

Finnish concert pianist Paavali Jumppanen had never applied for a position at a music institution until he saw that ANAM was looking for a new Artistic Director. Now based in Melbourne with his family, he tells **Patricia Maunder** about his passion for pursuing the new, his relationship with Boulez, and his aim to create an environment at ANAM that allows for the students' artistic personalities to grow alongside their musical abilities.



*Paavali Jumppanen. Photo © Pia Johnson*

# In Search of Adventure

Why has virtuoso pianist Paavali Jumppanen moved to the other side of the world, far from his home in Finland, and far from his main performance playgrounds of Europe and the United States? He relocated to Melbourne a few weeks ago for the same reason he created a multi-disciplinary arts festival in the remote northern Scandinavian region of Lapland: Jumppanen has an appetite for adventure that is not easily satisfied, especially musically.

Since January 2021, he has been Artistic Director of the Australian National Academy of Music, a professional performance training institute better known as ANAM. The start of his three-year tenure happened even more remotely than anticipated due to the pandemic. His limited time on-site was mainly during 2021's final weeks, when *Limelight* sat down with him at ANAM's temporary home, the Abbotsford Convent cultural precinct in Melbourne. The plan had always been for years two and three to be the true adventure, with Jumppanen based in Melbourne with his cellist wife Matilda and their daughters, Freia, aged three, and Saaga, born just after he started in the role.

"This opportunity was a family decision ... a chance to embark on an adventure together," says the Finn acclaimed by *The Boston Globe* for the "overflowing energy of his musicianship". As he observes, "performers travelling around the world and mostly being away from home don't often get the chance to travel with their family, let alone the opportunity to spend a long period of time in a country they love, committed to working at an institution they admire."

"I've travelled to Australia several times; I think I've done eight national tours here over 15 years, but my wife never came with me. I've made great friends here, very close friends, some of them attended our wedding, so it's really lovely to bring Matilda here to experience what I've already experienced. I think there are rare moments in life when several things seem to come together, and once there was the invitation to apply for this job it felt like this is a chance, we'll do it, and then luckily I got appointed."

Jumppanen had already been an ANAM resident artist several times, starting in 2010. "I'd never seen a music school like it before," he says. There's nothing like it in Scandinavia, he adds, so conversations have arisen with friends there about establishing such an institution for elite-level performance development. In most other respects, however, his homeland of Finland has "a great education system, especially early music education." It was crucial in taking young Paavali from the small city of Espoo to the world.

"I was in a musical family in the sense that music was loved and listened to," he says, recalling childhood concerts at Helsinki's Finlandia Hall and summer festivals such as the Savonlinna Opera Festival, held each year at a picturesque medieval castle. "My two older brothers had a piano teacher come by our house every week. He was a very charismatic character and was, I suppose, my first idol."

Little Paavali would interrupt the lessons, demanding to be taught as well, but ultimately his formal instruction began with another teacher when he was five. He then moved onto the local music institute – part of Finland's well developed system of early music education – where he was blessed with a gifted teacher. "It was really a lucky break in hindsight," says Jumppanen. "[She was] just teaching normal, everyday, average piano-playing kids from my hometown, Espoo, but surprisingly many of her students ended up being professional musicians."

In his early teens, Jumppanen's musical passion grew. "In the seventh grade I decided I would practise three hours every day so I could get the things done which I wanted to get done," he recalls. There were also "long days on weekends practising at the music institute," weekly rehearsals with the chamber music group he formed with friends there, summer music camps and then the decision to switch to evening classes so he could devote his days to music. The modest, thoughtful 47-year-old doesn't view this formative period of his life as a montage of progress and success, however. "Of course with that kind of intensity there was some frustration if something didn't work out playing-wise,

## Faculty, administration, staff, student musicians all have a similar calling; it really feels like a team.

or I wanted to learn something that was too difficult, or if a performance didn't go well." Even then he was not easily satisfied.

Before progressing to the pinnacle of Finnish music education, the Sibelius Academy, Jumppanen was already travelling to Paris for private lesson with Russian-born Konstantin Bogino, whom he describes as a mentor still teaching him to this day. "He set the bar very high for the standard of playing, the kind of repertoire he wanted his students to learn, and the challenges for us – surprising things like you must attend the next national piano competition, which I never thought of" (but won in 1994). "There was always this feeling that teachers and the music institute were opening doors in music making which were exciting all the time, and I actually feel that I'm kind of in that mode still in some ways. I've been lucky to hold [onto] that relationship to playing as if it is an opportunity to learn more things on the piano, and repertoire, and play to people and go to places."

Jumppanen certainly has been going places since becoming a professional musician. Among the career highlights he nominates are playing a Liszt piano concerto at Budapest's Liszt Academy, and taking a year's sabbatical as a Harvard University visiting scholar. "I went there to do research on Beethoven, but I also ended up studying musicology and music theory." He speaks of free-ranging conversations there that fed his curiosity. They continue after a fashion ten years later, with everyone from musicians to environmental scientists. It was during his time at Harvard that Jumppanen became a "very dedicated fan of baseball". Jumppanen proudly reveals he once caught the ball at Fenway Park, the Boston Red Sox's storied home, but is slightly ashamed of frequently watching baseball during lockdown.

