

Collaborative Authorship of a Musical Composition and its Playful Elements as a Reflection of Generational Like-Mindedness of Composers in Malera Kasuku's Piano Trio (1977)

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Collaborative authorship of compositions is a rare phenomenon in classical music. This makes each multi-authored piece intriguing in the light of the reasons why the composers collaborated, the compositional process, the musical result and the reception of the work. A fascinating example of this from Estonian music history is a piano trio – a neoclassical piece consisting of three movements for violin, cello and piano – jointly composed in 1977 by three young composers, Mati Kuulberg (1947–2001), Lepo Sumera (1950–2000) and Raimo Kangro (1949–2001). They attributed the work to the pseudonym Malera Kasuku, formed from the initial syllables of their own names, which is still used in promotional materials for the composition to this day.

The article focuses on the creation, presentation, performances and reception of Malera Kasuku's Piano Trio, illustrating, amongst other things, the uniqueness of this multi-authored collaboration. The discussion shows, through the aforementioned aspects of the work, a certain creative like-mindedness among the three composers in the 1970s, while also revealing some aspects of the organisation of the Composers' Union as the central institution of Soviet professional composers.

The work was commissioned from the composers by the ensemble Tallinna Trio (Jüri Gerretz on violin, Toomas Velmet on cello and Valdur Roots on piano), drawing inspiration from Albert Dietrich, Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms's jointly written violin sonata "F-A-E" from 1853. Unlike the latter piece, the authorship of which was divided up between the different movements of the sonata, the new work was composed on the basis of its instrumental parts: Kuulberg wrote the violin part for all three movements of the piano trio, Sumera composed the cello part, and Kangro the piano part. None of the composers had an advantage in shaping the entire work, because each of them took it in turns to compose their parts first, second or third in the three different movements. The musical result of the work has thus been viewed both as a polyphony of styles and as a unique synergy in the work of the three composers.

From a theoretical standpoint the thematic approach is based mostly on the idea of postmodernist playfulness, viewing the piano trio also as a manifestation of a generational like-mindedness between the composers. The article explains how the playfulness of Malera Kasuku's piano trio manifested itself, from what it may have resulted, and in what way the playfulness has influenced the reception of the work and contributed to its remaining in the repertoire canon of Estonian chamber music. The study begins with an overview of the state of musicological research into the late Soviet period and introduces the generation of composers who started working professionally in Estonia in the 1970s, including Kuulberg, Sumera and Kangro. In order to examine the common and unique characteristics of Malera Kasuku's piano trio as a work of collaborative authorship, the paper also gives general overview of the phenomenon of multi-authored works in art music, with specific reference to examples from Estonia. The descriptions and reviews of the work in various media outlets published since its creation serve as the main sources for the study.

In addition to the aforementioned method of cooperation between the composers when writing the piece, one of the playful aspects of Malera Kasuku's Piano Trio also relates to the presentation of the piece at the Estonian SSR Composers' Union working meeting, where Sumera presented it as the work of a Japanese composer. Although the Union's working meetings occasionally listened to music by composers from other Soviet Republics, their primary objective at the time was to assess and give feedback on the work of their colleagues, i.e. Estonian composers' works. Because of this, it is possible to read the composers' adoption of the pseudonym Malera Kasuku both as a prank on the work's audience and as a mockery of the organisation of the composers' union during the Soviet era. The inclusion of the "Japanese" composer's work at the Union's working meeting was probably made possible by the fact that the meeting was chaired by Raimo Kangro. On the other hand, the fact that the ruse was successful also highlights the formality of the meeting, as evidenced by the fact that no

one objected to the rather absurd proposal to listen to the music of a Japanese composer during the meeting, and thus casts a shadow over the functioning of the Union as a representative organisation of professional composers as a whole. On the basis of the minutes of the event (TMM MO 257, 30, pp. 184–185) and later recollections of those involved, it can be concluded that some of the participants saw through the joke, while others did not; the minutes of the meeting, in any case, record only the fact of listening to Malera Kasuku's piano trio, to which only one sentence was given as feedback: the piece was well received.

However, at the work's first public performance, a concert in the Estonia Concert Hall on the evening following the day of the Composers' Union working meeting, Malera Kasuku had lost its meaning as a pseudonym, as the programme notes (Roots 1977) already contained references to the actual authors of the work. Nevertheless, both the composers and musicians continued to refer to the piece as written by Malera Kasuku, using the pseudonym in programmes for subsequent performances and publishing the piano trio's score under that name in 1978 (a later edition, printed in 2001, also includes the names of Sumera, Kuulberg, and Kangro).

The composers' general attitude towards their co-written piece was and remained jocular: even at the end of the 1990s, Sumera called the work a mere joke and distanced himself from the possibility of seeing it as musically valuable (Musica grande ... 1998). In the reception of the work, too, the piano trio is often referred to in terms of the composers' youthfulness, but it is clear that the frequent performance of the work also reflects its musical interest: in addition to the Tallinna Trio, whose repertoire included the work until the ensemble's dissolution in 1991, it has been repeatedly performed by several other ensembles, most recently in the early 2020s. It has also been recorded several times.

Although the presentation of Malera Kasuku's piano trio as a mysterious, even mythical, composition has dominated the reception of the work, the analysis here also reveals the more ordinary aspect of its origin in the context of co-authored works: like other pieces in the unusual field of collaborative authorship, Malera Kasuku's piano trio remained almost a one-off collaborative venture as far as its composers were concerned (both "Gooti kolmnurk", a project by Lepo Sumera with composers Erkki-Sven Tüür and Peeter Vähi, and Raimo Kangro's partnership with Andres Valkonen were very dissimilar to Malera Kasuku's piano trio in terms of both genre and concept). Furthermore, it was also a commissioned work and not an initiative of the composers themselves. Although the three composers were given the unusual task of writing the piece in collaboration, they nevertheless set out to create an entirely "ordinary" work in terms of structure and sound. This is where the joke at the level of the work's idea can already be seen. In this sense the playfulness of Malera Kasuku's piano trio distances the work, for instance, from the happenings organised in Estonia at the end of the 1960s, where professional composers and musicians purposefully experimented with form (Allas 2014; Vaitmaa 2000: 154). It is worth noting, however, that the cellist Toomas Velmet was the link between these happenings and the "birth" of Malera Kasuku.

Its reception suggests that the noteworthiness of the piano trio at the time of its creation was due mainly to the peculiar conception of the work and the way in which it was presented (including the use of a pseudonym). However, after the composers' deaths in 2000 and 2001, the piece has also been used as a marker for almost an entire generation of composers who passed away before their time; this is interesting not only from the perspective of historiography, but also explains the work's revival on concert platforms more than twenty years ago.