

MARTIN KUUSKMANN

KÕRVITS | TAMBERG | TÜÜR

Estonian National Symphony
Orchestra

Mihhail Gerts, *conductor*



ORCHID CLASSICS

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Tõnu Kõrvits (b.1969)		
1	"Beyond the Solar Fields" for Bassoon and Orchestra (2004)	16.51
Eino Tamberg (1930-2010)		
Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (2001)		
2	Perpetuo moto (It Won't Stop). Vivo	6.00
3	Interludio – La danza irrequieto (Restless Dancing). Allegro irrequieto	4.24
4	Solo (Alone). Lento	8.46
5	Postludio – Perpetuo moto (It Moves Again). Vivo leggiero	3.38
Erkki-Sven Tüür (b.1959)		
Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (2003)		
6	Movement 1	16.50
7	Movement 2	4.51
Total time		61.20

Martin Kuuskmann, *bassoon*
Mihhail Gerts, *conductor*
Estonian National Symphony Orchestra

As a musician and an artist, it is such an honor to work with composers whose music you feel a real connection to. Hence, I consider myself an extremely lucky and blessed individual for having surrounded myself with not only composers whose music I love, but individuals I sincerely care for and love as people.

The three concertos on this album have a very strong personal connection to me as all three composers are my dear friends (RIP Eino), starting from Tõnu whom I go back to our toddler years. Tõnu may not have been the first composer I had commissioned but it was only a matter of time with him, and he has graced me with several amazing solo works since.

Eino's piece in turn came as a commission from the former Estonian Ministry of Culture which I premiered in 2002 with the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra. I must thank my lucky stars here to have performed it some years later with the great Neeme Järvi only a couple months before Eino Tamberg's death. Neeme, who basically grew up with Eino, gave me some invaluable advice in terms of style and character to this fantastic work. I'm forever grateful to him for that. Eino loved to laugh and was just the most gracious of people, full of love, humour and kindness, and it is very evident in this concerto. We became quick friends in the process of him creating this concerto and remained close until his passing. In fact, the very last piece Eino wrote was a beautiful solo work for bassoon, "Call for a Dance" (and Eino LOVED to dance) Op.138, written in the summer of 2010, a work I premiered in 2011.

Finally, I had been fixed in getting a concerto from Erkki-Sven, whose groove ridden, 70's rock influenced music had always fascinated me, and still does. The idea came to fruition in 2003 largely thanks to my dear friend, conductor/producer Kristjan Järvi and the Norrlands Operan Orchestra in Umeå, Sweden, that commissioned it. Through some unforeseen scheduling issues, however, Erkki-Sven ran out of time to write a new concerto. He felt terrible, of course, but what to do - we had a concerto date in the calendar, and just 5 months away.

Help came from another maestro and friend, Paavo Järvi, who suggested to have one of his favorite works of Erkki-Sven's, his Cello Concerto, to be rewritten for the bassoon. Granted, it caused a bit of a stir in Sweden, but the result was brilliant.

Last but not least, I have always loved a good challenge, and since I loved the music of all three composers, I did not hesitate to ask them to write whatever their mind poured out, and I operate in the same terms to this day with whatever I play - always curious, always learning, always searching. The only limits given to them were the lowest possible note and the highest I was comfortable with (G5). Why did it take me twenty years to finally record these works? Everything in life happens for a reason, and I would say it was probably for the best as I was able to grow and mature with them. It was an immense pleasure to record all three with my friend, Mihhail Gerts and the fabulous Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, during a rather intense period of 4 days. It was quite a wild ride, but here it is now. I hope it brings the listener joy and new discoveries about the bassoon as a very vocal, highly expressive and flexible instrument.

From three points of view

While certainly not the most popular choice among instruments to have been graced with extensive repertoire from the Baroque era through the First Viennese School to the early Romantic period, many crucial composers of those respective times did dedicate concertos to the bassoon – Vivaldi, C.P.E. Bach, Mozart and Carl Maria von Weber among them. Mozart even wrote three, though only one, the concerto in B-flat major K. 191 survived. Most often, these concertos were composed explicitly for specific musicians – virtuosos at this particularly powerful, resonant woodwind instrument. That today's Estonian bassoonist Martin Kuuskmann is the dedicatee of not just one but more than half a dozen concertos can be understood not only as a testament to the reed player's distinguished instrumental prowess, but also as evidence of the bassoon's evolution over the past centuries, the modification the instrument

experienced, the expansion its repertoire has undergone and the significance it has thus gained.

