



KASPARS PUTNINS

A BLESSING FOR ESTONIAN CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS IN AN ERA OF THE INDIVIDUAL VOICE

By MARIS HELLRAND / Photos by KAUPU KIKKAS

The double Grammy-awarded Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir has been the beacon and benchmark of Estonian professional choir music since its founding by Tõnu Kaljuste 35 years ago in 1981. Since the 2014/2015 season, Latvian conductor Kaspars Putnins has joined the creative journey of the choir, while putting a strong emphasis on new repertoire particularly by Estonian composers.



The EPCC together with Finnish guitar virtuoso Marzi Nyman performing a folk-inspired piece 'Vitsa' by Tauno Aints

A recent example of this was the cooperation with Weekend Guitar Trio for Jazzkaar, and performance of new music for guitars and choir at Tallinn Creative Hub, a former power plant. A rare combination of a very rocky electric guitar by the Finnish virtuoso Marzi Nyman together with the most classical choir, while performing a folk-inspired piece 'Vitsa' by Tauno Aints, was certainly a very novel but popular experience for the audience at Jazzkaar, as well as the fans of the choir. Furthermore, the premiere of Sven Grünberg's composition 'Kas ma sind leian?' (Will I Find You?) touched the chords. Putnins says, he has been a huge fan of Weekend Guitar Trio and Robert Jürjendal's work in particular for decades. 'This cooperation is a wonderful expansion of who we are, how we see and hear things. The particular qualities that those guys bring forth in the way they approach sound and the way they express themselves in music is very inspiring for us. Some of the elements are simple but they are so intense, so well thought through and so delicate as well,' he explains.

Kaspars Putnins is an intellectual musician who the choir members consider to be very sincere, kind and well mannered yet quite outspoken when working.

Putnins has likened the EPCC to a luxury car: 'It's a modern Rolls Royce, not a strange vintage. It's very modern, sophisticated, smooth and stylish. It's certainly got a very nice character.'

What is the kind of music that the audience expects from you? Does this expectation shape the identity of the choir? 'The audience is not a monolithic entity; it has many faces and many components to it. On the one hand, there are some particular expectations; on the other hand, in the communication with the audience you can also introduce trends that can become very important. That is how I see our choir and my position here: we keep telling and retelling the story of the EPCC while adding new colors, new elements into that story. We expand that space.

This has to happen with a group of this kind. It has to maintain its identity but at the same time it has to also expand organically and grow.

This identity is of course the repertoire which everybody knows and everybody associates with the EPCC – Estonian music that the choir has been dealing with. And this, by the way, has been seen as very innovative at the time. We all know the music of Arvo Pärt and Veljo Tormis and have a particular association with it. But it's difficult to identify oneself with audiences of 30 years ago, when all this was totally new and positively striking at the time. It was so innovative. This is what we are known for and that is of course what we still do to a large extent. We take that repertoire abroad and we bring that to our audiences here. But at the same time it's also very important to expand, to look for the new Arvo Pärt (if there is one); the new Veljo Tormises. And you are very rich here in this country, or we are very rich in this country should I say – we have very bright and interesting personalities writing new music. I am very happy to have such a great relationship with them all.'

Yet the passion for new music is not only about challenging the audience or evolving the identity of the choir. For Putnins music has a vital role in shaping the contemporary society: 'I still think that in this post-modern world the qualities that are being created here and now, the expression of the thoughts of feelings of a creative person right now, with all the good and bad things and all the environment in all its aspects taken into consideration; this is extremely important. Sometimes you can't even realize it fully, but it is like the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, the sky above us. We don't think about it all the time, but when it's suddenly absent then we are in trouble. With contemporary arts, we create the space where we live. It doesn't mean that we necessarily consume it every day, or that we have to listen to the most modern music every day or read modern poetry. But for the society as such, it creates that space where it lives.'

The EPCC will participate in the Eesti Muusika Päevad ('Estonian Music Days') in April 2017, with two new works by Evelin Seppar and Tatjana Kozlova. Another exciting project on the horizon is the Üle Heli festival in October, focusing on electronic music. Putnins says: 'One of the directions I'm very interested in is the new media and its potential relationship with the human voice – the choir as an instrument. We are commissioning a new piece by Lisa Hirsch for that purpose, as we have already done so with Ülo Krigul and Mirjam Tally.'



New music helps to develop the choir beyond its comfort zone and adds new colour to classic repertoire as well, as Putnins explains: 'The vision of the composers we work with is not just that we commission one piece from somebody with a very obscure vision of what the choir could be, who then delivers the score the next day and we just sing it. No, this is really a relationship. We get to know each other and they get to know the choir from the inside out. And then through their artistic vision, they will give new colour to what we potentially are, which we don't even know. Through this kind of collaboration we can obtain something new in the frame of our identity.'

The impact of new music goes even further: 'Through this innovative experience, one reveals new qualities in the other repertoire as well. If you are very familiar with the music of Brahms for instance, you will probably look slightly differently at Bach as well. This expanding universe gives you more insight into all of its aspects. It's not that by doing something you lose something else. It's vice versa in fact. Once you sharpen your ear to very complex contemporary music, you can enjoy the particular colour and precision of, say, 19th century music much more. It may sound a bit paradoxical, but that's the way I see it. I've just experienced that. Once you know very well Schnittke's "Psalms of Repentance" you can suddenly sing Rachmaninoff very differently.'

Kaspars Putnins was born and raised in Latvia and at the time of EPCC's founding he was just a teenager. Both Estonia and Latvia consider themselves to be strongly rooted in their choral traditions. Both celebrate regular song festivals, with tens of thousands of singers, and find their identity in music. Looking from the inside, how similar and/or different are these two cultures really?

