

IN THE HANDS OF FINLAND'S **KIMMO POHJONEN**, THE ACCORDION ABANDONS ITS FOLK ROOTS TO BECOME A GUTBUSTING FURNACE OF SHAMANIC SOUND, ANIMATED BY PRIMAL ENERGIES AND ORCHESTRAL DYNAMICS.
WORDS: LOUISE GRAY

If you're one of the hordes that have been terrorised by a wheezing rendition of "La Vie En Rose" at a pavement cafe anywhere in Europe, nothing can quite prepare you for the Finnish accordionist Kimmo Pohjonen. A performer whose blend of virtuosity and resolute experimentation is routinely likened to that of Jimi Hendrix or Laurie Anderson, Pohjonen is a galaxy away from those squeezebox-squealing tourist torturers. On stage, he's a giant wrestling with a vast accordion. The size is important. The sounds he wrings from it - the thing almost breathes - are live, feral entities. At times, you hear train noises, unearthly wailings and exuberant choral arrangements that may or may not have a link to devotional music. It's a music that has its roots in traditional music in concept only: he is, for instance, a long way removed from English composer Howard Skempton's rediscovery of old accordion motifs. Pohjonen often refers to the "endless time" of Early Music, and it's possible that his continua(improvisation is, in a sense, a method of cheating time.

With his five-row chromatic accordion connected to a series of looping samplers and effects pedals and then amplified into a hall by a surround-sound system, Pohjonen's music has a curious dynamic. It may hint at some traditional refrain - one hears them as dangerously alluring siren songs - before barrelling it through an artillery of continuous samples; the accordion may be literally assaulted as its master thumps out additional rhythms or drags the bellows into a gutbusting screech. On stage in London this summer as part of David Bowie's Meltdown festival, Pohjonen - performing his piece Kluster accompanied by electronic percussionist Samuli Kosminen - resembled nothing so much as a Laocoön, caught in a struggle between sound and silence, light and dark.

Off stage, Pohjonen comes over as a carefully poised man in his late thirties, considerate enough to bring a plate of cheese - the only food he can find in the fridge at the Bruges Kunsthalle where he will later be performing, alongside multimedia artist Marita Liulia and Butoh dancer Aki Suzuki, in Manipulator. A sly, subtle spectacle of a show, Manipulator has a simple premise: the three-way manipulation of sound, movement and vision. It is a complex arrangement of interactions, always with a central core of improvisation.

Liulia's heady animations are generated by feeding images from a digital camera and then, after a little trickery from some programming bugs she found in Photoshop and Director animation applications, projected onto a huge screen at the back of the stage or on the performers' pristine white clothes. In Bruges, Manipulator lasts for five hours (it's been known to take even longer), during which the audience can come and go as they please, a device reminiscent of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's Einstein On The Beach. That the periodic absence may not hinder the audience's pick-up of Manipulators narrative - or non-narrative - is important, so the theme is one of process and continual rearrangements.

"That," says Pohjonen, "is the key question. The most important thing is that we listen to each other. We have no idea what's going to happen in tonight's Manipulator. We've seen some of Marita's stored images, but we don't agree anything that we do on stage. We just try to find a line the enable us to do five hours."

Manipulation and transformation are at the core Pohjonen's music and performance. It's a threai that's developed most radically with Kalmuk, the show that Pohjonen will bring to London this month ar most ambitious work to date. Named after the southern Russian tribe and taking its inspiration painting by contemporary artist Martii Innanen (naive in style, I suppose, but there's an extraordinary weirdness about it - I love it"), it will pit him and two electro-percussionists, Abdissa 'Mamba' Assefa and Pohjonen's Kluster partner Samuli Kosminen, againts 15 members of Finland's best-known chamber orchestra, The Tapiola Sinfonietta. Premiered in Helsinki's Savoy Theatre two years ago, Kalmuk destroys the careful sonic placement that chamber music traditionally implies, and recreates it in a permanent flux, visually and structurally.

But this doesn't mean that Kalmuk is one vast free- for-all. Its recordings demonstrate a piece that veers from full-on bombast to surprising delicacy. Carefully wrought arpeggios give way to clouds of electronic noise that dissipate with the harmonic delicacy of a Ligeti. And at all times, you are aware of a constant movement, rather like an orchestra on the march. But it would be more accurate to describe Kalmuk as a piece in a constant state of development. Perhaps more than Pohjonen's other work - from his early youth as a pelimanni (folk) accordionist in his home town of Viiala to his dramatic break with classical music in favour of folk studies as a student at the Sibelius Academy - Kalmuk synthesises the many disparate strands in his practice. Above all, it places improvisation at the heart of classical music. Not that Improv

has ever been wholly absent from the classical corpus. It's just that the technique, by its fundamental non-hierarchical nature, is often at odds with the dual authority of conductor and notated music.

