#### **LUCY ABRAMS-HUSSO**

# Contemporary clarinet repertoire from Finland and the United States: new ways of artistic expression and a study of sociocultural differences

#### Lectio praecursoria

The public examination (Artistic Programme) of Lucy Abrams-Husso was held on 18 October 2024 at the Camerata Hall of Helsinki Music Centre. The subject of the doctoral degree was "Contemporary Clarinet Repertoire from Finland and the United States". The title of the written thesis: The Musical Anthropologist: A study of performance practices in Finnish and American contemporary repertoire for clarinet. The Chair was Professor Mieko Kanno. The statement of the demonstration of artistic proficiency was presented by the Chair of the Artistic Board Professor Harri Mäki. The statement of the written thesis was presented by Professor emerita Helmi Järviluoma.

Musical performance during the lectio:

Heather Frasch: Quietly Breathing for bass clarinet and electronics (2012)

Lucy Abrams-Husso, bass clarinet

This doctoral project in the arts study programme, "Contemporary Clarinet Repertoire from Finland and the United States: New Ways of Artistic Expression and a Study of Sociocultural Differences", contained both artistic and sociocultural inquiries. As the title suggests, the aims were to develop my artistic abilities on the clarinet through the performance of contemporary music and to investigate my observations regarding the differences between American and Finnish contemporary music practices.

When I moved to Finland in 2013, I had never really played much contemporary music. I had attended universities in the United States that had new music ensembles and renowned composition departments. Yet, aside from performing at the occasional premiere, my training was almost exclusively orchestral training on "standard", older repertoire. This did not include contemporary music. Although it might seem surprising, my experience should not be considered unique.

Upon moving to Finland, one of the first things I was struck by was how much

contemporary music is performed by professional orchestras. It also appeared to me that my clarinet colleagues at the Sibelius Academy were more comfortable with contemporary music performance, or at least more knowledgeable about Finnish composers, than I had been about American composers when I was a university student in the United States.

As I have written many times, in many applications, it was the final term of my master's degree programme at the Sibelius Academy that shifted my experience with contemporary music – and it was more or less accidental. I was fortunate to be offered a solo concerto gig that led to my A-exam being programmed with all contemporary music. I also had good fortune in an audition that led to an opportunity to be clarinet soloist in none other than Magnus Lindberg's *Kraft* in May 2016 with the Sibelius Academy Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sakari Oramo.

These experiences in spring 2016 led to a number of realisations: contemporary music did not have to be practised as a niche specialty, separate from "classical" clarinet performance. Contemporary music allowed me to develop my musicianship and gain confidence in ways I had previously been unable to do through the playing of exclusively older repertoire. Audiences (at least in Finland) seemed very receptive – perhaps uniquely so – to contemporary music. These observations, in particular as they related to my own personal and artistic development, encouraged me to pursue doctoral research in contemporary music.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

In structuring my doctoral project, I knew that I wanted to keep performing contemporary music for my own personal artistic betterment. Second, I wanted to understand how and why contemporary music seemed to be practised differently in Finland and the United States. These two motivations helped to form the three research questions of this doctoral project:

- 1. What specific musical skills are required to perform contemporary music, and how can these skills be applied to all works, by all composers?
- 2. How does the experience of working with living composers change one's overall artistic practice and approach to all classical music?
- 3. What are the differences between the American and Finnish contemporary classical music cultures?

The pursuit of artistic and sociocultural aims required me to use methods from both artistic research and ethnography. This also reflects my own dual background in both clarinet and anthropology. As artistic research, that is "research in and through art practice" (Borgdorff 2010, 45–46), contemporary music in this case serves "as

both the subject and the medium" of the research project (Huber et al. 2021, 17). Knowledge, or data, was generated through the artistic practice of preparing and performing contemporary clarinet works by Finnish and American composers. It was only through preparing and performing these works that I could investigate the unique skills required to perform contemporary music and examine how working with living composers affects one's artistic practice.

