living out Paavo's rule-of-thumb philosophy – clarity before choreography.

A different kind of Estonian evening, "50 Years of Festivals" featured a kaleidoscope of music and performers, along with the Pärnu City Orchestra, JAYSO and EFO (18th). In order of programme, Kaspar Mänd, a rising choral and opera conductor, got to the symphonic roots of Beethoven's *Egmont Overture*, his beat heroically tight. Then came the soprano Arete Kerge accompanied by Kadri-Ann Sumera (daughter of the composer) in a haunting 1927 song, *Homesickness*, by the venerated Juhan Aavik, reminding me of certain Slavonic precedents from Chopin to Dvořák, Foerster and Russian romance. Paavo took to the podium next for an emotionally nuanced performance by Allar Kassik of Veljo Tormis's originally choral *A cloud over the moon* (1991). Kassik, a veteran who can hold a tune, arranged this for cello and strings in 2010, adding a cadenza. A little jewel out of some northern landscape filmed in cold light.

Come the second half, preceded by a conversation with Neeme beamed into the hall, a different perspective and energy took over. For Paavo Jüri Reinvere's Double Concerto for flutes various, string orchestra and percussion, with Maarika Järvi and Monika Mattiesen (who gave the premiere at the 2016 Pärnu Music Festival), posed a tough call. This lengthy, absorbing work goes through the gamut of extended techniques and colour vibrations punctuated by romanticisms, sudden gravity depths, snarls, granite climaxes and long decays. Poet and essayist, one-time student of Sumera, Reinvere is an interesting figure, a potent independent of pungent intellect. There's much to take from his world. Born in 1971, visually going the Brahms/Seegerstam way, he took a bow.

Zoning in from another universe, Kristjan Randalu's distinctively individual style upholstered four Mozart extracts into a quirky kind of serenade/divertimento for piano and orchestra, a classic/jazz cross-harmony, inner-voiced fusion even Gulda hesitated to attempt. Nuts and bolts akimbo, it needed the 'Champagne Aria' conclusion to lure everyone into the party, Kristjan Järvi, ever the loose-limbed MC, at his over-seeing best, his young orchestra getting a taste of late-night cool, pulverising beat and forbidden fruits. B-flat was never like this.

Kristjan, who in 2015 made Tallinn his base and is a big player in these parts (Baltic Sea Philharmonic not least), is the opposite of his father and Paavo in style, taste and goals. A charismatic, physical force, he's very much a man of action, nothing is impossible, concert days he gets himself and his hand-picked musicians high on adrenalin (remember that extraordinary night at the Champs-Élysées, March 2015? – fifteen world championship rounds, one prize in sight). A nostalgia encore, Kirbu Epiphany (2020) – the closing track of his new Nordic Escapes album with the Nordic Pulse Ensemble and LSO – glimpses inner privacy. "Go back to one childhood memory which is the most comforting, loving and safe. Kirbu is this place for me. It is my internal sanctuary. A place of pure light and simplicity. Kirbu is the name of a river that runs in front of our house outside the city of Pärnu in southern Estonia, my childhood summer home ... A few years ago I came back there and a realization came to me. An epiphany! I was in awe of the beauty of the place and in calmness of spirit that took over, I sat down and played this tune. I hear hushing birch trees and warm sunlight and a big smile ..." Randalu found the melody. Kristjan floated the pulse.

Radical juxtapositions similarly referenced the one chamber gathering of the week, recalling memories from the last nine Festivals (20th). It finished classically enough – a cultured, ensemble-tuned reading of Mendelssohn's E-flat Octet. Genius on fire (no prisoners in the Scherzo or Presto) thrillingly led, and encored, by the infinitely enlightened Florian Donderer, concertmaster of the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen and Estonian Festival Orchestra (Hans Christian Aavik, Eva Bindere, Mari Poll, Xandi van Dijk, Karin Sarv, Thomas Ruge, Theodor Sink – standing). But began less traditionally with Franz Hasenhörl's 1954 transcription of Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* for violin, double bass, clarinet, horn and bassoon, appealingly convincing and impeccably dispatched (Emma Yoon, Juliane Bruckmann, Signe Sömer, Alec Frank-Gemmill, Rie Koyama). Then Schubert's Second String Trio, the violin part transferred to flute: the kind of mellifluous domestic solution (had this work been around, it wasn't published until 1897) with which no nineteenth-century Viennese household would have been unfamiliar (Maarika Järvi, Georg Katsouris, Teet Järvi). A reading not without charm, if stronger at the (flute-friendly) thematic rather than (violin-g geared) developmental level. Finally Bartók's Contrasts, boldly temperamental and stylish, a grippingly responsive re-creation, no shortage of class, electricity or theatre (Triin Ruubel, Olli Mustonen, Matthew Hunt in heightened form, ripe for the recording studio).