Although the idea of working with the Tapiola ensemble came from its director, Pohjonen knew that his ideas - playing from memory, experimenting with effects, improvisation and spatial changes - for the piece might arouse opposition. "I told the manager a year before we began work that I would want musicians to move around, to improvise, to connect their own instruments to various electronic units," he says. "This way, those who felt that they couldn't work this way wouldn't feel compelled to do so."

In the event, half of the Sinfonietta opted out, but even so, he faced a certain amount of perplexity, and initially, resistance from the remaining members. "What was difficult for them to understand was that I didn't want to make the piece ready when we started rehearsals for *Kalmuk*," he recalls. "I didn't write notes for the musicians, so there was no question that we would play this way or that way. I wanted to experiment, to play, if necessary, one section over and over, rather like a rock band may do. This was the biggest surprise for them. During the rehearsal he challenged me, saying, 'Why didn't you tell us that we had to work like this?'. He was angry? "Yes, in a way, but maybe he hadn't understood the process I was trying to achieve. When we work in this way, I get the best part of everyone. The process itself is the most interesting aspect of working with people. It was a continual trial and error, and little by little, any problems there were disappeared."

Pohjonen's working method, however, wasn't just process for process's sake. "What I got from the Innanen painting, and what I've taken into *Kalmuk*, is this idea that each of us has an animal part that no one else can see," Pohjonen explains before moving onto shamanistic tradition. "That's a big part of Finnish culture, and one that's very much interesting to me. In the 1980s, I used to go to see a shamanistic theatre group in the north of Finland, and found it fascinating. I've read those books about people who eat mushrooms and bang drums to go really far away. I think it's also the same kind of method or situation." Although *Kalmuk* may not take the theme of shamanistic transfiguration to the hairy-pelted conclusion that Björk reached in her video for the single "Hunter" some years ago, Pohjonen was certainly aiming at wearing down the civilised veneer of the orchestra. "I know it's not easy to be a beast on stage," he declares. "You're aware of the audience. Sometimes you're ashamed of looking wild [a thump on the table makes the cheese slices jump], but I've found that when you can go into the music somehow more deeply, when everything becomes intuitive, then you don't care how it looks. Yes, that's the feeling I love. I love to watch the musicians in *Kalmuk* change their style of playing." He mimes the transition between a sedate violinist and a frenzied one. In fact, it's a fair impersonation of the Dirty Three's Warren Ellis. "I think it's good for them. And it's good for the audience to feel that energy coming out."

For those unable to see *Kalmuk* in action, the DVD release will probably be the next best thing. Pohjonen has his musicians moving, at times whirling, as a method of both altering sound itself and the relationship of the body to the actual craft of playing. Dispensing with conductors ("That was another difficulty for them," Pohjonen acknowledges, "although I suggested that if it helped, they could think of 18 conductors on stage"), *Kalmuk* has as its heart the improvisation that fuels its creator's interest. The work has changed considerably over the course of two years. "We performed *Kalmuk* again at the Helsinki Festival in August," he says, "and it's fascinating to see how much more inside them it is. The musicians are more relaxed. It's more about here [Pohjonen hits his chest with a reverberating thud]. We're now more and more a band that is playing a piece."

Pohjonen often speaks of 'constructing', rather than 'composing' music, an essential difference that goes beyond semantic hair-splitting. "Normally when I compose I go to my rehearsal space and record myself," he says. "When there is a theme to a project I probably tend to work with people in a normal way, but usually I just play alone and improvise. The next day, I'll listen to those tapes and if there are parts that I like, then I'll work around them. I'll develop that part and compose around it. I never start writing with notes on paper. I just play and play and play and do these boring tapes. Sometimes there's something interesting, sometimes not."

