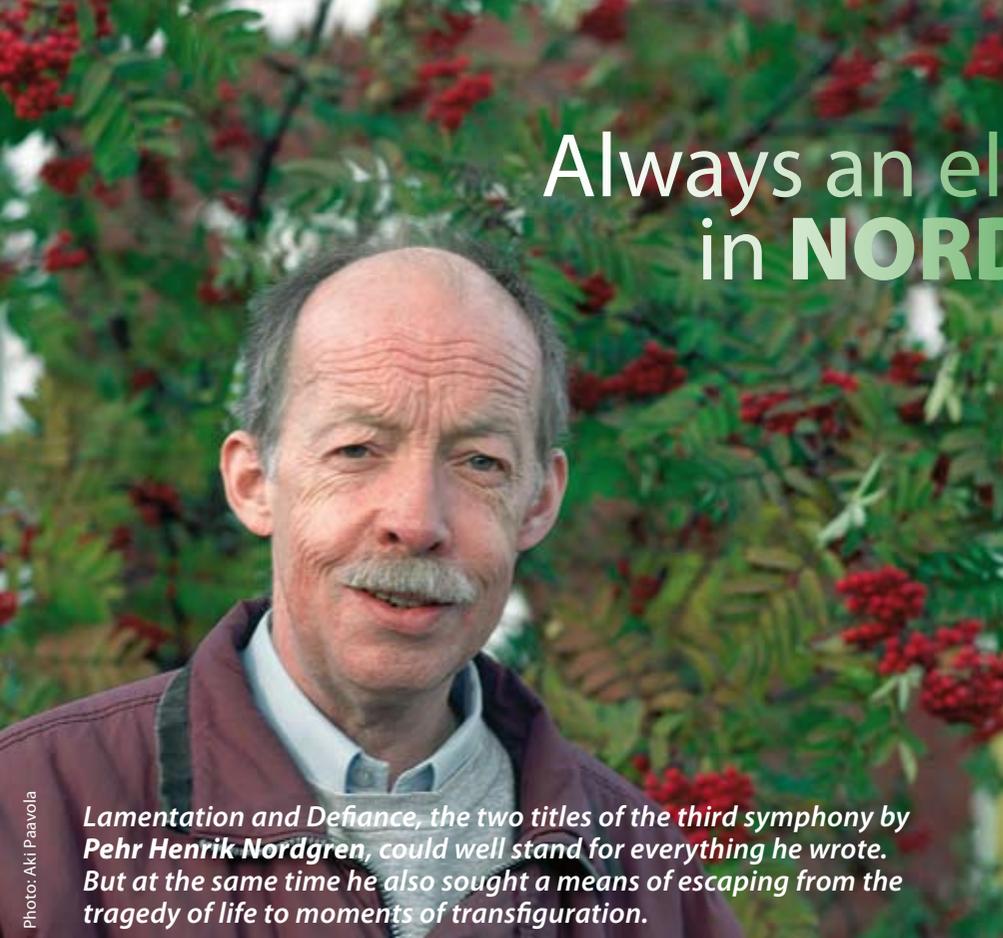


# Always an element of hope in **NORDGREN's** works



*Lamentation and Defiance, the two titles of the third symphony by Pehr Henrik Nordgren, could well stand for everything he wrote. But at the same time he also sought a means of escaping from the tragedy of life to moments of transfiguration.*

Photo: Aki Paavola

Pehr Henrik Nordgren died on 25 August 2008. He was born at Saltvik in the island province of Åland in 1944.

Nordgren studied music at the University of Helsinki, obtaining an arts degree in 1967. The topic of his thesis was the orchestration of the works by **Dmitri Shostakovich**. Throughout his life the Russian had been his greatest spiritual mentor, even though stylistically the two had very little in common. Nordgren then took private lessons in composition with **Joonas Kokkonen**, and from 1970 to 1973 studied composition and traditional Japanese music at the Tokyo University of Art and Music. On returning to Finland he set up home in Kaustinen, where he worked as a freelance composer right up to his death.

The list of Nordgren's works is both long and varied. And indeed, he ranks as one of the greatest and most distinctive contemporary Finnish composers. In *Euphonia II* (1967), his breakthrough work, he used a "melodic-polyphonic cluster technique" – concurrent strands of melody converging to form dense webs of sound.

Mere musical modernism did not, however, suffice for him, and his study of folk music, especially that of Ostrobothnia, Ingria and Japan, proved decisive to his development. The Japanese influence is visible in the major piano suite *Hoichi the Earless* (1972), the two quartets for traditional Japanese instruments (1974, 1978)

and the *Autumnal Concerto* for four Japanese instruments and orchestra – a magnificent blend of Japanese and Western timbres.

The move to Kaustinen, the 'capital' of Finnish folk music, resulted in the emergence of a stronger folk music element in the 1970s and a partnership that was to prove uniquely fertile with the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra conducted by **Juha Kangas** in the nearby town of Kokkola. Nordgren had got to know Kangas back in the late 1960s, and Kangas has done most of all to promote his colleague's music, conducting no fewer than 38 different works by him at 370 concerts.

For the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra Nordgren wrote as many as 22 compositions. Some of his works for string orchestra, such as his most often performed *Portraits of Country Fiddlers* (🎻), *Symphony for Strings* and *TRANSE-CHORAL* have already become classic items in the Finnish string-orchestra repertoire, and Nordgren can without any doubt be regarded as the most notable Finnish string-orchestra composer of all.

Many of Nordgren's 28 concertos are also scored for a solo instrument and strings. In them he aims not at superficial virtuosity but at using his solo instruments as a medium for expressing his innermost feelings. His last concerto is that for organ completed in late 2007, to be premiered posthumously in Kokkola in January 2009.

Although vocal music does not play a leading role in Nordgren's output, some of his finest and most far-ranging works do in fact belong in this genre, such as *Agnus Dei*, *Taivaanvalot* (The Lights of Heaven), *Beaivi, ähcázan* (The Sun, My Father) and *Tuuri*. Other major pillars in his oeuvre are his eight symphonies (1974–2006) and eleven string quartets. The String Quartet No. 11 was premiered at the Kuhmo Chamber Music Festival in July 2008; in the nature of a testament, it addresses the ultimate, fundamental questions facing man.

The dominant emotions in Pehr Henrik Nordgren's works are often anguish, torment, guilt and defiance. His later works, in particular, often also feature a meditative, mute inner reckoning. *Lamentation and Defiance*, the titles of two of the six movements of his great *third symphony* (🎻), could well stand for everything he wrote. But he also sought a way of escaping from life's tragedy, and his works always carry an element of hope. One of the finest transfiguring moments in all Finnish music comes at the end of *TRANSE-CHORAL*, at the point where a radiant major chord finally breaks through, cleansing life of all its impurity (🎻). And his final, *8th symphony* likewise leads from darkness to light, the focal point being that at which the minor that has dominated the beginning gives way at the end to the major.

Nordgren's music is unusually communicative, highly rewarding for the listener and at its finest purifying. In departing this world he took with him one of the most original voices in Finnish music. ■



The Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra will premiere Nordgren's Concerto for Organ and Chamber Orchestra on 17 January with Jan Lehtola. On 23 January the orchestra will hold Nordgren's memorial concert in Helsinki.