

Matthew Whittall

being the pine tree

for accordeon

2007

Music Finland





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Program note

The title is paraphrased from a quote by the poet Basho, "When you depict a pine tree, you must become the pine tree," referring to the Zen concept of non-duality between object and observer, or the dissolution of the self into the wider continuum of creation. Basho's point was that a painting of a tree must not be a faithful graphic representation of it, but rather a timeless distillation of the being of that tree in its surroundings, independent of any pre-existing concept of "tree". Simply put, to paint a thing must be to know it, and to know is to be. Thus, an artistic presentation of a thing becomes a devotional act, like meditation. Applying this to an instrument was a logical extension of the idea for me as a musician: to try to portray the instrument's "truth" through the process of composition, to know it on an essential level, to in fact become it. The accordion was an especially attractive vehicle, with its implicit physical connection to breathing, the most basic ritual act in meditation, as well as its sonic resemblance to the Japanese *sho*, a mouth organ played in *gagaku* music whose characteristic sound became the starting point for the piece. The form and duration of the piece are largely dictated by the instrument itself, specifically the space of time it takes to extend or close the bellows completely, in the manner of deep, calm breaths.

As one might expect from the above, the music is extremely, predominantly slow; it is marked by long pauses and contains few notated rhythms, though this came about for a more explicit reason. The extraordinary musicianship of Veli Kujala, the commissioner and dedicatee of being the pine tree, had already inspired other composers to the heights of transcendental virtuosity. I had thought to write him something along similar lines, but what eventually sparked my imagination was the intensity and commitment of his live performances, which seemed to have a parallel in meditation. I began to imagine what it would be like to turn that intensity inward, slowing down his virtuosity infinitely, reaching toward a pure state of awareness and focus, and bring the performing experience closer to the searing clarity of what, for lack of a better term, one could call enlightenment.

being the pine tree was commissioned with the generous support of the Madetoja Foundation.

Performance notes

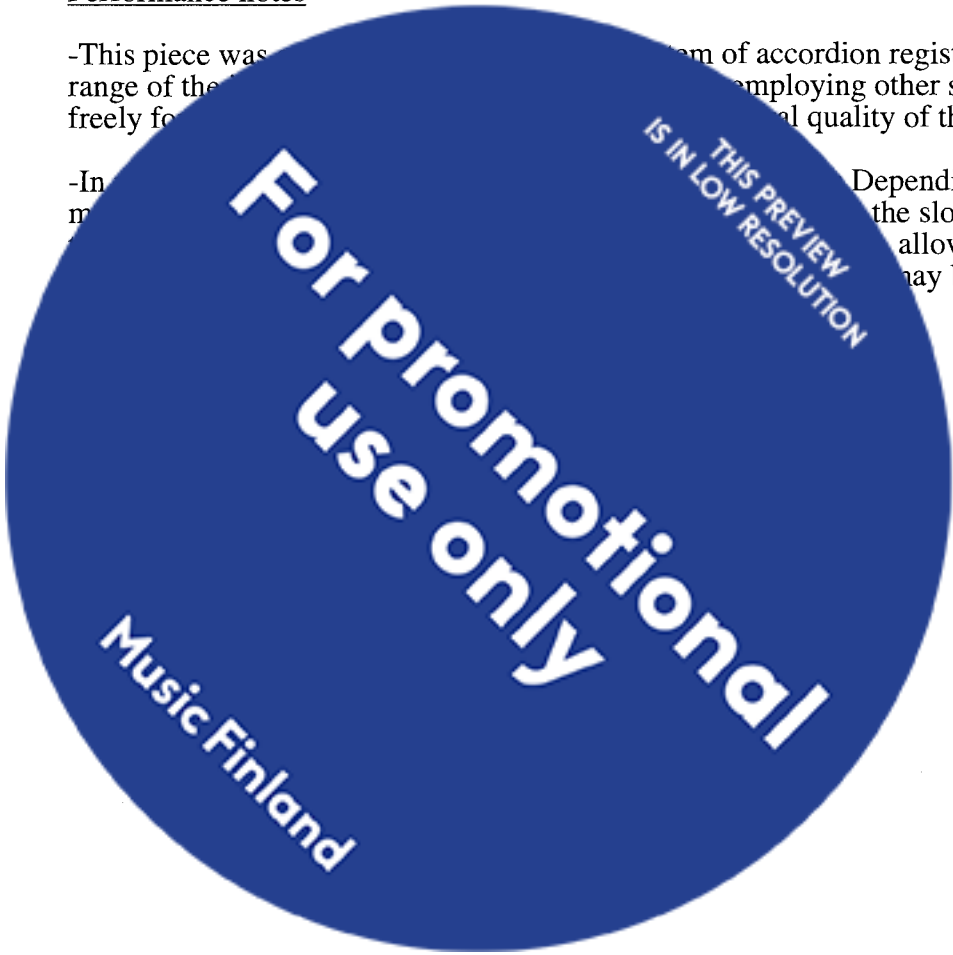
-This piece was composed for the system of accordion registration in use in Finland only, which may exceed the range of the instrument when employing other systems. Registration substitutions may be made freely for instruments where the tonal quality of the indicated register is more or less preserved.

