

## **Lotta Wennäkoski & Heikki Nikula: Immersed in the Finnish Quiet 33**

**Charlie Morrow:** Thank you for getting together for today. I wanted to talk to you both because we are presenting a piece that you're both involved with, but I thought that it would be very interesting to have a conversation with the two of you. About music in general, my first question that I ask people who come into our podcast is when in your life, did you have your most intense and immersive musical experience?

For example, Bart, who does the show with me when he was a little kid, he was in Holland and his parents took him out. The tide is very low. The sea is not deep. So he walked out into the sea, he was suddenly completely, mesmerized by the vista of the sea and that was his first really immersive experience. And I wonder if you had something like that with sound or light that just completely captivated you.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** I would say my immersive experiences have to do with silence, actually, because many things recognize the situation where you are on a lake in a boat. It can be like a summer evening or something, and it's very silent there.

When there's no wind, there's just the very flat lake surface around you. And then every now and then maybe a bird somewhere. But there's no, it's silent because even if there's a wind, we don't hear it taking to trees or something. So I would say that's like being surrounded by this empty silence.

**Charlie Morrow:** Heikki, did you have anything like that in your background?

**Heikki Nikula:** What came in my mind was that we go back to 80s and this is a real musical experience. I was playing in Radio Symphony Orchestra. It was a gig and there was a special concert composed by Vinko Globokar. Name of the piece was, Hello, Do You Hear Me? And I think it was around 87 and maybe it was even the first performance and playing in orchestra was one thing, but during those days it wasn't so often that it was made so that there were two other things happening at the same time in Sweden and in Norway.

And so there was a choir in Sweden, in Stockholm, and a jazz band playing in Oslo, like a, not a big band, but I think like a jazz group. And that was thing that has been in my mind for many years.

**Charlie Morrow:** I'm actually familiar with that broadcast. It was very famous. Reached us in America.

**Heikki Nikula:** And it was really exciting. Can we make it work? And in a live situation, it worked.

**Charlie Morrow:** I think it's very interesting when you create a media event in which the pieces of it come from different locations and then somehow the producers pull it together and make it, into one experience for you.

**Heikki Nikula:** And I guess there was three audiences also, at least it was in Finland. It was in Kulttuuritalo, which is, it was a famous concert place for the Radio Symphony Orchestra.

**Charlie Morrow:** I've been there. I think that show also was sent out by European Radio as a single show that was heard by listeners as a single event, which was the mix of the three different performances, but in stereo.

**Heikki Nikula:** Maybe I have another also, if I can tell you, which was totally different. Because it happened in Viitasaari New Music Festival when Alvin Lucier was there. And I think the piece was called Carbon Copies and it was made that we were some few players when we individually went wherever. And I went with my friend Jussi Limatainen to bushes and we make a recording in Viitasaari forest.

Just about those sounds, because it was really silent there. And the idea was that then when we perform the piece, every player has own recording, and then we improvise. With that material, I felt that was also very immersive.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah, absolutely. Alvin was one of the first composers that I that I knew personally, who was working with immersivity and cool, beyond harmony or room acoustics and so forth. Like I'm sitting here in a room, his composition where he deals with the accumulation of the layers of sound and so forth.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** That's a great piece. I heard he's doing that by himself. In Viitasaari. It's a time of music festival.

**Charlie Morrow:** Interestingly enough, then we could jump to the present and talk about the piece that we're in the process of constructing.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** You've written Rumbo for six bass clarinetists and you've had the collaboration with Heikki for the instrument. And we are trying to make a spatial arrangement of it. You've identified a group of players. I found one. JD Parron. He says hello. I spoke to him yesterday in New York.

**Heikki Nikula:** Okay, thank you.

**Charlie Morrow:** I'm gonna be seeing him on March 11th for lunch. He's been part of Anthony Davis's opera about Malcolm X. Okay. And he was in the Metropolitan Opera performance. He's been tied up with that during the autumn and was talking about the experience of being an improviser with one of the top opera orchestras and what it felt like.

