



Kimmo Pohjonen

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Finland's extraordinary accordionist turns 50 this year and shows no sign of playing it safe. Fiona Talkington marvels at his inventive back catalogue

Tractors, ballet, wrestling, chamber music, King Crimson, theatre, pigs, the Kronos Quartet... and an accordion. How I would love to hear the world through Kimmo Pohjonen's ears.

Ideally your journey into his music doesn't begin with a CD, but perhaps

walking alongside Pohjonen on a windswept beach, heavy grey skies, pebbles crunching underfoot, the cry of birds above, the beast – the accordion – groaning as you walk, revealing its colours, threatening and beautiful. His music is all around as well as in the depths of his soul. He is uncompromising

in his artistic vision, gentle and generous with others. He's both a wild-child and a saint, both fearless and humble. Will you walk with us? The rewards are plenty.

Back to reality. Life for Pohjonen is packed with various projects and a busy diary. He plays rock stadiums, huge festivals, jazz clubs,

concert halls, farmyards and boxing rings. From Kautokeino to Kyoto, there is Kimmo.

He grew up in a small Finnish town playing folk accordion in local clubs, and then trained as a classical accordionist. Going along to a concert by students from the ground-breaking folk music department at Helsinki's Sibelius Academy, he realised he was somehow missing out. "I was playing from scores eight hours a day but it wasn't coming from my heart. My classical training was about rules; how you should play, and shouldn't. It took me years in the folk music department to realise that the main thing is to improvise. You do the feelings and try to forget those rules." Hanging around the music stores Pohjonen discovered that there were looping and sampling devices that would enable him to work more deeply with the accordion to play the music he wanted to make.

The year 1999 saw his first solo release *Kielo* ('a gutbusting furnace of shamanic sound,' said *The Wire*) and a fast-growing international profile. Soon major projects were developing as well as his long-standing and continuing musical relationship with percussionist and sampler Samuli Kosminen (of Icelandic band múm). The realisation that Pohjonen was one extraordinary musician brought Finland's Tapiola Sinfonietta into the picture. "I wanted to make a symphony that would raise eyebrows, including my own," Pohjonen told me at the time. He took away their music stands, and gave them the courage to improvise.

Phillip Page, Pohjonen's international manager who has worked with him for many years, describes him as an "uncompromising adventurer with something new and exciting always on the horizon." It was that pioneering spirit that gave the world KTU, the collaboration with the mighty force that is King Crimson's Trey Gunn and Pat Mastelotto. They found themselves in global demand, and if the Crimson faithful were simply curious, it soon became clear that these musicians had created something new that grew out of mutual respect and deep musical passion. It's hard to capture the roar of KTU live on disc, that feeling of heat and sweat from the stage, their virtuosic playing and their rocketing energy, but *8 Armed Monkey* (2005) and *Quiver* (2009) give a glimpse into this enticing world.

Pohjonen was brought into the farmyards of the UK in 2008 for his *Earth Machine Music*.

He performed with farmers, their machines and animals, having made an earlier trip to record samples from any creation or creature that would emit a sound, from pigs to potato sorters, tractors to threshers. Britain's Soundduk has worked closely with Pohjonen over the years: "As anyone who has come across Kimmo will know, he is a Pandora's box of sounds, melodies and rhythms all delivered by a muscular ball of energy," says Soundduk's Polly Eldridge.

Two years later those muscles were flexed again when Pohjonen revived the Finnish tradition of the accordion used as entertainment at wrestling matches. *Accordion Wrestling* delivered a tightly choreographed stage show with 12 professional wrestlers; "a unique and complete revelation for all who witnessed them," says Eldridge. "There are very few artists who can pull off such work with such aplomb."

Meanwhile one of the world's most famous string ensembles, the Kronos Quartet, had expressed in interest in his music, fuelled by their own passion for improvisation. Pohjonen often describes his new projects as diving somewhere very deep. This was the same, immersing himself in the sound of the quartet. But he also says behind the music of *Uniko* (2011) is life, maybe like the Finnish weather, "sometimes so beautiful and sometimes so ugly and nasty, and then nasty can be nice too."

Movement, dance and theatre have always been a major part of Pohjonen's performances and the stage of Finnish National Opera in 2011 revealed his *Bright Shadow* project with dancer and choreographer Minna Tervamäki [pictured left]. In another partnership he discovered the joy of playing with his daughter, the drummer and singer Saana Pohjonen.

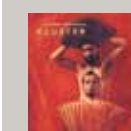
He has been showered with prizes and awards, recent ones including the Finnish Society for Aesthetics' prize for Aesthetic Act of the Year in 2012 for work with Romanian street musicians, and one of Finland's highest honours, the prestigious Order of the Lion of Finland's Pro Finlandia award.

There's much more to say, but let's stop awhile on this walk (to be resumed later), and just wish someone who is truly fabulous at 50 a very happy birthday. *Kiitos Kimmo!* ♦

♦ **PODCAST** Hear music from Kimmo Pohjonen on this issue's podcast

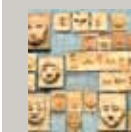
Pohjonen often describes his new projects as diving somewhere very deep

BEST ALBUMS



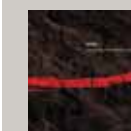
Kluster (Rockadillo, 2002)

Snarling and lyrically scintillating, Pohjonen teams up with sampling guru and percussionist Samuli Kosminen. Face your inner accordion fears.



8 Armed Monkey (Rockadillo, 2005)

The mighty power of KTU featuring Pohjonen and Kosminen with King Crimson giants Trey Gunn and Pat Mastelotto. The accordion becoming the 'ultimate in air guitar' (Rolling Stone).



Uniko (Ondine, 2011)

Kronos Quartet in a stunning collaboration with Pohjonen and Kosminen. This has taken audiences by storm wherever they've played. A Top of the World in #75.

BEST DVD



Kalmuk (2002)

One of Finland's finest orchestras, the Tapiola Sinfonietta, put their trust in Pohjonen and followed him into the world of improvisation. They changed each other's lives and showed Pohjonen as a force to be reckoned with.

BEST FILM & APP

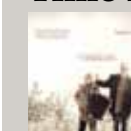


Soundbreaker (2012)

This award-winning film is a must for any would-be Pohjonen fan. Biography, interviews, archive footage. It's now been shown in over 30 countries, and has just been released as an iTunes App for tablet.

IF YOU LIKE KIMMO POHJONEN, THEN TRY...

Maria Kalaniemi & Timo Alakotila



Åkerö (Åkerö, 2012)

If Pohjonen's accordion music trampled down borders, then Maria Kalaniemi's took the instrument to new heights of elegance. Here she is with another of Finland's most respected musicians – the brilliant composer, arranger, pianist and harmonium player (with JPP), Timo Alakotila.