

Erkki-Sven Tüür

The word 'energy' frequently recurs in Andrew Mellor's profile of the Estonian whose recent work asks big questions

When discussing the music of Erkki-Sven Tüür, it's worth starting with geography. The composer lives on an island, surrounded by the cool waters of the Baltic (more on which later). Hiiumaa may be 22km from the mainland but it belongs to Estonia, a country strongly influenced by Finland and Russia to the north and east, yet tightly bound to those southern Baltic siblings with which it famously sang its way to independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

That seismic shift in Estonia's existence came only a few years after Tüür's breakthrough piece, *Insula deserta* ('Forgotten island', 1989), first performed in 1989 by the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra up on Finland's west coast. The piece has a terse beauty taken forward in *Passion* and *Illusion* (both 1993) and to some extent in *The Wanderer's Evening Song* (2001), which vibrates with fervour characteristic of the Baltic choral tradition. These three later works, like the music of Tüür's compatriot Arvo Pärt, speak of a nation coming to terms with its new-found freedom – looking to wipe the slate clean but doing so with cautious optimism and an acknowledgement that scars remain. When the MS *Estonia* sank in the Baltic in 1994 it looked momentarily like the country might spiral into a vortex of lost confidence: life without a superpower in charge had suddenly become real.

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In truth, the pain still lingers in revitalised, laudable Estonia and in so much of its exceptional and heartfelt music (not just classical). It is there in Tüür's works even if his central preoccupation has become a celebration and manipulation of energy in its many forms – a compulsion to seize the moment. The overriding power of Pärt's music helped lead Tüür into composing following his flute and percussion studies. But he was just as interested in the bands King Crimson and Yes, and the pulsating rhythms of John Adams and Mike Oldfield.

Those interests pushed him into the only really viable action for a post-adolescent in Estonia: starting a band. For four years until 1983, Tüür was flautist, keyboardist, vocalist and writer in In Spe, the group that would become known as the godfather of Estonian prog-rock and which sneaked past the Soviet censors with its largely instrumental albums. There was an etched, patient quality to the 'chamber rock' the band produced with Tüür on Moog synthesisers and his wife, Anne,



on piano and guitar. *Illuminatio* from an album recorded in 1982 foreshadows the composer's viola concerto of the same name (2008) in its patient journey, and clearly owes something to Estonian folk music (when Tüür left the band in 1983, he was replaced by the young Alo Mattiisen, who went on to arrange some of the most significant anthems of the Singing Revolution).

But In Spe could not contain the many musics swirling around Tüür's head: yes, rock and minimalism, but also Gregorian chant, polyphony, microtonality and 12-note serialism. By way of release, the composer exploited those different worlds for their contrasts, and a series of polystylistic scores followed that juxtaposed supposedly incompatible ideas and styles. *Architectonics VI* (1992), written for members of the Avanti! Chamber Orchestra in Finland and one chapter in the longstanding series of the same name, has a string quartet busying itself with a tight, four-voiced conversation that slips and slides through adjacent notes while wind instruments and a vibraphone play a note row; from the two elements, a third emerges. In another example, the industry of the string group in Symphony No 3 (1997) is incited by numerous interrupting voices that spring forth as if from another world.

While Tüür's music was clearly mining energy in such contrasts, the composer soon started to explore how he might do so within a more specific and personal framework. Around the turn of the century, he started to develop a method whereby an entire work would be 'encapsulated in a source code – a gene, which, as it mutates and grows, connects the dots in the fabric of the whole work'. This 'vectorial' technique used intervals (determined by number sequences) which then controlled the direction of a piece with specific references to voice-leading and the score's various structural arcs.

As in equivalent serial or delimiting techniques, the effect was in fact to make Tüür's music more free and

improvisatory – just as hitting golf balls in a driving range loosens up a player's swing.

When a grid is established, intuition can reign. This became the key to Tüür's mature style, the next chapter of the composer's polystylistic method, 'the endpoint of a journey that began as a search for balance between the individual and the universal' (according to Tüür's Estonian colleague Kerri Kotta). The first steps on the vectorial journey were taken with *Oxymoron* (2003), a search for harmonic unity within the oxymoron of combining vertical and horizontal activity.