I also relied on ethnography and autoethnography. Ethnography, an anthropologist's primary tool for embedding oneself in a group of people to closely study their social relations and cultural practices, is a qualitative research method that has been widely employed in a variety of fields. Initially, anthropologists used the term autoethnography to describe using an individual's personal experiences to understand broader patterns of cultural practice, rather than relying only on the researcher's participant observation (Heider 1975, 3). Soon after, the term was adopted to describe methods by which the researchers rely on their own first-person perspectives to understand the topic being studied (Van Maanen 2011). As a research method, autoethnography "uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences" (Adams et al. 2014, 1). Importantly, however, autoethnographers are not examining themselves in isolation; autoethnography is not narration, but rather a tool for cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang 2008, 54).

I used practice-based artistic research and autoethnography to gather data in and through the research outputs of this project: four artistic components and a written dissertation. The artistic components were three live concerts and a CD recording. Each performance was created around a theme central to contemporary music. The programmes for each performance were split equally between works by Finnish and American composers. My research has also been informed by my experiences as a professional freelance musician working with various new music ensembles and orchestras over the past ten years.

#### CHOOSING REPERTOIRE

For the purposes of this research project, contemporary repertoire was considered works composed post-1980. The 1980s were a pivotal decade in Finland for driving contemporary music to the forefront of cultural life. Similarly, the 1980s in the United States was a period when institutionally and geographically divided styles of contemporary music began to become more fluid. Also, as access to the composer was integral to my research questions and aims, this practically speaking means repertoire composed in roughly the last forty years.

In choosing repertoire, I had initially intended to identify and perform important or "core" contemporary American and Finnish works. I reasoned that this was both

best for my personal artistic development and what would be most appealing to audiences. However, I quickly realised that no such core repertoire exists in contemporary American and Finnish music. I could select works and justify them as "core" for any number of reasons – their presence on audition lists, competition requirements, or proximity to the institutions connected to my artistic work. However, if so-called standard classical repertoire, older repertoire, contains those works that have stood the test of time, then really there is no way of knowing today what will still be performed in one hundred years. More importantly, any attempt to select works based on perceived artistic significance ultimately runs counter to the aims of my research, since it would be an exclusionary rather than inclusionary exercise. Therefore, the repertoire chosen for my performances contained music of broadly different styles, and features those composers whose work is institutionally affiliated or accepted as well as work that exists outside those structures.

#### IMAGINED MODELS

My first doctoral concert, Imagined Models, was performed on November 13, 2018 in the Organo Hall of the Helsinki Music Centre. The performance was conceived of as a contemporary version of a traditional clarinet recital and focused on the artistic role of the clarinettist as soloist. I performed solo works for clarinet with piano by Uljas Pulkkis and Kirmo Lintinen, an unaccompanied clarinet solo by Markku Klami, and the chamber clarinet concerto Gnarly Buttons by John Adams. Following the performance I wrote two posts on my website, or blog, where I reflected on the performance preparations (Abrams-Husso 2018a; 2018b). This written content, which I continued to produce throughout the preparations and after the performance of each artistic component, turned out to be an invaluable resource. Not only did it force me to think deeply about previously ignored aspects of the artistic preparations, including rehearsals with composers and my pre-examinations with Kari Kriikku, but having to actually write my thoughts down became its own act of analysis. Writing forced a type of intellectual follow-through that would not have been possible by only listening back to the recordings of composer interviews, my practice sessions, rehearsals, or performances.

