



Erland Johansson's painting of Englund (1991)

PHOTO: MAYNIE SIREN

# Einar Englund

## – classicist and classic

*Born 100 years ago, Einar Englund composed music of biting irony and great drama, but also of fleeting beauty and subtle romanticism, and always brilliantly scored.*

Einar Englund (1916–1999) is a Finnish classicist. After the Second World War, he set himself apart from the National-Romantic trends then dominant in Finland with an idiom reflecting the influence of Shostakovich, Bartók and Stravinsky. He had developed a keen interest in contemporary music while still a student at the Helsinki Conservatory, but his teachers favoured a command of the traditional compositional crafts rather than experiment. *The Piano Quintet* he composed as his degree assignment bears witness to this.

### Musical echoes of the war

The Continuation War of 1941–1944 between Finland and the Soviet Union, during which he was called to active service, had a decisive influence on Englund the man and his music. After the war, when the time came to process his experiences in music, he felt more in tune with Neoclassical irony, sarcasm and satire than with safe, familiar National-Romanticism. His new approach had come to stay – as had the marches and musical explosions that, he always insisted, were echoes of the war.

His first two symphonies, the *War Symphony* of 1946 and the *Blackbird* of 1947, placed Englund in the forefront of Finnish music. He also began to gain a reputation as an outspoken critic and as a brilliant improviser on the piano. In the 1950s he wrote the scores for a number of films, radio and theatre plays. He also composed concert music, such as the *Introduzione e Toccata* for piano, the popular first *Piano Concerto* ♫), in which he was often the soloist, and a *Cello Concerto*.

The 1960s were a “quiet” decade, during which he composed only some little pieces such as light songs, the reason for this being ascribed to his disappointment in the trend in new music. Englund the critic had made it clear that he abhorred the radical avant-garde, but his silence was also a consequence of the lengthy crisis that followed his first wife’s death.

### New angles on Neoclassicism

The “silent” period ended above all with the third symphony, *Barbarossa* (1969–1971). The next symphony, the *Nostalgic* ♫)) (1976), is one of the Englund works most frequently performed. Its elegiac tone is claimed to have been due to his sense of being alone with his ideals at a time when Modernism based on 12-tone technique reigned supreme. He did, however, experiment with dodecaphony in such works as the *Passacaglia*, the *Hymnus sepulchralis* for mixed choir, and the Fifth Symphony, *Fennica* (1978). But his basic approach continued to be Classical, not experimental. His music, and especially his solo and chamber works, had pronounced tonal and melodic features, examples being the two piano sonatas, the *Piano Sonata* and the “happy” *Violin Sonata*. In the 1980s his idiom took a deeply expressive turn in the *Concerto for 12 Cellos* known as an “apotheosis of the dance” and in the *Cello Sonata* inspired by the sound of church bells.

The text of the *Sixth Symphony* (1984, for mixed choir and orchestra) consists of aphorisms by **Heraclitus**. For a man with first-hand experi-

ence of war, they provided a means of expressing his optimistic faith in the dynamics that dominated the world and human life. The same underlying philosophy is reflected in the light, bright *Flute Concerto* (1985) in which a harpsichord adds a completely new timbre to the orchestral palette. His failing health in the 1990s ultimately prevented Englund from composing any new works. By the time he died, he had nevertheless won a growing international reputation, thanks principally to the many recordings of his works.

Variety of expression and clarity of message are salient features of Englund’s music. It is music of biting irony and great drama just as much as of fleeting beauty and subtle romanticism, and always brilliantly scored. He constantly discovered new and sometimes surprising angles on Neoclassicism. For him, the basic Classical values were not, however, just museum exhibits in a showcase but creative tools – the hallmarks of a classic composer.

CHRISTIAN HOLMQVIST

### Footnotes

\* Works by Einar Englund will be heard at numerous concerts in this centenary year. In Kokkola on 11 June, the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra will perform his 4th Symphony, and also on the programme will be his *Concerto for 12 Cellos*. The Saimaa Sinfonietta paid tribute to him in February, and the centenary will be evident at several concerts in the Korsholm Music Festival in summer.

\* New, re-copied orchestral parts of Englund’s fourth symphony, the *Nostalgic*, have been published, and an orchestral score is now available for purchase.