

# LARS KA – from Roman to Modern Ro

“There is no such thing as atonality as long as you work with fixed pitches. I am more inclined to believe that tonality is built into the structure of the tones, whether we like it or not. One can argue that it is some kind of natural law,” says composer **Lars Karlsson** from Åland.

**T**he concepts tonality and melody have, in one form or another, followed **Lars Karlsson** (born 1953) throughout his career. His relation to them has of course changed and been modified over the years, but they have always retained a central position in his thinking.

Karlsson is in many respects a rare bird in Finnish musical life. He has for various reasons had cause to feel an outsider to mainstream art music, and this has in turn influenced his aesthetic development.

One major dilemma has been his relationship to tonality, and its application in the framework of modernism, which values rationally conditioned complexity. This struck a discordant note in Karlsson's temperament. That he was an outsider was discernible at many levels at an early stage already and it would eventually make itself manifest in his music.

At the age of twenty Karlsson started out in his career as a composer in the spirit of traditionalism and his first creative period (c. 1973-77), with works such as *Five Aphorisms* for piano, the song cycle *Med havet* (By the Sea) and the choral work *Åländsk symfoni* (Åland Symphony), could be labelled “romanticizing neoclassicism”. The emotionally charged passages in *Dialogue* for soprano and organ did, however, indicate that a change in orientation was just around the corner. There is an increase

# KARLSSON

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in chromaticism, the tonality is loosened up and the need for expression becomes more and more insistent.

The process led to Karlsson's second "expressionistic" period (c. 1978-83), in which works such as the *Composition for Organ and Arioso* for violin, cello and piano represent a broadening of his expressive vocabulary.

The free tonality that characterized the end of the first period has now acquired more dodecaphonic overtones. There is greater complexity and the works can in a way be considered Karlsson's dalliance with the Central European modernism of the period between the wars, culminating in the *Composition for Organ and Symphonic Wind Orchestra* (1983). This was Karlsson's most ambitious work to date from a structural point of view; his previous models Bartók and Berg have been replaced by names such as Messiaen and Ligeti, and it represents a new avenue for him with its colouristic modernism.

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The path did not, however, lie in this direction for Karlsson. He had reached a creative dead end and among the few new works composed during the following "period of searching" (c. 1984-89) is the organ work *Passacaglia et fuga B-A-C-H*, one of his most successful, in which he returns once again to his own instrument.

The *Divertimento* for string quartet (1989), which manifests the upheavals in style typical of the period in a neoclassicism influenced by one of Karlsson's teachers, **Einar Englund**, constitutes – together with the choral work *Mare crisiuum* – the bridge to the "synthetic" fourth period that still continues. Its first major test is the *Violin Concerto* (1991/93), an illuminating example of the stylistic synthesis that characterizes Karlsson's output of the 1990s. The chromaticism has had to yield to a more diatonically-coloured tone language, melodies



based on triads are back in favour and free tonality is more often replaced by a more traditional major-minor tonality.

Karlsson's eclecticism is, however, no loose patchwork but the result of an intensive relationship with tradition. The solo part is technically the most challenging ever in a Finnish concerto; the large two-movement form is held tightly together and the instrumentation is effective.

Now the dam burst and in its wake followed the musicianly *Suite for Helena* for wind quintet (1994), in which each movement is based on an Åland folk melody – the only folk music borrowing by Karlsson so far – and his most exacting organ work, the massive *Toccata, Variations and Fugue on the Hymn "Den blomstertid nu kommer"* (Now is the Season for Flowers, 1994).

*The String Quartet* (1997) hints that nothing of the characteristic expressiveness has been lost, while *Two Love Scenes and a Daydream* for vocalist, soprano saxophone and big band (same year) is an interesting stylistic achievement proving that Karlsson is fully capable of writing for modern big band.

### SYNTHETIC OPERA TECHNIQUE

The secular oratorio *Ludus latruncularum* (Slave Play, 1996), to a multifaceted allegorical text by **Valdemar Nyman**, was Karlsson's most ambitious work so far. In it he sums up his musical experience, at the same time making the barrier-breaking idiom clearer, more easily accessible and spontaneously melodic than ever before. His third large-scale work of the 1990s is the *First Symphony* (1999), in which Karlsson first challenges the symphonic mode of expression. In three movements, it has a well-nigh Mahlerian breadth of spirit if not so much of duration, and a genuinely symphonic tension in its construction.

The oratorio's evocative choral sections and lyrical arias and duets indicate that it was not a big step to the stage. The chamber opera *Rödhamn* (Redhaven), to a libretto by **Lars Huldén**, was premiered at the Finnish National Opera in 2002 and is unusual, if not unique, for Finland in that the libretto was in Swedish. However, the thing that distinguishes *Rödhamn* from other Finnish operas in Swedish – such as **Erik Bergman's** *The Singing*



Karlsson's opera *Rödhamn* at the Finnish National Opera (Photo: Stefan Bremer)

*Tree* and **Mikko Heiniö's** *The Knight and the Dragon* (both with librettos by **Bo Carpelan**) – is that all the roles were sung by Swedish-speaking singers. Huldén's libretto is based on true events – the leading character is related to Karlsson – and it develops into a poignant drama about happiness in love, death and loss. The music is influenced by the aesthetics of the oratorio, even though the expressivity is more obvious and the contrasts between, for example, the diatonic and chromatic elements are more sharply chiselled.

Otherwise, Karlsson's working method can be characterized as decidedly synthetic. He infuses fresh life into well-trying operatic forms of expression, picks elements from music history – such as a medieval Troubadour song and two Ålandic folk melodies – and adopts a personal leitmotif technique.

The First Symphony was followed in 2004 by the *Second Symphony*, which in many respects continues along the same course with some genuine development of motives. Karlsson's abundant and varied vocal output has been enlarged by works such as the Neruda composition *Body of a Woman* 🗣️ for male choir (2003) and *Ocean Scenes* for oboe, viola and piano (2006). Karlsson is currently working on a new chamber opera.

## IN HARMONY WITH HIS TIME

In the course of almost a decade Karlsson had thus established himself in five central genres of music history (opera, oratorio, solo con-

certo, string quartet and symphony), a fact that may be far from self-evident. His stylistic development has, as we have observed, been anything but staked out, though it may in retrospect seem logical.

The emotional force emanating from within has, however, functioned throughout as a philosophical-ethical guiding principle. Consequently even a modernistic aesthetic, focused as it is on technique and theory, has for Karlsson smacked more of "engineering" than of a living and communicable artistic vision.

Karlsson often stresses the spiritual perspective, in both artistic production and consumption. He sees tradition and its collective wisdom as an invaluable asset for today's composer, and he stands out in many ways as an uncompromising, honest composer who has always followed the dictates of his heart.

The music of Lars Karlsson also gives the impression of being in harmony with the pulse of time, with "the laws of nature", and one can rightly claim that the "romantic modernist" has been transformed into a "modern romanticist". A composer in the present. ■

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