

Kalevi Aho: Tuba Concerto (2000)

The entire repertoire of concertos for tuba and orchestra is of recent provenance. The first classic of the tuba literature, the concerto by Ralph Vaughan Williams, dates from 1954. Only in the last couple of decades, however, has the instrument started to become more popular. This is above all a result of a great improvement in standards of tuba playing all over the world, and of the activities of eminent young tuba players.

The tuba was by no means an unknown instrument for me. It already has a central role in my opera *Insect Life* (1985-87), where it is the instrument played by the main character, a vagabond, and one of the scenes in the opera even contains a major, very demanding cadenza for tuba and alto saxophone. Before starting work on the *Tuba Concerto* I did, however, familiarize myself even more closely with the tuba's capabilities, under the guidance of Harri Lidsle, who plays in the Lahti Symphony Orchestra. He has given the premières of numerous Finnish tuba concertos, and from the beginning I had him in mind when composing my own *Tuba Concerto*. I also asked him what notes he would like the concerto to begin and end with. In accordance with his wishes, the first tuba phrase in the concerto begins lyrically with an F below middle C, and the work concludes on a middle C, on which the soloist makes a *diminuendo*.

I started to sketch the fundamental musical material of the work in August-September 2000, when I was hiking in the hills of eastern Lapland, far off the beaten track. I had some manuscript paper with me and, whenever I arrived at the summit of a hill, I wrote down a new tuba theme. Using the material written on three different hilltops as my starting point, I then composed the concerto between the autumn of 2000 and the early months of 2001.

By nature the tuba is a very songful instrument, and its melodic, *cantabile* quality is at the heart of the concerto. The instrument is also capable of expressing powerful emotions, as on occasion the concerto features overtly operatic, impassioned musical gestures. Moreover, the tuba is technically a surprisingly agile instrument. Here, however, both the supervirtuosic aspect and also the use of innovative playing techniques are subservient to the *cantabile* element: in this concerto the display of technical brilliance is not an end in itself. Nonetheless, large intervallic leaps, played *legato*, and the wide range of the solo part mean that the piece is extremely demanding for the soloist. The only 'new' playing technique to be used is simultaneous singing and playing at the end of the finale.

Many tuba concertos are rather short, and I thus decided to write a three-movement concerto lasting about half an hour – the sort of work that could hold its own as a solo item in the grand style in a symphony concert. The movements differ in character: the opening movement is mostly lyrically songful, whilst the second is fast – and also includes a solo cadenza. In the finale, slow and fast tempi are combined. Among the orchestral instruments, an important role is played by the tuba's little brother, the baritone horn, which on several occasions plays duets with the tuba or continues the tuba's phrases in a higher register.

The first performance of the *Tuba Concerto* took place at the international tuba and baritone horn congress in Lahti on 11 August 2000. The soloist was Harri Lidsle and the Lahti Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Osmo Vänskä.

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TUBA SOLA

