

“Composing is tremendous fun and challenging: you always learn something new. If only I could be back playing in a rock band sometime. And when the time and the place are right, I’ll get out my easel again,” says Tommi Kärkkäinen, a man who knows the meaning of life.



## TOMMI KÄRKKÄINEN – THERE’S MORE TO LIFE THAN COMPOSING

Glancing through the list on the notice board of applicants accepted for the Sibelius Academy in summer 1992, my eye happened to catch and make a note of the name of Tommi Kärkkäinen. Four years later, while browsing through the works submitted for the Ung Nordisk Musik (Young Nordic Music) festival, the name Kärkkäinen struck a familiar chord. Only six years later the same guy is in the news more than virtually any other young Finnish composer. Having even had a taste of international success as well, he really does seem to be in the fast lane. How did it all happen?

“When I started at the Sibelius Academy, I made a deliberate choice: I’d spent the first few years slogging away at composition exercises and not hanker after any outside work,” he says by way of explaining his invisibility as a young student. “Then four years later, when I’d filled up all my exercise books, I started composing ‘real’ music and discovered I needed some contacts.”

Kärkkäinen accordingly sought to get involved in the Ears Open association and the Ung Nordisk Musik organisation. Ever since

his first composition proper, *Nocturnal Voices II* (Yön ääniä II, 1995) was performed at the UNM festival in Copenhagen in 1996, music by Kärkkäinen has regularly been heard at the major Nordic forums for young composers, until he became ‘too old’, that is. Born in 1969, he made his last UNM appearance in Helsinki in August 2000 with the orchestral *Nocturnal Journey* (1999).

The master behind this young apprentice is a man well known in Finnish music circles, Professor **Paavo Heininen**. “Heininen lays a lot of store by craftsmanship, but most of all he stresses a broad understanding of culture. It’s not enough for a composer nowadays to sit at home composing or waiting for a commission to come along. Which is why I want to be active and involved in lots of things. As soon as I can find a suitable studio I’m going to take up my other passion, painting, again, join the Uusinta Festival Factory, get on the committee of the Society of Finnish Composers, the Finnish Composers’ International Copyright Bureau, and things like that.”

### Progressive Rock and Orchestral Music

Although the Kärkkäinens as a family went in for Classical music and little Tommi was sent for piano lessons, rock music held the strongest appeal for the young and budding musician. “My friend Antti chose bass, Mikko guitar and Eero keyboards. So that left me with drums,” is how he explains his choice of instrument. Only a decade ago Kärkkäinen was the percussionist in YUP, a band that at that time played progressive rock but that is still going strong and becoming more and more popular. Kärkkäinen makes no secret of his rock background and says he would love to be back playing in a band somewhere, even if only for a moment.

Considering this background, it is surprising that it has not filtered through into Kärkkäinen’s music. “But I suspect there are nevertheless moods and events in the music of Pink Floyd or Rush that have influenced my compositions.” It will be interesting to see whether the rock element gets stronger with time. Many composers

have found this happening.

Things began to change when, in his late teens, Kärkkäinen heard **Igor Stravinsky’s** *Rite of Spring*. All of a sudden he was stricken with the Classical bug and Stravinsky became a major source of inspiration. Not until he had been accepted for the Sibelius Academy did he really entertain the idea of composing as a profession, however. For the first few years he kept close to the ground. He then caught the public eye with *Seven Miniatures* (1996) for orchestra, a work that won second prize in the Kuopio Composition Competition in 1997 and the International Rostrum of Young Composers in 1998. “These wins gave me a name and resulted in commissions. They haven’t influenced my actual music in any way.”

The Rostrum honour had one immediate consequence: a commission from the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra to celebrate the 450th anniversary of its host city, Helsinki. Kärkkäinen surprised everyone by producing a work in no way related to the Finnish capital. Instead, *Fontana obscura* (2000) drew inspiration from an obscure fountain or spring reputed to be at the bottom of the lake in the region where he was born. As a child he remembers wondering why the water did not run out of this hole. The idiom of Fontana obscura is that of a maturing composer; it is, with its thirds constructions, more consonant than his previous orchestral works *Seven Miniatures*, *Suite I* (1997) or *Nocturnal Journey*, and certainly *The Unborn* (Syntymätön, 1997) for wind sextet.

Tommi Kärkkäinen has fast become associated with orchestral music, partly, of course, due to the opportunities afforded him to write for various orchestral line-ups. Hearing his own music actually performed still counts for most of all to the young composer-artist, since it provides substance on which to work. “Of all the instruments, I somehow feel most at home with the orchestra. I also draw inspiration from my own compositions: one piece always suggests new ideas for the next, especially if it proves to me that I can now do something better than I did before.”

### Under Salonen’s Wing

That does not mean to say Kärkkäinen cannot turn his hand to chamber music, the genre with which young composers usually begin. Among his early works are a number of interesting studies in harmony, such as *In a Cave of Silver Grey* (Hopeanharmaassa luolassa) for flute and live electronics, or the *Sonata for Oboe and Midi Piano*. In the former various protractions turn what appears on the surface to be a solo work into a composition that operates at an exquisite

number of levels. The *Variations for Solo Cello* are, by contrast, a small-scale study of form, as is *Calvin & Hobbes* for piano.

Things are really happening for Kärkkäinen at the moment: the past couple of years have been highly productive and some of his works still await their first performance. The premiere of his new *Cello Concerto*, for example, is scheduled for the coming autumn in Bergen, Norway. The soloist in this, his biggest work to date, will be the young Finn **Sennu Laine**, principal cellist at the Berlin Staatsoper. *Atrum unda*, commissioned by the Savonlinna Orchestra, is likewise to be premiered before the end of this year.

The most exciting project is, however, an orchestral work ordered by **Esa-Pekka Salonen**. On being awarded the Finland Prize in late 2001, Salonen immediately announced that, having joined the ranks of middle-aged people with comfortable incomes, he felt it his duty to patronise the arts and culture and had therefore decided to commission a new orchestral work from three young Finnish composers. Heading the list of possibles was Tommi Kärkkäinen. The star conductor says he has been keeping a close eye on Kärkkäinen for some years now. Kärkkäinen’s reply on being asked what he intends to do is, “Give it everything I’ve got.”

Another thing Paavo Heininen tries to impress on his students is that there is more to life than composing. There is no need to remind Tommi Kärkkäinen of this – a man whose hobbies include cooking, drawing and a passion for the cinema. Nor has he completely abandoned the idea of composing rock music. Being asked to name his favourite whisky does, however, throw him into some confusion: Talisker, or maybe Balvenie ...or perhaps Laphroaig or Lagavulin...? “It’s the one I happen to be pouring out,” he finally decides.

Listening to Tommi Kärkkäinen speak, it is not difficult to tell what part of Finland he comes from. His eastern accent is not something he has ever sought to disguise, any more than his reasons for composing: “It’s tremendous fun and challenging. Every work will be different, and you always learn something new as you go along.” Many of his colleagues find the question far more difficult to answer, but Tommi Kärkkäinen, the father of a little girl and boy, finds it equally easy to define the meaning of life. “Children and family.” A spring that will never run dry.

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Commissioned by the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra  
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### Fontana Obscura for orchestra

Heininen (Photo: Annu Mikkonen)