

# Connoisseur of

*Olli Kortekangas has received many commissions for choral works and operas – no hardship at all for a composer with a passion for song and lyric poetry.*

Despite turning more and more to orchestral music in recent years, **Olli Kortekangas** is still unquestionably thought of as a vocal composer. His works continue to be predominantly vocal, but that is hardly surprising, considering the devotion with which the choral and the opera world has adopted him as its own by performing his works and keenly commissioning new ones.

Audiences and musicians have been equally eager to adopt his solo songs. A good example of this is *Syvä ilo* (Profound Joy, 1996), now in the repertoire of many a top Finnish singer. It has also enjoyed a good reception outside Finland, not least thanks to its performance by **Soile Isokoski**. It is a work with which the composer himself is particularly satisfied: “More or less spot on,” he says. A set of four songs based on texts by **Aaro Hellaakoski**, **Lassi Nummi** and **Kai Nieminen**, it was originally commissioned by the Finnish Cultural Foundation as a birthday present for **Mirjam Helin**, founder of the international singing competition bearing her name.

The composer himself is about to celebrate a birthday: his 50th in May. This is, however, no reason for him to rest on his laurels. On the contrary, this year looks to be extremely full. And best of all, he'll be busy working on his favourite genre, opera: *Messenius and Lucia* composed for the fourth centenary of the city of Oulu is to be premiered in the autumn. But even before the opera has received its first public performance,

he is already working on another large-scale project, an opera commissioned by the Savonlinna Opera Festival.

## Practical experience

It is only natural that Olli Kortekangas should be interested in vocal and, especially, choral music, since he himself has been an active singer. He first came in contact with singing and choirs on joining the Candomino youth choir at the age of 16. He had already composed a few small pieces, mainly for his own instrument, the piano, but singing in the choir inspired him to try his hand at this genre. “Would I have got enthusiastic about choral music if I hadn't sung in a choir myself?” he wonders. “Somehow it just seemed natural to compose for my own choir right from the start.”

In the six years he sang with Candomino, Kortekangas got to know all kinds of choral music from different eras and gained the experience so valuable to a composer. He also acquired a feel for conducting. “My own singing gave my compositions a practical touch. I reckon they're very singable.” Singing also made me realise what fun it is to experiment with one's own voice.”

Candomino became important for Kortekangas in another respect as well. The founder and conductor of Candomino, **Tauno Satomaa**, introduced the budding young composer to **Einojuhani Rautavaara**. Kortekangas became

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his pupil while still at school and continued with him at the Sibelius Academy from 1974 onwards. "Being accepted to study with Rautavaara meant an awful lot to me," Kortekangas says looking back. Although, as a student, he expanded his repertoire with many other types of music, Rautavaara encouraged him to keep composing for choir. "If a student was naturally interested in writing for a particular combination, Rautavaara would encourage him to do so."

Kortekangas has since worked with several choirs, both in Finland and abroad. One of his main partners has been the Tapiola Choir, for which he has been actively composing since the mid-1980s. It is for this choir that he composed such works as *MAA* (EARTH, 1985), *A* (1988) and *Ikikaiku* (Eternal Echo, 1999). A was composed in collaboration with the visual artist **Raija Malka**, and *Ikikaiku* with choreographer **Päivi Järvinen**. For the choral projects of Olli Kortekangas very often incorporate some other art as well.

## A passion for lyric poetry

Olli Kortekangas has also composed to order for several other Finnish choirs, and naturally for his "own" choir, Candomino, which is at the moment recording his choral works on a CD to be released this year by Alba Records. One work to be included on the CD is *The Mediterranean Sea* (2002), a suite combining three elements important to him: Candomino, the poetry of **Lassi Nummi**, and a region he likes to visit. The Mediterranean Sea is Kortekangas's biggest a cappella work, and one very dear to him. It was, he says, "written with my 'heart on my sleeve', challenging to sing but, I believe, gratifying to listen to. Of its five movements, the odd-numbered ones are settings of poems by Lassi Nummi, while the even-numbered ones are vocalises, wordless mood pieces. Each movement has a distinct theme and appearance. *Sea Picture* is a serious, epic movement that yields to the whimsical *Aubade*. *Aeneas, in Marble* evokes Antiquity, while *Chiaroscuro* is reminiscent of Renaissance art. The final movement, *Venice*, summarises the cycle and pays homage to what is perhaps the most mythical of all the Mediterranean cities."

Another choral work of which he is particularly fond is *Shadows* (2002). The commission was a real pleasure to do, and the commissioner was none other than the great choral guru **Eric Ericson** and his choir. It also led Kortekangas back to one of his favourite authors, **D. H. Law-**

**rence**. He had already used texts by this controversial early 20th century writer in, among others, the *Three Romances* (1995) for mixed choir – a work that has become a great favourite in choral circles. The very fact that it has been chosen as the obligatory work for the II International Harald Andersén Chamber Choir Competition in 2006 says something about its popularity and prestige. According to Kortekangas, each of the three romances may be thought of as depicting one period in human life, "I think *Cherry Robbers* symbolises youth, *Green* middle age and *Old Song* old age – though I don't yet have any experience of that," he laughs.

