

Pure Music

by Colin Likas / Butler – April 8, 2014

The year was 1994. The location was Yale University. [Martin Kuuskmann](#) had a question for his friend [Chris Theofanidis](#). "I precisely remember asking him, 'What is that thing you put things in to make them cold?'" Kuuskmann recalled. You mean a refrigerator?

Yes, a refrigerator! I couldn't think of the word.

"And that's when (Chris) realized, this dude is not American," Kuuskmann, an Estonian, concluded.

About two years later, Theofanidis would begin working on a piece of music for Kuuskmann -- a bassoon concerto.

Kuuskmann, 42, will play a since-revised version of the piece April 11 at [Butler University's Schrott Center](#), part of the [Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra's](#) contribution to the 2014 [Butler ArtsFest](#).

"Whether people know what the bassoon sounds like or they don't, they've never heard anything like this before," Kuuskmann said. "I really get a huge kick playing this piece because of what it demands, musically and technically."

Kuuskmann has played at New York's Carnegie Hall, alongside esteemed Estonian composer Neeme Jarvi, and has received a Grammy nomination for his work. Yet all of the opportunities he has received and success he has had can be boiled down to two life-changing events that occurred before his eighteenth birthday.



Photo: Peter Adamik. Kuuskmann and Estonian-American conductor Kristjan Järvi before a performance of the Erkki-Sven Bassoon Concerto for amplified bassoon.

Destiny of a Musical Career

That Kuuskmann became a musician was no accident. While his father was an engineer -- a career Kuuskmann entertained briefly -- other members of his lineage were connected to music. His mother was and still is a piano teacher for children in Estonia. His great-grandfather played the clarinet.

At 6, Kuuskmann began playing piano. But he would take on the clarinet as his primary instrument at age 12. In spring 1986, Kuuskmann, then 15, received entry into Tallinn Music High School to play clarinet. A tuba player at the school suggested he try a different instrument. "I was tall enough," Kuuskmann said, "and Estonia needed bassoonists."

Three months later, Kuuskmann began focusing completely on the bassoon. He was attracted to the instrument because of the challenge associated with playing it, as well as its tone -- which he called both "soothing" and "harsh."

But a tragic accident would set in motion events that led to Kuuskmann's professional career.

When Kuuskmann was 15, his closest friend died in a cross-country skiing accident. His friend was a violinist who had entered Tallinn Music High School the year before Kuuskmann auditioned to get in. The emotional toll his friend's death took on Kuuskmann prompted him to repeat the ninth grade.

"The music theory and pitch, they were at a so much higher level than I was used to," Kuuskmann said.

During his final year at Tallinn, Kuuskmann was able to apply for a one-month foreign exchange program that sent him to the United States. At the end of his stay with his host family, Kuuskmann showed interest in applying to study music at San Jose State University.

Photo: Peter Adamik. Kuuskmann playing for the 2013 Usedom Music Festival in Germany. The annual festival celebrates Baltic nations and their cultures.

Kuuskmann popped into the college's music school "a day or two" before he was set to return to Estonia. While there, he connected with Vernon Read, a now-deceased bassoon professor, and the school's dean. Kuuskmann auditioned and got a full scholarship.

In August 1990, Kuuskmann was back in California to begin his collegiate studies.

While he does not believe the accident directly affected his playing the bassoon, the emotional aspect, in general, is something he believes has made him a better musician.

"If I was just some dried up toast of a person," he said, "I don't think my playing would be



anywhere near as expressive as I feel it is."

In 1992, Kuuskmann received his first opportunity at a professional recital, in an Estonian town hall. That same year, he landed at Yale University, where he eventually met Chris Theofanidis.

Kuuskmann asked Theofanidis in 1996 if he could produce a bassoon concerto. The work was completed the following year.

Before the piece was finished, Kuuskmann had left Yale for the Manhattan School of Music. While there from 1995 through 2003, he made connections with bassoonist [Frank Morelli](#), the first bassoonist awarded a doctorate by the Juilliard School, and people on Broadway. He also played with the [New Jersey Symphony Orchestra](#) and several of New York City's top freelance orchestras.

Ultimately, he decided to concentrate on solo work. He moved from New York City to Washington State with his wife and their child in 2003.

"It's very different from Manhattan, where I was freelancing all the time and trying to fit in my solo life, and one had to give," he said. "Solo won over."

One of his finest and most frequent solo performances is Theofanidis's concerto.



Photo: Peter Adamik. Kuuskmann performs around the world. This photo was taken before the release of his Bach Concertos CD, when he played at the opening week festivities for Norway's Stavanger Concert Hall.

Breathe In, Breathe Out

Kuuskmann debuted the Theofanidis concerto with [Absolute Ensemble](#), an electro-acoustic chamber band, shortly after the piece was completed. It was two parts at the time and has since been expanded to three.

The concerto has brought Kuuskmann acclaim -- something few other bassoonists can likely say.

"All bassoon concertos are unusual, so let's just define that right off," said Elaine Eckhart, ICO executive director. "There are lots of piano concertos and lots of violin concertos. I'm not sure what instrument comes next after piano and violin, but it's definitely not bassoon."

Kuuskmann employs a technique known as circular breathing in the piece. Used by some woodwind players, this is achieved by breathing in through the nose while also blowing air stored in the musician's cheeks into the instrument. This allows the musician to continue playing the instrument without having to stop for breath.

"It's very complicated. I was a woodwind player and I could never master it," said Amylou Porter, ICO operations manager.

The technique allows this piece to represent the physics aspect of the ICO's contribution to ArtsFest, the theme of which is "Fables, Fairy Tales & Physics."

Porter and Eckhart, along with Kirk Trevor, the ICO's principal conductor, heard Kuuskmann play the piece at Indiana State University's Contemporary Music Festival in 2012.

"The reaction by everyone -- the people in the audience, the staff members, the orchestra members -- was, this is a fun, exciting piece, he is a dynamic artist, we need to bring him to Indianapolis, and we need to bring this very piece," Eckhart said.

Kuuskmann said the piece is "pure music," containing fast, slow, high and low notes. He added that it allows people to hear the bassoon at a higher pitch and in a more dynamic way than they typically have.

Kuuskmann recalled a particular moment of pride for him as a musician when he played the concerto at the Parnu Music Festival in Estonia last summer. Russian conductor [Gennady Rozhdestvensky](#), who is 40 years Kuuskmann's senior, approached him after the performance.

"He came to me after and said, 'This was something else. This was not a bassoon. This was a different instrument,'" Kuuskmann said. "It doesn't bloat my ego, but it does add fuel to the fire."

Kuuskmann will bring that fire to the state of Indiana for five days this month. In addition to playing with the ICO at Butler's Schrott Center, he will also teach master classes at Butler, Indiana University and DePauw University.

His concerto is one of four pieces being featured in the ICO's ArtsFest contribution.

Kuuskmann's involvement in particular is exciting to Eckhart for multiple reasons.

"He's really in the height of his career, so it's a very optimistic picture for a bright future," she said. "I think it debunks a classical music myth that everybody involved is gray-haired and there's no energy or excitement."

Kuuskmann said he does not treat any of his performances as just another show, adding that he is looking forward to visiting Indiana again.

"To be able to do it for the second time with [Kirk Trevor](#) and the orchestra is even more special because we know the material, and there's more space of freedom, and a little more space for them to hear what's going on," he said. "It's going to be a nice five days."