

# Timo Alakotila combines modern and traditional musical languages

*Timo Alakotila is one of Finland's most active and versatile musicians and composers. His talent as a composer is known internationally across genre boundaries. His extensive oeuvre consists of e.g. concertos, music for theatre and dance productions and numerous arrangements.*

Young Alakotila's interest in music was sparked in 1972, when he attended a concert by violinist and composer **Konsta Jylhä** and his band **Purppuripelimannit** (The Potpourri Players). Big roles were also played by his musician father, **Toivo Alakotila**, master fiddler **Aarne Järvelä** and Aarne's brother, **Mauno Järvelä**, who played in the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra at the time. The same phenomenon was repeated in the style of these violinists: a wide, singing sound with vibrato, combined with swing, solo improvisations and syncretized folk music bowings. These features can also be heard in Alakotila's compositions.

Alakotila's own musical studies started with classical piano lessons. He graduated from the Helsinki Pop/Jazz Conservatory in 1992, majoring in composition. Studying piano under the guidance of **Vladimir Shafranov**, Alakotila learned about free accompaniment and improvisation. Another important person was **Kaj Backlund**, who taught Alakotila composition, arrangement and theory. Both teachers emphasized the importance of transcriptions. In his compositions, Alakotila fuses different elements together using his phenomenal, personal style. Good examples of this include the preludes to **Jean Sibelius'** Violin Concerto and 5th symphony. The Scottish Symphony Orchestra performed these under conductor **Thomas Dausgaard** with an ensemble of folk musicians and with **Pekka Kuusisto** as the soloist, at the BBC Proms festival 2019 in London. The preludes were also in the Lahti Sinfonia concert program in autumn 2021.

## A stream of compositions

At the beginning of the 21st century, Alakotila's classical music compositions began to flow. One of his first major works was the *Concerto for Free Bass Accordion* and Chamber Orchestra, with **Johanna Juhola** as the soloist. Shortly after, he completed the *Accordion Concerto* for **Maria Kalaniemi** and the UMO Jazz Orchestra. In 2004, the BBC Concert Orchestra, Kalaniemi and the fiddle group JPP performed Alakotila's *Moraine* under conductor **Jaakko Kuusisto**. *Baroque Violin Concerto*, composed for **Kreetta-Maria Kentala** was the first in a series of concertos Alakotila composed in 2006. He has written close to 20 concertos for various instruments and several other works for classical ensembles.

*Concerto Grosso* for string orchestra (2007) was inspired by Händel. As an interesting twist, Alakotila gave it a sprinkling of Finnish folk music influences. This combination helped him discover a way to write modern music in a traditional style. Polskas, waltzes and minuets are common in both genres, and *Concerto Grosso's* third movement, *Polska*, evokes thoughts of Finnish folk music and dance, where varying bowings combat the steady pace of the music.

## Commissions with folk music nuances

Timo Alakotila often receives requests for works that include folk music nuances. One of his longest-standing partners, violinist **Pekka Kuusisto**, commissioned *Sketches from Folk Scenes* for violin solo, harmonium and string orchestra from Alakotila. It was premiered by the Australian Chamber



Photo: Maria Mäkinen

Orchestra in 2009, when Kuusisto was the orchestra's artistic director and concertmaster. The Australian concert tour included more than ten concerts and later, Kuusisto toured conducting the work in Ireland, Sweden, USA and Finland. The piece begins with a rhythmic pizzicato texture that has influences from traditional polska. The harmonium leads the listener to the second movement with a ceremonial march. Its melody is an old wedding tune, integrated into Alakotila's music. The last movement, *A General Quadille from Karelia*, was inspired by a comprehensive collection of folk dance tunes collected and published in the 1890s.

Alakotila feeds his creativity and seeks inspiration by playing in different ensembles and going to a lot of concerts. He found a soloist for his violin concerto *Between Three Worlds* when being part of violinist **Eeva Oksala's** doctoral thesis committee. The title of the work refers to the three musical landscapes that take turns in the three movements. The varying time signatures and brilliant, occasionally slower solo sections culminate, through a

violin cadence, towards a fast-paced finale.

Orchestral piece *Forsman* represents Alakotila's latest works. A traditional tune about Maria Magdalena, collected from Espoo, Finland, was selected for this piece. Its beautiful melody appears in the middle of the song. Otherwise, the musical language of the piece consists of a rhythmic, partly modal dialogue between groups of instruments.

Fennica Gehrman has signed a publishing contract for several of Alakotila's orchestral works as well as choral and chamber music pieces. Upcoming publications include the female choir pieces *Koivu ja tähti* and *Valo*, *String Quartet No. 3* (La Cantina) and *Hope 2021* for string quintet and piano.

Timo Alakotila remains an active composer. In addition, he has worked on more than 250 records as a composer, musician and producer. He is also a well-respected teacher and has developed a method for folk music improvisation. In 2011, he was awarded the title of artist professor.

Minna-Mari Roms