

JUHANI NUORVALA AND MICROTONAL MUSIC: INTERVIEW WITH A COMPOSER FROM FINLAND

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Д-р Антон Ровнер

To the readers of the journal "Problemy muzykal'noy nauki/Music Scholarship:" We are presenting an interview with Finnish composer Juhani Nuorvala. The Conversation took place on September 26, 2016 prior to the concert of the Moscow Ensemble for Contemporary Music, where his music was performed.

Dr. Anton Rovner



Could you tell me about your early background and your formative years? Where did you study and with whom? As I understood, you studied in Finland and in New York.

In the 1980s I studied at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, where my teacher was Eero Hämeenniemi, a mid-generation composer and a student of Paavo Heininen. Hämeenniemi had been a founding member of the well-known Korvat Auki or "Ears Open" Society, a group of particularly talented young modernists, among them Kaija Saariaho, Magnus Lindberg and Esa-Pekka Salonen. I studied with him for a long time, and for one semester I took the time off from the Sibelius Academy and went to Paris to study with Tristan Murail. I graduated from the Academy in the early 1990s, and at one point I got a Fulbright to study composition in the United States at City University of New York with David Del Tredici and a few other teachers.

Which composers provided an influence for you when you were young?

I went to study with Tristan Murail, because at that time, when I was in my twenties, I became very interested in the French Spectral School. Other than that, I was always fascinated with American minimalism, which was very unusual at that time in Finland. So I was perceived to be a strange bird by my colleagues, due to my interest in minimalism and American music in general. Not that my music reflected that so much, when I was a student, but later on in my life that influence began to show more. In the mid-1990s I started to find my own voice as a composer, and for the most part I left behind the academic modernist style that was prevalent in the new musical scene in Finland at that time and still

is up to now. My journey to New York to study with a famous neo-romantic composer reflected that tendency in my musical tastes, as did my going in New York in general, since for many years I was very interested in the American Downtown music, especially in minimalism and post-minimalism. I already knew a lot of this music, which I had the chance to hear in live performances for the first time, when I went to New York in 1993-1994. By that time I had already been familiar with the composers from the Bang on a Can festival, unlike, I suppose, almost everybody else in Finland.

Another streak in my musical activities was my ever deepening interest in microtonality or alternative tunings, and that started very gradually. Of course, the French Spectral School, which fascinated me earlier, already had much to do with microtonality. Since I was interested in this musical trend when I was a student and even studied with Tristan Murail, the microtonal aspect of Spectralism became one more ingredient in this mix. I started to incorporate microtones, namely, quarter-tones, when I was still a student. Later I started studying microtonality deeper and becoming more acquainted with a broader assortment of styles and techniques of microtonal music, as well as the theory of various tunings and temperaments. I became particularly interested in just intonation and the American trends of microtonal music, in particular the music of Ben Johnston. I already had this interest, and I knew about this when I came to study in New York during the 1993-1994 academic year. But that did not form a part of what I wrote at that time, and also my teachers with whom I studied then were not in the least into this direction in music. Still, I did meet

some musicians who were important in this trend. One significant meeting I had was with composer Joel Mandelbaum. I studied at the City University of New York. Whereas my studies took place mainly at the university's Graduate Center, it was possible to take courses at any of the colleges or universities of the CUNY system. When I went to study at CUNY, I knew that Joel Mandelbaum was teaching at Queens College. I wrote to him before I came, and it turned out that he had retired. But I was able to meet with him, and he showed me the Scalatron, the microtonal keyboard built in the 1970s, which was still working at that time at his studio at Queens College. I have recently found an old cassette tape of an interview that I took from him at that time, which has not yet been published anywhere, and I intend to have it published – possibly online – because it is of interest to microtonal musicians. Joel Mandelbaum told me about his work in 31-tone equal temperament and showed me his compositions in this scale. These were quite new things at that time for me. He showed me his Woodwind Quintet and gave me a copy of a few pages from the score and a recording on a cassette tape, from a performance put up by microtonal bassoonist and composer Johnny Reinhard. Mandelbaum recommended me very warmly that if I wanted to study microtonality, I had to get in touch with Johnny Reinhard, whom he described to me as a walking encyclopedia of microtonal music. However, I had already been aware of Johnny Reinhard and knew that he was organizing the American Festival of Microtonal Music. During my year of studies in New York I went to the concerts of this festival, where among other things I heard performances of the electric guitarist Jon Catler's microtonal rock band and bought some cassette tapes.

So, as I understand, you started incorporating microtones into your music around that time? What kinds of microtonal tunings and temperaments did you use in your music? Did you start with quarter tones and then pass onto more complex tunings and temperaments, like just intonation?

