

# KIMMO HAKOLA, MUSIC DRAMATIST *par excellence*

*Kimmo Hakola is a creator of intense musical dramas that recognise no stylistic or expressive limits. "Many contemporary composers have an aversion for narrative", says Hakola. "Personally, I see musical events as drama: the music writes the script. On the other hand we all, like it or not, tell our own story. Why pretend this work is not part of me? Round the corner everything is a great mystery that neither words nor music can fully describe."*

No way can Kimmo Hakola (b. 1958) be said to avoid narrative. His musical dramas have an almost Shakespearean sound and fury, bursting with intensity and tender tranquillity, dramatic disputes and heart-rending monologues, striking juxtapositions of moods, of contrasts and surprises. His music can, at its strictest, be Modernistic and make great demands of the performer, but it can equally well have the romantic flow of film music, the exoticism of oriental folk music or the distinctive, heady charm of Klezmer.

Some may see in Hakola and his pluralism signs of Postmodernism, but as composer **Juhani Nuorvala** points out, "Hakola's Postmodernism is not of an intellectual, ironic nature; rather, he may be said to embrace his oriental dances and Hollywoodian string themes with warmth and love." And when he displays a flash of humour, it is not simply gratuitous, slipped in as a joke, but springs from a worldview of almost Beethovenian stature and a desire and ability to see things from many perspectives.

## Ebb and Flow

If the music of Hakola fails to keep to the conventional tracks, then the same can be said of his career. He began to make a name for himself with his *First String Quartet* in 1986. Finland at the time was at the peak of its Modernist period and the quartet, alternately wildly virtuosic and drawn in upon itself, fell naturally into the Modernist mould of the times. It got an excellent reception and in 1987 was voted by the UNESCO Rostrum of Composers as the best work by a composer of under 30. Hakola thus made a successful start to his career – one is almost tempted to say too successful. For the good reception of his breakthrough work merely raised the pressure on a composer already exceptionally self-critical. Over the next few years he produced only a few solo pieces for violin (*A même les échos* I and II, 1988) and double bass (*Thrust*, 1989).

Hakola's next success was *Capriole* (1991) for bass clarinet and cello, winner of the UNESCO Rostrum of Composers in 1993.

With its unconventional combination of styles, Capriole heralded a new era in Hakola's musical thinking, for inserted in the Modernist virtuoso piece is a long episode of Mongolian folk music. It was also clear from Capriole that here was a composer no longer fettered by the traditional, dogmatic constraints of style. Despite the success of Capriole, Hakola's career was for some years still marked by a strong creative urge tempered by introspective searching. The painful battle to reconcile the two in the *Piano Concerto* was finally won with its premiere in August 1996. By this time expectations were running inhumanly high, yet the work nevertheless succeeded in exceeding them and taking its listeners completely by surprise.

The Hakola Piano Concerto is a work on a grand scale, a colossus in nine movements lasting 55 minutes. What is more, its content well matches its dimensions. It has lustre and force, solemnity, profound emotions and humour. An example of its humour is the cadenza, which is like the distorted image of an etude player in a hall of mirrors, dashing off a C major scale, getting carried away in a little jazzy jam and thoroughly caught up in a barrage of notes in a take-off of serial music. "My Piano Concerto is no heroic tale, but it could be the story of human victory, failure and the spice of life," Hakola says.

The Piano Concerto at last unleashed Hakola's creative powers, which have since gone from strength to strength, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The past few years have produced such large-scale works as the *Second String Quartet* (1997), a *Clarinet Quintet* (1997), *Hymyilevä Apollo* (The Smiling Apollo) for soloists, choir and ensemble (1997), *Sinfonietta* (2000), the chamber operas *Marsin mestarilaulajat* (The Mastersingers of Mars, 2000) and *Sinapinsiemen* (The Mustard Seed, 2000) and a *Clarinet Concerto* (2001), plus a number of smaller-scale works.

## No Patent Solutions

Over the past few years Hakola has struck a productive vein not hampered by limitations of

style. He has no stereotyped, patent solutions to composing. Instead, his materials and strategies may vary considerably from one work to the next. He seems to shun the traditional ideal of symmetry and unity in favour of a deliberate imbalance, an element of surprise, of pluralism, of the spice he spoke of in conjunction with the Piano Concerto.

In the *Second String Quartet* the unconventional strategy has resulted in a very unusual overall form: the work consists of five Allegro movements, each conceived in a different way. It has certain material affinities with the first quartet and is thus essentially Modernistic. Also from the same world at the level of expression is the one-movement *Sinfonietta*, a raging, unrelenting orchestral *tour de force*.

For some reason the clarinet seems to fire Hakola's imagination like no other instrument. In the solo piece *Loco* (1995), for example, the clarinet also plays a bass drum by means of a pedal, and oriental folk music of Hakola's own invention has an important part to play. In the *Clarinet Quintet* the first movement is impetuous and Modernistic, while the second contains allusions to the late Romantic era, Klezmer, and even organa with medieval overtones. It could be likened to a diptych, one panel of which is abstract and the other figurative.

The *Clarinet Concerto* can only be described as a roaring success. It is a work combining different musical universes in more ways than ever. Its salient features include the violent, rhythmic beat and the play with tonal elements in the cadenza of the first movement; the other movements are marked by intro-

spective meditation, romantic sentimentality, and dreamy or passionate, virtuosic Klezmer moods by turn.

The two operas by Hakola are almost complete opposites of each other, for the only things they have in common are the chamber format and hence relatively short duration of just over an hour. The first of the operas, *The Mastersingers of Mars*, is based on the incomparable world and aesthetic of the cartoons by the Finnish artist **Matti Hagelberg**. It also includes such unusual (for an opera) elements as TV quiz shows, pilgrims on their way to Mars, and a heroic Teddy Bear Patrol out to rescue the universe. The absurd ambience is reflected in the music, which is a mixture of Modernistic abrasiveness, minimalist repetition, oriental timbres, stylistic and other quotations, even from Bach, Mozart, Donizetti and Puccini. The second opera, *The Mustard Seed*, is a serious study of the 18th century Finnish religious dissident **Jaakko Kärämäki**. The music is uniform in style and expression, the only exception being the beautiful, tonal hymn tune, again by Hakola. Despite its religious topic, the opera has a universal dimension in that it addresses life and ideas in general. It seems to stress the importance of the individual's own inner conviction rather than the institutionalised view of life imposed from outside. This is precisely the moral code and aesthetic which Hakola himself abides by in his music.

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Kimmo Hakola (Photo: Johanna Mannila)