

*Erik Bergman was a man of many contrasts: sparkling in company yet revelling in solitude; spontaneous and impulsive yet a pedantic stickler for detail. A nature-loving country lad yet happy to go out on the town. As a musical anarchist in his day, Bergman composed works that made audiences gasp in amazement. He was an ice-breaker, a trail-blazer who likened himself to the playing of violist Vladimir Mendelssohn: "An absolute wizard: explosively temperamental but like mimosa a moment later – just like me."*



# ERIK BERGMAN

## – a bird that flew in front

HENNA SALMELA

ERIK BERGMAN (1911–2006) was a reformer funnelling winds of change into Finnish music and seeking fresh modes of performance, novel combinations of instruments and timbres. His intellectual curiosity led him all over the world, to Berlin and Vienna to study composition, to Ascona to learn from Vladimir Vogel, and to the Vatican Music Academy. He later made numerous journeys to the Mediterranean region, Asia and elsewhere, sought the roots of Western culture in the Orient and drank deep from their sources. He recorded rituals at a Buddhist monastery in Nepal, and music in Bali and Sri Lanka. While on his travels he collected exotic instruments, which he gladly showed to visitors at his home in Helsinki. In time, they amounted to quite a sizeable museum collection.

"I come from Ostrobothnia, I'm not afraid of a fight," was Bergman's motto. By this he was referring to his avant-garde attitude, his desire to break down fences and violate norm. His mentally active beat was reflected both in Bergman the man and his music – a man known for his temperament. Even at the age of over 90 he still had the stamina to be the untiring life and soul of the party, keeping a close watch on what was going on around him with a penetrating twinkle in his eye. In 1998 he departed on a trip round the world with his wife-to-be, Christina Indrenius-Zalewski. They were married two years later, when he was 89, and the marriage was his fourth. Inspired by his travels, he composed the dance poem *Le Voyage*. For the last scene in this he envisaged an African woman dancing naked. Bergman always had an eye for feminine beauty.

For Erik Bergman, the choral music he loved represented "a reflection of human experience, a subconscious undercurrent of emotions or a blazing flare of life." All these elements are present in his vast choral output. An exacting choir leader himself, he raised male-choir singing to a new plane with his uncompromising attitude and innovative repertoire. It is impossible to speak of Finnish choral music without mentioning such

Bergman classics as the *Galgenlieder* (settings of poems by Morgenstern), *Bardo Thödöl* (based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead), the *Hathor Suite*, *Lapponia*, *Lemminkäinen*, *Nox*, *Bim Bam Bum* and the songs inspired by his third wife, **Solveig von Schoultz**.

In his music Bergman aimed at simplicity and keeping things "uncluttered". Scores packed full of notes were, he said, exhausting. Freshness was what he was after, but not novelty merely for the sake of it. For him, regression was the same as surrender. He applied serialism and used a speech chorus. He raised eyebrows, but was encouraged by Jean Sibelius, and he gained in stature as he broadened his range of expression. In addition to the opera *Det sjungande trädet* (The Singing Tree) he composed a wealth of vocal, chamber and orchestral music, solo pieces, but not a single symphony. His last, prolific decade was marked by idiosyncratic concertos for oboe, violin and cello, and his very last work was the *Fantasia for Trumpet and Orchestra*, Op. 150 he composed in 2003.

Music by Bergman is this year being performed on an exceptionally wide scale. Much of his output has, however, never yet been recorded. Designed to fill this gap is a 3-CD project led by Matti Hyökki of Bergman's choral music. According to Hyökki, while the Bergman pieces may not necessarily cause a spontaneous frisson in the singers, their quality is beyond dispute; their diversity, humour and intensity are what make them striking.

In 2003, three years before his death, Bergman suffered a stroke that robbed him of his power to compose, write and speak. This was a tremendous blow to a man who had always had an exceptional command of language that had kept him in the focus of events. He did not, however, entirely lose his power to communicate. When I took him a bunch of flowers in hospital, he made a highly evocative gesture with his hands, drawing a picture of my figure in the air. He could still amuse his audience from a hospital bed.

*O lät mig bli en förelöparfågel  
nattblå, men med ett bröst av pärlemor,  
och lät mig störta främst, och dränkt i dimman  
få ropa ut: jag tror på ljus, jag tror.*

*O let me be a bird that flies in front  
with pearly breast though I am blue as night,  
and let me rush ahead, and drowned in mist  
may I cry: I believe, believe in light.*

Erik Bergman: Fåglarna  
(Text: Solveig von Schoultz, translation by Jeremy Parsons)



Photo: Maarit Kyöharju

\*) Slagverket kan skötas av en man.

\*) Das Schlagzeug kann ein Spieler bedienen.