

Humanism as symphonic fuel

Kalevi Aho's music reaches out into new territories

Imagine a steep mountainside in the heart of myth-drenched Finnish Lapland. In the background a majestic fell, in the foreground a deep valley against a backdrop of dusky forests and bare mountains. The Chamber Orchestra of Lapland is perched half way up the slope, the Radio Symphony Orchestra at the foot. Grouped around are "mountain musicians": brass players and exotic percussionists. The scene is illuminated by the seductive rays of the northern sun, the wind whistles and it seems as though nature itself wants to take part in this spectacular event.

This will – weather permitting – be the setting for the first performance of the *Twelfth Symphony*, subtitled *Luosto*, by **Kalevi Aho** (b. 1949) on 16 August 2003. A symphony specially designed for outdoor purposes may not be unique in symphonic literature, but it is certainly rare enough to attract attention beyond the boundaries of Sodankylä, the municipality that commissioned it.

Obviously one of the biggest challenges has been designing the sound and acoustics so that the symphony also works in a normal concert. Though Aho admits that there are always risks involved in a project like this, he is convinced that the symphony will be able to hold its own in other contexts. "The tonal language was, of course, conceived with the specific demands of the first performance in mind, but the musical substance should guarantee that balance won't be a problem anywhere else, such as at the Sibelius Hall in Lahti."

The symphony is 52 minutes long and scored for 120 musicians and two singers – Aho's largest work of its kind to date. On a conceptual plane it is programme music somewhat similar to Richard Strauss's *Alpensinfonie*, though the musical expression is, of course, very different. Inspired by the scenery and traditions of Lapland, it depicts both "inner" and "outer" experiences, from shamanic

seances via evocative tone paintings of the mid-winter darkness and the midnight sun to a raging storm in the mountains, in four movements of very varied character.

STRIKING IDIOM

"His slightly unassuming yet always kind appearance is vaguely reminiscent of Shostakovich, while his musical voice, with its pluralistic conception of the world and its intricate balance between the deliberately banal and the subtle, is undoubtedly closer to late Mahler." It is easy to agree with this anonymous opinion of Kalevi Aho. Traces of these masters are present in his art and worldview, although "Mahler seen through the eyes of Shostakovich" is probably nearer the mark.

Like Shostakovich, Aho matured early and by the age of 22 had already written three symphonies and as many string quartets. As in both Mahler and Shostakovich the symphonies – together with the three chamber symphonies – form an emotionally conditioned dramaturgical thread running through his works.

Starting with the *First Symphony*, written in 1969 when he was still studying composition with **Einojuhani Rautavaara** at the Sibelius Academy, Aho wrote no fewer than three symphonies over the next four years. The first two already display two basic qualities of his musical conception: his feeling for and often highly original use of form (the first and last movements of the *First Symphony* are fugues and the *Second Symphony* is a gigantic triple fugue) and his propensity for stylistic and expressive openness and flexibility (the second movement of the *First Symphony* is a stylised waltz, the third an excursion into a slightly surrealistic pseudo-Baroque world).

The *Third Symphony* bears the subtitle *Sinfonia Concertante No. 1* and is a first attempt to determine the optimal relationship between the individual (the solo violin) and the collective (the orchestra). The next attempt came ten years later with the richly expressive, passionately virtuosic *Violin Concerto*. The magnificent *Fourth Symphony* with its widely varied emotional contrasts between massive and subtle orchestral sonorities inevitably calls to mind the *Fourth Symphony* of Shostakovich and represents the culmination of Aho's first stylistic period.

OPERATIC SATIRE WITH A CRITICAL BARB

The Neoclassical and at times tonal traits of the first period were replaced by a more modernistic approach in the structurally and emotionally intricate *Fifth Symphony* (1975–76), which is almost "Ivesian" in its "colliding" musical planes. This modernistic approach was further accentuated in the *Sixth Symphony* – Aho's most uncompromisingly advanced symphonic work so far, including both micro-intervals and clusters on its emotionally varied agenda.

