

PAAVO HEININEN – a complex, timeless modernist

Paavo Heininen (b. 1938) has succeeded in composing an unusually wide, interesting and varied oeuvre in a career of nearly 50 years: orchestral works and concertos, two operas, a wealth of vocal and choral music, numerous solo and chamber music items and electronic music

The term 'modernism' is one often associated with Heininen. It is impossible to discern in his works any sharp or sudden shifts of style. Rather, his idiom has gradually and systematically evolved. Yet 'modernism' alone hardly describes the complex nature of his output, with its feelers in many directions. But though Heininen has drawn widely on modernistic devices, he has always, true to his own principles and in a way that is interesting, sought contacts with the thought patterns of earlier music as well. His synthesis of old and new never, however, leads to an ironising brand of postmodernism or a superficial mixture of styles, but rather to the application of the approach and structural principles of different eras within a distinctive, homogeneous idiom that is all his own.

From the very start of his career, Heininen has at times been branded a 'difficult' composer. This is to some extent a reflection of the cultural climate in Finland some decades ago, when the very mention of atonalism or dodecaphony was sufficient to arouse horror in the mind of many a listener. The wealth of detail in Heininen's music, and his desire to avoid facile, obvious solutions may likewise have created an impression of inaccessible music. Yet in addition to his infinite command of compositional technique, it is always easy to detect in his music a strong inner need to express himself and a distinctive sense of humour. It may, however, be a good idea to bear in mind a comment made by **Erkki Salmenhaara** in 1976: "The listener may be obliged to make a little effort in trying to fathom his music, but surely such effort is a condition for the reception of any non-commercial piece of music?" Today, if ever, when the international entertainment industry is engulfing us with unprecedented force, and the hunger for quick, easily-digested thrills has become common even in classical music, surely the works of Heininen are powerful evidence of the potential of serious, ambitious music?

Heininen has made a strong impression on the Finnish musical scene in other ways as well. An excellent pianist, he has given many of his piano works their first performance. He has written studies of contemporary Finnish composers and an extensive philosophical essay on serialism, and he can look back over a distinguished career as teacher of composition at the Sibelius Academy since the late 1960s. Among his eminent former students are **Magnus Lindberg**, **Kaija Saariaho**, **Jukka Tiensuu**, **Jouni Kaipainen**, **Eero Hämeenniemi** and **Veli-Matti Puumala**.

EARLY TOURS DE FORCE

From his very earliest opuses of the 1950s, Heininen was clearly a disciple of dodecaphony. This made him the first Finnish composer of his generation who did not really go through a youthful neoclassical period. He has, right from the start of his career, also shown a tendency for large-scale formats.

The road to recognition of the young composer was not always smooth, however. Though neither the first nor the only Finnish dodecaphonist of his day, Heininen was widely regarded as 'difficult', 'radical' and 'theoretical'. From the present-day per-

spective it is hard to understand how the early works could be classed as radical. The Adagietto movement of the orchestral *Tripartita* (1959), for example, is very softly dissonant, its deep-hued overall mood, clear dramatic structure, dense motif technique and limpid orchestration being highly evocative of Heininen's teacher, **Joonas Kokkonen**.

Heininen was first exposed to the strict serialism of the Darmstadt school while studying with **Bernd Alois Zimmermann** in Cologne in 1960-61. The serialist ideas of the independent roles that can be assigned to the various musical parameters have continued to exert a strong influence on Heininen's thinking right up to the present day. Among his most markedly serialist works are the *Quintet* of 1961, *Musique d'été* and the chamber orchestra work *Soggetto*. The sunny, summery *Musique d'été* is scored for a typically serialist multicoloured chamber ensemble. It is for the most part made up of short, crystal-clear cells that are passed from one instrument to another somewhat in the manner of late Webern.

The great tour de force of the young Heininen was the orchestral *Adagio* lasting some twenty minutes that is still one of the finest works in all Finnish orchestral literature. Subtitled "concerto per orchestra in forma di variazioni", it is powerful music that takes deep breaths, is characterised by dodecaphonically expressive melodies yet also draws on Lutoslawskian timbral fields and aleatory. The massive orchestral textures of the *Adagio* are impressive and the use of chamber music-like instrumental combinations to produce different timbres is both enchanting and richly imaginative.