This continual process of isolation - the way in which motifs are pulled out of a whole day's work of intuitive playing ("I can be surprised at what I hear," Pohjonen says, suggesting that not all the music recorded in such sessions comes from entirely conscious activity) - is expedited by his involvement with electronic media, but he's careful to stress that there are more important strands contained in the practice. "Do you know about the Kalevala?" he asks, bringing up the subject of Finland's epic heroic song-poetry and a topic central to the rise of the country's recent folk revival. "It was something I was very much interested in while a student at the Sibelius Academy. We'd listen to these old tapes of Kalevala songs. The instrument would often be a jouhikko, a kind of prototype violin, something that I also played at the time. It was this world where people just played and played: there was more time and music was part of the lives. It went beyond the modern idea of the concert. Many of the tapes consisted of long

improvisations and jammings. I was very fond of that world. Somehow when I compose, I try to find that endless world again, where there is time to sit down, relax and take it easy."

It's an attitude he carries still. With Heikki Laitinen -the former director of folk studies at the Sibelius Academy and a teacher whom Pohjonen credits as his "great guru", the "godfather" who eased his potentially vulnerable passage from the classical world into folk music studies - Pohjonen was to make his first big impact in Finland. Collaborating with dancer Rejo Kela, the trio's Kelavala - a performance project reconstructing ancient motifs through digital media, a process of reinvention close to the spirit of improvisation - drew lazy comparisons to Laurie Anderson's large format works. If the association wasn't entirely accurate (for one thing, Anderson has always had a social and political focus that's resolutely post-industrial), it nevertheless gives a measure of the impact that Kelavala had in Finland. It was the first of a number of ambitious Pohjonen projects: Broken Windows, featured as part of a Finnish contemporary composers' series, followed in 1998; two years later, Kalmuk, commissioned to celebrate Helsinki's status as European City of Culture; and this year, Manipulator.

Pohjonen divides his time these days between solo shows, work with the Muster duo and large-scale work. The range of activity is, he suggests, necessary to keep him motivated. "There was a moment when I nearly quit the accordion," he recalls. "I had been playing since I was ten years old. I'd started with folk music, then turned to classical and then back to modern folk. I'd moved from one-row to two-row and then to five-row accordions and back again. I had had a period when I was really in love with all the traditional Finnish tunes, played on smaller accordions. I was hardly touching my five-row at all. Suddenly, it came out that I couldn't find any music that pleased me so much that I wanted to play it. I made some of my own compositions, but I wasn't happy with those either."

This all happened in the early 1990s. He reacted to this malaise by travelling to Tanzania to study the mbira at the Bagamoyo, College of Arts, and afterwards Argentina, propelled by a love for Astor Piazzolla's tangos. Buenos Aires proved to be a profoundly depressing experience. "Their playing was so great that there was no way I could copy their mood," he despairs. "You have to find your own way of doing something, otherwise it's valueless."

Returning to Finland, a friend coerced him into doing a solo concert. "I was thinking of playing the African thumb piano, which, by this time, I'd been playing for some years," he remembers. "Then I considered the harmonium instead. And then I just asked myself, what is my main instrument? Answer: the five-row accordion, the instrument I started playing when I was young."

Nevertheless, still searching for a new approach to old technology, Pohjonen began a trawl around Helsinki's music shops. Lugging the accordion in with him and hooking it up to various effects pedal MIDI units got him some weird looks, but, little by little, he began to accumulate the basic machines that he would need. "Then one beautiful day, I found out these samplers and monitors, and I realised that this was the thing," he recalls. "They enabled me to hear so many new sounds from the accordion. I thought, how is this possible?" Entering the digital dimension was nothing short of a revelation. Pohjonen has, he says, hardly touched acoustic accordion since.

Strangely, Pohjonen's plugged-in accordion doesn't seem to have drawn any mutterings from the traditionalists: he was named Finland's Folk Musician of the Year in 1996, 1997 and 1998; his first solo album, Kielo (1998, World Village/Harmonia Mundi), won numerous awards before it was turned into a ballet by choreographer Jorma Uotinen at the Finnish National Opera House; and he's played on over 65 albums in the past six years. The move has repositioned him within the shifting boundaries that differentiate musical genres. The jazz establishment embraces him (he has been voted Accordionist of the Year twice by Jazz Rytmit magazine in Finland), and he's just as likely to turn upon billings in so-called World Music events. He picked up further prizes with rock group Ismo Alanko Säätiö and with Pinnin Pojat, an unclassifiable duo in which Pohjonen (adding marimba to his palette) performs Arto Järvelä from Finnish folk group JPP.

His unclassifiability suits him, and, by implication, the freedom that flows from it. "We've spoken about shamanism, getting access to the primitive, to this power of change, but change also means the same person doing different things," he says. "Maybe transformation is a word that says 'not me' any more. It's just a question of finding it and controlling to it."