

PUUMALA'S MUSIC: An Avalanche of Sound

“Composing is funny really; you get so wrapped up in what you are doing that your whole life seems to revolve round the work on hand. Then it’s performed and that’s it”, says Veli-Matti Puumala, a composer whose music is brimming with great maturity.

The plains of Ostrobothnia in Finland produce men of two types. Some are quiet and unassuming, do not boast about their achievements, even when they would be justified in doing so. They are remembered afterwards for their deeds. The others, by contrast, stop at nothing and start advertising their great plans before these even get off the drawing board. They can already hear the millions cascading into their bank accounts as they fill in their lottery coupons. They are remembered afterwards for – well at least for their great promises, regardless of whether these promises have ever been redeemed.

Veli-Matti Puumala (b. 1965) is a composer from Kaustinen in Central Ostrobothnia and a prime example of the former category. No strutting about with his nose in the air for him; nothing will persuade him to brag about his achievements. And why should he? For him, it is sufficient that he *knows* what works and why. The facts speak for themselves. Why boast about them?

Ever since the early 1990s Puumala has been the unofficial “master composer” of his generation, in Finland and to some extent the other Nordic countries. Such epithets are usually coined by the media, and we all know how the media can make or break an artist. But Veli-Matti has shown the world he is capable of work of a high artistic standard regardless of what the papers have to say about him and what people expect of his works.

Puumala had a thorough apprenticeship, first as a student of **Paavo Heininen** at the Sibelius Academy and then at Siena in Italy, where he gained wider experience and vision under the late **Franco Donatoni**. His name was first etched on the minds of new music lovers at the Ung Nordisk Musik festival, in which he has participated a record number of times (ten). Music by him was thus heard first in the other Nordic countries, after which the circle spread by degrees to take in the rest of Europe. From Heininen he assimilated a craft of the utmost precision and thoroughness that has gradually equipped

him to expand his expressive range. He graduated with a Master’s degree in music in 1993. Expansion has not, in Puumala’s case, meant only a conceptual opening out: his works have become longer and larger. In the early days his ideas tended to be statements or questions devoid of an answer, but since the *String Quartet* of 1994, his music has acquired a more dialectic element: a thesis answered by an antithesis and naturally followed by a synthesis, and often a surprising one at that.

First Tetralogy

Two tetralogies stand out in Puumala’s oeuvre to date, though neither was deliberately composed as a series. *Scroscio* (1989), *Verso* (1991) and *Ghirlande* (1992) for chamber ensemble and *Tutta via* (1993) for small orchestra form a set of four compositions in which each is related to the others and yet differs in many of its details.

The performance of the tetralogy at a concert of Puumala’s works at the Helsinki Biennale in 1993 marked his final acceptance as a “heavyweight” composer. Despite his youth, his music is brimming with great maturity. The materials in his stylistic palette are clearly postserial, yet he nevertheless aspires towards a mixture of rich timbres.

The works are constructed in a fascinating manner by means of a visual approach. First he draws a “diagram” of the composition, sketching in the general drift and structure. The resulting music is, being the outcome of such careful planning, structurally coherent. Scored for ten instruments, *Scroscio* is a very compact work of intricately crafted transitions from one musical event to the next. The timbre of *Verso* differs due to the instrumentation alone: it is written for clarinet, guitar and string trio. Though lasting a mere five minutes, it is a cameo packed with detail. The longest of the works for chamber ensemble is *Ghirlande*, in which a similar mode of expression combines with a slightly more drawn-out development. The orchestral work *Tutta via* marks the culmi-

nation of this series. It is an extremely potent work that releases its energy in sudden outbursts leaping from one musical “state” to another.

