

Ville Hiilivirta has reason to smile:

“There’s plenty of room for sound in the Music Centre”

Interview: Anu Karlson

Photos: Kimmo Tähtinen

Nowadays, there’s a lot of competition for a job in the number one orchestra in the country. But for those who get a job in e.g. The Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, competition is about encouraging each other. “When someone nails a tough passage colleagues will scuffle their feet or show the thumbs-up.”

Ville Hiilivirta has been virtually unbeatable on competition arenas already in his teens. He reached the 1st prize at the National Brass Competition in Lahti in the youth category in 2000, at the age of only 15. The same was his result six years later when he participated in a Europe-wide competition in Marl, Germany, and further in 2010 at the International Horn Competition in Lieksa, Finland. But by then he was already principal Horn at the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. And before that he was the 2nd/3rd horn for three years at the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra.

AK: I first heard you perform at the Ateneum Art Museum during Children’s Festival when you played *Grandfather Benno’s Night Music* for solo horn by Usko Meriläinen. You did a great job of it, too. I’m sure that many others made a note of your name at that event. I think you were about ten years old. Do you remember this performance?

VH: I suppose I must’ve been already thirteen. I can’t remember that specific performance but I do remember another concert from that time when I performed that piece. It was a concert featuring compositions by Usko Meriläinen at the Tampere Conservatory. A piano teacher, **Kristiina Junttu**, from my music institute, the West Helsinki Music Institute organized the concert because she was from Tampere.

I took the train there alone and for some reason hadn’t found out where the Conservatory is situated exactly. This was the time before smart phones and Google Maps. So I hailed a taxi from the railway station and said to the driver that I needed to get to the Conservatory and that I was in a bit of a hurry. There was a dress rehearsal before the concert. The cabbie drove to the first traffic lights without saying a word but then turned to me and said: “Listen lad, you’re in Häme now. You’re not in a hurry anymore!” His remark soothed a young musicians nerves.

It was in Häme where you eventually won your first job. Although this would be in a while. You are the child of two string players: your father plays the double bass at the Finnish National Opera and your mother played the cello in several orchestras before changing to administrative duties. How did you come up with the horn as an instrument? It is, after all, one of the most difficult instruments.

I actually took up the horn because it felt the easiest. But to start from the beginning, I first attended music kindergarten and started taking piano lessons at the West Helsinki Music Institute at the age of five. Soon, however, I lost interest in the piano.

I don't know whose idea it was originally that I would begin to play a wind instrument. I had had spent a lot of time at the back stage of the Finlandia Hall, because my mother was the manager of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, and even before that at the Savonlinna Opera Festival, and seen the everyday life of an orchestral musician. Maybe I thought that the wind players had the most fun!

It was my mother's idea to take me to an event called Come and Blow! at the Vantaa brass festival in the spring of 1993. I tried out every brass instrument and decided that the horn was the best because it was easiest for me to get a tone out of it. They hired a teacher for me at the institute and got two other boys to take up the horn as well and so we three started to study the horn under **Timo Ronkainen**.

Like many young top musicians of the day you have graduated from the Sibelius Academy and hold the degree of Master of Music, although it isn't actually "meaningful" for an orchestral musician. You studied in Germany, as well, and hold the diploma from Hanover School of Music and Drama. What was Hanover like as a place to study in?

From a studying point of view it was a really good place. Hanover isn't, after all, the most vibrant of Germany's metropolises but that was actually a good thing as I could really concentrate on playing. They do have a nice radio orchestra and an opera house so there was a good amount of concerts to attend. I originally went there as an exchange student. I spent half a year studying under **Markus Maskuniitty** and decided to stay another year. I applied directly as a post-graduate student because I already held the degree of Bachelor of Music from the Sibelius Academy. So I was accepted directly to the Master's degree program and could skip all the theory and history lessons in German language. At the end of the year I passed the diploma exam.