His choral background undoubtedly explains why special allowance is made for the singer; the parts may be difficult, but they are logical. The horizontal dimension is possibly more marked in his choral works than in his other music.

Being a composer with a love of lyric poetry, Kortekangas lays great store by his texts, as is evident from both his choral and his other vocal works. He has a liking for topics that permit both a concrete and a philosophical approach and touch on worldview and religion. The subjects of his songs are often earth, sea and light.

## Opera his closest genre

A great lover of theatre, literature and vocal music, Olli Kortekangas inevitably fell under the spell of opera at an early age. Even today he still looks upon opera as his closest genre. It is an opinion shared by the public at large: Kortekangas is best known for his operas, namely *Short Story* (1980), presenting an alternative slant on traditional opera, the international award-winning TV opera *Grand Hotel* (1985), *Joonan kirja* (The Book of Jonah, 1995) commissioned by the Finnish National Opera, and *Marian rakkaus* (Maria's Love, 1999), the middle work in the trilogy *Aika ja uni* (The Age of Dreams) commissioned by the Savonlinna Opera Festival.

Since Maria's Love, Kortekangas has returned to his favourite genre in a big way. His latest opera, *Messenius and Lucia* (2004), is to be premiered in September as part of the celebrations surrounding the fourth centenary of the city

of Oulu. It is his biggest opera to date, and his first "classical" opera in two acts. The idea for this opera about the Swedish historian **Johannes Messenius** originally came from the City of Oulu and its cultural circles, who thought the tragic story of this Swede would be a good topic for an opera. One reason for choosing Kortekangas to write it was that he had been Composer-in-Residence of the Oulu Symphony Orchestra since 1997.

**Juha Seppälä** was asked to write the libretto, having previously been the author of a radio and a theatre play about Messenius. The premiere on September 16 will be staged in Oulu by the City Theatre, Symphony Orchestra and Conservatoire together with the local opera society. The stage director will be **Pertti Sveholm** and the conductor **Arvo Volmer**. The part of Messenius will be sung by **Hannu Niemelä**, that of





The Candomino choir and Tauno Satomaa have performed and recorded works by Kortekangas. (Photo: Mauritz Hellström)

his wife Lucia by **Päivi Nisula**, and that of Karla by **Essi Luttinen**. The chorus has traditionally been assigned a significant role in the operas of Kortekangas, and this one is no exception: the Oulu Chamber Choir and the Ynnin Pojat boys' choir will have their work cut out!

Working on the opera was, Kortekangas reports, most enjoyable. "I knew from the start who would be singing the main roles, and this mode of working suits me admirably. I also worked in very close partnership with Seppälä the librettist." All in all he spent two years writing the opera.

The new opera in fact, he says, began where the previous one, *Maria's Love*, left off. That, too, was an opera of grand emotions, both real and imaginary. And the same applies to *Messenius and Lucia*. "I'm fascinated by the inherent nature of opera, the ability to portray an era and its phenomena 'through the big feelings of a little human'. Added to which, opera has quite unique resources at its disposal: the human voice, orchestra, text, dramaturgy and direction, the visual aspect."

Although this opera again views a particular era through the eyes of one individual, it also has another topic: the conflict between the public and private self of a great man. *Messenius and Lucia* traces the life of the Swedish historian Johannes Messenius famous in the 17th century. It follows him from Sweden to Kajaani Castle in Finland, where he and his family were imprisoned for nearly twenty years. "In the libretto and the music we describe his conflicting persona, a man on the one hand of outstanding talent and industry, yet also of emotional instability." Another of the opera's themes is the relationship between a visual image and reality. The opera does this via the portrait of Messenius painted by **Cornelius Arendt** in 1611 and now hang-

ing in Oulu Cathedral. This painting is also one of the "characters" in the opera.

Kortekangas tends to write textures that are musically very dense, as in this opera. "It varies a few motifs and harmonic ideas throughout the work." This again is well in keeping with his "motto" as a composer – a motto he has adhered to ever since he was a young man and that has merely grown stronger with the years: "simple is beautiful".

On completing *Messenius and Lucia*, Olli Kortekangas immediately set to work on another big opera production. The commission for this came from a most unexpected quarter: the Finnish Parliament and the Savonlinna Opera Festival. Together they have ordered an opera from Kortekangas and theatre director **Michael Baran** to be premiered at the Savonlinna Opera Festival in summer 2007.

### Human voice at heart

Olli Kortekangas has already travelled a long, long way as an opera composer. He says that he has, in the process, learnt what he really thinks about the numerous opportunities and challenges inherent in opera and how he wants to deal with them. "It's important to try out and look for new solutions, but on the other hand the history of opera is full of well-tried ways of creating music theatre, and it's worth learning from them, too. Luckily opera is such a difficult genre that you never get too big for your boots. Your feet remain firmly on the ground!" he laughs.

A connoisseur of vocal music, Olli Kortekangas wishes to train the spotlight on the most important element of all, the human voice. For this is what lies at the very heart of opera. ■