

duos for violin and double bass

audite

elina vähälä | niek de groot





**Krzysztof Penderecki (1933)**

Duo concertante

per violino e contrabbasso (2011) 5:19

**Isang Yun (1917-1995)**

Together for Violin and Double Bass (1989)

I. 4:02

II. 6:23

**Jaakko Kuusisto (1974)**

Miniö, Op. 23 (2012) 7:02

**Erkki-Sven Tüür (1959)**

Symbiosis (1996) 12:04

**Alfred Huber (1962)**

(Re)Actio, Op. 18 (2012)

I. Krieg ('War') 4:06

II. Frieden ('Peace') 6:18

**György Kurtág (1926)**

Virág az ember (for Miyako) (2000) 1:38

**Wolfgang Rihm (1952)**

Dyade for Violin and Double Bass (2011) 16:27

### On an Equal Footing

Every instrument has its own identity – be that on a tonal, technical or psychological basis. But as is also the case with people, their external appearance changes over time; they are in vogue for a while and then, for no apparent reason, go unnoticed. The violin, ever since its triumph in the late seventeenth century, was never subjected to such fluctuations – unlike the foundation of the orchestral strings, the double bass. In eighteenth century Vienna it appeared as a solo and chamber instrument in equal measure, its sound agile and sensuous: a real crowd-pleaser. The nineteenth century, however, developed standard combinations of instruments for chamber music which no longer included the double bass, making it more and more exotic – it was therefore par for the course that, in his “instrumental zoo”, Camille Saint-Saëns gave the bass the role of the elephant. It would take until the middle of the twentieth century before composers began exploring the instrument’s qualities once again, challenging it on a technical level. But when they did, it was with increasing enthusiasm.

This led to the combination of violin and double bass, despite undeniable optical and physical differences, being an encounter on an equal footing – no doubt the reason why numerous prominent contemporary composers are happy to become involved in the adventure that is a violin-double bass duo. In the course of this, they are rarely interested in the theatrical aspect but more in other issues: should contrasts be accentuated or should the two parts be united to form one “super-instrument”, as Erkki-Sven Tüür had in mind? Should the two instruments be protagonists in a “narrative”, or do they appear as representatives of fundamental principles of human nature – as in the yin and yang, as drawn upon by the Korean composer Isang Yun?

### Concertante and Narrative (Krzysztof Penderecki)

As might be expected, all seven composers whose music Elina Vähälä and Niek de Groot have put onto their stands deal with the subject individually. And it is not surprising that Krzysztof Penderecki – a former *enfant terrible* of the Polish avant-garde, nowadays an international musical prince – chose a classical, accessible form for his *Duo concertante*. For Penderecki has always been interested in more than simply continuing musical structures and methods: communicating with the public continues to be of greater importance to him. In famous works such as the string study *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, his *St Luke Passion* or his *Polish Requiem* he speaks directly to the audience, bringing them to historical account.

Alongside Penderecki’s large-scale confessional works, which also include his operas, the composer has dedicated much time over the last decades to solo pieces and concertos, working together with prominent players. In 1995 he wrote his second violin concerto, bearing the sobriquet of “Metamorphosen”, for Anne-Sophie Mutter. Sixteen years later, their friendship led to the *Duo concertante* which Anne-Sophie Mutter had commissioned for herself and the Slovak double bass player Roman Patkoló, a scholarship holder of Mutter’s artists’ foundation: it was premiered in 2011 in Hanover.

The narrative stance of Penderecki’s duo forges ahead with a powerful gesture at the very beginning: a vigorous violin tremolo and a harsh bass pizzicato. A plaintive melody with Slavic hues is played by the double bass in a high register, and then taken up by the violin in the same register. Then the moods change as



quickly as in an improvisation, with tone and character being determined by one or other instrument. An *allegretto scherzando* gives way to a dolls' dance reminiscent of Stravinsky (*vivace*), where Penderecki makes ample use of virtuoso techniques (harmonics, *spiccato*, double stops) in both instruments. A recitative, *scherzando* and *vivace* are repeated in varying sequences; at the end, both parts intensify, breaking into a frenetic dance in which the double bass player beats the strings and even hits his instrument with the knee – no doubt also an attractive visual effect.

### **Yin and Yang (Isang Yun)**

Whilst Penderecki's duo is a commission in the classical sense, *Together* by the Korean-born composer Isang Yun (1917-1995) is an offering to his publisher ("For Harald Kunz on 4 July 1989") and at the same time a youthful salute – as ideal interpreters, Yun had imagined his violin-playing granddaughter and the son of his publisher, a budding double bass player. However, the premiere of the piece – which turned out to be not entirely suited to young players – was given by the two virtuosos Helge Slaatto and Frank Reinecke in the spring of 1990 at the Numos Festival in the Danish city of Århus.