Yes, I started with quarter tones in 1990, and then, in 1995 I wrote my first composition where I incorporated just intonation, albeit only in one movement, not in the entire piece. That went on for quite a while, and I wrote musical compositions that had sections or movements in alternative tunings, most notably, just intonation. I used overtone tuning in the kantele, for which I have written a lot of music since that time. The kantele is a Finnish

folk instrument resembling a zither. The concert kantele is the modern version of the instrument, which has tuning levers, which make it into a chromatic instrument; they work precisely like the pedals of the pedal harp, except that they are adjusted with the fingers, not with the feet. My first musical composition incorporating just intonation is called *Three Impromptus for clarinet and kantele*. That work has been quite popular among kantele players, and as many as three CD recordings are available. The part of the clarinet is challenging as it incorporates quarter tones, sixths tones and just intonation adjustments for pure thirds and sixths. Similarly to many of my other compositions of that time, the *Three Impromptus for clarinet and kantele* were not written in just intonation throughout. So I wrote a number of other compositions like that, which had static harmonies for entire movements or sections, basically presenting an overtone drone of a chord from the harmonic series, somewhat resembling Johnny Reinhard's 128-note scale of harmonics up to the 255th, except that in my pieces I didn't exceed the 15th harmonic. There was usually a melody drawn over this static chord. As the years went by, I started to write longer compositions, as well as entire compositions in alternative tunings, particularly just intonation. So in my microtonal music I started to incorporate harmonic movement and, eventually, counterpoint. Sometimes I compose music in other tunings besides just intonation, but most of my compositions are in just intonation or involve approximations of just intonation.

What kinds of tunings or temperaments have you used in your musical compositions, besides just intonation?

Sometimes I write quarter tone music, although quite rarely. In 2013 I wrote "Fanfare and Toccata", a composition for the Fokker 31-tone organ, (which is located in Amsterdam, Holland) and viola da gamba. So I have explored the famous 31-tone equal temperament as well in my music and will continue to do so in the near future. Recently I have looked into more unusual types of equal temperaments, although I have not written much yet with them. I have been taken by 22-equal, which has some very interesting properties. There has also appeared a new branch of tuning theory, called Regular Temperament Theory, which is practiced mostly online, outside the academia. They have useful new concepts and plethora of interesting new tuning systems, which are given funny names, but possess quite interesting properties. Thus, I have

recently written music in the so-called “porcupine temperament.” This unusual system has fourths that are so narrow and minor thirds that are so wide that stacking three minor thirds will get you to minor seventh, which equals two fourths. That is how the intervals combine in this “porcupine temperament,” and this minor seventh turns out to be quite close to the harmonic seventh or the seventh partial of the overtone series. That is how this temperament works. I used this temperament in my music for a piece of dance theater called *Omnipotens* (2016, Espoo, Finland), featuring an evening’s length of spoken monologue and dance, and it is scored for tenor saxophone and kantele, the latter being tuned in this strange tuning. The saxophonist found the right fingerings on his instrument in order to play in this temperament and learned to play and improvise in a 7-note scale. So it may be said that in recent years I have been widening my palette of different tunings. For a long time in previous years I had worked only in just intonation, but now I am interested in a larger variety of different temperaments. This “porcupine temperament” could also be tuned in 22-note equal divisions of the octave, but in this case I used 96 equal divisions of the octave to tune it. It is not necessary to use any small steps here, but the 96 equal divisions of the octave is where one can also find this quasi-diatonic seven-note scale which I used, and 96 was chosen because the transposition interval of the tuning lever of the kantele, is 100 cents, obviously, i.e. the standard semitone of 12-equal, and that interval also belongs to 96-equal and is a logical chromatic alteration in this temperament. So any of the chromatically altered kantele notes belong to this temperament, too. That is why I chose this particular equal division of the octave – at the suggestion of a student of mine. The aforementioned 22-equal scale has recently been gaining some popularity among the microtonal community, although written scores are still a rarity. That is a particularly fascinating tuning system that I intend to explore.

As I noticed from your CD, as well as from your pieces that are to be performed in Moscow by the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble, your music tends to slant towards diatonicism, rather than chromaticism. Is all of your music generally diatonic with added microtonality?

Yes, it is true, although I do not use the term “diatonic.” I usually say simply that it is tonal and consonant. “Diatonicism” implies a diatonic scale, and I do not usually work with scales, although I did

in the dance piece that I mentioned. I usually work with harmonies and harmonic progressions, and then the scale comes as a by-product of that. I start with a collection of pitches, and then I search for melodic tunes, out of which my musical composition grows and evolves.

Is it possible to obtain tonal, quasi-diatonic scales with the “Porcupine” scale, the 22-equal and the 31-equal temperaments?