So it raises an interesting point about how you are both an improviser and. a symphony player. For him as an improviser, he was surrounded by symphony players. I wish I had a recording. He just said when the basses did a unison, it was unbelievable. Sitting there with his bass clarinet.

**Heikki Nikula:** Oh yeah.

**Charlie Morrow:** You must have that experience quite a lot.

**Heikki Nikula:** Yeah.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Is it scored for him, the piece?

**Charlie Morrow:** There's an improvising piece. He was in a piece from the premiere.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** So the composer would plan it is him.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah. Planning was him. Yeah, exactly.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Sounds very good. Maybe I'd take the idea one day and it will be him in my, some very serious piece, you just do anything you want when the others follow the sheet music.

**Heikki Nikula:** There are some of those,

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** yes, I'm sure. Yeah, but what I'm talking about RUMBO, actually, it was the original idea came from Angel Molinos. Who is a bass clarinetist based in Helsinki. He's originally Spanish and he wanted to commission pieces for first bass clarinet, then two bass clarinets then always bass clarinet and something.

But then the series of commissions ended up with. With my piece for six bass clarinets. And I'm not sure if I would have chosen to set up myself, but obviously I've been doing a lot of music for bass clarinet because we have a long cooperation together and so I thought, okay. I might be the right person to do it anyways.

So yeah, bass clarinet, it's of course like one of the best instruments I know, because it's very versatile. It's just, it can do so many things, has so many colors and a huge *ambitus* ...

**Heikki Nikula:** ... range.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Thank you. But here I maybe did not want to really show the extremes, but maybe to explore the sonic quality of the instrument, because I love that as well. For me, it's like a very human sound.

**Heikki Nikula:** And maybe space also.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Space as well. Although it's just a normal concert set up that the six bass clarinetists are sitting on stage and having their music stands there. But but yeah creating some kind of world with the six bass clarinets, a sonic world.

**Charlie Morrow:** This is the right moment to discuss it because since I'm producing. A playback of what would be six separate recordings that were synchronized in the rock church. To think about how you might like to place those six recordings in space once they're synchronized. Since they're each going to be recorded in a different space, they'll each be in a kind of a sound bubble of their own because each has his own acoustics.

And while we're not going to ask them to choose very different places but just, to record themselves so that we can hear all the expressive quality of your composition. I think that what makes the piece a really great piece is just the all the nuances, the subtlety. So we want to hear them. We don't want to go crazy with the space.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah, that's true. Yeah. Of course, like it also, my ideas have the inner acoustic because I'm using a lot of multiphonics. One player creates a kind of a hollow sound space by By himself or herself, and then it's multiplied, of course, with the six, when they all might have this kind of multi chronic at the same time, or at least some of them, if not six. Yeah, so that, in that sense, it's true. It's about space as well. Then all over the world. The spaces they have.

**Charlie Morrow:** One, one way to view it would be if you could imagine a flower arrangement in which we had six flowers, like from the same family, like six big lilies in a vase. We were doing something like a flower arrangement.

That would be one way to think about what we're doing. Which is what my first thought, because the church itself is such a nice kind of space with rough walls. Since this is really the first discussion we're having about that space and where the sound should be what might come to mind? You don't have to do exactly what you say the first time, as part of our pre production, why don't you think about that space? What might we think about?

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah I'm thinking of a coach. That's my first thought, while the bass clarinet tube is like a little bit hollow, and then the sounds are already there, and then they could be a little bit helped from the surroundings, in a way. Do you get, does this make sense? What did I say?

**Charlie Morrow:** Very much should we record them at each planet player in stereo or should we take them in mono? Cause mono would be stereo. I, okay. So in stereo, then we have a lot to work with. Also, since we are using good electronics, we could make the, Each clarinet in the church space could have its own size. For example, one orchestra.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** That would be really cool.