Today, many concertos exist for bassoon. The expansion of the instrument's range and increased ease of its playability through technological advances in the 19th and 20th centuries, together with the emergence of progressively sophisticated genres, pushed the instrument into a new era of emancipation. A period of transformation that, one could argue, is still in full bloom today. For Kuuskmann himself is a catalyst of change. In order to adequately perform Eino Tamberg's *Bassoon Concerto, Op. 108*, Kuuskmann had his instrument altered, adding three keys to the upper register instead of an initial single one, which gives him more agility to fleetly manoeuvre through the faster passages. When he first premiered the piece in 2002, the bassoonist had to adjust sections of the score in order to play them. Only later, after updating his instrument, was he able to express the most demanding sections in the higher register as notated in the score. His motto today, when faced with similar inquiries of composers: "If they can hum it, there's a good chance I can play it".

Indeed, the three concertos compiled in this programme are connected by a shared elevated complexity of their solo parts. Complex not for the sake of boasting, but primarily to demonstrate the instrument's versatility, from its deep horn-like surges starting at B-flat, a balanced cantabile baritone reminiscent of the violoncello to expressive outbursts in the higher register – seldom harsh, always commanding.

Completed within three years of each other, between 2001 and 2004, the concertos share more commonalities. Tõnu Kõrvits, Eino Tamberg and Erkki-Sven Tüür all wrote their pieces explicitly for Martin Kuuskmann. All three concertos were premiered by the Estonian bassoonist – Tamberg's in 2002, Kõrvits's *Beyond The Solar Fields* in 2004, both in Tallinn, and Tüür's *Concerto For Bassoon And Orchestra* in 2003, in Umeå, Sweden. All three works offer a broad glance at

contemporary classical music from an Estonian point of view that may be more omnipresent and influential today than ever. Additionally, Kuuskmann has had a close personal relationship with all three composers – Kõrvits was even one of his closest childhood friends.

Tõnu Kõrvits's approach on *Beyond the Solar Fields* is an especially contemporary take on musical organisation in that it incorporates a field recording of a woman singing the Estonian folk song "Helletus" – the score's instrumentation reads "For solo bassoon, orchestra and tape." Stylistically however, Kõrvits doesn't deny his musical heritage but embraces devices borrowed from early 20th century impressionism, stretching the music to Eastern realms, with heavy use of the double harmonic minor scale, microtonal flexions in the bassoon part that are mirrored by the glissandi in the string section as well as an at times clarinet-like sonorousness of the bassoon, consistent with the piece's underlying folk song inspiration.

Unfolding in one long movement, introduced with nine patiently elaborated measures of just the bassoon, lush orchestral colorations are interspersed with sparsely accompanied solo sections that make use of the instrument's multiphonic range and its wide array of percussive faculties. The pre-recorded tape doesn't enter until just before the very end, accompanied by tense orchestral harmonies that intermittently drown out the playback recording. Sustained strings and a subsequent bassoon solo statement follow like an afterthought. The tradition is as present as ever, but newly contextualised. Something another Estonian composer, the late Veljo Tormis understood better than anyone, famously saying, "I do not use folk song, it is folk song that uses me."

Distinctly contrasting to Kõrvits's piece in its formal structure, yet equally diverse in its stylistic ambitions, Eino Tamberg's *Bassoon Concerto* is representative of the composer's life-long search for a musical diction that diverges from Romantic paragons in its expressive extremes, but does not completely neglect tonal

ideals. A true individual among the neo-classicists, Tamberg held a special interest for the bassoon in his work; even the last piece he wrote before his death in 2010, *Invitation to Dance, Op. 138*, was written for the woodwind. His is the only of the three concertos in this programme where Kuuskmann collaborated with the composer. Often a composer of extremes – in pitch, pace and dynamic spectrum –, Tamberg welcomed the bassoonist's input regarding the solo part, keeping what was in the realm of the possible and altering what wasn't.

