# *Can a listening room be like an embrace that receives you?*

MERJA MÄNNIKKÖ




The Saapuminen working group: Merja Männikkö, Heta Haapsamo, Vaatu Ravela, Jaakko Autio and Henna-Maria Hanhineva. Photo: Eerika Arposalo.

*Arrive at yourself, so that you are ready to sense what happens in the listening room as well. Give yourself permission to sit down, simply to be, and to receive what the work Saapuminen (Arrival) has to give. Ground yourself in this moment. Will you let everything simply happen?*

The starting point for the Saapuminen process is OWLA, a sound work exploring local identity in Oulu, created by sound artist Jaakko Autio for Oulu Art Museum in 2023. As part of the programme of Oulu2026 European Capital of Culture, OWLA is transformed into the Saapuminen listening room in collaboration with dance artist Henna-Maria Hanhineva and the working group.

The singing of three Oulu choirs, Cantio Laudis, Cassiopeia and Tuiran kamarikuoro, combined with the movement of dancers Heta Haapsamo and Vaatu Ravela, brings a new dimension to experiencing the OWLA sound work: body-based listening and writing.

In this text, Merja Männikkö, who works with body-based writing, gathers the insights and bodily sensations of being, moving and sensing in the listening room that arose during the working group's process. The body-based text is set in italics.

# A direct connection to the OWLA sound installation is possible in a shared circle




The circle invites listeners to choose their place freely, according to which voice from the speakers draws the ear at that very moment. Photo: Jaakko Autio.

Jaakko Autio always begins building a sound installation by defining the centre of the room, which shows as a black taped cross on the floor of the Satula space at Oulu Art Museum. First he carries all the material to the middle of the room. From there it gradually moves out to different sides of the space, until finally the centre is empty. The space is ready for listening and for movement.

A temporary community forms when we sit in a circle with others. Eyes open or closed. We notice how a voice makes us turn towards it, sharpen our hearing, feel the choral singing flowing through the body. Even if you spend a lot of time alone, in the listening room you can become part of a community and approach your own way of being together with others.

*Listening together is a creative, whole way of returning in time to something deeply essential:*

*to what lies between people, to human thought.*

The circle formed by the speakers and chairs is no one's stage; it belongs to everyone taking part. You can sit so that someone else is listening to the work across from you. You can see them. They are not only a receiver but respond to the sound in their own way. Perhaps a smile rises at the corners of their mouth, or their posture relaxes, as they hear others talking and laughing in the work. Then you can change seats to hear the conversation of the sound installation from another direction:

*I hear a lullaby for Oulu, for a many-voiced Oulu:*

*How has Oulu changed me? What inspires me? Where do I rest?*

*The human voice is enough to awaken the wish to hear more.*

I hear nuanced sound, high and low. A texture of sound that strokes my ears and my body, which begins to sway from side to side, searching for connection, for arriving on the same line as the sound.

Listening to the spoken passages and the bursts of laughter, a sense of release begins to grow among the listeners, and little by little they find a connection with one another. I am part of the group!

It is exciting to see how people begin to arrange themselves in the space. Agency calls!

# The dancers listen with their whole bodies



Dancers Heta Haapsamo and Vaatu Ravela move in the embrace of light, in the space created by the choral work. Director Henna-Maria Hanhineva witnesses the moment. Photo: Jaakko Autio.

Dancers Heta Haapsamo and Vaatu Ravela sit on the floor and begin the day's rehearsal with their director Henna-Maria Hanhineva at the centre of the listening room, near the taped cross. Their own world of movement has been emerging and growing stronger over the past days. The listening room has become so familiar that the symbolic tape mark is no longer needed. The empty space has been claimed.

The first time I was in the listening room as a dancer, for just under an hour, I found myself in a wonderful state of timelessness, where my senses of hearing and movement were deeply heightened. The experience of the room was also different in daylight and in the darkening evening.

*How does the room feel at two o'clock?*

*How does the room feel at five o'clock?*

*Light, light, light! What are you like?*

Together with Henna-Maria, Heta and Vaatu have explored how cellular breathing carries the body and sets it dancing, giving rise to the dancers' wondrous circle of movement, open to everyone in the listening room. What impulses are in the air? Which of them will I catch for myself next? Does the movement finally melt into play? Do we then change places like children? Does the listening room find an atmosphere all its own, in the midst of everything?

*Touching without touching.*

*Being held without knowing it.*

*The invisible line of force of the whole universe carries us.*

*I lean on something as fleeting as the air between us, and I know you are holding on to it.*

*Vortex, embrace, cycle, cycles, repetition and the collective pulse of the core.*

HETA HAAPSAMO



Heta Haapsamo and Vaatu Ravela in the swirl of the embrace theme. Photo: Jaakko Autio.