Yes, exactly, that is what is derived from them. The 31-tone division has a long history, having been discovered in the 17th century by the famous Dutch astronomer and physicist Christiaan Huygens and propagated in the 1950’s by another Dutch physicist, Adrian Fokker. It is almost exactly the same as quarter-comma mean-tone, which was the main tuning system for some two hundred years in Western music. But “Porcupine” is not really a scale – rather, it’s a temperament in the abstract usage of Regular Temperament Theory. There are many scales in that temperament, and various tunings can be used for it, 22-equal and 96-equal being two of them. Similarly, Meantone, in this abstract sense, is a temperament where four fifths land on the same pitch as (two octaves plus) a major third, which means that the syntonic comma, or 81/80, is done away with, or tempered out. Many scales can be used in Meantone, such as major, minor, the chromatic scale and so on. And many tunings can be used for it, such as 1/4-comma meantone, 1/5-comma-meantone, 19-equal, 31-equal and even 12-equal. Porcupine, on the other hand, combines intervals quite differently, and other commas in it are tempered out – not the syntonic comma. And has its own scales. There are thousands of such newly discovered temperaments.

Could you name some of the most important compositions of yours, which define your musical style, and describe them?

There are two compositions of mine, which I consider to be the most important in my entire musical output. One of them is my *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra*. It does not get played much, due to the difficulties of getting contemporary concertos performed. This work consists of five movements, one of which is an accompanied cadenza. It was written in 1998 in Helsinki and has been performed four times around that time, always with Harri Mäki of Tapiola Sinfonietta as the soloist. Its first movement incorporates just intonation 11th and 7th partials. In fact I arranged this first movement into a version for bass clarinet and tape,

and called it *Concertino*. It is included on my CD on the Alba label. That movement of the concerto was influenced by the music of dance-clubs, such as techno and house. In the electronic version I actually made use of real sounds of synthesizers and drum machines. I've later made arrangements of the solo part of *Concertino* for other instruments: bass clarinet, trumpet, accordion, cello and electric kantele. It gets played fairly often.

The other important musical composition I wish to mention is my opera "Flash Flash," which is written entirely in just intonation. Only one of its three acts, namely, the middle act, called *Intermission*, has been performed as a semi-staged concert opera. The plot of the opera is about Andy Warhol, and the librettist was Juha Siltanen, one of the leading playwrights in Finland – although the libretto is written in English. It was completed in 2006, and the performance of its middle act took place in 2009 at the Musica Nova Festival in Helsinki with five singers and the ensemble Avanti! conducted by Dima Slobodeniuk. I have been trying to arrange a full performance of the opera ever since then, but there have been numerous obstacles, including a number of cancelled performances, but we are continuing to try to find an opportunity for a performance of it. It created a lot of interest among the contemporary music community in Finland at the time of the sold-out performance of the second act.

I would also like to mention another orchestral piece of mine from 1996, which is called "Notturmo urbano." It may be found online on Youtube, where there is an excellent performance of it by Dima Slobodeniuk conducting the Helsinki Philharmonic – unfortunately, there has been no decent recording of it on CD. This work was performed numerous times after it was premiered by the Tapiola Sinfonietta, and still is now and then. It is a very dance-like piece, influenced by popular music. That piece was performed once in Kiev, Ukraine, and one Finnish orchestra took it to their tour in Japan. Of the current repertoire that is played now, the pieces that you are going to hear tonight, *Boost* for cello and synthesizer and *Ruoikkohuulu* (*Flute of the*

Seaside Reeds) for alto flute and electronics – those are both microtonal, electro-acoustic pieces that are making their current round. In 2014, the Radio Symphony Orchestra premiered my *Septimalia*, a work in virtual extended just intonation for re-tuned orchestra.

Where do you have your music performed in Finland or in other countries?

My music is performed most often in Finland, in new music festivals, such as Musica Nova, Time of Music, Vintasaari, as well as in various concert series. The new music scene in Helsinki has recently become very lively, not least because of the Music Centre, which was opened there in 2011. Sometimes my musical compositions are performed in other countries as well. My piece for alto flute *Ruoikkohuulu* was performed in New York in March 2015 at the American Festival of Microtonal Music, organized by Johnny Reinhard. The Finnish electroacoustic group *defunensemble* took *Ruoikkohuulu* in Australia and Boost to Kiel and Berlin in Germany. I have some connections with musicians in the Netherlands. This is in part because the kind of contemporary music that they compose and perform there is close to my music in its aesthetics. The Netherlands Wind Ensemble, with Finnish folk singer Sanna Kurki-Suonio and kantele musician Eija Kankaanranta as soloists, arranged a concert of my music as well as Finnish folk music in my arrangements, in Amsterdam, Groningen, and Maastricht in 2006, and then took it to Prague in 2007. There is also a vibrant microtonal scene in Amsterdam connected with the recently renovated Fokker organ and the small but very active community that arranges concerts. The Fokker organ installed in the contemporary music center, Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, and their new organist is a Finn, Ere Lievonen. So I have been going there on and off. I am starting to work on a commissioned piece for the Ensemble Scala, Ere Lievonen's group specializing in 31-tone music. As far as my other important musical activities, I have taught composition at the Sibelius Academy in Finland since 2011.