'Generally speaking we are very similar, because the whole tradition has the same roots. It's very obvious that the singing tradition is going thousands of years back into our history and it has been a very important part of our societies. There are songs for almost every aspect of life – all

seasons have their songs, all festivities, all jobs and tasks, anything that has to do with human life – all have their songs. Yet these songs are all quite different of course. Even in Latvia they are different from region to region. In Estonia and Latvia we were both 'Lutheranized' fairly early on, and my speculation is that this has also been a huge boost for the choral tradition. There is evidence that in Latvia, even in very small rural schools with just 10 children and one teacher, they would sing four part chorals every day in the 17th century. And then both countries have experienced similar political problems and a similar political environment and which all served to strengthen the choral quality. The need for singing still resonates with us.

The contemporary scene is very much influenced by personalities. Here in Estonia you would of course mention Gustav Ernesaks and Tõnu Kaljuste, who with their vision and their very powerful charismatic leadership would influence and start trends. The same is true in Latvia with Teodors and Imants Kalnins, who introduced the completely new sounds which we now associate with Latvian choir music. But in fact this was kind of invented as we went along. This invention then resonates and grows into something really spectacular. The new sound is probably a wider trend; it is about precision, about what we sometimes call 'white sound', about a very delicate blend, an ensemble feeling. This is something I can hear in Estonia as well.'

The contemporary composition scene makes it harder to speak of trends or directions, however: 'This period of history is a period of individuals. Composers can create their own worlds. Of course they are influenced by each other. But still, this is very much the era of an individual voice.' Putnins enjoys a full calendar for both himself and the EPCC, with the US tour being one of the highlights of 2017.

'I'm really happy here. It's so humanly, personally interesting for me to dive into these relationships and into this country with its so many wonderfully talented people.'



The EPCC

The Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir (EPCC) is one of the best-known Estonian music ensembles in the world. The EPCC was founded in 1981 by Tõnu Kaljuste who went on to be its artistic director and chief conductor for twenty years. Over the years 2001–2007, an English musician named Paul Hillier took over. In 2008–2013 the artistic director and chief conductor was Daniel Reuss. Since 2014, Kaspars Putnins has been the artistic director and chief conductor of the choir.

The repertoire of the choir extends from Gregorian chant and baroque compositions to the music of the 21st century, with a special focus on the work of Estonian composers such as Arvo Pärt, Veljo Tormis, Erkki-Sven Tüür, Galina Grigoryeva, Toivo Tulev, Tõnu Kõrvits and Helena Tulve, and introducing this body of work to the world. Each season, the 26-member choir gives about 60-70 concerts, both in Estonia and abroad.

The EPCC has cooperated with a vast range of outstanding and world famous conductors, including: Claudio Abbado, Helmuth Rilling, Eric Ericson, Ward Swingle, Neeme Järvi, Paavo Järvi, Nikolai Alekseyev, Olari Elts, Andrew Lawrence-King, Roland Böer, Frieder Bernius, Stephen Layton, Marc Minkowski, Christoph Poppen, Sir Colin Davis, Michael Riesman, Louis Langree, Paul McCreech, Gottfried von der Goltz, and Andrés Orozco-Estrada, and Gustavo Dudamel.

The EPCC has also worked with the following world-class orchestras: The Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, The Australian Chamber Orchestra, The Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra, The Prague Chamber Orchestra, The Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra, The London Symphony Orchestra, The Mahler Chamber Orchestra, The Berlin Rundfunk Orchestra, Concerto Copenhagen, Concerto Palatino, The Württemberg Chamber Orchestra, The Salzburg Camerata, Les Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble, The Philip Glass Ensemble, The North Netherland Symphony

The latest ECM album 'Gesualdo' by Tõnu Kaljuste and the EPCC has been nominated for the best classical compilation Grammy.

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Orchestra, Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra, The Basel Chamber Orchestra, The Los Angeles Philharmonic, The Estonian National Symphony and Tallinn Chamber Orchestra.

The EPCC has furthermore been a welcome guest at numerous music festivals and outstanding venues all over the world, including: The BBC Proms, Mozartwoche in Salzburg, Austria, The Abu Gosh Music Festival, The Hong Kong Arts Festival, The Moscow Easter Festival, Musikfest Bremen, The Salzburg Festspiele, The Edinburgh International Festival, Festival Aix-en-Provence, The International Cervantino Festival, The Vale of Glamorgan Festival, The Bergen International Festival, The Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, The Sydney Opera House, Wiener Konzerthaus, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Versailles Opéra Royal, Palau Musica in Barcelona, LSO St Luke's in London, The Esplanade (Singapore), The Kennedy Centre (Washington DC), The Lincoln Centre and Carnegie Hall in New York, The Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and more.

Another important aspect of the choir's life is recording music (for ECM, Virgin Classics, Carus, Harmonia Mundi and Ondine), resulting in various award-winning CDs.

EPCC recordings have twice won a Grammy-Award for Best Choral Performance: in 2007 for the album of Arvo Pärt's *Da Pacem* (Harmonia Mundi) with conductor Paul Hillier, and Arvo Pärt's *Adam's Lament* (ECM) with conductor Tõnu Kaljuste.

All in all, the choir boasts 15 Grammy nominations with works by Arvo Pärt, Erkki-Sven Tüür and music from all the Nordic countries. EPCC recordings have also won the award Diapason d'or, Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik, Danish Music Award, de Choc de l'Année Classica 2014 and more!