By that time I had actually already won my first audition. Between my two years in Germany in the spring of 2007 there was an audition for 2nd/3rd horn at the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra, which I won. The next week I had the audition to study in Hanover. I asked the Orchestra if I could start after one year of studying in Hanover. They fortunately agreed, as it is in the orchestras interest as well when the musicians educate themselves.

Motivation to study through competitions

You have taken part in many competitions with excellent results. What do you think you've gained by competing in Finland and abroad?

The most I have gained from competitions is to have had a fixed date to rehearse a certain program. A competition itself is a great long term motivator for practicing. Not the winning or monetary prizes or soloist engagements as such. Of course they are a nice bonus. But the most lasting benefit is that a competition makes you spend endless lonely hours in a room with the horn.

Another benefit from competing abroad is meeting other nice horn players. I've made great friends that way.

The way to an orchestra leads through an audition. There's no merit in previous competition prizes or degrees. Do you think that an audition is the best way to find the most suitable candidate for each position in the orchestra? Should the system be developed or changed in some way?

The words "most suitable" are very important, at least in our horn group and winds in general. We have tried to bear in mind that we're looking for the most suitable musician for the orchestra. Not necessarily the best soloist. That's why the decision is made based on the orchestral excerpts. I know that in the United States they have taken this a bit too far. They hardly listen to a concerto at all. They practically only listen to excerpts and very short passages too because there can be up to a hundred candidates for each position.

It's hard to say how the system could be improved. We don't have the resources to invite every candidate to play with the orchestra. On the other hand there are relatively few musicians in Finland so we already know most Finnish candidates. They might have had gigs with us.

But as brutal as it is, it's the playing that decides. It's a hard job, everyone must start from the beginning, no matter how well they've played before. The candidate's character and compatibility to the orchestra will surface during the trial period.

What are your own experiences from auditions? You've won quite a few.

I've won two auditions for a permanent position: first in Tampere and then my current job in Helsinki. I've been in the final round for a couple of others and then there have been some auditions for short-term positions. I've had all kinds of experiences.

In Germany I attended a lot of auditions. There were lots of vacancies and I partly wanted to get used to auditioning. I already had attended, and lost, a couple of auditions before leaving for Germany.

I tried to get used to playing behind the screen and to the fact that there are twenty people waiting for their turn after the lottery for the playing order. And how to perform on the best level when it's your turn and how anything can happen. That's what I learned in Germany, with some success, apparently.

One way to develop the audition process would be to divide the candidates to smaller groups and let them know the approximate time when they will audition. And maybe even hand out a list of the order of repertoire in advance. This would eliminate the uncertainty factor of having to prepare to audition at 10 a.m. but having to play at 3 p.m. Because many good players lose the audition because they can't keep up the charge for so long and lose the edge at some point. If we were to try and make the logistics of the audition such as to know beforehand what will be required it would make it more like a concert.

The audience listens to music, not to mistakes

How have you acquired so strong nerves that it feels like everything is perfect when you play?

Everybody makes mistakes sometimes. And they should! I've worked on the mental aspect of playing. Especially **Erja Joukamo-Ampuja** did workshops for mental practicing at the Sibelius Academy that have helped me a lot. You just have to try to prepare as best as you can and on the other hand bear in mind that it's not the end of the world if you clam one note. The audience is there to hear music. Small mistakes don't matter if the whole is good and musical.

People have a tendency to enlarge their mistakes. Isn't it a tough habit to lose?

I'm as annoyed by mistakes as everybody else but it's no use to show it while performing. On the other hand I've noticed while listening to playbacks of my playing that although I feel that I've messed up a certain passage you can hardly notice it on the tape. A performance enhances everything. Being aware of this has helped me.

Regarding auditions, listening to auditions in Tampere from the other side of the screen helped me to realize that even at an audition the jury isn't there to hear mistakes. The jury rather wants to hear beautiful and touching music.

