

Susanna Mälkki tells in a brief interview of her liking for the music of **Veli-Matti Puumala**, which she will be conducting in Stavanger and Oulu in 2005.

SUSANNA MÄLKKI: interpreting Puumala

You conducted Veli-Matti Puumala's double bass concerto 'Taon' at the Tampere Biennale in spring 2002. Was this your first contact with the music of Puumala?

Susanna Mälkki: I'd heard music by Puumala at Music nova, Zagros and other concerts, and I'd played in his chamber work *Hart, kurz – weich, innig* during my days as a cellist, with the Gagego! Ensemble in Gothenburg. But the 2002 Tampere Biennale was the first time I conducted any music by him.

It's interesting that having conducted Puumala's orchestral music, I can now detect the same strong dynamic charge there as in his chamber music.

It was said of the concerto *Taon* that it raised the solo instrument to a new expressive plane, as it were. What thoughts did it arouse from the conductor's point of view?

SM: The orchestra at the Tampere Biennale was the Tapiola Sinfonietta, which had already premiered the concerto. This naturally made rehearsing and performing it easier than if the orchestra had been doing it for the first time.



SUSANNA MÄLKKI (Photo: Alma Hilt)

There is something utterly undorned and 'serious' in the double bass concerto that made a great impression on me. Added to which, the works of Puumala always have an incredible drive or febrile tension – which is precisely why Puumala's music appeals to me. It has a special voice all of its own that comes across and that is far from ordinary – because some art music doesn't leave any impression at all.

Veli-Matti Puumala has been described as a composer of international calibre, and the *Taon* concerto was hailed by the critics as a wildly jubilant breakthrough and a masterpiece. How challenging are his works for the conductor?

SM: The works of Puumala are delightfully challenging for players and conductor alike. Puumala is an admirable composer in that he refuses to compromise over his artistic vision and does not make his works calculatingly easier; he is absolutely unconditional over his art. This demands the same uncompromising attitude in the performers, too.

At an elevated level, performing any music, and not just contemporary, is demanding; the Rakhmaninov piano concertos, for example, are to my mind extremely demanding as well. Yet the performance must transcend this and see what the extremes are intended to convey and express.

Puumala often wants to place the musicians in the orchestra in some special way, and he often comes up with some unusual solutions; this calls for suitable rehearsing conditions and sufficient time. But as we know, orchestras' rehearsing sessions are pretty limited.

A new Puumala piano concerto is to be performed at Stavanger a year from now. How did this commission come about?



VELI-MATTI PUUMALA (Photo: Maarit Kytöharju/Fimic)

SM: My fellow conductor **Hannu Lintu** and I hit on the idea of a joint Nordic commission – Lintu is the Chief Conductor in Helsingborg and I'm Artistic Director in Stavanger and Principal Guest Conductor in Oulu. The aim was to commission new works from four Nordic composers of the younger generation (with financial support from NOMUS) and to perform the works in all these countries. Together we decided on Veli-Matti Puumala for the Finnish composer. The others are **Knut Vaage**, **Per Mårtensson** and **Jesper Koch**.

Puumala has been commissioned to write a piano concerto that will be premiered in Sweden by the Helsingborg Orchestra and **Roland Pöntinen** on 28 November 2004, with Hannu Lintu conducting. The next performance will be in Finland in January 2005, in Oulu, where I am Principal Guest Conductor. I'll be conducting the piano concerto also in Stavanger a year from now, on 7 April 2005.

One of the aims of this project was to highlight some good composers not yet heard often enough at concerts in their own country – or especially in their neighbouring countries. Orchestras in the various countries already have many partnerships with contemporary composers, and they could to my mind be offering composers more opportunities such as this. Because this commission is a joint one, each

work will get several performances in several countries within a relatively short period of time.

You plan some of the repertoire for Stavanger and are also Principal Guest Conductor in Oulu. Do you have any special plans with regard to forthcoming repertoire?

SM: Among the things I've been planning for Stavanger are various theme programmes; we have done concerts with themes such as "American" (Adams, Zappa, Gershwin, Bernstein etc.), "Viennese School" (Schönberg, Webern, Berg), "Finnish" (Lindberg, Tien-suu, Sibelius) and so on. I like programmes with a general idea throughout the evening. Naturally I'm happy to perform Finnish music whenever there's a good opportunity. But there are so very many new works, and each country has its own variety of interesting composers. Of course no one can 'specialise' in absolutely everything. I do try to keep up to date, however, by listening to premieres either on the spot or on the radio.

In my own attitudes I must nevertheless stand one hundred per cent behind whatever work I choose. Which is precisely why I enjoy doing music by Veli-Matti, because I have such strong faith in it.

HENNA SALMELA