*I listen with both my ears and my body to what surrounds me. I am held by the sound, under its influence. I feel the sound calling me into movement. I observe, experience, sense with my body the space and its people. Deep wisdom lies within my body. The world turns within me. At times my balance wavers. Still, movement carries me forward.*

The principles of Authentic Movement are present in the dancers' work, in which one's own experience is shared with others. The mover is seen when they reveal which movement is especially meaningful to them. They own their experience of movement. When a moment in the dance that matters to them touches others too, the experience grows stronger and comes closer to a situation where movement material that moves others is being found.

Next it is time to explore the theme of the embrace. How can one offer an embrace to oneself or to another? What is it like to receive one? Are you the one who offers or the one who receives? How do you touch without touching? It is a search for connection, and at the same time gentleness and presence towards oneself and the other. For the mother of a small child, the embrace is constantly present. The need to be held does not end in adulthood. It is a basic human need, and not one that is always met for everyone.



Heta Haapsamo's embrace is open as she arrives in the space. Test audience: Merja Männikkö and Jaakko Autio. Photo: Henna-Maria Hanhineva.

*How far can an embrace reach? Can it travel all the way around the circle?*

*Do the embrace and the circle then become one?*

We rehearse Saapuminen. At first Heta is behind us, arms open at her sides like an embrace. OWLA begins to play. A luminous cathedral space unfolds before me and lifts me above the everyday.

On the opposite side of the listening circle Vaatu stands in the same posture as Heta. Meeting the listeners as a dancer is a delicate task.

# Body-based writing as a tool of the artistic process



Merja Männikkö writes through her body, feeling strongly and sensing the movement of dancers Heta Haapsamo and Henna Hanhineva. Photo: Jaakko Autio.

The body-based writer may join the dance, moving between seated, writing witness and dancing. Movement gives strong impulses for writing. Slow movement is something especially moving.

The result is a subtle text that wishes to come close to the one who experiences it. The text is close to being moved, to a quiver, to a stroking of the mind, to touching in the air.

*My gaze searches for the other.*

*You come closer, the choir supports our approach, it too grows stronger.*

*Only the two of us in the midst of the others. We explore drawing near, connection.*

*I return to myself. I stay floating where I am, I turn my back.*

*When will we arrive at each other?*

*When the speech begins, what changes?*

*We can take flight!*

*I rise onto my toes, I let the sense of weight carry me.*

*Speech sets us free to move.*

*Sound comes out of me too.*

As the writer, I make observations that the working group listens to and takes in. Saapuminen stays alive as it transforms during our work. When everyone brings their own skills and ideas, the work becomes shared.

# Cultural climate change needs bold experimentation

The Saapuminen group feels it has stood at the threshold of something new during its intensive working process at Oulu Art Museum. Together we have explored how the different layers of encounter arise, and how they exist and act in the space at the same time. When the sound installation has its own duration and structure, how can dance join it and create a space for encounter? Together we have wondered whether, between performing and being together, there might still be a special, touching space of its own. Could it share something with the following words?

> *"By cultural climate change we mean reconnecting the world around us, creating a new sense of togetherness."*
>
> The quotation is from the Oulu2026 bid book, from the section on Cultural Climate Change, page 7.

As a working group, we hope that Saapuminen leaves a trace in the one who experiences it, moves their inner world and travels with them out into the world as a strong emotional experience. Individual visitors, their words, actions and choices, matter. It matters that one chooses culture and holds on to hope. The centre of culture is in the one who experiences it!

## EXPERIENCE THE WORK

The listening room is open 12–15 November during museum opening hours: Thu 9–18, Fri 11–19, Sat–Sun 11–18. Arrive and stay at your own pace. At certain moments the work is also answered with a bodily ritual:

Fri 13 Nov at 17:00
Sat 14 Nov at 14:00
Sun 15 Nov at 14:00

## WORKING GROUP

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|---|---|
| Jaakko Autio | sound art, listening room and production |
| Henna-Maria Hanhineva | choreography and direction, production and preview images |
| Vaatu Ravela | dance and text |
| Heta Haapsamo | dance and text |
| Merja Männikkö | body-based writing |
| Eerika Arposalo | initiating the process and background support |

## CHOIRS

Cantio Laudis, Cassiopeia, Tuiran Kamarikuoro

Funded by Oulun Valistustalo and the Oulu2026 programme. Produced in collaboration with Oulu Art Museum.

Originally published in Finnish on the Oulu Art Museum blog, 11 November 2026. English translation for this edition.