I had expected that recordings, integral for any type of field work, would be my primary source material. In particular, I had planned to formally interview every composer whose works I performed. I reasoned that these interviews would ultimately provide the answers to my questions about differences between Finnish and American contemporary music practice. However, already after the first concert I realised that my own musical preparations and the analysis of my interactions with different composers were more directly relevant to my research questions than the data gathered through the interviews I was conducting. Autoethnography, rather

than ethnography, was increasingly relied upon. Already in my first "Imagined Models" post, I wrote:

Within the module that was my first concert, including Libby Larsen's Dancing Solo and Steven Stucky's Meditation and Dance (which were performed in conjunction with "Imagined Models"), I believe Aria, Dancing Solo, Meditation and Dance, and Gnarly Buttons are comparable. All four works are traditionally notated, employing no extended contemporary techniques, all four works are tonal, and all four composers are internationally recognized and have their works performed regularly outside their country of origin. What I find different with Aria than the other three, from an artistic point of view, is that Aria requires more independent artistic decisions to be made for its generation and requires much more 'digging' to get to the heart of what the work is about, artistically. Dancing Solo, Meditation and Dance, and Gnarly Buttons, were, to me, quite stylistically clear and also very literal. Aria, more abstract. There are two obvious factors that could contribute to my perception of this - first, Larsen and Adams (and Stucky, but to a lesser degree) are known for their vernacular musical references which might be clear to me, since I am American, and second, I have played works by Adams and Stucky before, and might be more familiar with their oeuvre. However, I do not think this is entirely responsible for my observations... (Abrams-Husso 2018a.)

Analysis of and through my first doctoral concert demonstrated that my perspectives as a performer, including the observations I was making about and through my own practice, were already revealing what would become the core themes of this project: artistic decision-making and shared ownership.

# "FLOLLINEN"

The aim of the second doctoral concert, Elollinen, was to compose a concert for a non-traditional concert space. Contemporary compositions are uniquely versatile and adaptable to non-traditional concert spaces, which can often help to enhance the acoustic, social, and interactive qualities of a performance. Elollinen was conceptualised for the Talvipuutarha Winter Garden, which is one of my favourite places in Helsinki. The name *elollinen* refers to the living, organic quality of contemporary music and the natural environment of the botanic garden. The garden is free to use during public opening hours. There are three rooms, each of which has different but excellent acoustics, each offering opportunities to explore different spatial relationships between performing musicians and between the musician(s) and the audience. This programme contained eight works: four by American composers, four by Finnish composers. It included the first commissioned work of the project, and also contained

the project's first works for bass clarinet. The concert was planned for April 2020.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the concert had to be delayed and moved to the Organo Hall of the Helsinki Music Centre. In the original performance, different works were to be played in different parts of the garden. In transferring the programme to Organo, I incorporated some of that movement by playing different works in different locations in the hall. Some works were performed above the audience on the choir balconies, others on ground level with the audience. This enabled me to experiment with both the spatial relationship between performers and audiences and the different acoustic environments of the Organo Hall.

As mentioned, the second concert introduced two important artistic aspects within my project – the bass clarinet and premiering new works. The bass clarinet is a very important instrument in contemporary music performance (Molinos 2023), and it was a personal goal of mine to become more comfortable on the bass clarinet as a solo instrument through this doctoral project. The ability to premiere brand new works is an artistic endeavour unique to contemporary music performance. In my study plan, I hypothesised that premiering new works instils in the performer a deeper sense of shared ownership in the artistic production, because premiere performances entail greater artistic responsibility for the performer. While this is true, analysis of my first and second concerts revealed that experiencing shared ownership is not contingent on performing brand new repertoire. In fact, sometimes shared ownership can be better experienced through performing some existing repertoire.

As I wrote in the first post following the Elollinen concert, the first indication that shared ownership was an aspect of performance practice independent of commissioning and premiering works came from my interactions with Kriikku and Heikki Nikula during the preparation and pre-examination of this programme.¹ When I played the works for each of them, I noticed that their comments extended beyond the composer's intentions (as notated in the score or shared orally). Also, both Kriikku and Lotta Wennäkoski suggested that I consult Nikula about *Limn*, which reflects both the "instrumental expertise that Heikki has as a bass clarinettist" but also Nikula's "body of knowledge on the specific performance practice of the works from the perspective of shared ownership." (Abrams-Husso 2020a.)

