

Erik Bergman (Photo: Matias Uusikylä)

In the previous issue of Highlights Gustaf Sjökvist, the renowned Swedish choral conductor, wrote about Eric Ericson and Swedish choral music. Here Sjökvist examines choral music from the opposite sides of the Baltic, featuring the Finns Erik Bergman and Einojuhani Rautavaara and the Estonian Veljo Tormis – three choral composers each with his own distinctive sound.

THREE CHORAL COMPOSERS – THREE DISTINCTIVE SOUNDS

Gustaf Sjökvist

Erik Bergman has always been fascinated by the human voice, and the search for new expressive means has always been a prominent aspect of his works. In many ways he is the leading figure in modern Finnish choral music. His first choral works, which were mostly for male-voice choir, were written as early as the mid-40s and for many years Bergman conducted several male-voice choirs, including the Akademiska Sångföreningen.

Bergman's first compositions were written in an almost National Romantic spirit, but he gradually began to find a path of his own which led to a more individual style. Towards the end of the 50s he composed *Vier Galgenlieder* for speech choir, without a single note of song, to a text by Christian Morgenstern. Other important works are *Lapponia* (1975), *Dreams* (1977), the *Hathor Suite* (1971) and *Samothrake* (1971). Each of these works represents a different stage in Bergman's stylistic development. An

important source of inspiration in *Lapponia* is nature in its different guises – the darkness of the arctic night and the light of the midnight sun – together with melodic formulae taken from the musical heritage of the Saami people. In *Dreams* the composer paints a picture of an imaginary dream landscape with a mixture of clusters, Sprechgesang and improvised passages. The *Hathor Suite* is based on an ancient Egyptian tale, and here Bergman mixes choral sound effects and soprano and baritone voices with flute, clarinet, harp and diverse percussion instruments in an extremely colourful manner. *Samothrake* is a dramatic scene based on a poem by Gunnar Ekelöf.

In the early 90s Petrarch's immortal love poems inspired Bergman to compose the four-movement *Petrarch Suite* (1991) for baritone solo and chorus. Here the composer uses such expressive means as Sprechgesang and speaking chorus, interspersed with lyrically sonorous choral passages, joyful songs and lamentations. *Nein zur Lebensangst* (1991) is a suite in three movements to poems by Peter Lauster. Bergman recalls how he was captivated by

these poems and imagined them set to music. In order to make the words more readily understood, part of the text is declaimed before each movement. The first movement is for speaking chorus only, the second juxtaposes the recited text and the scattered sounds of the choir, and the last movement is characterised by the choir's homophonic recitation.

One of Finland's most prominent cultural ambassadors in the field of choral music has been **Erkki Pohjola** and his Tapiola Choir. The invigorating sound produced by these young singers has inspired many composers, including Erik Bergman. *Tapiolassa* (1992) is based on a short excerpt from the Kalevala which describes Tapiola himself, a figure in Finnish mythology. A melody in 5/4 time is developed in an archaic polyphonic style, lyricism is fused with dramatic force, naive playfulness is combined with shamanistic ecstasy.



Einojuhani Rautavaara (Photo: Matti Kolho)