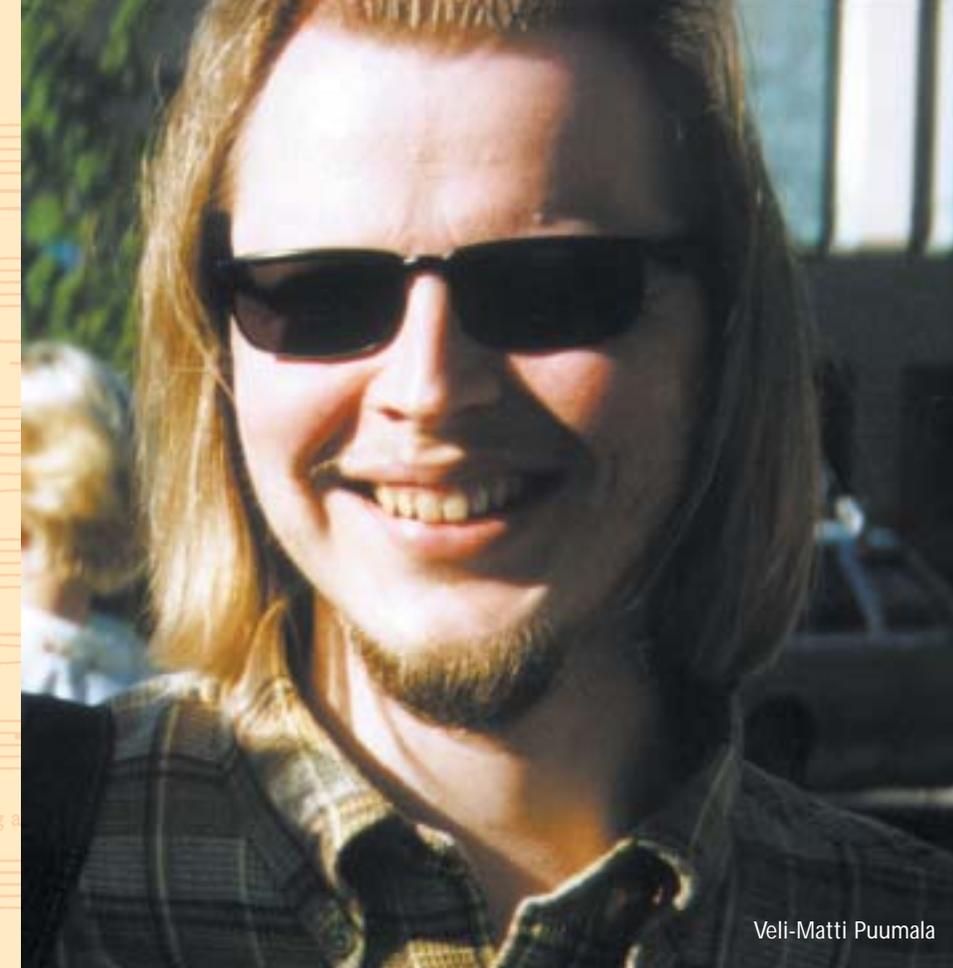
Ecstatic Avalanche of Sound

Completed in 1994, the *String Quartet* represented a complete change of direction in Puumala’s output. Although the harmonic approach was much the same as before, the String Quartet, lasting nearly half an hour, for the first time presented Puumala as a composer who allows his musical ideas room to develop and grow. Though not technically one of the easiest works to perform, the String Quartet is, when well performed, rewarding: the tension is never released from the first to the very last note.

The String Quartet was, as was only to be expected, an interim audit for Puumala, then 29, and an indication of the shape of things to come. It was followed in quick succession by a second tetralogy: *Chant Chains* (1995), *Chains of Camenae* (1996) and *Soira* (1996) for chamber ensemble and the big orchestral work *Chainsprings* (1997). Here again the instrumental line-ups vary enormously, as do the characters of the works. So why speak of a tetralogy? As the names (apart from *Soira*) indicate, they are all concerned with a chain-like musical scheme proceeding from one link to the next and usually ultimately coming full circle. “*It’s important to me for the centre point of my works to be at the maximum distance from the starting point,*” says Puumala. “*So by the time I get to the far side of the circle, I know I have reached half way.*” The result has been works of longer duration. “*I have a horror of short, sharp, ‘cut off’ forms.*”

Chant Chains is an intensive composition lasting 20 minutes. The moods and gestures change, as in a story with surprising twists in the plot. *Chant Chains* admirably demonstrates Puumala’s gift for constructing broad spans that delight the listener as each new section comes into sight and it becomes clear just where the music is leading. *Chains of Camenae* is quite different from *Chant Chains* in character. The rhythms are interestingly static, though the events within the notes at times proceed at a frantic pace. *Chains of Camenae* is like an ant heap that remains in place despite the swarming masses on its surface. Only towards the end of the work is there a snatch of melody accompanied by a bass beat such as is associated more with folk music.

Stylistic borrowing from folk music was a new element of Puumala’s idiom and even more pronounced in *Soira* composed in honour of the 20th anniversary of his old



Veli-Matti Puumala

school in Kaustinen. *Soira* is an absolutely delightful timbre circus. It is scored for an unusual collection of seven instruments: flute, oboe, French horn, trombone, percussion, viola and cello, plus an accordion adding a solo element. Also placed around the hall are four groups of players blowing into bottles. The work falls into a chain of different modes ranging from “orchestra” to “virtuosi” and “camera”. The music is marked off by general pauses, an Armenian folk melody and a *Tempo di “Polska”* section towards the end that ties the work to the folk music tradition for which Kaustinen is renowned. The listener cannot help being aware of the presence of folk music lurking in the background of the strictly modernist mode. Is it the spirit of the Kaustinen folk music tradition famous the world over?

“*I suppose my musical background is a combination of everything underlying it. Although my school was particularly strong on folk music, we did all sorts of experimental things with a classical orientation as well. Right now I’m composing a radiophonic work. It is an art form which enables the recombination of different musical genres still further. It even includes throat singing.*”

The orchestral work *Chainsprings* is a chapter in itself. In a single movement and lasting nearly half an hour, it attracted attention at its first performance for the unusual placing of the players, designed to give the

orchestral timbre a new slant. At times the broad masses of sound rise to a climax that can only be called ecstatic.

Full-time Composer

Of the most recent works by Puumala, the one to cause the biggest stir has been the double bass concerto *Taon* composed in 2000. This concerto covers such a fascinating variety of moods that it deserves to find its way into the repertoire of every double bass virtuoso.

Right now Puumala is able to concentrate full-time on composing, having been awarded a five-year artist’s grant by the state. This should permit him to take on less teaching at the Sibelius Academy, where he follows in the footsteps of Paavo Heininen, and leave him more time for composition. And time is what he needs, for he is a composer who likes to polish his works down to the finest detail before releasing them for public inspection. Consequently, it may take him several years to complete a work.

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Osmo Tapio Räihälä

The writer is a Helsinki composer.