It was typical of Isang Yun's lifestyle that he did not perceive the two musical partners as rivals but that they, according to the title, *Together*, symbolise equal poles in a community. According to Walter Wolfgang Sparrer, "the polarity of yin and yang is an archetypal principle in Yun's work. Consequently, *Together* is a cycle of two contrasting pieces: the first movement, based on the central note C, is committed to the active yang principle, whilst the second movement, based on C sharp, is committed to the female yin principle."

With this philosophical approach, the 72-year-old Isang Yun towers above the political context of many of his earlier pieces. There, he had primarily portrayed the suffering and suppression of his people, downtrodden first by the Japanese occupation and after the Second World War by dictatorship and tyranny (shortly after his breakthrough in the West, he was kidnapped and tortured by the South Korean secret service, and was only freed after international protests; thereafter he was active and much respected as professor of composition in Berlin). By contrast, in *Together* Yun focuses on the constant exchange and transformation of motifs. First and foremost, however, he challenges both instruments to a highly flexible treatment of pitch and sound quality. Never, not even in the planar second movement, does the sound appear static; instead it is shaded by accents, quickly changing dynamics, trills, *glissandi* or harmonics. The protagonists are not the instruments, as is the case with Penderecki, but instead it is the sound itself which they produce *together*.

### **Nordic Idiosyncrasy (Jaakko Kuusisto & Erkki-Sven Tüür)**

During the last four decades a particular music culture has developed in the Nordic-Baltic region which looks more towards American "minimalism" than the central European avant-garde and its changing discourses. This difference becomes palpable in the two duos by the Finnish musician Jaakko Kuusisto and his Estonian colleague Erkki-Sven Tüür. Neither do they have a classical conception as in Penderecki's work, nor a philosophical foundation as in Yun's duo, but

they take the instrument as a starting point – its technical challenges, its sound character, its energy, but also local playing traditions.

Jaakko Kuusisto, alongside his brother Pekka, is the epitome of contemporary violin playing in Finland. Like Elina Vähälä, to whom he dedicated his violin concerto of 2012, Kuusisto studied at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. As concertmaster of the Lahti Symphony Orchestra, Kuusisto became acquainted with the international repertoire for orchestra; in addition, he has recorded the violin literature by Jean Sibelius as well as contemporary Finnish composers, increasingly also turning his hand to conducting; in August 2018 he will assume his first chief conductorship with the Kuopio Symphony Orchestra in central Finland.

A practitioner therefore, for whom music runs in the blood. His duo *Miniö* could also be seen as a big improvisation which Petri Lehto – the double bass player of the Lahti Symphony Orchestra who commissioned the work – might spontaneously be making up together with a colleague from the first violins. The bass begins with weighty stomping in single notes and stacked fourths on open strings, whilst the violin “fiddles” in fifths, according to its tuning – this scene (which returns at the end) exudes the vitality of rumbustious funfairs but also refers to the cunning rhythmic shifts of the American composer John Adams, whom Kuusisto regards very highly. The middle section, on the other hand, is entirely different – a study in flat, crystalline harmonics, sounding both pallid and mysterious.

Only two hours by boat from Helsinki lies the Estonian capital city of Tallinn, which formed part of the Soviet Union until the early 1990s. However, despite forty-five years of socialist rule, Estonia not only maintained its cultural traditions but also produced an entirely autonomous “school” of composers including Arvo Pärt and Lepo Sumera, whose harmonic simplicity and sonic purity offers an alternative to the concept of modernism of the mid-European avant-garde. Born in 1959 and a pupil of Sumera and Jan Rääts in Tallinn, Erkki-Sven Tüür also grew up within this school. After wild years spent as a member of the group “In Spe”, one of Estonia’s most popular rock bands, Tüür’s music was soon played across the world. To date, he has composed nine symphonies as well as concertos, chamber music and an opera about the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg who, during the Second World War, saved a vast number of Jews from deportation in Hungary and who vanished without a trace after the invasion of the Red Army.

In 1996 Tüür wrote the 12-minute duo *Symbiosis* for Helge Slaatto and Frank Reinecke. As in Kuusisto’s *Miniö*, there are episodes of particular sounds and playing styles, creating a clear structure within the work. Tüür’s scope, however, is a different one: he does not plan for an improvisatory togetherness but considers the violin and the double bass as a form of hybrid instrument. “On this musical journey both are completely dependent on each other”, the composer writes. “With regard to the sound it was my goal to create a ‘super-instrument’ – as if the double bass and the violin formed a single, indivisible sound box.”

