

# KAUSTINEN FESTIVAL

Kaustinen, now in its 35th year, is the biggest folk festival in Scandinavia. Jan Fairley samples the midnight fun



It's midnight in the heart of Ostrobothnia in the Finnish countryside and, being the land of the midnight sun, it's daylight. In a natural arena covered by a tent like an enormous stripy elfin hat, I'm moving with hundreds of people around the wooden dance floor doing a *katrilli* (quadrille – like an eightsome reel). We're following the detailed calls of Finnish dance guru Antti Savilampi. On stage, playing non-stop dazzling fiddles, are the local band who just happen to be Scandinavia's leading fiddle group.

Known as JPP (pronounced 'Ee-pay-pay'), they include fiddlers Mauno Järvelä and his nephew Arto and other members of the local Järvelä clan from a hamlet down the road. Descendants of a line of folk musicians and farmers going back to the 1800s, JPP began in the 1980s, attracting immediate attention with their original compositions, sensational harmonies and quirky arrangements of traditional Swedish-inflected fiddle tunes. There are five or more fiddlers along with Timo Alakotila, maestro of the Finnish harmonium, and Janne Virkkala on acoustic bass. This year JPP joined Kimmo Pohjonen's Cluster for the second part of the accordionist's late-night appearance at the Festival Klub. Fresh from David Bowie's Meltdown in London, Kimmo's compelling performance – an intense extemporised conversation between body, voice and accordion – was as mind-boggling as ever.

Kaustinen, about halfway up Finland on the lefthand side, lies at the heart of a thriving musical culture, which the festival has helped sustain. Kaustinen boasts a Folk Arts Centre, an auditorium-cum-exhibition centre and a music school – each playing an integral part in the festival. In this way Kaustinen not only places itself firmly on the map of the world's most musical places, it is also central to the Finnish music system. It prepares students for the pioneering courses at Sibelius Academy, where students can major in traditional and world musics as well as classical and contemporary.

The Kaustinen festival began in 1968 as folk revivals were taking off in many parts of the world. Remarkably, it flourishes in a village with little more than a main street, whose wooden houses seem to sprout out of the countryside itself. For ten days every July, its population of around 4,000

ABOVE LEFT: *The Compania de Danza Folkorica Tenochtitlan from Mexico*

LEFT: *The main arena with "elfin hat"*  
(Aki Paavola/Kaustinen)

## Kimmo Pohjonen's performance was mind-boggling



expands to include up to 20,000 visitors who camp in gardens and fields.

This is not a WOMAD-type festival, catching European summer tours of international artists. Rather it focuses on Finnish music and links with other cultures. A major 2002 theme was a celebration of Kaustinen traditions, and this didn't always mean old tradition. It's well known that Finns are mad tango fans, with their own distinctive version of the dance. But it was still surprising to hear the work of Piazzolla, the Argentinian new tango composer, played as brilliantly as it was by the incredibly young 15-member Guardia Nueva orchestra.

Cycling back to my digs at 4am, through fields full of wild flowers garlanded by low lying mist, my ears rang with the sounds of quintessential Finnish instruments: fiddles, accordions and *kanteles* (the Baltic zither), not to mention harmonicas, spoons, and the odd *nyckelharpa* (keyed fiddle) playing waltzes, *polskas*, *mazurkas*, *schottisches* and tangos.

Acoustic music is definitely one of the highlights of the festival. I had a chance conversation with a typical *pelimanni*, as Finns respectfully call their native folk musicians. Seventy-five-year-old Knut Ewalds has been making music since he was ten; he



made his first nyckelharpa in 1973, his present one in 1980 and, like JPP, has always played for dancing back in his home village of Borgå. Accompanied by his wife Berit, he comes to Kaustinen to listen and play, as do many other amateur musicians. Festival director Jyrki Heiskanen says that as many as 3,000 musicians gain free entry in exchange for playing at specific times and

whenever they feel the urge – which means old and young jam together until all hours. One of the best places to hear this music is the Pelimannitalo, an 18th century wooden folk musicians' house reconstructed on the festival site. Local folk musicians and bands are regularly programmed and it's a beautiful intimate space unique to Kaustinen.

There is live music on site from 9am, plus dance and instrument workshops, but most people seem to emerge around noon for the family-friendly arena shows. The 2002 programme involved several international folk dance groups, including Transylvania's Somesul-Napoca, Aboriginal Australia's breathtaking White Cockatoo, and Mexico's spectacular Tenochtitlan, the latter moving from Aztec dance to *marachi* music.

Another central theme of 2002 was multi-cultural Britain. The music on offer went down a bomb, from Ireland's Danú to Wales' Julie Murphy and Fernhill as well as the boisterously entrancing Bollywood Brass Band and Natacha Atlas. Shetland's Fiddlers Bid captured a multitude of hearts, not only because of the extraordinary harmonies of their driving fiddles, but because after their arena gig, they simply moved to the beer tent to continue playing until breakfast.

ABOVE: *Kantele player Hannu Saha & bass player Timo Myllykangas of JPP performing in the Pelimannitalo (Simon Broughton)*

LEFT: *The "mind-boggling" Kimmo Pohjonen (Aki Paavola/Kaustinen)*

But it was undoubtedly the appearance of the Waterson-Carthys — Norma Waterson, Martin Carthy, Eliza Carthy and Tim van Eyck — which took everyone's breath away. They were nothing short of awesome, their tunes and songs plundering the depths of emotion. With Martin's iconoclastic guitar-playing, Norma's gorgeous voice, Eliza's anarchic energy distilled into both fiddle and singing, and Tim's inventive accordion playing, we were riveted. To close, all four harmonised the English hymn 'Sleep On Me'; in the same moment they evinced shivers down the spine, gooseflesh and tears.

Sunday's chill-out closure completed Kaustinen's Music of the Soul theme. One of my abiding memories will be old kantele masters singing and performing in the ochre-coloured wooden village church. Then, as the choirs from the whole region massed together, the arena transformed itself into the equivalent of the Welsh Eisteddfod.

If it's been a truism for years that Celtic and British folk musics are the world music of Europe, then Scotland's Salsa Celtica were the fitting triumph for the final night. With Venezuelan singer Lino Rocha improvising over Steve Kettley's sax solos and pipe and bagpipe solos from Fraser Fyfield, everyone was up moving while screaming for more. Land of the midnight sun – rave on! █

**Next year's festival runs from July 19-27 2003**  
**Kaustinen Folk Music Festival**  
**PL 24, 69601 Kaustinen, Finland**  
**Tel: +358 (0)6 8604 111**  
**Fax: +358 (0)6 8604 222**  
**Email: folk.art@kaustinen.inet.fi**  
**www.kaustinen.net**