

Seven questions for Harri Wessman

Finnish composer Harri Wessman loves the sound of a choir and strings. His pieces for children are popular with teachers, and the critics have described his music as gently dissonant and dance-like, and also melodic. He compares the compositional process with another art he loves, namely cooking.





PHOTO: LISA WESSMAN

1 How did you come to music?

I came to music at the school in Tapiola where, in the early 1960s, **Erkki Pohjola** had founded the Tapiola Choir that later became famous the world over. I played the cello and double bass in the chamber orchestra that accompanied it. My image of how music should sound to a great extent derives from that time. I love the sound of a children's choir and strings, but I've always been a bit afraid of winds and things that rattle. It was also around then that I became close friends with **Jaakko Ilves** the violinist, **Risto Poutanen** the cellist, **Ilmo Ranta** the pianist and **Jarmo Kankaanpää** the bassist. I have written two piano trios for the Ilves–Poutanen–Ranta Trio – the Tapiola Trio. In spirit they are in the “neopathos” style that, back in those early days and with a touch of playful self-irony, we called our “school”. We wanted to put across the emotional dimension of music at a time when it wasn't fashionable in modern, and certainly not avant-garde circles.

2 Which works of yours mean the most to you?

I used to get a bit annoyed that my old song *Water under Snow is Weary* (Vesi väsy lumen alle)  for choir is particularly highly rated at the expense of my other works. After all, I wrote the first version back in 1973, when my composition studies had barely got under way. I suppose I would have liked some later, more ambitious work to evoke similar reactions. I don't think quite like that any more. It's an advantage for any composer to have one piece that is played and recorded over and over again. New CDs with this choral work of mine are constantly being released in the United States. The international success of this song was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the Tapiola Choir sang it on its international tours in the 1970s and 80s. The words are by the Estonian poetess **Eha Lättemäe** (1922–2012), who used engaging and purposely naive imagery to weave her poems. Beneath them it is possible to discern a second level, the one she used to escape from the pressure to which she was subjected. She was not allowed to do the work for which she was trained or to travel abroad. What sort of metaphor is there hidden in the opening words *Water under snow is weary, under ice it stretches sleeping*?

I wrote the *Trumpet Concerto*  in 1987 as a commission from the Kemi Music Institute for 17-year-old **Pasi Pirinen**. He gave it a masterly performance, and even now I still look upon it as one of my best compositions. In some places it's

quite romantic, in others dance-like. **Jouko Harjanne** recorded it with the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by **Leif Segerstam**, and **Ole Edvard Antonsen** later made an equally brilliant recording for BIS, with the Sundsvall Chamber Orchestra conducted by **Christian Lindberg**.

3 How do you believe your music comes across to the listener?

Most people regard music as emotional communication, unless they're the type who hear music more as a sort of aural architecture, as a sound construct, as mobile acoustic forms. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and the emotional communication dimension is, I believe, also possible in a wilder and less traditional idiom.

4 Where do you find the inspiration for your compositions?

The majority of my compositions have been commissions, and luckily they incorporate a social aspect: they've been for a particular performer or performers. Communicating with the musicians is extremely inspiring. The commissions have also had a fixed deadline, and that's a good stick for lazybones. I don't seek inspiration in a birch forest, or walking along the seashore; I'm happiest in an urban environment. Yet I consider myself lucky if I have sufficient time on my own, and peace and quiet while work is in process – but also to be able to discuss things with the future performer.

5 How would you describe your composition process and your musical language?

All kinds of material interest me: timbres, rhythm, harmony, melody, technology, folk music. At one time I derived great strength from the book *Twentieth Century Harmony* by **Vincent Persichetti**. Also important was the thorough grounding in jazz harmony I received from **Eero Koivisto** at the Sibelius Academy. **Joonas Kokkonen** taught me for nearly a decade with the patience of a psychotherapist and succeeded in inoculating me with a technique for making musical motifs and ideas evolve into bigger and psychologically coherent units. Critics have sometimes described my music as gently dissonant and dance-like, and also melodic. I do not refute this. The composition process has a close affinity with another art I love, namely cooking. There is a magnificent description in the

Danish film *Babette's Feast* directed by **Gabriel Axel** of what cooking is fundamentally all about.

6 And what about your pieces for teaching purposes? How do they take shape and what must you bear in mind when composing them?

Writing pieces for teaching purposes alongside other works has turned out to be a lengthy project. Maybe sometime during my lifetime I'll manage to produce pieces suitable for all instruments and the different Music Institute grade exams. I don't write children's music. Stylistically I write in the same way as for professionals; technically, the pieces just have to be easier to play. Most difficult of all is writing for children who are complete beginners. The pieces need to be rich in expression, and in order to achieve this, you have to make full use of everything that's idiomatic in the instrument. You also have to include elements that are natural to the present day and age: timbres, special effects that are easy to produce, and so on. Not just for the sake of it, however, but to reinforce the musical message.

How can you do this when experience has shown that if you commission composers to write pieces suitable for children, they turn out to be too difficult? To avoid this, I dedicate works to a specific young player working for a particular exam. With the pupil and teacher I run through the techniques that the child already masters and those that still are required before taking the grade exam. I find out how fast the player can handle staccatos, whether the young clarinetist can manage *frullato*, and so on. That done, I know the limitations and the recipe.

7 What plans do you have for new compositions?

I've got a commission from the Lauttasaari Music Institute for a *Concertino for Flute and String Orchestra* in which the young virtuoso **Peppi Kajoluoto** has agreed to be the soloist. Another interesting challenge is a *Concerto for Viola D'amore* for **Sirkka-Liisa Kaakinen-Pilch**. I remember the words of Joonas Kokkonen when I tell myself a composer should work hard. He once said in a different context: “In certain circumstances, even a composer, deserves to be sacked.” So start notating – pronto – and *carpe diem*. Life is not as long as we'd like!

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