This second stylistic period continued with such key works as the first opera, the intense monologue *Avain* (The Key, 1977–78) for baritone and thirteen instrumentalists, which reveals an unerring instinct for stage and drama. This quality was refined even further in Aho's next work in this genre, as in the sombre and modernistic *Cello Concerto*, in which the individual is inexorably crushed by the collective.

The opera *Hyönteiselämä* (Insect Life, 1985–87), to a libretto by the composer himself after a play by **Josef** and **Karel Čapek**, and the *Insect Symphony* (Symphony No. 7, 1988) based on material from the opera, present a searing criticism of society. Here Aho's ironically satiric side, occasionally glimpsed in his earlier works, scores a real triumph. He writes effective tape music – his only attempt so far in this field – and happily makes use of pastiches on such popular music forms as the tango and foxtrot.

The insect opera and symphony heralded a third stylistic period, in which the pluralistic element plays an even greater part. Yet each work



Insect Life (Photo: Kari Hakli)

constitutes a stylistically independent project. The *Sixth Symphony* had explored one avenue to the end and it was time to find a new angle on the symphonic problem.

AN ABSOLUTE SYMPHONIC AESTHETIC

If the "abstract intrigue" so prominent in Aho's mainly non-programmatic music is absent in the programmatic, post-modernist *Seventh Symphony* (virtually unique among the Aho symphonies), then Aho is back on home ground in the extremely demanding *Piano Concerto* and the massive *Eighth Symphony* (1993) for organ and orchestra. In the *Piano Concerto* he continues to tackle the individual-collective relationship and pursues his thesis (with the soloist to guide him on his journey) of the abstract intrigue to unprecedented heights. The same tendency is apparent in the broadly-conceived *Eighth Symphony* with its imaginative use of the organ as a dramatic and intellectual commentator.

The thesis/antithesis concept so typical of Aho's artistic temperament sprouts an offshoot in the witty, pastiche-like *Ninth Symphony* for trombone and orchestra (1993–94). Written for **Christian Lindberg** and subtitled *Sinfonia Concertante No. 2*, it is nevertheless permeated with the dark undertones typical of this composer.

In the strictly non-programmatic *Tenth Symphony* (1996), drawing on the main theme from the first movement of Mozart's *Symphony No. 39*, Aho sums up his experience of the symphony so far. With its ingeniously modified (though never merely imitative) "Classical-Romantic" aesthetic, it may be seen as a tribute to the greatest forerunners in this field, with Bruckner in the vanguard.

Meanwhile, Aho has also continued to explore new means of operatic expression. In this respect his two latest operas, *Ennen kuin me kaikki olemme hukkuneet* (Before We All Have Drowned, 1995/99, libretto by Aho based on a radio play by **Juha Mannerkorpi**) and *Salaisuuksien kirja* (The Book of Secrets, 1998, libretto by **Paavo Rintala** and Kalevi Aho) are important, though different, milestones. The psychologically astute chamber opera *Before We All Have Drowned*, composed for the Finnish National Opera, raises seemingly trivial human life to a higher existential plane. One striking feature of the opera is the natural writing for the human voice. The compact fresco *The Book of Secrets*, composed for the Savonlinna Opera Festival, is the last part of a "human" trilogy, preceded by **Herman Rechberger's** ... *nunc et semper...* and **Olli Kortekangas's** *Marian Rakkaus* (*Maria's Love*).

CHAMBER MUSIC: THE QUINTET PROJECT

Another important line in Aho's output is his chamber music. He has never returned to the



(Photo: Ghadi Boustani)

string quartet since his first four youthful attempts. Instead, he has experimented with various quintet constellations – six so far, including quintets for bassoon and string quartet, for alto saxophone, bassoon, viola, cello and double bass, and for clarinet and string quartet.

His relatively comprehensive solo repertoire includes two *Sonatas for Accordion*, both written for **Marjut Tynkkynen**, a *Sonata for Solo Violin*, a *Sonata for Oboe and Piano*, a virtuosic *Piano Sonata* written for **Liisa Pohjola** and a series of compositions for solo instruments named "Solo", including *Solo III* for flute, *Solo IV* for cello and *Solo VI* for double bass.

