

# Päivi Hirvonen

Beautiful fiddling and singing creations from deep in the Finnish tradition, says **Chris Nickson**

**I**t's true, the world really is full of magical things, and discovering new music is among the best of them. It's out there if you look, and sometimes you'll find a real gem like *Alku – The Beginning*, the first solo album from Finnish fiddler and singer Päivi Hirvonen. It's beautiful; sometimes gliding, sometimes raw and roaring, mostly her own compositions, with breathtaking, utterly committed performances, assured yet intensely emotional. Music to crack open stone. And at its heart it continues the Finnish folk tradition.

That's hardly surprising. It's been part of her music since she began playing violin when she was five years old.

"I grew up in Jyväskylä in central Finland, and started with classical music," Hirvonen recalls. "But I began playing folk music. I went on to study at the University of Applied Sciences in Central Ostrobothnia, but more and more I was playing folk, wondering if I could do it as a profession, and the classical side faded. After that I began to study folk music properly at the Sibelius Academy."

She's still there, finishing her doctorate on storytelling and solo performance, and still very much in love with music.

"Folk gives you the freedom to express yourself in the most natural way. It's full of amazing melodies and the mystique of life. You can create a whole world in the old ballads. When I got to know the music of Karelia, in western Finland, it made me want to learn more. My music tries to put together the east and west of the country, so I compose my music in a different way."

Her full-throated singing, arresting and primal, and fiddle playing that can swing from the gentle to the wild "come with my music. I need to use my instrument so it comes out. When I compose, I wonder about the type of tune, of course. But in performance I need to let my voice out. With the playing, I've always loved to get all from my instrument. I know what I want and I usually take it. That comes through. It has to, or I'd be failing."

That's not to say there's no delicacy. It's there in abundance, sketched and shaded, and often beautiful, evocative of nature.

"When you live in Finland, you're always close to nature," Hirvonen points out. "So that comes in, even if you don't think about it." But at the centre of her writing is the story, and "it starts with that when I compose. Stories bring different feelings and that gives me different sounds. It has to touch me, it needs more than a good

melody, a song has to have emotion and presence, the presence of the performer."

She has presence, while different tunings on the violins offer touches of the unusual, as does the octave instrument (tuned an octave lower) on *Viinanpiru*, for a touch of the unworldly. For extra textures, there's a bowed lyre, a Mediterranean instrument that arrived in Finland a little over a century ago.

*Alku – The Beginning* was recorded over a few days last May, but the album's roots lie much deeper. "I started to make it six years ago," Hirvonen explains, "and even started recording a few times. Every time, something came up, and now I'm glad. I felt that this was the first time I was ready for it, that I found a core I'm ready to let people hear."

Although she took advantage of the studio, there's an immediacy to the sound. Vocals and instruments were recorded separately, "but when I was playing the violin, I was singing in my head. I did a small amount of overdubbing. A few songs have extra voices, only because it was possible, but I wanted it to be small. I wanted it to sound the way I am live."

There's a sense of adventure to it all, venturing into unknown territory. And that's certainly part of her music. As part of her PhD, Hirvonen has to give five concerts,

exploring aspects of her music (some can be seen on YouTube), and they take her into stranger territories. In one, for instance, she experiments with loops, something she doesn't use in normal performance.

"I might do more in the future," she says, "but I prefer me and my instrument."

For now, with her own CD out, she has plenty to keep herself busy. She has a thesis to write, hoping to have it complete by the end of the year, and her other main project, Okra Playground, release a new album very soon.

**"I**'m enjoying the release of this solo record, and when I have time I'll go into my rehearsal room. I know I've found my core on this album, but it's changing all the time. When I finished recording, I wondered, what next? What will my new songs sound like?"

But that might have to wait a little while. 2018 is going to be a full year for Päivi Hirvonen. In addition to her academic work, she hopes to find time to perform some solo concerts that build on her CD.

"I like to plan," she says, "and have everything arranged. So I hope to do a few things. I can't hold back my music."

She couldn't if she wanted to. Magic will out, always.

paivihirvonen.com