What is on top, what is below, what are melodies, what is accompaniment? With such deliberations *Symbiosis* challenges popular clichés of the brilliant violin and the dull sounding double bass. From the outset it is almost impossible to tell the two instruments apart by merely listening: whilst the bass begins with a high, pallid harmonic, the violin produces the same note in a low register – a confusing effect which Tüür repeats several times, frequently interrupted by brutal arpeggios. After a sort of archaic chorale a new section highlights the rhythmic aspect: the violin seems to be improvising its melodies over jazz-like accompaniment – for the first time the musical body divides into two individuals driving each other along until they fuse again at the end.



### **Weapons and Flowers (Alfred Huber & György Kurtág)**

The fact that an entirely different approach to music is possible is proven by Alfred Huber, a neurosurgeon, composer and festival founder born in Linz, Austria, who has been working as an independent physician in Kempten im Allgäu, Germany, since the 1990s. Until 2000, Huber studied composition with Herbert Willi at the Vorarlberger Landeskonservatorium in Austria. After graduating, Huber began to doubt his former approach of creating and feeling music. By exploring cognitive psychology, which studies information processing in the human brain under interdisciplinary aspects, he broadened his view from the composer's studio to the audience and its specific perception. In the commentary about his second string quartet (2009), Huber describes the consequences: "The distinct orientation towards the audience members and their capacities and possibilities to listen inevitably necessitates a renunciation of the avant-garde's traditional techniques. In ever-new approaches, I now attempt to analyse art music of the eighteenth, nineteenth and, especially, the twentieth centuries in terms of the theory of information. [...] These insights and my reinterpretations then directly influence my compositions."

An example for the creative combination of analysis and work is the duo *(Re)actio* (2012) with which Huber refers to the two Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003. On both occasions he felt an almost compulsive dramaturgy in the curves depicting public agitation. "Everything seemed to occur according to a pattern without any alternatives; the media, governments, public opinion in countries taking part in the war, as well as in those refusing to take part, seemed united in a ghostly choreography. Inspired by Christopher Clark's book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, I finally developed a musico-dramaturgic concept which attempts to trace the rising and falling curves of public agitation during a war and at a peace settlement."

Musically, in the first movement of *(Re)actio*, Huber appears to refer to baroque depictions of war, such as the *Battalia* by Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber. The two parts exchange martial motifs, rhythmically distinctive, aggressive, in permanently increasing motion. The *Frieden* [peace] movement, on the contrary, does not appear reassured, but rather as a cynical march of the victors, shot through with imperious, oppressive gestures and striking *glissandi*. This time, the musical reference point is not the seventeenth but the twentieth century and a composer such as Dmitri Shostakovich who precipitously portrayed the war in many works.

Diametrically opposed to the merciless stance in Alfred Huber's duo is a tenderly floating piece which permeates the oeuvre of the now 91-year-old György Kurtág, a master of miniatures and extremely compressed statements. It appears for the first time in the chamber cantata of 1968, *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, and later on in transcriptions for piano duet or string combinations, often with a dedication to the Japanese-Hungarian conductor and scientist, Miyako Furiya. "Virág az ember – Man is only a flower" is the title of this sequence of notes over sustained chords which starts over and over again. Man as well as music is transient; but both come into flower for a short while, leaving behind their traces and their message.

### **A Bear and an Elf (Wolfgang Rihm)**

So far, we have not yet looked at how violinists and double bass players themselves manage this encounter of the third kind. One could ask Elina Vähälä and Niek de Groot directly. For once, however, a violin diva such as Anne-Sophie Mutter will have her say, as she – having commissioned the duos of Penderecki and Wolfgang Rihm – admitted in an interview for the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* that Rihm's piece did not come naturally to her: "With great fright, I remember a work by Wolfgang Rihm which I premiered last year – *Dyade* for violin and double bass. It is impossible to imagine two more diverse instruments, both in terms of sound character and pitch. Rihm always joked that he had written it for a bear and an elf. I really had to fight for that work; to begin with, I found it very awkward and unwieldy. But as with all things in life, the longer one works at it, the clearer it becomes. One clings to small sound islands and eventually a structure emerges from the fog. The things that come naturally are, in retrospect, always worthless. That is why *Dyade* is particularly precious to me, because I found it really hard. But in the end I loved it dearly."

