

Performance Programme

A great learning: how to find balance in the presence of a tiger
Experimental music-making as pathway to sustainable artistic practice

“The Great Learning” is a large-scale work of avantgarde music theatre composed by Cornelius Cardew in 1968–1970. It incorporates ritualistic, choreographic and sculptural elements within a philosophical, pedagogical and humorous framework and calls for a large force of performers, many of whom ideally don’t have formal musical training. The mostly graphic notation allows for open interpretations on a variety of found or self-made instruments, creating a unique musical language outside and between commonly established categories.

The eponymous text by Confucius advocates individual and collective growth by way of “looking straight into one’s own heart and acting on the results”, “watching with affection the way other people grow” and seeking a balanced stance even “in the presence of a tiger”.

These principles have been applied in a four-year project to study and perform Cardew’s work in its entirety whilst developing tools for making and sharing art in ethically, psychologically and societally sustainable ways. With funding from Kone Foundation, the research has been conducted at Tulkinnanvaraista forum for avantgarde music and Uniarts Helsinki and led by instrumentalist–composer, DMus Juho Laitinen.

We have introduced experimental working methods to take distance to learning as a dialectic and mechanistic process, instead appreciating knowledge as elastic and amorphous matter. We have given equal weight to thought and action, creating a polyphonic music-making practice rooted in collective and compassionate philosophical pondering. At the same time, we’ve taken an activist stance in promoting a slow, morally responsible alternative to the market-driven and consumption-based “tiger” of mainstream art world.

In this performance, I will be joined by members of the Great Learning study group to demonstrate and elaborate on the underlying principles and their practical applications in our work. Alongside Cardew’s music, repertoire with sounding, theatrical and verbal elements by Alison Knowles, Takehisa Kosugi, Mieko Shiomi, Christian Wolff and myself are performed.



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Juho Laitinen works as an instrumentalist, composer, pedagogue and scholar. After studying the cello and voice in Turku, London and New York, he received a doctoral degree from Sibelius Academy in 2013. Laitinen has performed internationally and composed acoustic and electronic music for concerts, films and installations. As director of Tulkinnanvaraista, a forum for new and experimental music, he conducts the resident ensemble UMUU and works as dramaturge in the forum’s music theatre productions. He has also initiated the founding of Naarmu Ensemble, a collective of enthusiasts of music and live art open to all.