His other career highlights include past performances with ANAM students – which might seem like professional politeness now he's Artistic Director, were it not for the sincerity with which he recalls them. "It felt like we were all able to encounter with those pieces and with each other. There was a sense of everybody joining in with full energy and curiosity, so many of those [performances] have been memorable."

Closer to home is Lapland's annual Våyläfestival, for which Jumppanen has been lead curator since it began in 2017. "We wanted to create a festival that travels upstream on the river which marks the border between Finland and Sweden, so every year we cover a distance of 400 kilometres and present concerts, exhibitions, readings and performances on the Finnish side and Swedish side, Finnish side, Swedish side, to Norway. That's a very difficult but very exhilarating concept."

He also speaks warmly of a journey that's been more musical and intellectual than physical: his association with Pierre Boulez. It began in 2000 when Jumppanen's teacher in Basel, who knew the French composer, suggested that he learn the "notoriously difficult" Second Sonata by Boulez and play it for him. "I at first resisted, but then I really fell in love with that work and the musician." Delighted to "receive practical commentary from the composer" when he played the piece in Boulez's presence, Jumppanen went on to develop a close working relationship with the Frenchman before his death in 2016. Indeed the pianist is now a leading interpreter of the composer's work, both as a performer and recording artist. This pivotal meeting also gave Jumppanen "courage to then go to composers of my own generation in Finland and commission work from them".

His other accomplishments include winning the prestigious Young Concert Artists International Auditions in New York in 2000, and being the PianoEspoo Festival's Artistic Director from 2015 to 2021, when his hometown's international festival turned 30. As a solo artist and chamber musician he has performed with the likes of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Australian Chamber Orchestra. It's an impressive CV by any standards, but while he admits to being reassured and gratified by some of his accomplishments, "they were always side products of this process of playing and learning". Indeed there has never been a moment where he felt he had "made it", because as a freelance musician insecurity is the "expected state".

From his perspective that's not necessarily a problem. Insecurity is "tied with the inherent but also conscious wish to learn new things and do new things," says Jumppanen, who considers small projects without secure funding as the "best things ... because that means by definition you're trying to do something new". As a pianist who can never be a permanent member of an orchestra, he has "made a virtue out of necessity by explaining to myself that that kind of insecurity is a good driving force for a somewhat free-spirited search within art ... Something that I admire very much is the ability to be a different artist and a developing artist through the different decades of your life."

Jumppanen is definitely doing something different by becoming ANAM's Artistic Director as he approaches 50 – and not just because he will be based on the other side of the world. While he has taught in the past, it's the only position at a music institution he has applied for "because I've been very content with my freelance career. It doesn't lead to a luxurious life but it leads to a life of freedom to look for the next thing, which I've always enjoyed. I've actually been daunted by [the idea of] being tied to working in an institution."

His long, positive association with ANAM helped him take the plunge. From the first residency Jumppanen was impressed, and not only because a finishing school for young musicians, so to speak, is rare anywhere in the world. He also admired the “industry, inspiration, curiosity and a kind of humbleness” that the student musicians brought to their work, and what he considers the “extremely unusual ... sensation that the whole institution has similar goals.” He says it’s “felt within the whole institution, so faculty, administration, staff, student musicians all have a similar calling; it really feels like a team. When you go to an orchestra let alone a music institute or conservatory, different branches of people are doing different things.”

He believes ANAM’s size, with only about 70 students per year, and its mission, means everyone can have the “gratifying feeling that what you do is actually part of what everybody’s here for”. He’s observed this in “little things”, like returning to his desk after rehearsal as a guest artist and having others in the office ask how it went. “People are aware of what’s happening; that’s such a powerful feeling within a musical institution.”

That can’t have been easy during the pandemic, when ANAM has had to operate virtually for weeks and months on end. After Nick Deutsch spent the last of his five years as Artistic Director grounded in Germany, Jumppanen took up the reins via Zoom at the start of

2021. “What became very clear, even from a distance, is that he exhibited a very firm hand and control of things,” ANAM General Manager, Nick Bailey, told *Limelight* early this year. “I think we’ve all – faculty, students and administration – found him delightful to deal with. He carries authority lightly. He’s charming, and very Finnish,” says Bailey, chuckling as he explains that by this he means Jumppanen is “not particularly effusive. Before he speaks he thinks, and when he speaks it carries great weight.”

What Bailey describes as the “magical” moment of the Artistic Director’s first year was when he first played with the student musicians at an end-of-year concert. Many at ANAM had never heard the pianist perform in the flesh before, given Jumppanen’s last residency was in 2016. When he played a chamber work by George Enescu “it was just the most jaw-droppingly beautiful thing we’d heard all year ... I think the board thought: ‘Yes, that’s why we made this appointment!’” It was a very collaborative performance, recalls Bailey. “He played with the musicians as equals, but also led them beautifully from the keyboard, so that was a very special ending to a troubled year, and left everyone keenly anticipating his arrival in February.”

