

A new opera by **Mikko Heiniö**, *The Hour of the Serpent*, is to be premiered this autumn. In composing his music, Heiniö wishes to emulate the way in which **Federico Fellini** the film director and **Antoni Gaudí** the architect approached their art. "Their work has tremendous humanity, fantasy, humour and playfulness".

MIKKO HEINIÖ – The Hour of the Serpent strikes in the autumn

Photo: The Finnish National Opera / Stefan Bremer

After the premiere of the church opera *Riddaren och draken* (The Knight and the Dragon, 2000) in Turku Cathedral, the Finnish National Opera commissioned Mikko Heiniö to compose an opera twice the length. Heiniö reckoned it would take him two years to do, but three years were in fact to pass before *Käärmeen hetki* (The Hour of the Serpent) was finished, and he was also working on other assignments as well.

A period as long as this demands a good story if the composer is to enter into the lives of his characters. "The history of opera is full of librettos I couldn't bear to spend three years with. Many of them just stretch out scenes in which nothing really happens." The libretto in Finnish by **Juha Siltanen** operates at many levels and permits numerous interpretations. "The libretto kept developing throughout the three-year process. We had almost monthly meetings. And in between we communicated mainly by text message."

The Hour of the Serpent is set in Helsinki in 1896 and right at the end in Paris. The story focuses on one woman, Alice, and four men. "Though the opera's not called Alice, she's clearly the sun round which the satellites revolve."

In order to defend her honour, Alice holds on to a lie from which she can ultimately be liberated only by leading those around her to their destruction. Each of the four men has a different relationship with the lie. Which of the characters is the seducer, the victim, comic or tragic, and ultimately the Serpent that strikes at the right moment or is reincarnated by shed-

ding its skin depends on the viewer's morals.

The mood is marked by the *fin de siècle* atmosphere and psychoanalysis. "The problem of the main character, Alice, is nevertheless one that faces the modern woman. The erotic-sexual pressure raging within her cannot be held in check within the constraints of the period."

The lie, fib or sham is as topical as ever. Its manifestations fascinated the members of the team working on the project, such as stage director **Erik Söderblom**, right from the beginning. The story knits together a variety of genres, such as the picaresque novel, the psychodrama and the thriller.

The Hour of the Serpent is a vast leap from Heiniö's first opera, *The Knight and the Dragon*. It has travelled a long way from the static, fatalistic mystery play performed in an echoing church to the theatre stage and a character drama of unpredictable events and dynamic music. Heiniö, being a marathon runner, knows that an opera is a similar leap into the unknown: neither can be simulated in the lab.

The worlds of the two operas do, however, have a link in the *Sonata da chiesa* or *Four Snake Scenes from the Old Testament* (2005) for brass, celesta and percussion. Some of the material from *The Hour of the Serpent* found its way into this *Sonata*, but the *Sonata* music had to allow for the seven-second echo in Turku Cathedral, where it was to be performed. Placed in different parts of the Cathedral, the various instruments exploit this echo effect.

SINGABILITY, VITALITY AND HYBRIDS

The Second Symphony, *Songs of Night and Love* (1997), has a solo baritone. Heiniö describes it as a programmatic symphony in which the programme is sung. It could in fact be regarded as paving the way for *The Hour of the Serpent*.

As a young man, Heiniö dreamt of a career as a writer and philologist but in the end chose music. In many of his songs and choral works he has subjected the linguistic parameters of his texts to almost systematic treatment. At one extreme are the works whose texts are broken down into their basic phonetic units devoid of any semantic content. Representing the other extreme are the vocal works in which the meaning is all-important.

This is the principle behind *The Hour of the Serpent*: apart from a few melismata, the short syllables are kept short and not drawn out into vocalises. "I have respected the relative length and stress of the syllables as far as possible, and it is in fact possible to a considerable degree." Heiniö has admirably solved the problem of singability in modern music. There are no awkward interval jumps. Diatonic cells can be detected, and there are no bulky chromatic blocks in the melodic flow.

