



The composer Erik Bergman has always presented a radical profile. He is the inquisitive and rebellious type who refuses to accept restricting norms – the “odd man out” who goes against the current. And for a long time this image of the composer as the wild Ostrobothnian, the provocative innovator, the “eternally youngest” of the Finnish composers, has been built up by the press like a cult.

## ERIK BERGMAN – Surrounded by Magical Sounds

Today, when he can look back on a ninety-year-long life and a sixty-year-long career as a composer – his opus list amounts to some hundred and fifty works – he is, if possible, even more ecstatic than ever. One of his most recent works, which he has actually called *Lextase pour un guitariste* (Op. 144, 1999), is a colourful, humorous étude, in which the guitar-player is given full freedom to improvise; to expand the intimate sound world of his instrument with singing, whistling and percussive elements, albeit within a clearly controlled formal framework.

To Bergman the present is all-important. And the future. This was already the case in the mid-fifties, when he was the first composer to introduce the twelve-tone technique in Finland. During the feverish rebuilding period after the war, at a time when the musical life of Finland was still relatively isolated from the rest of the world, he was one of the most active pioneers of new music. At that time Bartók stood out as one of the leading figures and Bergman regarded him as a synthesis of the opposites Schoenberg and Stravinsky: Bartók was the composer who liberated European art music from the constraints of stiff, symmetrical rhythms.

### The Sensualism of Rhythm

Rhythm has always been a focal ingredient in Bergman's compositions and he has always enjoyed its invincible sensualism. He is fascinated by dance as a human means of expression. This is seen most clearly in *Samothrake*, a setting of an evocative poem by Gunnar Ekelöf in which he creates a cross-cultural concept with the help of narrator, mixed choir, double bassoon, two trumpets, two trombones, two percussionists and dancers. In the same way he also develops a primitive dance-like force in the

last movements of most of his major works, an explosive rhythmic catharsis which almost takes one's breath away. And now, after his great synthesis, the opera *The Singing Tree* (composed 1986–1988, premiered 1995) he has finally composed a ballet, *Le Voyage*, which was first performed in a concert version in the autumn of 2000. A stage premiere is planned for the autumn of 2001, Bergman's anniversary year.

*Le Voyage* is a thrilling documentation of a Western modernist's fascination with Polynesian rhythms, tangos from Buenos Aires, samba and orgiastic South African rhythms. The experiences of a month spent in the southern hemisphere, filtered through the composer's own identity, are presented in six movements, and the result is highly personal world music. Erik Bergman's ballet takes the form of a cavalcade; the composer himself calls it a dance poem for dancers, singers, instrumentalists, chorus and orchestra. A radical never completely changes his skin and Erik Bergman has consistently refused to think in purely symphonic terms.

For many years it was also believed that the solo concerto was not his genre, but with the orchestral work *Colori ed improvvisazioni* (Op. 72, 1973) Bergman firmly adopted a colouristic-aleatoric tonal language. Shortly afterwards, inspired by skilled musicians and their need for rewarding pieces, he tackled concerto form. His first solo concerto was *Dualis* (1978), a one-movement cello concerto, which was soon followed by others: the *Flute Concerto*, the *Piano Concerto*, the *Violin Concerto* and, after a short gap, *The Maestro and His Orchestra* for violin and strings (1996), the *Oboe Concerto “Cadenza”* (1996) and the *Concerto for Cello and Strings* (1998). A characteristic feature of each of these concertos is the desire to experiment

with different timbres. Since Bergman is constantly on the lookout for new performance techniques, musical imagination is encouraged and the musicians' demands for technical challenges are fulfilled many times over. Furthermore, Bergman's collaboration with committed musicians soon resulted in a large number of chamber music works for various constellations.

One of the most noticeable features of Erik Bergman's compositions is the manifestation of an ear that is hypersensitive to sounds. First of all he stretched vocal expression to the limit in all manner of whispers, drones, smacking sounds and incantations. He was the first Finnish composer to experiment with speech choir, inspired by his studies with **Wladimir Vogel** in Switzerland. His settings of **Christian Morgenstern's** poems *Drei Galgenlieder* for male choir and *Vier Galgenlieder* for mixed choir and, at a later date, *Bim Bam Bum* for tenor, narrator, male choir and instrumental ensemble have become valuable classics. Bergman has a mischievous sense of humour that not infrequently breaks out in a peal of burlesque laughter.