Bailey believes the ideas Jumppanen developed through that “difficult transition year ... will find expression in 2022”. Key among them is a greater emphasis on chamber music. “Paavali has come in and

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*Paavali Jumppanen with ANAM's 2021 horn musicians. Photo © Pia Johnson*

heard what the faculty have been asking for and said: 'Let's do this. Let's change things so there's time and space each week, if not each day, for the students to rehearse chamber music.'" According to Jumppanen himself, this change meant overthrowing his original plan of not teaching. He concluded that teaching chamber music was "the best way for me to work with every musician at ANAM, and because of my chamber music background I feel very comfortable doing that".

Jumppanen is "also keen to have more time for reflection in the program," says Bailey. "We deliberately make an intense and busy program, because that's the life that [students are] going to have to get accustomed to if they're going to make it as professional musicians. So without lessening the intensity of what they're doing, he's keen to have time for them to think creatively about questions like what it is to be a musician today, and "what the community needs from its musicians". Indeed, Jumppanen has thought deeply about many matters he believes the world of classical music should be mindful of, from its "history dominated by male composers" to the environmental cost of flying orchestras around the planet.

This thinking informs his role as an advocate for funding. As ANAM's Artistic Director, "I see my role as being somebody who must first prepare musicians for the work they do in the community," which in this context

means responding to and developing "that fundamental need for humans to experience art. Without that there is no case for the politicians or whoever is deciding about funding." Secondly, he and other spokespeople must demonstrate to the politicians et al. what ANAM does and why it needs their support. Art "elevates the beautiful and criticises the troublesome aspects [of society], so surely this kind of activity should be funded at a time when there are very harmful trends in the world."

He also speaks of not only helping student musicians to "reach their maximum as instrumentalists" but also creating an environment that "allows their artistic personalities to grow. Nobody is already a complete artist at the age of 23 or 25 and, as I'm trying to experiment in my own artistic life, not even when they're 47 ... Growing artistic personality is important because that's the part of yourself who interprets the music." By enabling ANAM's musicians to polish their armour before starting professional careers in earnest, "the entire music-making level of the country is enhanced," says Jumppanen.

This artistic directorship is a serious business then, requiring profound thought and insight. However, it's also a significant opportunity for the Finn to indulge his love of curatorship, which he considers "a big part of music making". Most of this year's ANAM performance program will be at home at Abbotsford Convent,

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a seven-hectare inner-Melbourne site on a bend in the Yarra River. “It has a troubled history, an interesting history as well,” says Jumppanen. “I think we really must make music here in the convent in a relevant way, and in a way that is connected to the place,” he adds, suggesting concerts featuring music played there in its ecclesiastical era. Looking ahead, he’s also keen to partner with organisations including ANAM for a Boulez centenary season in 2025.

The academy’s just-announced 2022 program includes several appearances by Jumppanen, such as three of five concerts in the Bach Diaries series at the convent chapel starting in March. For the most part, however, it’s the student musicians who are on show, from Perth Concert Hall to Auckland Town Hall, and back in Melbourne, from Hamer Hall to the convent, where program highlights include the ANAM SET Festival on 13–15 May. Announced early in Jumppanen’s tenure, it is the culmination of 67 close collaborations between individual student musicians and composers including Brett Dean, Elena Kats-Chernin and Richard Mills. Other big names associated with ANAM this year are resident artists such as Johannes Fritzsich, Sara Macliver, Erin Helyard and Diana Doherty.

They will help ease the absence of Jumppanen during his four months of professional leave each year. He will continue performing internationally – including

what he describes as a “ghost tour” of the US, which was cancelled just as the pandemic began and repeatedly postponed since. “I do want to also run my artistic projects here when possible,” he says, because “this is now my artistic home for the next little while”. He hopes to realise at least one of his forthcoming recording projects in Australia, and is “looking for a place [for] a full concert-length cycle of contemporary Finnish music which has technology built in; some video and some live electronics”.

Of course Finland is where his heart is. Apart from loved ones back home, winter is what Jumppanen will miss most (though returning for a white Christmas each year will help). He enjoys winter sports: skiing in particular, and sometimes ice hockey, which was a favourite of his younger days. Back then he broke two ribs playing this fast, physical game “a couple of days before a very important engagement in a major European concert hall. I’m not going to name which one, because then my colleagues would know what I’m talking about,” he says, laughing quietly. He also loves kayaking so, given his Melbourne house is by the Yarra, Jumppanen has ideas about kayaking to work.

He is here, after all, in search of adventure. *Paavali Jumppanen will play organ with ANAM Strings in the first concert in ANAM’s Bach Diaries series at Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne on 10 March at 3pm.*

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