Four movements – the tempo markings read *Vivo, Allegro irrequieto, Lento* and *Vivo leggiero* – unravel with extreme urgency, spurred on by a sumptuous percussion section with Stravinskian panache, characteristic of Tamberg. The composer exhausts the entire range of the bassoon in his score, including several ascents to the high D (another nod to Stravinsky), but never allows virtuosic detours at the cost of the concerto's formal coherence and orchestral stringency. The last movement begins with a particularly striking ensemble dissection, led by clarinets, bassoon, timpani and piano, who by completing each other's phrases create an aural mosaic. This brings with it a Fugue-like quality, a reference to the fundamentals, however fundamentally transfigured they may be.

If there is another kindred trait to all three concertos in this programme, it is their embrace of variance. For each concerto, in the respective composers' own way, veers towards disparate sonic landscapes within the blink of an eye. In Erkki-Sven Tüür's case, this doesn't come as a surprise. His beginnings were famously polystylistic, with an extensive background in the eclecticism of progressive rock. His early works as a composer would alternate traditionally harmonic and atonal material, homophonic and polyphonic passages and an atmospheric gracefulness with explosive eruptions within but a couple of measures. Traces of this adventurous inclination remain in his work today.

Tüür's *Concerto For Bassoon And Orchestra* – a two-movement-stream-of-thought-journey – is based on an earlier work, the composer's first cello concerto

from 1999. In fact, only the solo part was altered, adapting the cellos rawer tenor tone to ranges on the bassoon capable of capturing a similar expressiveness, often to a more vehement end. This more driven aspect is especially prominent when the tempo accelerates – the bassoon concerto already being faster than most interpretations of the cello concerto as it is. One such instance can be heard just after the exposition at the 3-minute mark, when *pianississimo* abruptly grows into *fortissimo* for a lengthy string of 16th-notes – a theme carried from the bassoon to the string parts and back again in harmonious counterpoint. Back are the fundamentals. What follows is an impressive elaboration of idioms from several eras with Romantic peaks and a passionate bassoon part that travels the full gamut of the instrument's possibilities.

The currents are strong in each of the three concertos, pulling and tugging at the core-compositional fabrics from all directions and stretching them to their extremes. Who better to invite to perform these different views on the bassoon than a champion of the instrument like Martin Kuuskmann. Recorded at the Estonia Concert Hall, Tallinn in 2021 with Mihhail Gerts conducting the Estonia National Symphony Orchestra, Kuuskmann captures captivating entries into the still growing, inspired bassoon literature.

Tüür, describing the process of composing, has explained: „if you put a seed in the soil, you don't know what kind of shape it will finally take. It always surprises you and yet it's always so natural. If you look backwards, then you have this feeling that it's the only way it could exist. There's no other way. This is something I want to also achieve with my compositions when I listen to them. You don't know where it finally ends up. But after you've listened to it, you decide this is the only way.“ It's an illuminating thought that — even if it wasn't shared by two other composers presented here — gives us another perspective on this unique programme.

Friedrich Kunzmann



Martin Kuuskmann

Bassoon

Multiple Grammy-nominated Estonian bassoonist Martin Kuuskmann belongs to the leading voices on his instrument, performing repertoire landmarks from across the entire scope of classical music with celebrated orchestras the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, MDR Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra, Iceland Symphony Orchestra, the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and more. He has worked with renowned conductors Neeme, Paavo and Kristjan Järvi, Risto Joost and Daniel Bjarason, among others. Kuuskmann's unmatched expressive versatility is only one of multiple reasons for his great esteem among composers and colleagues worldwide – fifteen bassoon concertos have been written explicitly for him by A-listers Christopher Theofanidis, Páll Ragnar Pálsson, the three composers presented on this album and more. His reputation as a chamber musician precedes him and has led to countless international collaborations with acclaimed chamber music ensembles such as the Berlin Philharmonic Winds and produced partnerships with the likes of Leif Ove Andsnes and Kirill Gerstein. Not only has the bassoonist performed on celebrated international stages – ranging from Carnegie Hall to Sala Sao Paolo – but Kuuskmann also balances his deep expertise in classical and chamber music with occasional forays into jazz – collaborations with master improvisors John Patitucci and Joe Zawinul included. Kuuskmann's exceptional artistry is documented in a steadily expanding recording catalogue that includes three Grammy-nominations.