### Rich Spectrum of Sounds

But at the same time he is extremely aware of the microscopic sounds in his surroundings and nature has always been a significant part of Bergman's inner landscape. He grew up in a small idyllic town and his father was a professional gardener so he has learnt to observe even the smallest nuances of the changing seasons. When he composes he likes to get away from the noise and bustle of the capital city. In the winter he goes to a weekend cottage north of Helsinki where he can listen to the silence of the forest and enjoy a sauna. In the summer he goes to his favourite haunt by the sea near his birthplace Nykarleby. There, in Grynna, he has

built up his own paradise close to nature. There he can sit in a steaming sauna and look out of the window and watch the antics of the seagulls. There, among the many wooden huts, he has his own composer's workshop. And there he cultivates his rock garden, he nurtures the plants with loving care, he wanders along the paths and he listens.

The morning landscape, with its sounds of awakening, frequently recurs in Eric Bergman's sound world. His early orchestral works include *Aubade* (Op. 48, 1959) which, according to the composer, was inspired by the morning mist in Istanbul, and he christened his first concerto (the flute concerto which has already become a classic) *Birds in the morning*. For Bergman birds are a metaphor for freedom and flight. He himself has always wanted to be (and often has been) the leader of the flock, a musical explorer. Birds are a feature of several of his compositions, in particular the masterpiece for male choir *Svanbild* (The Swan) and *Fåglarna* (The Birds) for baritone, five soloists, male choir, percussion and celesta. Both compositions are settings of poems by **Solveig von Scholtz**, who was the composer's wife for more than thirty-five years.

Nocturnal visions are also expressed in strong terms in Bergman's music. The four-movement choral work *Nox* is fabulously effective. Four poets, writing in four different languages, have provided inspiration for totally divergent moods: the setting of Quasimodo's poem is tranquil and meditative, Hans Arp's is bizarre, Eluard's is elegiac while the setting of Eliot's poem is completely ecstatic. *Nox* is a

masterpiece. Its subtle timbres and rich spectrum of emotions present two aspects of Bergman's creative spirit which, more than every technical experiment, constitute the essence of his artistry.

### Seeking the Origin

While keeping his eye firmly on the future, Erik Bergman has also explored the past, searching for the very roots of the deepest existential issues. In the 1950s he studied Gregorian chant at the Vatican and he was also fascinated by ancient Mediterranean cultures. And long before it became fashionable to adhere to Eastern cultures and religions he saw the value of their wisdom. He realised that we have a lot to learn from ancient cultures, where respect for the intuitive has survived to a far greater extent than in the Western world's rational way of thought.

Basically Bergman has always been searching for the common origin of different cultures, after an original music. He set out on that path as early as the 1950s in *Rubaiyat* (for baritone, male choir and orchestra) in which he evokes his own musical vision of **Omar Khayyam's** poems and at the same time displays a profound knowledge of Arabic and Persian musical traditions. In the same way he has also sought out the very marrow of every cultural area that he has become acquainted with – and there have been a good many of them over the years.

His perhaps most personal work, *Bardo Thödol* (Op. 74, 1974) is a setting of the Tibet-

an Book of the Dead. Before Bergman created his visions of Bardo, a state between death and rebirth, he spent years studying Buddhist philosophy and also undertook numerous journeys to drink in the Buddhist atmosphere – among other things he spent a longer period with Tibetan lamas in Nepal. The musical material of the forty-minute work, as well as Bergman's own choice of poems (taken from a German translation of the Book of the Dead) is based on detailed studies of religious rituals and musical formulas. This is a remarkable achievement in itself, an impressive result from a highly receptive composer with equal focus on intellect and intuition. The scale of the work and the large number of performers – narrator, mezzo-soprano, baritone, mixed choir and orchestra – as well as the thematic material, which is perhaps both strange and demanding for Western ears, has unfortunately prevented this masterpiece from gaining its rightful position, not only in Finnish musical life but in the music history of the world.

The fascinating sound world of *Bardo Thödol* is created with the help of a number of Tibetan temple instruments – a damaru (rattle-drum), a dung-dkar trumpet (conch) and a fantastic cymbal – part of his impressive private collection of folk instruments from the whole world, souvenirs from his extensive travels. The composer keeps the instruments in his own home, hung on the wall or displayed on shelves and tables in his living-room. With inexhaustible enthusiasm he willingly demonstrates the instruments for visitors. “Listen to this!” he says, jumping out of his chair and striking two cymbals against each other. The sound is deep and penetrating. Full of atmosphere. Ancient spiritual culture.

Burlesque and ecstatic. A master of colours. Certainly, but all this is overshadowed by Erik Bergman's vision. It is the inner life, the inner sound that counts, that which can't be seen or touched. That is the only thing that matters.

Lena von Bonsdorff

Erik Bergman will be 90 on 24 November 2001. Music by him will receive an exceptionally wide hearing this year, and numerous concerts are to be held around his birthday. These will include a gala concert by the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra at which a new Bergman commission will be premiered, and concerts by the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra and at the Sibelius Academy.

Erik Bergman (Photo: Heikki Tuuli)