**Charlie Morrow:** So once, once we have the vertical in that, space we could make a bass clarinet that was from the floor to the ceiling and another one could be very tiny. So the scale of the bass clarinets can change once you, once, once you, we're mixing in 3D. And you might think about, if they should all be the same size or for example in the mix it changes.

It could be it's up to you because Or if you want us to do the mixing and us to decide about those things, it's a really your perspective of how it comes to life. Because each element is at the moment totally under your control.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah. Sounds very wonderful. Exciting.

**Heikki Nikula:** Is it going to be like surrounded with sound?

**Charlie Morrow:** I'm thinking of doing it if possible in surround plus vertical stereo. So it'd be basically a six channel recording. Or I'll put this around and then just one overhead we can, we're going to decide that because it depends on how much over the audio audience it sits, because there's a balcony audience and there's a, the church floor level.

**Heikki Nikula:** So it can be like magical.

**Charlie Morrow:** Totally.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah. And when we do that, I'm going to try to record a version of it in 3d that could be played back in a 3D system in another space without headphones.

**Heikki Nikula:** Yeah.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Actually another thought comes to my mind now when you talk about all these possibilities. Distance is very important to me in my music in a way.

If I write for symphony orchestra, I'll always think of them on stage. And then we hear this sound here, and then the next sound is very far. And there's like empty space, which reminds me of my immersive experience is on the lake. And so I was thinking, could it be possible to somehow have the image of distance between the, it is there, but then somehow in the recording as well.

**Charlie Morrow:** Oh, definitely. Now that we're talking you'll have time to think about it between now and when we ask the players to do their recordings. And then we will hear those recordings. And then if we decide to change something about the recordings, We can do that too. We, the reason it started so far ahead was so we'd have every option to develop, this realization and space.

I'm excited that we're gonna have such a wonderful experience in the end.

**Heikki Nikula:** Yeah.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah.

**Charlie Morrow:** Wonderful ingredients and a unique piece for sure.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Unique performance at least.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah, thanks. True.

**Heikki Nikula:** I'm happy that everybody liked to join. So that we got this group together.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yea.

**Charlie Morrow:** Personal relationship to the players, I think is very important for music, of certain music. Some of the music is rather anonymous. I most often like to have personal connections and personal choices.

**Heikki Nikula:** Yeah.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** That's very important because it's always a personality that is delivering the score.

**Heikki Nikula:** So now we have to do musical click track.

**Charlie Morrow:** That's true. And we can. And also ...

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah.

**Heikki Nikula:** That's what I've been thinking. I will check the tempos very carefully. But after that, it's not like only clicking, but there can be some sounds, maybe introduce like first beat of the bar or whatever, so that it is, you feel free and you still play with click track. So that is important.

**Charlie Morrow:** Oh, that's great. When we use this system before what we did was we put it we put our click information into Cubase and Cubase generated a visual screen that just simply gave us a beat, like bar 47, one, two, it was a visual click track. There was no clicking to be heard that we didn't want any click sounds in the performance. No. Ideally we're talking about a visual click track.

**Heikki and Lotta:** OK Ok.

**Charlie Morrow:** And so that's what, and Otso Pakkorinen will make that visual click track. And interestingly enough, he's also an animator.

**Heikki Nikula:** Okay. So it will be visual.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah, it'll be a visual click track. Yes.

**Heikki Nikula:** Okay, cool.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** You should have told us. I didn't know. I haven't it rings a bell in me. Maybe we'll, or maybe you just mentioned about it considering your opera.

**Charlie Morrow:** I did mention it in my opera, and then I said, and I just, it's my bad. I didn't explain it as fully as I might.

**Heikki Nikula:** Now we are in that point that now we are living those days that it is time to really think about that. Yeah.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** To decide the tempi. But by the 1st of March, we can do it a little bit earlier. Even earlier. I think that's a good point. Oh, I just they are very useful. Composers never act before they get on lead time. That's the professional brief ...