Recent and upcoming projects include two duo albums, each with a long-time collaborator: Schubert's Voyage (Berlin Classics), with Kristjan Randalu, and Retratos (Audiophile Society) with the Brazilian pianist, Jovino Santos Neto. Besides holding a chair as an Associate Professor of Bassoon at the University of Denver, Kuuskmann continues to pursue a prolific career as one of the most sought-after performers in his field. The New York Times has called his instrumental proficiency "amazing... stunning", confirming that the bassoonist is one of the great virtuosos of our times.

Mihhail Gerts

Conductor

Hailed by critics for his "astonishing precision, highly expressive gestures and warmth" as "a name to remember", the Estonian conductor Mihhail Gerts has made a name for himself following successful debuts with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Staatskapelle Dresden, Orchestra Sinfonica dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra and Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France.

Gerts has appeared before more than 60 different orchestras, among them: City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, Helsinki Philharmonic, Gulbenkian Symphony Orchestra, Luxembourg Philharmonic, Belgian National Orchestra, Sydney Symphony, Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra, Slovenian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Monte Carlo Philharmonic, Sofia Philharmonic, NHK Tokyo, Osaka Philharmonic, Taiwan National Orchestra and many others.

Since 2021 Gerts is the founder and artistic director of the TubIN festival dedicated to promoting the music of one of the greatest symphonic composers of the 20th century Eduard Tubin. In addition to his symphonic concert career, Gerts has also gained extensive operatic experience as First Kapellmeister and deputy GMD of the Hagen Theater (2015 to 2017) and resident conductor of the Estonian National Opera (2007 to 2014) where he conducted over forty different productions of opera and ballet.

Estonian National Symphony Orchestra

The Estonian National Symphony Orchestra (Eesti Riiklik Sümfooniaorkester, ERSO) – a vivid and versatile orchestra who's always striving towards excellence. The unique position in the intersection of cultures brings together Nordic, Western and Russian musical traditions. Celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2026, ERSO has become the most prominent orchestral ambassador of Estonia abroad,



powerfully increasing its international scope particularly in recent decades. Since the 2020/21 season, its Chief Conductor and Artistic Director is Olari Elts. Neeme Järvi, the longest-serving chief conductor of the ERSO, continues to cooperate with the orchestra as an Honorary Artistic Director for Life and the Artistic Adviser of the orchestra is Paavo Järvi.

The orchestra performs with renowned conductors and soloists from around the world, including, of course, most prominent Estonian musicians. ERSO's CDs demonstrate a quality that has been recognised by several renowned music magazines and the orchestra has won several prizes, including a Grammy Award for the recording of cantatas by Sibelius. Its home venue is the Estonia Concert Hall in Tallinn and it has dazzled the world with numerous tours and participated in reputable international music festivals. They have played in prestigious venues such as the Konzerthaus Berlin, Musikverein in Vienna, Rudolfinum in Prague, Brucknerhaus in Linz, the Avery Fisher Hall (current David Geffen Hall) in New York, the Grand Hall of Saint Petersburg Philharmonia and the Concert Hall of the Mariinsky Theatre, the Kölner Philharmonie, the Helsinki Music Centre, Berwaldhallen in Stockholm, and many more. Some of the festivals ERSO has attended include the Festival Radio France Occitanie Montpellier with Neeme Järvi and the Eufonie International Festival of Central and Eastern Europe in Warsaw under the baton of Olari Elts. Some of the highlights of the previous seasons include a concert tour with Olari Elts and violinist Daniel Lozakovich, which took the orchestra to Isarphilharmonie in Munich, La Seine Musicale in Paris and Meistersingerhalle in Nuremberg. In May 2023, another successful concert tour took the orchestra to Great Britain, where 11 concerts were given with pianist Barry Douglas under the baton of Olari Elts.

The orchestra has enjoyed fruitful cooperation with highly acclaimed record companies such as Chandos, BIS, and Onyx, and in the past also with Alba Records, Harmonia Mundi, and Melodiya. In addition to local radio and

television channels, ERSO's concerts have been broadcasted by Mezzo, medici.tv and they have also reached many radio listeners via the EBU. In 2020, the orchestra launched its own channel – erso.tv.

As for conductors and soloists, ERSO is fortunate to perform with the very best from all around the world, including front-rank Estonian musicians. Commanding a repertoire that ranges from the Baroque period to the present time, the ERSO has had the honour to premiere symphonic pieces by almost every Estonian composer, including Arvo Pärt, Erkki-Sven Tüür, Jüri Reinvere, and Eduard Tubin.

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