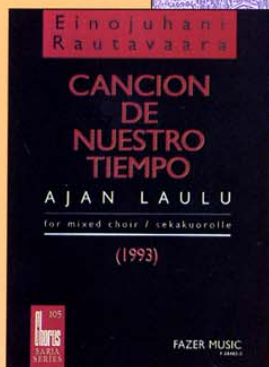
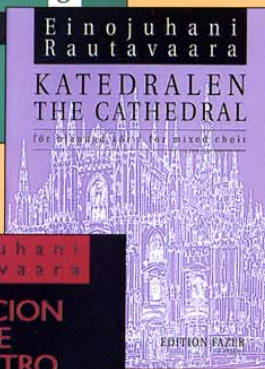
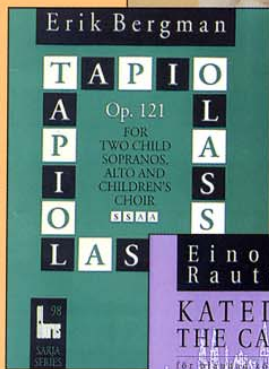
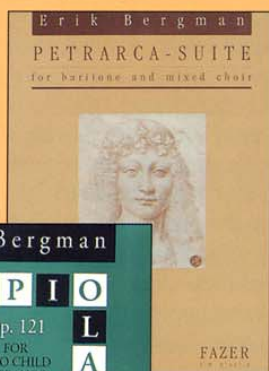
One of the most widely acclaimed Finnish composers in international circles is **Einojuhani Rautavaara**. Stylistically he is probably the most heterogeneous of all living Finnish composers – neo-classicism, dodecaphony and neo-romanticism are a few of the concepts with which his music has been associated at different times. One of the major premieres for which **Harald Andersén** and the Finnish Radio Chamber Choir were responsible was Rautavaara's almost two-hour *Vigilia* (*All-Night Vigil*, 1971-72) for choir a cappella and soloists. This work features many different styles. The influence of orthodox sacred music is particularly noticeable, combined with solo recitations flavoured with quarter-tone intervals. Two of the movements from the *All-Night Vigil* have been published separately, and the complete score has recently been published by Edition Fazer.

Both Rautavaara's choice of texts and his stylistic means of expression display elements of mysticism. *Nirvana Dharma* (1979) for choir a cappella and flute is one example – the text was written by **R.D. Laing**. Another example is *Katedralen* – a cathedral of music to poems by **Edith Södergran** – which was written in 1983, commissioned by the Finnish and Swedish Broadcasting Companies. Here the composer uses a number of different stylistic solutions – the aleatoric introduction and coda, spoken passages which gradually merge into song, whole-tone and half-tone chord progressions and so on. The musical structure becomes a sort of cathedral; the intervals and melodic figures from the

introduction reappear at the end, all the building-blocks are fitted together, and a starry sky is painted above the cathedral. Rautavaara's sacred music also includes *Magnificat* (1979) and *Credo* (1972).

Suite de Lorca (1973) has become a best-seller, sung by numerous choirs throughout the world. Each of the four Lorca songs has its own distinctive compositional style – the first is an ostinato, the second is built up of long glissandi, the third movement is based on the Phrygian mode and the Suite ends with a movement in which the choral part-writing produces a guitar-like imitation. A commission from the Tokyo Philharmonic Chorus resulted in *Cancion de nuestro tiempo* (1993), where Rautavaara once again used texts by **Federico Garcia Lorca**. In the first movement the choir recites Lorca's surrealistic representation of industrial society and war, while in the second the music symbolises the enigma of time. The last movement, *Sleepless City*, is based on a text which took on a new urgency in 1993, and was then given the subtitle *Nocturno del Sarajevo*.

Rainer Maria Rilke has been a source of inspiration to Rautavaara on many occasions. The song cycles *Fünf Sonette an Orpheus* and *Die Liebenden*, the concerto for double bass *Angel of Dusk*, the orchestral work *Angels and Visitations* and the brass piece *Playgrounds for Angels* were all inspired by Rilke's poetry. The *Duino Elegies* have accompanied Rautavaara, both literally and spiritually, throughout his life, but it was not until 1993 that he felt ready to set *Die erste Elegie* to music. Four triads



constitute the twelve-note series which forms the basic material of the piece. The music is gentle and expressive, even when it rises to dramatic heights.