What emerged from the development was the distinctive energy that gives so many of Tüür's scores the feeling of huge swirling structures, and that took Estonian music into a new and wholly optimistic era. '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,' the composer writes on his website. Which doesn't stop each work sounding distinctive. To date there are nine symphonies, 11 concertos, works for string orchestra and chamber ensemble and an opera (*Wallenberg*, 2001) on the subject of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swede who saved thousands of Jews during the Second World War. Almost all have been recorded, some more than once. Recent developments include a tendency to anchor big orchestral scores firmly from below (Symphony No 8, 2010), which might reflect the influence of Finland (the nearest landmass to the north of Hiiumaa) and particularly of Tüür's friend Magnus Lindberg.

Not unrelated to that influence, the principle of 'energy conversion' in Tüür's works has been outlined by Kotta – that is, how a passage might combine a decelerating rhythm with accelerating dynamics, giving the impression of an energy field transferring from the former to the latter.

TÜÜR FACTS

Born October 16, 1959, in Kärđla, Hiiumaa, Estonia

Studied Flute and percussion at Georg Ots Music High School, Tallinn (1976-80), and composition with Jaan Rääts at the Estonian Academy of Music (also Tallinn; 1980-84) and privately with Lepo Sumera

Awarded Estonian Music Prize (1987, 1988); Great Bear Prize (1996, 1997); Culture Prize of the Republic of Estonia (1997); Baltic Assembly Prize for Literature, the Arts and Science (1998); Annual Prize of the Estonian Music Council (2003) and a second Culture Prize of the Republic of Estonia (2014) for *Peregrinus ecstaticus*

Artistic Director International contemporary music festival NYYD in Tallinn, 1991-2011

Key quote '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'

The process is in evidence in the later symphonies, but some of the more recent concertos have apparently glanced back to the idea of material contrast. The clarinet concerto *Peregrinus ecstaticus* (2012) juxtaposes two groups of material that generate a controlling force field between them. Tüür's organic and dynamic use of texture in this piece, particularly his conjuring of low sounds and control of the resulting energy, is extraordinary. The consistently stimulating and beautiful viola concerto *Illuminatio* sees the solo instrument manipulating the orchestra from above (or, at least, from the middle) as if the ensemble is a giant marionette. Dazzling, tight constellations emerge above in high trumpets, woodwind and strings.

If you're tempted to read bigger metaphors into gestures like those, fine. Tüür writes, 'One of my goals is to reach the creative energy of the listener. Music as an abstract form of art is able to create different visions for each of us.'

One of his most recent works provides a more specific image. The piccolo concerto *Solastalgia* (2016), written for Vincent Cortvint and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, bears a particularly strong relationship to the island of Hiiumaa and asks the biggest existential question of our times: how long can such an island remain? 'Winters are no longer winters and summers no longer summers,' Tüür said of life on the island at the time of writing the score. The big, broad piece casts the solo instrument as a tiny creature whose smallest gesture can have seismic effects. But gradually, it loses its voice. 6

ENERGY AND CONTRASTS ON DISC

Showcasing some of Tüür's choral and orchestral works



'Flux'
David Geringas vc Vienna RSO / Dennis Russell Davies
ECM New Series (1/00)

Tüür's Symphony No 3 adumbrates his early style, in which the music strains thrillingly in the face of two contrasting elements and a third emerges from the process. This excellent recording also includes the Cello Concerto and one of the composer's most iconic works, the unmistakably Baltic *Lighthouse*.



'Awakening'
Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, Sinfonietta Riga / Daniel Reuss
Online (2/12)

Tüür's 'awakening to the light' written for Tallinn's year as European Capital of Culture in 2011 is a work that pivots, and magically so, on the transmutation of textures – in this case bringing human voices into the orchestral mix. *Awakening* is a radiant and uplifting work, and the fillers (*The Wanderer's Evening Song* and *Insula deserta*) are valuable too.



Illuminatio. Symphony No 8.
Whistles and Whispers from Uluru
Genevieve Lacey recs Lawrence Power va
Marko Myöhänen elec Tapiola Sinfonietta / Olari Elts
Online (5/18)

The viola concerto *Illuminatio* is one of Tüür's most compelling recent creations, a journey towards a light source that eventually washes out the sound altogether, making it a fascinating counterweight to that most famous of Baltic concertos, Pēteris Vasks's *Distant Light*. The concerto gets an exquisite performance from Lawrence Power here and the disc also includes the mesmerising recorder concerto *Whistles and Whispers from Uluru*.