The second research theme that developed from Elollinen was the concept of notation culture, which I define as "what the performer does with the score to turn notation into sound" (Abrams-Husso 2020b). In my second post about Elollinen, following the performance, I wrote:

As a performer, I have begun to feel that in most Finnish contemporary compositions there is more space for, or even expectation that, the performer 'translates'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Kriikku premiered Saariaho's *Oi kuu* and Tiensuu's *Plus II*, while Nikula premiered Raasakka's *Everyday Etudes No. 1: Gardening* and Wennäkoski's *Limn*.

the score far beyond what is notated; that the performance practice of Finnish contemporary music requires a greater creative contribution on the part of the performer. (Abrams-Husso 2020b.)

I make explicit in that post, and I reiterate here, that a broader decision-making capacity for the performer does equate to a more creative performance or artistically valuable music. However, analysing the ways in which the performer interacts with the score suggests that notation culture can reveal important differences in performance practice within contemporary music. It is important for performers to recognise differences in notation culture and consider how notation culture affects the types of musical decisions one makes in a performance.

# RECORDING WORKS FOR CLARINET AND ELECTRONICS

The topic of my third artistic component was works for clarinet and electronics, another theme unique to contemporary music and one that I was new to as a performer (the two works performed with electronics on Elollinen were my first performances ever of electroacoustic music). Rather than a live concert, this performance was a CD recording produced by the Siba Records label in April 2022. The album contained eight works for clarinet and electronics, including one commissioned work by Molly Joyce. There were works for both bass clarinet and regular clarinet, and a combination of six solo works and two chamber music works.

The recording environment introduced new and very important aspects of contemporary music and performance practice to my research project. In the early stages, I made the conscious decision to make the performances on the CD distinct from live performances. In other words, I wanted to take advantage of the technological capabilities of the studio to make artistic performances that would not have been possible in a live performance situation. I also chose to be the artistic director as well as the solo performer of the album, which meant nearly all of the decisions were made between myself and the sound engineer Tuukka Tervo. It could be argued that the presence of another person to manage the recording sessions and provide feedback might have improved the artistic product. From an artistic and research perspective, however, my dual roles performing and directing afforded the richest learning environment and the broadest possible experience of studio recording.

The process of making *Duel* revealed new levels of artistic decision-making required when working in a studio environment, specifically the creation of the acoustic sound space for each track and deciding on the relationships between acoustic and electronic sound. Recording, as an aural-only medium, changed how I approached the performance of each track. Conscious of removing the audience's visual references, I found that I had to focus on communicating the music in a different way.

The performance process of recording, of immediately listening to playbacks and making adjustments, was also a fundamentally different artistic process than preparing for a live performance. The ability to perform in smaller musical sections, and the knowledge that sound engineering technology could be used to patch sections together, eliminate errant sounds, and adjust pitch and volume, encouraged greater risk taking and eliminated altogether the fear of making a mistake. It was as if the artistic process of practising and performing merged into one.

I found that the patterns of performance practice regarding notation culture and shared ownership observed through the first two concerts held for the electroacoustic works performed on the CD. The electronics in the six solo works performed on the album functioned as a type of aural notation. Their acoustic properties and their musical relationship with the clarinet communicated, to me, the composer's expectation of the musician's relationship with the notated score. Alongside the notation, the electronics were capable of limiting or promoting the clarinettist's creative possibilities in performance.

I began to understand that shared ownership was shaped more by notation culture – by the potential for the performer to contribute more extensively beyond or building from the notation – than by a performance being a premiere or not. Collaborating with composers, receiving their feedback, and discussing performance practices with them also does not alone promote a performer's sense of shared ownership. I found that the nature of the relationship between composer and performer during performance preparation was often dictated by the composer's expectations of the performer (Hayden & Windsor 2007). As I had through the first two artistic components, I constantly questioned whether my perspectives where being shaped by my geographic proximity to Finnish composers and distance from American ones. However, the elimination of face-to-face meetings during COVID and the reliance on video calls and emails made it clear that the differences I experienced could not be attributed only to my physical location.