I once had an audition in Germany where we played the first concerto by Richard Strauss in the first round. The opening fanfare went pretty well. Then there's an orchestral interlude before the main theme begins with an upward octave legato. I really messed up the upper note of the legato and almost lost my bearings but then I thought it's no use to brood over it. I'll just have to play on. I finished the phrase and the same legato repeats in the next phrase. And no matter how hard I concentrated the same thing happened. I

thought to myself there's nothing I can do now but to play on for as long as they let me. I tried to play as convincingly and brilliantly as I could and did my extra best.

At the end of the first round they announced to us 20 or so candidates that judging by the first round no one will get a permanent position in this audition. However, from the second round on the audition would continue as a substitute audition. And when they told the names of the candidates proceeding to the second round I was among them a few major mistakes notwithstanding. I suppose those mistakes cost me the permanent position.

There are many kinds of horns: in addition to the normal double horn you play the vienna horn and in older music even the natural horn. Then again you also have to play the Wagner tuba.

More to the point we get to play! The notion that a Wagner tuba would cause the conductor gray hairs is old-fashioned. Nowadays our attitude towards the tuba is of great ambition. Our orchestra recently bought a brand new set of tubas and we're itching to play them. It is possible to make fine art with the Wagner tuba, they're not anymore the necessary evil that must be dusted off for the last three Bruckner symphonies and hope that nothing goes wrong...

The main problem with the Wagner tuba is intonation: the hand isn't held inside the instrument as horn players are used to because the hand can be used to fine tune intonation. That used to be the issue... but also we've got better quality instruments recently. Our horn group did specifically a testing trip to Mainz, Germany where we found good instruments that we liked.

You are a young orchestral musician. You have played professionally for five years and you are only 27 years old. Do you think that this is what you will be doing until retirement?

At least at the moment I'm enjoying orchestral work. You can't tell what the retirement age will be in the future but at the moment it looks like I could hold the same position for nearly forty years. In deed you never know what will happen, the whole orchestra might be shut down for all we know. It's useless to try to predict the future even ten years from now. In the Netherlands they are shutting down several orchestras, which concerns us musicians greatly. Although philharmonic orchestras aren't usually the first ones to go, it's mostly radio orchestras that have to fight for their raison d'être. Personally I don't think two full sized symphony orchestras in the capital region are too much. We both draw near sold out audiences every week.

In deed, the red "sold out" is featured nowadays in nearly every one of your announcements.

As a modest Finn you'd think that oh, it's just the new hall and of course a part of is the exciting new Music Centre. But I hope that as many people as possible who haven't been to a concert before will come again.

The solidary horn group

You have two equal principal horns in the horn group of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, Mika Pajanen and you. How do you divide your work?

It's basically 50-50. We try to even out the challenging and fun stuff so that both get to play an equal amount of solos. We've managed to do this in harmony. In general there aren't any conflicts in our group, we get along excellently.

Do you also divide demanding concerts by having one play the first and the other the second half?

We do, quite often in fact. This is also due to the fact that we both have a 100% contract and must gather an equal amount of work shifts as the other horn players in our group. Everything has worked out quite naturally. We haven't had to force it in any way. Usually,

we divide taxing symphonies (e.g. all Mahler symphonies) by playing as each other's bumper. A bumper helps in the long tones and loud passages so that the principal can play the softer solos with sufficient sensitivity.

I think it's fair also for the tutti horns. Being a bumper is, after all, quite unrewarding, playing only the loud bits when the principal gets to do the nice solos and gets all the praise for them. This way both of us get to do both.

How does a horn player practice? A horn is, after all, an instrument which one can't play for eight hours a day even in top condition. Still you have to play constantly very difficult programs in the orchestra.

I'd say that when I was a student I practiced as much as possible. Now I practice as little as possible. You learn to notice when you've practiced too much and the muscles give in and when it's a matter of working on technique.