Not so long ago the name **Veljo Tormis** was virtually unknown in Sweden. Admittedly choir enthusiasts who had contacts in Estonia managed by various means to get hold of pieces by him, usually in the form of very poor copies, and the few choirs from Estonia that were able to visit Sweden before the liberation of the Baltic countries nearly always included Tormis's music in their programmes. Estonian immigrants in Sweden also used to talk about this fantastic composer, but apart from this very little was known about him. However, in the autumn of 1979 his choral work *Curse Upon Iron* from 1972 (Raua needmine, revised 1991) was broadcast on the Swedish Radio's classical music channel – and the result was a stream of requests to the radio programme Your Concert Choice. But it was not until 1991 that an edition was published which included an English translation of the text, enabling us to understand the piece to the full for the first time. Since then this suggestive, almost magical piece, with its throbbing shaman's drum accompaniment to the choral recitation, has become standard repertoire for many choirs, not only in Sweden but throughout the world.

Another piece by Veljo Tormis which attracted considerable attention early on was his *Autumn Landscapes* (Sügismaastikud) composed in 1964 (published in 1991). This suite consists of seven lyrical landscape scenes, sensitively portrayed in music. There are two versions of the suite, one for mixed choir and one for women's voices. *Childhood Memory* (Helletused) from 1982 has also been incorporated in the repertoire of many choirs. With its virtuoso soprano solo and the choir's dance-like rhythmic patterns, the piece is an important addition to the repertoire.

An ambitious edition of one of Tormis's most comprehensive works is now being published by Edition Fazer. The title of the work is *Forgotten Peoples* (Unustatud Rahvad) and it took Tormis nearly twenty years – from 1970 to 1989 – to complete it. The ancient folk songs from Estonia and other Finno-Baltic regions have been an important source of inspiration for the



Veljo Tormis (Photo: Tõnu Tormis)

composer, whose aim is to revive the aesthetic and ethical qualities of folk song in his compositions in an authentic manner. The Finno-Baltic Estonian minorities (the Livonian, Votic, Ingrian, Izhorian, Vepsian and Karelian people) mainly lived near the Gulf of Finland and St. Petersburg. Many of them have already disappeared, however, and others are gradually being assimilated by their larger neighbours – the Russians, Finns and Latvians. A number of arrangements of the music of these ethnic groups have now been published. For many choir leaders this presents a completely new field of repertoire to be explored, and it will undoubtedly provide a valuable addition to the programmes of many choirs.

The first volume called *Livonian Heritage* includes material from the former region of Livia on the west coast of Latvia. The

titles of the arrangements in the anthology are in Estonian throughout, but the texts to the individual songs are printed in the original language, in this particular case Livonian. English translations of the texts are also included, as well as phonetic aids to pronunciation. Livonian Heritage was followed by a collection of songs entitled *Votic Wedding Songs* (the Votic population lived near the border on the Estonian shores of the Gulf of Finland).

The third volume, *Izhorian Epic*, was composed in 1975 and uses material from an ethnic group that lived alongside the Votes, although their folk music was much closer to the music of Karelia. *Ingrian Evenings*, the fourth volume, consists of songs in Finnish – but the dialect is Ingrian. The Vepsian minority lived not far from Karelia, and their folk music included a form which resembles the pastorate. The main basis for the choral arrangements in the fifth cycle, which is called *Vepsian Paths*, consists of recorded material which Tormis himself has transcribed, using traditional musical notation. The title of the sixth cycle is *Karelian Destiny*. Of all the ethnic groups in the Finno-Baltic region, the Karelian people are most fond of singing. Kalevala, the Finnish national epic, also originated from this region. This volume consists of a suite of Karelian runic songs.

In his choral cycles Veljo Tormis has tried to bring out the special characteristics of the folk music of the different ethnic groups. His approach has been to focus on the genuine and the typical. By such means this national heritage can be preserved for future generations and become part of our global culture.

Koka kiitmine Praising the Cook

VELJO TORMIS

Allegro moderato [marcando] (♩ = 100)

sempre pp

I Tenori

II

Solo mf

Tutti sempre pp

Bassi I

II

Ü - vä

Ü - vä kok - ki, kau - nis kok - ki!

Ü - vä kok - ki, kau - nis kok - ki, kau - nis kok - ki, kau - nis kok - ki,

Ü - vä kok - ki, kau - nis kok - ki, ü - vä kok - ki,