SEARCH FOR AUDIENCE CONTACT

Reacting to the cagey reception of his modernistic works, Heininen nevertheless began writing works of stylised, simplified substance which, he said, merely alluded to his innermost musical world instead of giving it full expression. Yet not even the 'simple' works can be called stylistic pastiches, and they were far from easy in the Finland of the 1960s. For here again, Heininen adhered to his dodecaphonic idiom and the principle of constantly varying his musical figures. Compared with the works calling his entire personality into play, the rhythms, texture and cast of the stylised pieces are nevertheless less complex. His most highly-stylised work is possibly the neoclassical *second symphony*. Other audience-friendly works include the *second piano concerto* favouring traditional forms, the *Arioso* for string orchestra proceeding in broad, expressive sweeps and evocative of Mahler, many vocal works, the *Violin Sonata* and the *Libretto della primavera* for piano. The 'uncompromising vs. stylised' dichotomy persisted in Heininen's output throughout the 1970s.

CULMINATION OF FINNISH DODECAPHONY

"I wanted to write a work that would proceed as much on wings as the music of **Richard Strauss**, and would incorporate constructions as crystal clear as those of late Webern." This striving is ad-

mirably achieved in the *third symphony* (1969), which, together with the *Adagio*, marked the climax of Heininen's output of the sixties.

His great achievement of the early 1970s was the vast opus 32 consisting of a giant *Piano Sonata*, the smaller *Préludes-études-poèmes* for piano, *Poésies périphrases*, and the large, two-movement *String Quartet No.1*. These works are all based on the same 12-note row but differ considerably in their mode of expression. The quartet is lyrical, even nostalgic music bearing strong echoes of **Alban Berg**. The successive build-ups of the second movement, each carried out in a different way, bring the work to a forceful climax.

The 40-minute, three-movement Piano Sonata, *Poesia squillante ed incandescente* op. 32a, is possibly the largest work in the Finnish repertoire for solo piano. It, too, has its lyrical passages, but it also works up to instrumental brilliance and little short of manic outpourings. The disciplined writing and expressive melodic quality are evocative of the Viennese masters of the early 20th century, the rich harmonies, bubbling, showering pianism and bell-like tones of the second movement the music of France and such composers as Messiaen.

NEW TRACKS

After about the mid-1970s Heininen abandoned 12-note technique but not his fully chromatic idiom. In other respects he could be said to have returned to the serialist ideas of his youth, for from the late 1970s onwards, timbre, texture, space, dynamics, and various dimensions of rhythm acquired an increasingly important and independent role alongside pitch. The result was a mode of composition which Heininen called polyparametric or metamodernistic; the term 'post-serial' has also been used to describe his new technique. His application of serialism is, in its inventiveness and freedom from constraint, far removed from the stereotypical precision with which classical 1950s serialism translated the parameters yielded by mathematical progressions into notes on the page. Heininen seems to have been more concerned with what the basic principles of serialism had to offer the contemporary listener, i.e. the musical events of different independent parameters, either alone or in combination with the events of others.

In electronic music Heininen discovered a major testing ground for his new ideas. The tape work *Maiandros* operates in the border zone between piano and tape music. In *Gymel* the bassoon events are contrasted with the sounds of water issuing from the tape.

The focal instrument in Heininen's novel soundscapes was nevertheless the orchestra. The key work of the period was the close on half-hour, five-movement *Dia* (1979) astoundingly rich in orchestral timbres, shapes and textures. Though not given a generic designation, *Dia* has the overall form of a symphony: a broad opening movement followed by a slow one, a scherzo, a movement in misterioso vein and a forceful finale. *Attitude* is shorter, more classical and draws on fewer resources than *Dia*. Beginning in quiet mood, it keeps the various sections of the orchestra apart for quite a while in the classical manner, but as they gradually draw together, the music builds up to impressive effects.

OPERA COMPOSER

The 1980s were an opera decade for Paavo Heininen. *The Damask Drum* and *The Knife* finally made his name known to the public at large and decisively expanded the image of contemporary Finnish opera; the operas of the 1970s had been free-tonal in idiom and traditional in form, but those of Heininen introduced modernist style and expression into the Finnish theatre.

