



# SIMON SAYS...

All aboard! **Simon Broughton** embarks on the annual Folklandia musical cruise from Helsinki to Tallinn

**Y**ou can tell it's no ordinary ferry journey right from the outset. Everyone rolls up to the terminal with the usual wheely bags, but most have an instrument case as well – violin, guitar, accordion and, a bit of a giveaway, the distinctive trapezoid cases for a *kantele*. Yes, that's the Finnish zither and national instrument. We're boarding for the Folklandia cruise, an annual 24-hour journey, in more ways than one, that travels from Helsinki to Tallinn and back.

On board there are ten stages, 3,000 people and almost continuous music. Officially there are 130 groups starting at 6pm and ending at 3pm the following afternoon. There are a few hours break from about 5am but heading to my cabin after 5am I had to climb over a dozen musicians furiously jamming on the stairs.

There's a 'main stage', the Ocean Club, where the headline bands like Sväng and Frigg are programmed. The harmonica (mouth organ) quartet played some highlights from last year's brilliant *Sväng Plays Tango* album (reviewed in #141) and, more patriotically, arrangements of Sibelius' 'Karelia Suite'. The arrangements are super inventive, and the band look great on stage – with Jouko Kyhälä adding harmony on a *harmonetta*, which looks like he's blowing into a transistor radio and Pasi Leino on bass harmonica, looking like a toaster. For the tango tracks, a pair of dancers join in a slow-motion choreography, occasionally freezing into emblematic poses, strangely suited to the melancholy longing of Finnish tango.

The Ocean Club and Europa Theatre – hosting the large folk ensemble and dance performances – are the better stages. The



Sväng playing Finnish tango on their consort of harmonicas

Simon Broughton

others are sonically challenging with low ceilings, chatter from the bars and passers-by weaving through. The carpets are very busy and make you feel drunk, even if you're not.

The best performing area was the so-called Top Club where there wasn't any traffic. But Estonian accordionist Tuulikki Bartosik unwittingly landed the tricky slot as the boat began its return journey from Tallinn to Helsinki. There was a long and loud safety announcement in Finnish, Estonian and finally in English – we prayed it wasn't going to continue in German and French. Bartosik just sailed on brilliantly, almost dancing with her large piano accordion.

She was accompanied by Timo Alakotila, the busiest man at Folklandia, involved in

four different concerts. A leading figure in Finnish folk, he played on the very first Folklandia cruise in 1996 with Maria Kalaniemi, and sensibly found himself a shopping trolley to push his electric piano from gig to gig. He's an inspirational figure, playing alongside a lot of the young ensembles, but when I ask what Folklandia would do without him, he says there are 3,000 more talented musicians to draw on.

There aren't 3,000 musicians like him, of course, but Folklandia shows in its crazy way how fertile the scene is. It's a musical journey into Finnish folk from traditional to avant garde. The only downside is if there were a ferry disaster, God forbid, the country's folk scene would be decimated at a stroke. ♦

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