# FOLK CLARINET

The final artistic component of this doctoral project was the live concert Folk Clarinet, performed May 22, 2022 in the Organo Hall at the Helsinki Music Centre. The theme of this concert was folk music influences on contemporary music repertoire. The programme contained two works by Finnish composers, including a world premiere by Pia Siirala, and two works by American composers. Siirala's compositions are informed by her research of the personal song tradition of the indigenous Sakhalin, Kamchatka, and Chukotka peoples of North-East Siberia. The works by Kimmo Hakola and David Del Tredici are influenced by Jewish klezmer traditions, while Eric Mandat's solo clarinet work *Folk Songs* is influenced by timbral, harmonic, and

melodic aspects of different unnamed American folk music traditions.

Composers throughout time have drawn on Other ("non-European", "non-Western", etc.) influences in their music. The same continues to be true for contemporary music, infusing musical elements such as timbre, melody, harmony and rhythm, as well as aspects of presentation, audience communication, and other artistic fields. Acknowledgment and discussions surrounding cultural appropriation increasingly demand that those involved in the production of classical music and contemporary music become not only aware of appropriated material or influences, but also credit the source through their musical and non-musical communication with audiences.

In the context of this performance, my goal was not to analyse the authenticity or accuracy of folk material. Instead, I wanted to understand artistically how the folk music traditions referenced in these works affect musical preparation and performance based on folk music's functioning as a communally recreated, orally transmitted art form linked closely to song (Nettl 1976, 29). My findings were communicated to the audience through the programme notes for the concert and through my own musical presentation. This performance highlighted variation, improvisation, and individuality in the performance practice of this repertoire.

Except for my collaboration with Siirala, this was the only artistic component for which I did not communicate with the composers prior to performance. This was partly incidental (I attempted contact, but received no response), but I could say it was also somewhat intentional. The routine presence of composers throughout the first three artistic components (not for every work, but for most of them) was valuable for my research, but I must admit that I also used it as a source of artistic validation and reinforcement of self-confidence. By the time I reached this point in the project, particularly coming out of the lengthy artistic process of the CD, I wanted to stand on my own independent artistic voice. The presence and accessibility of a living composer in contemporary music performance practice is unique and highly valuable, but I came to see that it also created its own issues. Could my perspectives as a performer regarding performance practice be considered valid without explicit agreement from the composers themselves?

#### THE MUSICAL ANTHROPOLOGIST

The final output of this research project is the dissertation *The Musical Anthropologist: A study of performance practices in Finnish and American contemporary repertoire for clarinet* (2024). Its seven chapters address the artistic roles of a clarinettist today as soloist, composer, recording artist, and chamber and orchestral musician. The case studies presented throughout are selected from the four artistic components as well as from my musical working life in Finland. This thesis builds on the foundational work of clarinettist-researcher Mikko Raasakka, and more recently of bass clarinet-

tist Angel Molinos, both of whom have written extensively about the depth and significance of Finnish contemporary clarinet repertoire (Molinos 2023; Raasakka 2005; 2010).

Although not intended to be controversial, I think the title of the dissertation merits a brief discussion. What do I mean by musical anthropologist? Why not musical ethnographer? Or simply performer? Ethnography, particularly autoethnography, is becoming increasingly used as a method in a variety of fields, including artistic research. Its centring of personal experience and self-reflection are particularly well suited to practice-based artistic research, which requires artists to articulate previously ignored, or taken-for-granted, aspects of their own practice. Autoethnography also addresses, in some ways, the pitfalls of much social research, such as the fallacies of making universal conclusions about a group of people or a culture, as well as the prevalence of colonialist or ethnocentric biases (Adams et al. 2014, 9–10). Autoethnography and autoethnographic research can be and often is conducted without any cultural or sociocultural investigative aims. For that reason, I distinguish the methods employed here from other autoethnographic research. Although there are artistic aims in this project, there is the underlying goal of understanding how cultural and societal patterns shape the way we as performers practise contemporary music.