Even as a student I tried to practice as smart as possible and to find the most ergonomic and embouchure saving way to get to a good result. But especially nowadays I understand that to save the freshness and sensitivity it's wise not to play too much before the concert.

For example, when I won the audition for this job I didn't practice very much at all during the last few days. Instead, I played a lot during the two weeks before and then played less and less to retain the sensitivity required from a solo horn player until the audition. And it worked.

Horn on the lips from morning until evening

What kind of concerts are the most taxing for hornists? Did you recently have an evening when you sighed from relief afterwards?

Early in this year there was a concert where I was on a gig at the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra. Their both principal horns were playing as soloists, the program was Schumann's Concert piece for four horns. In addition we performed the Finnish premiere of *Al Largo* by Magnus Lindberg and finished the concert off with Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony. You'd think that the Mendelssohn isn't that taxing because it's light classical music. But because the key of the piece is A Major it's actually quite high in register and demands extra sensitivity. The Lindberg piece was also a tough nut to crack and on top of that the concert was repeated. During that week I was also working in my own orchestra and had some chamber music rehearsals so I practically had the horn on my lips from the morning until evening. After the first concert I remember thinking that if I can make it through this I can manage anything.

Purely from a sitting point of view the toughest experience recently was playing bumper for **Ismo Ponkala** in Tampere for a performance of Mahler's third symphony. The piece lasts for an hour and a half and you're just sitting there and concentrating constantly. Because I was the bumper I didn't even play the tricky solos but I could still feel it in my behind after the concert.

What kind of feed back would you like to get as an orchestral musician? Do you somehow feel the audience's reactions?

You do feel the reactions especially from the applause. The hairs in my neck stood up in the opening concert of the Music Centre when the audience was there for the first time and surrounded the entire orchestra. There was applause coming from every angle and the acoustics amplified it even further. It was hard to stop smiling! We Finns are, after all, a bit lazy to show our emotions. Even if we really like something it's rare to hear someone shout bravo. But it does warm one's heart when they do.

You solo wind players are raised separately quite often to take a bow.

It's always a wonderful feeling when it happens but hearing the colleagues' applause around you to show how well the concert went especially makes me feel good. It raises team spirit. Also when a player has a tricky passage and it might not even be that audible, for example a difficult entrance of the second horn, and they nail it we do scuffle our feet or show the thumbs-up in concert. We encourage each other!

We still have to talk a bit about the Music Centre. You played for a year and a half at the Finlandia Hall and before that for two and a half years at the Tampere Hall where they've made some improvements after your departure. How did you feel about the change?

When I played the Mahler in Tampere I noticed first of all how much the orchestra had improved during **Hannu Lintu's** term. I played for him for half a year before following **John Storgårds** to Helsinki. But it was pretty bad to play there. Kind of like you were an actor and there was a veil before the stage.

Over here you can hear everything and because of the light colour of the stage visibility is also exceptionally good. Beforehand I was afraid how sensitive the hall would be. But eventually, especially with the audience, you don't have to worry about it too much. The hall does tolerate a lot of sound, we get to play loud, too.

In August, when the FRSO bid their farewell to the Finlandia Hall by performing Mahler's second symphony I was one of the backstage horns. You do feel the enormity of the difference: no matter how loud we blasted you could hardly hear a thing. The whole big orchestra wouldn't carry through. When there's a lot of players and sound the hall gets stuck. It's always been possible to play soft there, though.

You have a nice back stage area here in the Music Centre.

Well the back stage area is superb. As you noticed we've furnished our locker rooms with enthusiasm. Especially Mika and **Sam Parkkonen** have bought the Hockey games and such. We have our own coffee makers in addition to the fridge and the microwave oven that are standard in our rooms. I visit the cafeteria quite rarely, which is a shame because now I spend most my time with my own group. At the Finlandia Hall café there was the famous round table where all sorts of philosophical discussions took place. That's still missing from this hall. On the other hand it's also possible to meet the musicians of the FRSO in the café, which is kind of refreshing.

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