

Lyrical, lingering music often veiled in melancholy mists

Kai Nieminen is a Finnish composer who cannot be classified under any particular school or style. Traces of impressionism, neo-romanticism and, fleetingly, even expressionism may be detected in his basically atonal music, and if necessary he is not against using devices of even more recent 20th century music. The various elements have nevertheless blended to form a homogeneous idiom and a personal style all of his own. As his closest musical soul mate and kindred spirit he mentions the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu.

Making a name for himself both as a guitarist and a composer, Nieminen studied the guitar at the Central Finland Conservatory and the Sibelius Academy, and musicology at the University of Jyväskylä. He also studied composition with Stepák Rak and Pekka Kostiainen and attended masterclasses with George Crumb, Paavo Heininen, Jukka Tiensuu and Theo Lowendie. As a guitarist, he has appeared in solo recitals and with orchestras. He has served on the jury of the Fernando Sor Guitar Competition in Rome and taught at the Royal College of Music in Cardiff, Wales.

The earliest works by Kai Nieminen date from the 1970s. Not surprisingly, considering his guitarist background, he first made news as a composer with extremely playable works for that instrument (such as *Night Sonata(s)* 1976–2006, *Acquarelli della notte* 1981, *Homenaje a Andres Segovia* 1993 and *Riflessioni sul nome Amedeo Modigliani* 2011), but he has, from the very beginning, also composed chamber music. His output of vocal music has, on the other hand, been relatively slight.

Then in 1995 came Nieminen's first work for orchestra, *Vicoli in ombra*. It gave him a considerable boost in his career and marked the dawn of a new era in his production in that orchestral works and concertos have since become his primary genres. Subsequent additions have included *Time around Spring* (1997), *Le città invisibili* (1998), *Chi Vivrà Vedrà* (1998/2000), *Time around Lights, Shadows and Spaces* (1999), *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (2000), *In Mirrors of Time...* (2000/07) and *In Woodlands of the Birds* (2002).

Nieminen's first real concerto was *Palomar* (2001), for flute and Patrick Gallois. This has been followed by a series of concertos for various instruments: for clarinet (*Through Shadows I Can Hear Ancient Voices*, 2002), violin (*Il viaggio del cavaliere... (inexistente)*, 2005), viola (*La Serenissima*, 2006), piano (*Reflections... In the Enchanted Waves of Time*, 2007), , oboe (*Somni de Gaudi*, 2008), guitar (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, 2009), horn (*To Touch Upon Other Times, Painting(s) on the Canvas of Silence*, 2010) and a double concerto for cello and accordion (*Marcovaldo*, 2012). The thing that interests him in his concertos is the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra, the individual and the collective. His performing background and his personal solo experience have stood him in good stead in composing concertos.

Most of Nieminen's works have an extra-musical stimulus, alluded to in their titles. They are not, however, really programme music, being constructed according to their own musical laws. The titles do nevertheless reflect the original stimulus and provide something of a guideline to the listening experience. The initial inspiration may be in literature or art, or equally well in an urban streetscape or nature. Such artists as Italo Calvino, Miguel de Cervantes, Georges Perec, Timo K. Mukka, Helene Schjerfbeck, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Amedeo Modigliani, Salvador Dalí and Antoni Gaudí have inspired works or been their dedicatees.

The writings of Italo Calvino have prompted several of Nieminen's works (such as *Le città invisibili*, *Palomar*, *Il viaggio del cavaliere... (inexistente)*, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* and *Marcovaldo*), and he has felt a great affinity with Mediterranean culture in general and Italian in particular. In his case, this means the synthesis of southern, Mediterranean culture and the northern shamanistic culture of Finland, just as Takemitsu constructs a synthesis between eastern and western thinking. Nieminen points out the global environment in which contemporary composers exist and their potential for lifting ideas from different countries and cultures.

The works of Nieminen are often constructed according to a narrative logic, as fantasy journeys in imaginary or dream-like worlds. *Vicoli in ombra*, for example, may be thought of as a wander through the shadowy alleys of Rome, at times peopled by strangers, at others silent and empty. Another art-based work inspired by urban scenes and a city is the viola concerto *La Serenissima*, the Venetian moods of which are enhanced by the quotation from Monteverdi that beautifully glides into view. Otherwise Nieminen does not, as a rule, go in for quotations.

Nieminen seems to be at his most idiosyncratic in lyrical, lingering music often veiled in melancholy mists. When he speaks of a sense of light and space, the most typical light impression of his music might be defined as a presentient haze. His music often has a strong poetic touch, a feeling of meditation and contemplation, of entering into a mood. The sense of melancholy is particularly marked in, for example, his orchestral *In Mirrors of Time*. The motto for this is a poem by Emily Dickinson through which the music captures the transience of time and existence. On the other hand, his music sometimes adopts a weightier stance, as in the violin concerto *Il viaggio del cavaliere... (inexistente)*, the sharply-etched melodies of which create a strongly expressionist atmosphere.

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