Three research themes – notation as cultural practice, performer agency and shared ownership, and performance practice as a reflection of cultural values – were developed as answers to my initial three research questions. Notation as cultural practice, or notation culture, shapes the ways in which clarinettists collaborate with the score, with other musicians, and with composers. It also affects the types of decisions that performers make in their artistic preparations and performances. As a result, notation culture affects the degree to which performers feel a sense of control or agency over the outcome of their performances. From my experience, the sense of shared ownership I felt in a performance was directly related to my agency as a performer: that is, my capacity to make artistic decisions that resulted in what felt like a uniquely individual performance. The third research theme connects how notation culture, agency, and shared ownership reflect cultural values and how, as performers, we reinforce or redefine our own values through what, why, and how we perform.

Though comprehensive, this study is not exhaustive. Within the scope of this research, the Finnish case studies I analysed tend to promote greater performer agency and therefore shared ownership than the American ones. While there are many possible reasons for this, I suggest that it could be linked to a more equal performance model in Finnish contemporary music practice whereby the contributions of composer and performer are equally valued, and the composer has expanded expectations of performer in performance. This does not, and cannot, apply to all Finnish or all contemporary American works. Nor is it any indication or assessment of the quality or value of the works themselves. What I hope is that these conclusions offer a new way for performers to understand their role in performances and

to become more aware of how that role changes within different performance practices. Contemporary music practices should be understood as highly variable, even within geographic and stylistic sub-genres.

In the concluding chapter of the dissertation, I outline two aspects of contemporary music study that continue to interest me as a performer and researcher. The first is the idea that contemporary music is a person-based rather than work-based artistic practice. Through my dissertation, I tried to make the case that *how* and *why* contemporary music is practised could be considered as equally artistically and academically significant as *what* is being practised. This breaks with work-concept centred approaches to pedagogy and musicology, and even arts administration. Studying, teaching, and practising contemporary music as a person-based art form places focus on the actions taken by and the interactions between people and groups of people. It seeks to understood contemporary music as a cultural practice sustained, developed, and furthered by people and groups of people rather than musical works or artistic styles.

The second aspect of further interest is that of the audience. The audience was in the front of my mind through the planning of every artistic component of this research project. However, their role in contemporary music practice remains critically important and largely mysterious. The listener has been designated as an agent in musical performance by scholars and composers, some of whom argue that for certain types of music, meaning even rests in the hands of the audience (Kramer 1996, 22; Abbate 2004; Cook 1990; Hatten 2018; Rutherford-Johnson 2017; Sessions 1950). Their complex role as patron, student, recipient, co-agent, and value creator in contemporary music production deserves further qualitative and quantitative study.

### Conclusion

As in most doctoral projects, the topic of the research is, or tries to be, limited and focused: Finnish and American contemporary repertoire for clarinet. The singular perspective is drawn from my own practice as a performing musician, interacting with other musicians and composers. The goals of the research are a bit broader – to advocate for contemporary music's inclusion in clarinet performance and pedagogy by demonstrating how the unique skills acquired through contemporary music performance enrich artistic development, and to understand the differences in Finnish and American contemporary music performance practices and why those differences exist. This study also contributes to a body of scholarship that highlights the unique perspectives of performers in the study of music. It is my hope that this study encourages performers, whether they formally consider themselves to be researchers or not, to become more aware of how and why they practise and perform in the ways that they do. It is only through this deep understanding that we, as performers, will be able to articulate to others the value of the art we make.

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