**Heikki Nikula:** Once I played Steve Reich "New York Counterpoint" and I made all the tracks by myself and I was in a studio with my friend, and because there are so many repeats. The

most difficult thing was that I'm not sure that this was fifth or sixth time, because if it was wrong, then I had to do it all over again.

And then I realized that there has to be good markings to make you feel free and safe, and then you can concentrate on making music.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah, we've, we found that for our opera. We wanted for our opera, instead of a conductor, what we have is a person who reacts. So the bell ringer who was played but our bell ringer who rang every movement was like a bell in a boxing match.

**Charlie Morrow:** And Vesa Viriko is a very animated person. And so throughout the performance, he would ring the bell, but his real job was he was visibly reacting to the music. He knew that each movement is a little story from East Finland with an almost absurd ending, and each movement is an hour of a day contracted into two minutes it, for everybody being able to look at those numbers, left them totally free to do what they like and the group was locked.

They did have also a click track, but those numbers were locked to the same track, which had the music, we had surround sound location sound, and that was also synchronized on the same track was coming from one laptop. So if you have any other element that you want to synchronize, you could think of this as a machine that we can set up any way you like.

And you could also talk to Otso, whenever you like. He lives in Helsinki and has his studio nearby. Delighted that we could talk about the piece. While I've got you here together, I thought I would talk more generally about your collaboration. I think that it's amazing when a musician, a composer has such a long, creative, and personal relationship and I wondered if you have any stories just to share from this adventure.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** I think the first piece I wrote for him was It's a piece called "Sade Aava," [Rain Opens]. I actually followed, it was like a text which was not present. So it was not vocal music, but music where I used text as a starting point. It was a sonnet like poem by a famous Finnish modernist, Eeva-Liisa Manner.

And then this was a piece for bass clarinet and ensemble, and it's a lot of raining and all kinds of noise. Sounds in the, but the funny thing is that then we were in a very Northern festival in Lapland one summer, a little bit after the premiere. And they asked me, don't you have anything like for bass clarinet solo?

You must have. Have something is obviously, there is one in your family. And and then I said, okay, we just do a solo piece out of this ensemble piece. And you were some, somewhere like really in the middle of nowhere in the woods, in the forest...

**Heikki Nikula:**... in Lapland.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah. On a little spring or something where he had to play this piece?

**Heikki Nikula:** Yes.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** And I couldn't actually go there because our son was two weeks old. So we were there with him somewhere else, but I couldn't carry him there. There was not even a road. I could take the carriage or, and it was a little bit like, exciting still with the two week old baby, I wasn't used to having the baby yet.

And doing things with him. And so you were there, I guess the audience and you had to sometimes if the landscape is very wet, you put

**Heikki Nikula:** Wooden paths ...

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah, wooden paths which you had to go for, I don't know how many kilometers to walk there. And then he played that's something

**Heikki Nikula:** Anyway.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** I've heard the beat there later.

**Heikki Nikula:** Anyway, the collaboration, of course, it's that I play a lot and Lotta is listening. And then I give total freedom and then we discuss what is coming.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** And of course he goes through all the clarinet parts and bass clarinet parts, which I write, also woodwind parts but obviously in my orchestral pieces, I do write a lot of orchestral music.

I really love that. And I'm lucky that the orchestras commissioned me and they play my music. And always, I can have pretty normal things for others, but the bass clarinet parts are always so special because he can tell me what are the practical things to write and and, the multiphonics that will work in an orchestral context and all that.

**Heikki Nikula:** Like multiphonics sometimes with the same fingering. It is easy to get from one point, but then you can get it from the higher or lower also, but it is good to check that it should be quite safe.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah. And if only that work on every instrument,

**Heikki Nikula:** But with the solo pieces, then you, it's much, much more adventures.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. I wanted to ask you, he you've obviously had experience with all of the clarinets. I think that clarinet families is quite remarkable in my own life. I wrote a piece for 60 clarinets.

