

Scottish Ensemble: Fire

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Pekka Kuusisto

FIRE was an extremely apt title for this latest programme of music devised by Finnish violinist Pekka Kuusisto and Scottish Ensemble Artistic Director Jonathan Morton. Drawing on musical traditions from Finland, Estonia and Hungary, *Fire* was brilliantly challenging and superbly grounded.

When it comes to classical music it is often the familiar that appeals most to audiences and programmers. What is often forgotten in concert halls the world over is that what is now considered established repertoire was once about the reinterpretation of musical language and absolutely cutting edge.

One of the joys of a Scottish Ensemble performance is the journey, a combination of the familiar coupled with exploration of new territory. This ethos is also exemplified by Pekka Kuusisto's inspired approach, fusing improvisation and innovation with a profound understanding of musical form, both classical and traditional.

What Kuusisto communicates so brilliantly from the very first note is a personal connection with sound, moving seamlessly from the traditional folk music of his native Finland to reinterpretation of established repertoire by composers such as Sibelius and Bartók. In the same performance works by contemporary composers such as Erkki-Sven Tüür and the violinist's own improvised electric/electronic *Suitcase Music* further extend our concept of musical boundaries.

Kuusisto's extraordinary range as an artist is equalled by his understanding of his craft and the passion of his delivery. His partnership with the Scottish Ensemble is absolute perfection and I hope that this current tour will result in much more creative collaboration in the future. During Bartók's *Divertimento For Strings* the sheer enjoyment of playing live was clearly visible in the faces of the entire ensemble, their technical precision and energy second to none. Einojuhani Rautavaara's *Fiddlers, Op. 1* (1952) opened the programme. Inspired by a collection of folk tunes collected in the Ostrobothnia region of Finland, Kuusisto performed these original works in between the five sections of the composition. This traditional fiddle music provided a bridge to Rautavaara's

work, an aural and cultural ground from which his unique and challenging sound emerged. The combination of primitive and highly structured musical form was a defining characteristic of the whole performance, heightening appreciation of the qualities of each.

All sound in this programme was equal, resonant and expressive. Between the compositions in the first half of the programme – Rautavaara's *Fiddlers*, Aulis Sallinen's *Some Aspects of Peltoniemi Hinrik's Funeral March* and Sibelius's *Humoresque No. 4, Op. 89 in G minor*, Kuusisto performed his improvised *Suitcase Music*.

These improvisations were a revelation, an entire world of sound revealed through electric violin, playback and voice. In the first improvisation a soundscape emerged adding layers of ordinary sound like a natural swarm. The cascading string sound and introduction of voice reminded me of the Icelandic group Sigor Ros and the openness of their sound; the insistence of pure voice without language from which the listener is free to make their own associations.

The range of Kuusisto's sound is stunning and intricate. During the first improvisation the stretched string sound evolved into what felt like a sound wave caught in a groove of recorded vinyl, morphing into the grind of industrial machinery and then becoming an underpinning drone for a traditional fiddle tune.

There was a sense throughout the programme of returning to the source and of the immediacy of sound as human communication. Whether the sound is of a single drum or of a symphony, the need fulfilled is human expression. Kuusisto used the violin unexpectedly as a percussive instrument, from gentle rain-like patter to the flat strike of his hand. Improvised works were incredibly cinematic and strikingly visual.

Kuusisto also brought humour into the final improvised sequence, halting the movement of the composition and accompanying it with Western style whistling to great comic effect. His performance of Sibelius that followed was in total stylistic contrast but equally virtuosic and assured.

Erkki-Sven Tüür's *Passion* (from *Action-Passion-Illusion*) echoed the multilayered work of fellow Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. This sublime piece of music begins sombrely with the bass and cellos building to pure ecstasy through the layered introduction of higher strings. This intensity or "sound cluster" dissipates like a flock, subsiding to the low grounding of cello and double bass.

In the same way that Pärt's music evokes contemplation of the sacred, Tüür's *Passion* feels like transfiguration through sound. The final encore of a Finnish Folk song sung unaccompanied brought the evening back down to earth with good humour. One has the sense that Pekka Kuusisto has his feet firmly on the ground.

In the same way that the late Martyn Bennett created bold new music from a profound and deeply felt understanding of musical tradition, Kuusisto is a visionary artist and performer. What was said of Martyn Bennett's music; "Only when we recognise that we are heirs can we truly be pioneers" is equally true of Kuusisto's reinvention of musical language.