That outlines the difficulties of Rihm's *Dyade* (2011) clearly. The intonation of the instruments, often moving closely together and in a high register, is precarious; the dynamics as well as the fingerings are extreme; but the greatest challenge lies in finding a narrative approach for this 16-minute dialogue. *Dyade* means something like "twoness", and Wolfgang Rihm once cryptically described the work as a "couple-relationship with all the bells and whistles" – however, the violin is by no means always the elf and the double bass frequently leaves his bear's den, revealing his tender and vulnerable side.

A great violin cantilena opens the piece, the bass discreetly joining in, whereupon the lines interleave; "the whole thing", as Rihm explained, "is an organic, flowing, growing entity, as though it had been improvised just now". But because every relationship between two people also includes dispute, outbursts and unfamiliarity, the dialogue, in several *con moto* sections, repeatedly builds up towards startlingly undisciplined wildness and sonic cantankerousness. The core of the work, however, consists of the transcendental *adagio* episodes, the heartfelt "great song" which at times almost seems to communicate a death wish. Here, the differences of the instruments completely fade into the background while Rihm presents music as nothing else than a comprehensible, deeply human language.

Michael Struck-Schloen

Translation: Viola Scheffel



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Violinist **ELINA VÄHÄLÄ** is one of the sought-after instrumentalists in the international music scene. She made her debut with orchestra at the age of twelve with Sinfonia Lahti and was later chosen as Sinfonia Lahti's "Young Master Soloist" by the conductor Osmo Vänskä. She is the winner of the 1999 Young Concert Artists International Auditions in New York.

Born in the United States and raised in Finland, she began to play the violin at the age of three at the Lahti Conservatory and later also studied under Zinaida Gilels, Ilja Grubert and Pavel Vernikov at the Kuhmo Violin School. At the Sibelius Academy Vähälä studied with Tuomas Haapanen and in 1998 she attended the class of Ana Chumachenco in Munich.

Elina Vähälä appears regularly with leading orchestras in Finland, Europe and the US, working with conductors such as Leonard Slatkin, Jukka-Pekka Saraste and Jakub Hrůša. Concert tours have led her through the UK, Finland, Germany, China, Korea, as well as to South America and Japan. Besides her solo career she is also a devoted chamber musician, having performed with artists such as Yuri Bashmet, Ralf Gothóni, Steven Isserlis and Arto Noras.

Her repertoire ranges from baroque to contemporary. She has given world premieres of works by Aulis Sallinen and Curtis-Smith as well as John Corigliano (first Nordic performance).

In addition to her solo career, she is involved in the educational aspect of music. In 2009 she launched the Violin Academy, funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation – a master class based educational project for highly talented young Finnish violinists. Elina Vähälä is a professor of violin at the Hochschule für Musik in Karlsruhe. She plays a violin by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini from 1780.





Dutch double bassist **NIEK DE GROOT** is one of today's leading soloists. Originally a trumpet player, he started playing the double bass aged 18. Within an unusually short time he became principal bass with several European ensembles, including a ten-year tenure as first solo bassist with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

After his formal studies Niek de Groot further developed his skills at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada. His playing has also benefited much from attending master classes with eminent cellists Frans Helmerson, Lluís Claret, Laurence Lesser, and from collaborations with Leonard Bernstein, György Sebők and Mstislav Rostropovich.

Since 2006 Niek de Groot has dedicated himself entirely to chamber music and solo performances. He performs regularly as a soloist and chamber musician at the important international concert halls and music festivals. His repertoire includes a wide share of contemporary music; he has worked closely with composers such as Kurtág, Stockhausen, Saariaho, Vasks and Gubaidulina.

In 1996 he was appointed Senior Professor for Double Bass at the Folkwang University of Arts, Essen, becoming the only French Bow playing bassist ever to teach in such a position in Germany. He also taught at institutions in Norway, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain; a much sought-after teacher, he regularly gives master classes worldwide.

Throughout his career, Niek de Groot has played on rare double basses by Cerutti, Bajoni and Amati. Most recently he was granted the lifelong privilege to play the world famous Domenico Montagnana double bass from 1747. His bows are especially made for him by Jochen Schmidt.





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*recording:*

January 9 - 11, 2017

*recording location:*

Leibniz Saal (Hannover Congress Centrum)

*equipment:*

dpa 4006 & 4011, Sennheiser MKH 800 Twin,

RME Micstasy M & Fireface UFX+

ME Geithain RL 901K & 903K

*recording format:*

pcm, 96 kHz / 24bit

*recording producer:*

Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff

*editing:*

Dipl.-Tonmeister Justus Beyer

*photos:*

Tatu Hiltunen (cover & p. 8)

AB-Design (p. 2, p. 9 - p. 12)

*art direction and design::*

AB-Design, Detmold

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