Heininen already had experience of vocal music: the large cantata *Cantico delle creature* and the song cycles *Lov's Philosophy* and *Schatten der Erde*. But the biggest pointers towards the future Damask Drum were the choral work *The Autumns* and the song cycle *Reality* for soprano and ten players. The vocal idiom of the half-hour *Reality* is boldly virtuosic and instrumental. The soprano at times assumes the role of a concerto soloist and at others that of one instrument among many. The texts are treated freely and with great variety, sometimes richly melismatic, at others broken down into phonetic material. The colouristic potential of the voice is also exploited to the full. Heininen's polyparametric style is thus revealed in all its glory in *Reality*. He later arranged a shorter version of it for soprano and piano.

The one-act opera *The Damask Drum* (1981-83) is only 80 minutes long and scored for a very small cast, yet Heininen makes infinitely effective use of the artistic and technical potential of his singers and players. The subheading "a concerto for singers, players, words, images and movements" says much about it, for it really is a Gesamtkunstwerk, a unified work of art in which ballet and visual drama are as important as the music. The visual rhythm – or silent music – is likewise underlined: the turning point at around the middle of the work, when the music seems to come to a halt, is when the Gardener tries in vain to extract a sound from the damask drum.

Heininen fashioned the libretto himself, using a Swedish translation of a classical Japanese *No* drama as well as some other material, and the Finnish modernist poet **Eeva-Liisa Manner** then translated it into Finnish. The theme of the opera is unrequited love and the bitterness and anger this engenders. This universal theme is reflected in the music, in which Heininen makes no attempt to evoke an Oriental mood. The opera has very little dialogue and events. The mu-



Photo: Pertti Niemi

sic nevertheless constructs an extremely intensive overall span consisting of a single crescendo from beginning to end. It is astoundingly rich in detail and admirably succeeds in drawing the musical profiles of its characters and scenes. The vocal parts are, as in *Reality*, demanding, virtuosic and colourful. The orchestra is relatively small and used in a way that is for the most part translucent in the manner of chamber music. Its role in the opera is not, however, merely to accompany, since it is a vital element of the musical structure. The chorus is significant and its lines unusually difficult to sing.

THE KNIFE – A WIDE-SCREEN CITY OPERA

Heininen's second opera, *The Knife* (1985–88), was the winner of a competition by invitation held by the Savonlinna Opera Festival and was premiered at the Festival in August 1989. The libretto for it was by a master of modernistic prose, **Veijo Meri**, and written in collaboration with the composer.

The two-act *Knife* is in every respect a larger work than *The Damask Drum*. It lasts nearly two-and-a-half hours, and has a large cast and orchestra. There is plenty of dialogue in *The Knife*, and the events are set in realistic present-day Helsinki: a café in a workers' district of the city, the fashion department of a store, a publishing house, and the island of Suomenlinna. The leading character is a young, eccentric poet and social misfit. Other themes touched upon include art, love and its absence, success and death. The opera gives a vivid description of cynical life in the city and its thriving subcultures, each abiding by its own laws. This explains why *The Knife* has been called "a sociological city opera". Having once won the woman he loves, the main character takes his own life, and the chance of love thus remains again unfulfilled.

The vocal melodies are difficult, expressive and highly melismatic, spanning broad intervals. Compared with the music of *The Damask Drum*, that of *The Knife* is nevertheless subordinate to the text; that is, for example, none of the chopping of words into phonemes of the earlier opera. The music of Heininen is a magnificent vehicle for the intensive mood and powerful drama of Meri's libretto. It also incorporates elements of parody, such as the tunes played by the poet and the music of the department store scene, which characterise the opera's different milieux.

LOOKING FORWARDS...

Having completed *The Knife*, Heininen took a few years' rest from large-scale formats. Many of his works of the 1990s continued in modernistic vein, sometimes with astonishing results.

The second string quartet bearing the peculiar name *Anadyr.mpl*, is multidimensional in both structure and expression. It has no melodic themes and instead, the events and microforms take shape mainly via textures and the changes in them. The overall construction is distinctive: a half-hour work divided into eight movements all differing radically from one another. The moods and events also change quickly within the movements; with the exception of the monolithic finale, there is no lingering over any idea or texture. The work is like a kaleidoscope of chorales, fleeting melodic gestures, wild polyphony, fast, flashing timbral planes and aggressive fragments.