An inseparable part of the Pärnu initiative is the Järvi Academy, focussing on training, courses and nine televised masterclasses, for not only conductors but also young string and woodwind players. Taking care of face-to-face conducting were Paavo and Kristjan. Online tuition was in the hands of Neeme Järvi in Florida, together with Paavo's sometime teacher Leonid Grin (in his early days a Kondrashin *protégé* in Moscow mentored subsequently by Bernstein). Participants had the prospect of two gala evenings (17th, JAS, 21st, JAYSO) with a repertory including Mozart 29, Poulenc's Sinfonietta and Haydn 93. For the second concert Stefan Dohr, principal horn of the Berlin Philharmonic, was on hand with the third of the Mozart Concertos, Messiaen's 'Appel interstellaire' from *Des canyons aux étoiles* for encore, and, without baton, the first movement of Dvořák's Sixth Symphony. Allotted a movement each, no-one disappointed, one has heard seasoned pros do significantly worse. With crisp orchestral support throughout, the Poulenc, not an easy work to bring off, particularly impressed, bigger-boned than expected.

Founded by Paavo in 2011, the Estonian Festival Orchestra focusses on “talent, energy and innovation ... Our spirit is what makes us unique – we are the first orchestra in the world to connect internationally-renowned performers with emerging talent from Estonia. High-level music making is at the heart of what we do.” With players drawn mainly from Estonia and Germany but also wider afield, top-flight musicians stiffening the ranks and match-making with a pool of discerningly trained talent that’s gone from local to international top league, the mix, friendship led, is enriching and passionate.

A reason to reach for still greater things, the final concert (23rd) must have given Paavo specifically, the Järvi family generally, an enormous sense of pride and achievement. If the players glowed, they had every right to. Programmed already the evening before (with subtle differences), Sumera’s Third Symphony and Mozart 39 (rugged, prophetically Beethovenian, unexpected insights in the slow movement, both halves of the Finale repeated) framed an utterly exalted performance from Alena Baeva of Richard Strauss’s early D-minor Violin Concerto, she in glorious form, a gracious queen of her instrument, every note, scale and stop emotionally charged, the purest of intonation to admire. I’ve never been that drawn to this work. The bigness and orchestral span of the canvas Paavo unfurled, Baeva’s unfailing belief, made me completely re-evaluate it.

When it comes to encores Paavo is generous, his enthusiasm boundless. Beethoven’s statement-making Prometheus Overture on the opening evening, period-brisk yet airy. Sibelius’s Valse triste signing off the penultimate concert. He has a way with this tableau, a rhythmic and dynamic tension, that’s eerily mesmerising. The concentration left Triin R near-gaunt, spiritually drained, fingers and bow barely hovering, scarcely believing that her violin could still sound so close to death’s threshold. Cinematic camera work. Three to close the final night. Sumera’s Olympic Music I (written for the boycotted 1980 Moscow Games). Alfvén’s string-testing Shepherd Girls’ Dance from his 1923 ballet-pantomime The Mountain King. Sumera’s Waltz from the 1986 puppet-film Spring Fly, arranged by Mihkel Kerem – a delicious pastiche flirtation, up there with the best of Shostakovich’s or Khachaturian’s show-tunes, offering Matthew Hunt and Florian Donderer, others too, a window to array their solo artistry. Drawing back the curtain ... half-light, smoky dreams, bent notes, distant *klezmer*, remembered smiles, languid embrace ... gifting his players utmost freedom ... Paavo Järvi, master of syntax and *rubato*, did nothing yet everything. All the time in the world. Silence.

Another Festival over.

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