

## MY INSTRUMENT

### Tuulikki Bartosik and her accordion

**Simon Broughton** meets Tuulikki Bartosik, the Estonian accordionist who is one of the most dynamic players on the international circuit

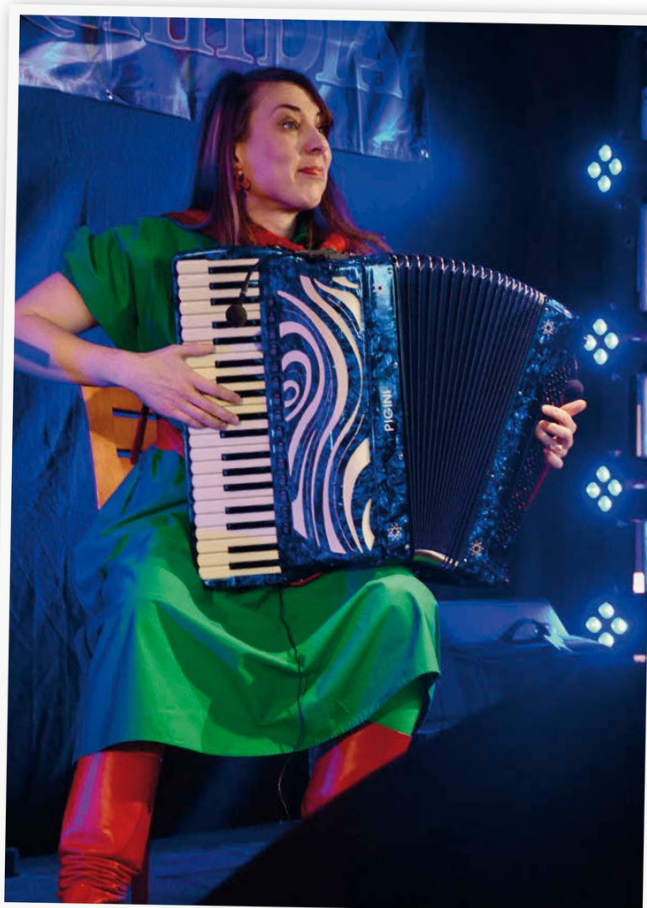
**W**e're on the heaving Folklandia ferry ship and I'm trekking with Tuulikki Bartosik from one stage to another, upstairs and downstairs. This is when I realise you have really got to love a piano accordion which weighs 14kg. "It's not hard to play, but it's hard to carry," she laughs.

Actually it's very hard to play like Bartosik plays it. She opens her Folklandia concert with a melancholy, sighing phrase and then waves her hand over the bellows and the sound flutters. The accordion is like a living, breathing creature with lungs. As she plays she seems lost in thought, gazing into a world inside her head. Often accordionists, because of the unwieldy nature of the instrument, look so solid, but Bartosik seems to dance as if the instrument is somehow pulling her along.

Bartosik's chosen instrument is a Pignini, specially made for her by the Italian company. Her instrument is less than two years old, but the model dates from the 1940s. "The accordion itself was created 150 years ago, it's as old as the Estonian Song festival," she says, throwing in a patriotic note. She was recently playing at the Song Festival celebrations in Tallinn [see p81 for more about the Song Contest]. "Pignini are mainly used by classical players. Around the 1940s they began to realise that we can play with symphony orchestras also. So rather than use a fixed 'oompah' bass, they developed a free bass so you can play melodies. On this one you can switch so you can play standard *stradella* [chordal] bass or switch to free melody bass. They only gave me two shades of blue to choose from. So when I got this accordion I had to change my whole wardrobe, because my previous one was a much lighter shade and it didn't fit at all." She is superbly colour co-ordinated. Blue accordion, green dress, red boots and red straps.

Bartosik has added various Estonian symbols to customise her instrument, like an eight-pointed star called *kaheksakand*. "It's a magic symbol and you can see it everywhere in Estonia. It's supposed to be a kind of protection. My grandmother used to sew a lot and made patterns from south Estonia."

In her concert Bartosik is almost dancing with her accordion and leads us through a fantastic imaginative world. It is like she's performing with a living creature. "Yesterday I had a really interesting moment," she says. "The ship was shaking and it changed the sound of the accordion. And today I did



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another kind of vibration with my left knee on the bellows." Her accordion seems like a surrogate partner.

One of Bartosik's innovations has been to record in natural environments across Estonia – in the forests or old Soviet military establishments. "I love to play in the forest; for me it's the best studio. Sometimes the birds sing with you, sometimes they are totally quiet. At an accordion festival in Amsterdam it seemed about angry male players with big black accordions showing off who can play faster. For me the accordion is a tool to express my voice. I don't want to play a polka machine."

Bartosik comes from south Estonia where actually singing is predominant and the accordion tradition isn't so strong. "I play an instrument that has no tradition, so I am absolutely free." ♦

+ **DATES** Tuulikki Bartosik is touring the UK from September 22-29, see *Gig Guide* for details