-In the first movement, depending on weather and humidity conditions, the instrument may exhibit the slow "top down" effect of partial formation. In such cases, the performer may allow that register to sound quietly before sounding it fully. This may become necessary in warmer, more humid conditions.

*I follow my breath as it goes in,
goes out. I want to know what I am –
a bellows of flesh, but what else?*

*That's what the stillness sings about,
day and night in the pine gloom.*

– Chase Twichell
"Ignorant Poem"



dedicated to Veli Kujala
being the pine tree
for accordion

Matthew Whittall
(2007)

Begin by slowly extending bellows slightly more than halfway, then remain still for several seconds before starting to play.

Timeless; Breathing deeply

close bellows fully

extend fully

Do not attempt to make all pitches sound simultaneously. Let them fade in and out naturally, unless otherwise indicated as follows: ————

♩ = 72-76 (applies to all notated rhythms)

extend fully

close fully

close

extend

close fully

L.H. 8va

8va

8va

ff

mp

pp

poco f

ff

pp

sub. mf

p

mp

f

mf

pp

ff

*Although the sound of this chord should not change.

8va

glassy

mp *pp* *poco* *mp* *mf* *ppp* *poco*

extend close

8va

p *mf* *ppp* (very long) *ff*

close fully extend fully

8va

p *poco* (short) *p* *pp* *ppp* *gentle mp*

Air valve: O Air valve: X

close fully extend fully

Play all R.H. -

(short) longer this time (short)

pp *mf* Air valve: X

close fully extend fully

(short breath) (longer)

poco f *p* *mp*

close fully extend fully

*Depress key, but do not

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8^{va}

(extending)

close fully

8

(like a glassy harmonic)

pp

extend fully (duration as long as possible)

close partially (silent)

breathe in...

...and out

p

mf

pp

ff

ff

mp < f

mp < f

mp < f

extend

close fully

extend

"reverse attack": smearing pitches, more or less chromatic

bellows shake

(short)

(longer)

(long)

ff

ff

f

(like deep, shuddering breaths)

extend

close

extend fully

let C_b fade

let C_b fade

close

*Starting dynamic is *pp*, fading at the end of the previous system (bass register).

**Allow pitches to be chromatic throughout.

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Very slowly, distant

8va

sempre pp

extend fully

close fully

8va

pp

extend fully

(loco)

f

fff

ppp

(extremely long)

Change bellows as needed, but very smoothly!

(loco)

mp gentle

p

pp

extend

extend fully

let lower D \flat fade

(longer)

pp

ppp (just barely audible)

(extremely long)

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*Depress but do not let the top down as crescendo builds.

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