**Heikki Nikula:** Okay.

**Charlie Morrow:** I had a chance to work with, I had 10 bass, 10 contrabass, half, E flat half double B flat and I had three 10 of the very tiny. Piccolo clarinets and so forth. Yeah. And then clarinets in between my piece looked like a wheel. Started out in separate groves in a city park and then they came and formed six circles of 10. I became very familiar with the clarinets, and I thought of in doing this interview, to have you talk a little bit about the personality of the clarinet and how it expresses itself in all these family members.



You talk about it. Two week old son. In a way they're little baby clarinets. They have their own personality. And then those big contrabass clarinets, they have a personality. And what's interesting about them as a family, they're made of natural materials. They're of earth. And I think every instrument, the materials that instruments are made from give them their personality when mixed with a human player.

Something in the materials. So I wondered if you could just talk a little bit about the clarinets, what they can do and what your thoughts are.

**Heikki Nikula:** Like you told clarinet family, they are so different in characters. If you think about E flat clarinet, that is really characteristic instrument and have its own field in the orchestra.

And then Bb clarinet, which is the most common, it is, it's singing so beautifully and also it is so versatile that it can be played in very virtuous ways. And then bass clarinet, thinking of this range of the instrument, you can go really to the deep sounds and then you can go pretty high also. So it gives its nature that it is so rich and colorful.

But of course, there are instruments also between. Bass horn has its own very soft sounds. It's different from the bass clarinet and the contrabass, which is the bottom of everything. In a way, I think that the bottom is rich in its most richness when you have this bass clarinet above. Then you really realize the bottom of the contrabass clarinet.

I think it's more, it is stronger that way, but with this all it's yeah, it is really good combination of colors and also all these instruments. You can show very quietly, but you can also play very loud. So the dynamics is also good with clarinets.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah, this is the essential, because none of the other woodwinds is like that, actually, that you are good in each register, in each volume.

**Heikki Nikula:** And especially bass clarinet, you can play very softly and very high also. Which is nice.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah. It's quite unique. The tuba is the brass cousin who can play low and very high, also very soft. But unless they're very special tones, the playing really soft at the high register, the tuba isn't that easy.

It's easier to do that, soft on a French horn, which, because there's not such a large amount of air to move. When I take the clarinets, the unique characters created by the reed, the sound is made by the vibration of the reed and adjusted by the pressure of the embouchure. And in a way it's like a cousin to the organ where you have all the pipes and different registers, but they're fixed.

The articulation is only with the fingers. In terms of how to start the sound, but the actual sound making is by the reed and the reed is adjusted now and again, but

**Heikki Nikula:**... Different ...

**Charlie Morrow:** It's always different in the clarinets for sure. It's in the organ, the reed part is fixed.

**Heikki Nikula:** Yeah, that's true. That's our life. We are trying to find the perfect reed, which makes you happy. Do you make your own reeds ever?

**Heikki Nikula:** I don't. No, I don't. I trust Fred's cut.

**Charlie Morrow:** I appreciate very much having this conversation with you. And thank you for being on the show. And look forward to the results of our collaboration.

**Heikki Nikula:** Yeah, I'm happy. This is now going on.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Yeah, I'm looking forward to hearing that.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah, me too.

**Heikki Nikula:** And it's nice to hear also that JD Parran that you have been talking and he likes to join us with this piece. We will send all the material to the players.

**Charlie Morrow:** We'll agree on what to tell the players and you can talk to them as you like. I'll introduce you to JD.

As I say, I'm eating lunch with him and we'll be in touch with him. I think of this as a very personal project in which people collaborate with each other to bring Lotta's ideas, alive and make Lotte world. Lovely to spend this time with you and I'll see you soon when I'm back in Finland.

**Lotta Wennäkoski:** Okay.

**Charlie Morrow:** We'll be in touch.

**Heikki Nikula:** Thank you so much.