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Seeking the connection between feeling, words and music

“I write the sort of music I’d like to hear. Isn’t that what every composer, if he’s honest, tries to do?” says Olli Korttekangas.

■ ■ ■ Thus **Olli Korttekangas** once crystallised his fundamental principle as a composer. Honesty has paid off, because many others also want to listen to his music. His choral works have found performers the world over, and his operas have spoken straight to the hearts of Finnish audiences. At 60 Korttekangas is one of Finland’s leading contemporary composers.

Olli Korttekangas first made a name for himself in the late 1970s, when he co-founded the Korvat auki (Ears Open) group that shook Finnish musical life with its avant-garde. He nevertheless soon distanced himself from the strictures of modernism and his expression began to expand. In the 1990s it grew richer, more dramaturgically dynamic and emotionally powerful. The change in his musical thinking has, however, always been a gradual, evolutionary process, not a sharp new stylistic departure.

“I try to define man’s place in the universe”

Vocal, and especially choral music occupies a focal position in Korttekangas’s output. He pays great attention to his texts; life philosophies and world-views are among the things that interest him. To give an example: his symphonic cantata *Seven Songs for Planet Earth* (commissioned by the Choral Arts Society of Washington and the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra, 2011) addresses the relationship between man and nature.

“My vocal texts are fundamentally about understanding human existence. What is man’s place in the universe? In my mind I’m a seeker and a sceptic, but I’m also open to alternative explanations. I can handle doubt; the world can be explained in many ways.”

One major category for Korttekangas is music for children’s choir. His works in this genre have often been coloured by a workshop-style mode of composition collaborating closely with young singers, most notably with the world-renowned Tapiola Choir. Then there are the ambitious *Verbum* (1987), *Shadows* (2002) and the *Mediterranean Sea cycle* (2003) demanding much of their performers.

Korttekangas has also written widely for solo voice. Foreign languages also interest him. “The language does affect the music,” he says emphatically. This is borne out in *Vier Bilder aus dem Buch der Wandlungen* (Four Images from The Book of Changes, 2001), using texts from the ancient Chinese Book of Changes in two languages. Another work, *Pietà* (2010) for soprano, viola da gamba and harpsichord, in turn represents the superimposition of many time planes: early period instruments, a contemporary idiom and poems by **Anna Akhmatova**.

Personal stories against a historical background

Opera, a synthesis of diverse modes of expression, is a genre for which Korttekangas feels a natural affinity. He has so far composed seven operas, covering a variety of milieus and epochs and differing in their treatment. Yet they all, he says, have one common theme: “The central idea in my operas is to view personal stories against a historical background.”

Marian rakkaus (Maria’s Love, 1999), examining 20th-century history overshadowed by war and dictatorship, was part of the operatic trilogy *Aika ja uni* (The Age of Dreams) by three composers commissioned by the Savonlinna Opera Festival. *Messenius and Lucia* (2005) describes the life of **Johannes Messenius**, a true-life Swedish historian of the late 16th and early 17th century, but with the addition of a modern dimension and debating the essence of historiography. The most highly-acclaimed of Korttekangas’s operas to date has been *Isän tyttö* (Daddy’s Girl, 2006) which has been staged both in Savonlinna and at the Finnish National Opera. *Yhden yön juttu* (One Night Stand, 2010), spotlighting young people in a modern urban setting, is once again more experimental and his most modern in terms of treatment, and like some of his choral works, it was composed along workshop lines.

Composing operas is, for Korttekangas, a major forum for collaborating with other artists. “I try to get together with the librettist as early as possible, and the story begins to take shape as we talk it over.” The composer of an opera is, according to Korttekangas, really a dramaturge. It is his job not only to mastermind the work as a whole but also to see that the characters have individual traits. “I

create a personal musical world for the different characters, a personal idiolect. This may, for example, be a leitmotif, but more often an instrumentation or harmony, or a phrasal construction. And the ensembles: they are the salt of the opera! There are far too few of these in contemporary opera.”

The drama of concertos and the bread-and-butter of chamber music

Side by side with his vocal works, Korttekangas has composed a fair amount of instrumental music. While he was composer-in-residence of the Oulu Symphony Orchestra in 1997–2007, he began to concentrate more on orchestral music. He has felt a special pull towards concertos (*Charms* for piano trio and orchestra, 1998, an *Organ Concerto*, 2009 and a *Piano Concerto*, 2011), in which the things that meant most to him are drama, communication and narrative. His most recent concerto, written for clarinet, was premiered in 2014.

Over the past few years, Korttekangas has developed a special affection for chamber music. “If opera is music’s cream cake, chamber music is its bread-and-butter. It is a licence and an obligation to engage in musical craftsmanship plain and simple. To me, communication, the inner dialogue of the music, is extremely important in chamber music.” Examples of this ongoing chamber music phase include *Aveux* for oboe and string quartet (2010), a *Cello Sonata* (2012) and *Chops and Swells* for clarinet and string quartet (2014). Works for period instruments are another interesting departure. The first fruit of this is *Crossing the Five Rivers* (2008) for viola da gamba and organ. An important category since the early-2000s has also been organ music – the weightiest example of this being the *Organ Sonata No. 2, Stargazer*, of 2005.

KIMMO KORHONEN

This is a shortened article published in Fennica Gehrman’s booklet of Olli Korttekangas

Korttekangas premieres in Helsinki

Jannen salaisuus (Janne’s Secret), children’s opera, libretto by Minna Lindgren
Finnish National Opera, 27.3.2015
The Return, for chamber choir to texts by Wendell Berry
Tapiola Chamber Choir/Hannu Norjanen, 29.3.2015
Höstlig skärgård, for male choir to texts by Tomas Tranströmer
YL Male Voice Choir/Pasi Hyötkki, 11.4.2015