The Saxophone Quartet, *Anadyr.img*, made up of five shortish movements, is in many respects akin to the second string quartet, but the musical events and moods linger longer



The Damask Drum

in the former. Heininen succeeds in weaving inventive, interesting textures for four saxophones, too.

At around the turn of the millennium, Heininen returned to electronic music. The result was a large number of short tape pieces using only synthetic sinewave tones as sound material. Together with three solo works (*Fluteyearn*, *Bluestring* for guitar, and *Exercises* for accordion) the tape pieces constitute an entity lasting an hour under the title of *Sinikosketus* (Blue Exposure).

...AND BACKWARDS

In the 1990s Paavo Heininen began exploring new ways of establishing contact with the Western musical tradition, and with his own history as a composer. This process often yielded a lighter, more cheerful Heininen, but one whose music had lost none of its richness and keen intellect. The recent 'neotraditional' works are a lively indication of a composer with a never-ending desire to stretch his musical worldview in new directions.

This tendency is particularly marked in the works of opus 66. All the works are scored for string or chamber orchestra, and many of them are dance suites. *Two Movements* op. 66a for strings, and the little orchestral *Three Proceedings* op. 66c are, for example, waltz studies. The finale of *Three Beings*, op. 66g, is a charming waltz that grows magnificently in stature towards the end, while the middle movement is a slightly enigmatic tarantella. Dance-like elements are again to be found in the eight-movement *Gentle Dances* op. 66d ending with a stately polonaise, and in *Five Lightnings* op. 66f, in which a gavotte and a mazurka are followed by a closing polka. *Two Essays* op. 66b for strings is not overtly dance-like, but the lofty melodic arches, hollow open-fifth harmonies and relatively simple texture reflect a classical approach.

Something in the nature of a retrospective of his early works is to be found in the *Bass Sonata*, *Piano Sonata No. 2* and *Memorabilia*. The first two of these are complete reworkings of pieces composed as a schoolboy and student, with all new harmonies. The second piano sonata is also Heininen's biggest piano work since the 1970s. Other recent piano works include the modernistic *Objects*, *Bluekeys* based on big-band works, the four-movement set of miniatures *A Soupçon of the Piano* and the collection of ten dances under the heading of *Mazurki*.

Heininen also had to assess his relationship to tradition in his Violin Concerto *A Notion* (1993). This is a fantasy on or notion of how the third violin concerto of **Aarre Merikanto** might have

sounded had Merikanto not destroyed all traces of it in 1955. Heininen next turned his attention on **Leevi Madetoja**, composing two string quartets in the style of Madetoja in 1999. Adapting his thoughts to the idiom of another composer was nothing new for Heininen, for he had earlier done music a great service by completing the partly destroyed *Symphonic Study* and *String Sextet* by Aarre Merikanto.

GREAT RECENT WORKS

The weightiest works by Heininen in the past few years have been the *Violin Concerto* (1999), the *String Quintet* (2001), the *Piano Trio* (2003) and the *Symphony No. 5* (2003). They also represent something of a synthesis of a modernistic odyssey lasting many decades and a recent awareness of tradition.

The half-hour *Violin Concerto* is in two main movements each with five subdivisions marked off by orchestral interludes. There are no obvious themes; instead the profiles of the sections are created by means of textures and musical characters. The music does not trace pronounced arches or take off in dramatic flight, but it does, in its intimacy and its polished richness of detail, say more than almost any other recent Finnish concerto.

Strong, dramatic spans and an overall sense of urgency are, by contrast, to be found in abundance in the *fifth symphony*, the work of a master who has been honing his musical craft for decades. Heininen's more recent concept of the essence of a symphony does not rely on themes and their variation, but this does not prevent the listener from experiencing its strong uniformity and its indisputable sense of going places. In its wealth of musical ideas the symphony is a veritable expressive horn of plenty. The handling of the orchestra is also tremendously rich and multidimensional, but without any sign of brilliance or machismo simply for the sake of it.

In addition to the profound, monumental fifth symphony, Heininen's expressive range also embraces truly jazz-like sensuality and wild rampaging, as in *Wolfsstock* for big band. The listener to Heininen can make all kinds of musical discoveries, but even after several hearings of a work, he will still find food for observation and thought. The music of Heininen invariably offers something new to savour.

LAURI KILPIÖ

The writer is a composer who has studied under Eero Hämeenniemi and Paavo Heininen at the Sibelius Academy.