Hybrids – unexpected and often crossover formats – are a fundamental feature of Heiniö the composer. The Fourth Piano Concerto, *Genom kvällen* (Through the Evening, 1986), is scored for string orchestra and mixed choir

and the sixth, *Hermes* (1994), and seventh, *Khora* (2001), are both dance works. In the sixth the solo piano is offset by a string orchestra and soprano, in the seventh by five percussionists. *Envelope* (2002) for solo trumpet and orchestra was composed round the Haydn Trumpet Concerto, and to be performed without a break between the movements. The Haydn orchestra plays up on the platform, but the other instruments 'envelop' the audience. The soloist moves from place to place.

Nowadays a freelance composer, Mikko Heiniö is also Chairman of the Society of Finnish Composers and Vice-Chairman of Teosto, the Finnish Composers' Copyright Society. He finally relinquished his post of Professor of Musicology at the University of Turku a year ago. He was the author of the volume on contemporary music in the *History of Finnish Music* (in Finnish) that won the nation's most prestigious prize for non-fiction, the Tieto-Finlandia. His work as a musicologist has made him aware of the different types of music in the world. Whether he is writing about works of his own or of others, he subjects them to penetrating analysis and where necessary supplements them with graphic tables or diagrams.

His erudition is likewise audible in his music about people and culture. He does not engage in playful irony with stylistic borrowings or dismiss them as 'seen them all'. Instead, he cultivates an exultant but carefully-contrived brand of hybridism, vitality, positive energy and rhythmic drive. "I have a strong liking for characterised

rhythm rooted in the spine and the pelvis. Rather than the mathematical abstraction of serial music, I must have a physical sense of rhythm."

The musicians performing his works are also offered a touch of physical drama, as in the *Piano Quintet* (1993), where they are expected to speak and hum. In *ReLay* (1998) the violinist and cellist get out of each other's way, sometimes literally, and inhabit worlds of their own.



Mikko Heiniö (Photo: Fimic/Maarit Kytöharju)

TENDENCY TOWARDS RHYTHM

Heiniö was using ethnic influences to give his works extra life before there was ever talk of world music. "I don't know how it originally came about. While I was at school I played rhythm music in a rock band. My teacher during my year in Berlin in 1975 was **Witold Szalonek**, who was interested in ethnic cultures. I chose my records and concerts on two grounds: ethnic and contemporary music."

The orchestral song cycle *Vuelo de alambre* (1983) is based on poems by anonymous Chilean prisoners. Despite their grim background, the texts also express memories and longing. The hidden melodies of the Andies, the marching songs and Latin-American rhythms sometimes find themselves on a collision course, but the emergent eloquence finally radiates sympathy, tenderness and optimism.

"I have a tendency towards rhythms of African origin, even if they have travelled via South America and the Caribbean. But I avoid stuck-on effects, because they lead to postcard folklorism. I examine the deep structures from a European, analytical perspective to see what I can build on them. Pentatonicism, for example, has somehow to be chromatised, and the overall sound ends up as European."

Vuelo de alambre uses a 12-note row from which two pentatonic scales gradually become distinguishable as the work proceeds. Expressive chromaticism and folk music overlap, join and part.

Heiniö liberally bends types of music with a strong rhythm to suit his purpose: tango, boogie, rhythm & blues and jazz. The time he spent in Benin in West Africa is reflected in *Khora* for piano and five percussionists.

In composing his music, Heiniö wishes to emulate the way in which **Federico Fellini** the film director and **Antoni Gaudí** the architect approached their art. "Their work has tremendous humanity, fantasy, humour and playfulness. I couldn't work with a frown any more than they could."

Jukka Isopuro

The Hour of the Serpent by Mikko Heiniö is to be premiered at the Finnish National Opera on 15 September 2006.