Apart from his operas, Aho is not a markedly vocal composer, but he has produced a number of fine choral works and the delightful song cycle *Kiinalaisia lauluja* (Chinese Songs, 1977) for soprano and small orchestra/piano. Here his well-developed feeling for delicate orchestral timbres adds a special dimension to these sensitive settings of ancient Chinese poetry.

WRITINGS AND RECONSTRUCTIONS

Aho himself claims that he entered on a fourth artistic era with the dynamic, energetic *Eleventh*

Symphony for six percussion soloists and orchestra (1997–98). Rhythm now occupies a more prominent role, and he pays closer attention to the surface of the music. The same tendency can be seen in the *Quintet for flute, violin, two violas and cello*, written for the Kuhmo Chamber Music Festival in 2000, and the *Tuba Concerto*, even though features characteristic of earlier periods are also present here. While constantly reaching out into new territory, Aho continues to draw on expressive devices familiar from earlier periods.

Aho has always adopted a humanistic approach in his music. This has included the completion and editing of works by other composers – a job for which, with his sound knowledge of music history, he is unusually well-suited. He has also produced an amazing amount of literature on music over the years, including 460 articles, a number of newspaper columns and a variety of essays. He has also reconstructed and completed works by **Erik Tulindberg** (the six string quartets), Sibelius (early chamber works and *Karelia*) and **Uuno Klami** (the orchestral version of the first act of the unfinished ballet *Pyörteitä / Whirls*). He has written a new third act to the ballet, which can also be performed separately under the title *Sinfonista tansseja* (*Symphonic Dances*). *Hommage à Uuno Klami* (2001). At

Martti Talvela's request he orchestrated Musorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*.

Aho has also written articles on Finnish music and the Finnish national epic the Kalevala, on Einojuhani Rautavaara the symphonist, and – with **Marjo Valkonen** – a biography of Uuno Klami. He has edited texts by **Joonas Kokkonen, Ernest Pingoud** and **Erik Bergman** and written many thought-provoking articles, not only on music, art and aesthetics but also on politics and social criticism.

THE CONCERTO CHALLENGE

Aho has always been a prolific composer. Still awaiting their premieres are the *Twelfth Symphony*, the *Piano Concerto No. 2* for piano and string orchestra commissioned by the Mänttä Music Festival and the *Flute Concerto* written for **Sharon Bezaly**.

The list of commissions is long and, as a natural continuation of the educational works which run like a scarlet thread through his output, includes a piece for the Tapiola Youth Orchestra. He is also working on the *Thirteenth Symphony*, commissioned by the Lahti Symphony Orchestra for the fifth anniversary of the Sibelius Hall in 2005. Aho is Composer-in-Residence of the Lahti Symphony Orchestra, which is now recording his entire output on the BIS label. The work at present gracing his piano (his faithful companion) is a commission from the BBC for the Manchester International Cello Festival in 2004: a concerto for two cellos and orchestra to be premiered by **Frans Helmerson** and **Jan-Erik Gustafsson**. The commission is, Aho says, as demanding as it is stimulating: "There aren't many historical models since Vivaldi and the big challenge is, of course, to create the necessary contrast between the two solo instruments and between the soloists and the orchestra."

A composer with one foot in the past and one in the present, Aho combines influences from the most disparate sources and transforms them through his creative and emotional filter into something quite unique. He does not believe in complexity simply for the sake of it. His music always communicates directly with the listener, being simultaneously 'easy' yet 'difficult', but never banal, over-intellectual, introvert or aloof.

Kalevi Aho is equally natural and unaffected in his symphonies and operas as he is in his intimate musical miniatures. Monumental landscapes painted in broad brushstrokes go hand in hand with delicate watercolours, serious artistic confessions and humour. The spectrum of human emotions is always wide, and he never lets his listeners off lightly. He poses questions and sows the seeds of thoughts and impulses that continue to germinate long after the last note has died away. ■