

Root salad f22

Tuulikki Bartosik

A visit to Scotland turned this Estonian accordeon player on to her own traditions, hears Chris Nickson

“Traditional music started for me in 1994,” says Estonian accordeon player Tuulikki Bartosik. Oddly, though, it wasn’t her native music. Instead, the interest began “in Scotland, where I met a traditional accordeonist. After that, I wanted to know where things came from. I was fascinated.”

That sense of the past informs her solo debut, *Storied Sounds*, which mixes music – her own compositions – with field recordings she made, mostly in the rural Rõuge area in the south of Estonia, where her grandparents lived. Accompanied by piano and mandolin, along with Welshman Dylan Fowler on guitar, it’s a lyrical, often introspective disc, very different to *Chatterbox*, her freewheeling, experimental collaboration with Britain’s Hannah James that came out to great acclaim last year.

It’s an album that’s been a while in the making, starting to take shape in 2012 when Bartosik worked with pianist Timo Alakotila.

“I decided back then it would be my music,” she explains, “and working with a small group of people. I was happy to let it go by until we were all ready to play together. And when that time came, we went with the flow, ready to let the music come.”

It’s the culmination of a hectic twelve months. Bartosik has recorded and toured with James, and she’s also been involved with *Upa-Upa Ubinakõnõ*, a CD of children’s songs from Southern Estonia. She’s a woman who seems to have really discovered her destiny. The accordeon was in her blood. Bartosik grew up in Tallinn, Estonia’s capital. Curiously, though, she only discovered the instrument when visiting her grandparents out in the country. That was the beginning of the path that took her first to a degree in classical music, then to become the first Estonian to study for a folk music degree at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, and the first to adapt Estonian traditional music for the free bass accordeon.

“I think it took my mother about 25 years to accept that I was really an accordeon player,” she laughs. But she’s more than that; Bartosik is a scholar, too. These days, while living in Sweden, she also teaches those studying a traditional music degree in Estonia.

“I’ve been doing that for ten years now,” she observes. “Mostly I seem to have the master students.”

The mix of music and field recordings that capture the ambience of place form much of the texture and idea behind *Storied Sounds*. The recordings give the disc a sense of place and ground it, offering a real context to the music, making it more concrete and less abstractly expressionistic.

“I’ve had so many lovely times in Southern Estonia,” Bartosik says. “It’s a very important place for me, its influence on me is huge. I wanted everyone to be able to hear the things I hear there. And I also wanted to explore the difference between city and country life. I was curious to see the similarities between them too, and whether the city could inspire as much as the country. On *Time?*, for instance, I went out in Stockholm and recorded everything around me. The pulse is so high that it surprised me, and you can hear it in the track. But is that just me or not? And what do I do with it? I’m planning on working with more of that kind of thing.”

She’s a woman with plenty of irons in the fire. With lucky, she and James will continue their *Chatterbox* tour early next year, which will bring Bartosik back to the UK.

“I had this thing for Britain for a long time,” she says. “It probably started with Scotland, then when I played with fiddler Emma Reid [they released the CD *Gubbdrag* in 2006]. I always want to come back, it feels like home. And the accordeon has a good reputation in the UK. In Sweden it’s seen as very bad, people don’t like it. In Estonia it’s

still associated with Soviet propaganda, but at the same time it's always been there and it's respected."

Although most of the music she's released lately has been her own, Bartosik is still fascinated by and committed to the tradition. That's evident through her teaching, which has expanded to include the formation of the Estonian Folk Orchestra, made up of her music students, a big band that uses old Estonian music as a foundation, treating it with respect but not trapping it in amber.

"I've been very influenced by Timo Alakotila, who's on *Storied Sounds*, and Mari Kalkun, who comes from the south of Estonia and writes pieces that are inspired by the folk music there."

She's also very aware of her own background in classical music, and of trying to combine that with folk music, but often finds that "it's like being two different people". With folk, however, she's discovered that "playing contemporary music I connect past and present," which offers plenty of possibilities in a country like Estonia.

She's a woman who's full of curiosity and eager to explore the world, both physically (she speaks five languages) and musically. As Bartosik writes in *Storied Sounds*: "We transfer out traditions to each other, take our world with us wherever we go, and we take something with us from every place we visit, every person we meet."

For Tuulikki Bartosik, folk music is a moveable feast.

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Photo: Matthias Bartosik