

# The return of joy

Anyone listening to the music of Matthew Whittall may sense his love of nature, Zen Buddhism and minimalism. He wants his music to make space for the listener and pure, authentic feelings.



PHOTO: SARA VUORIKI/MUSIC FINLAND

When Canadian-born **Matthew Whittall** (b. 1975), now resident in Finland, was seeking to establish his own identity as a composer, he found himself unable to get to grips with the traditional parameters – counterpoint and harmony – that still dominate music. These processes did not work for him, and nor did the saturated, dense element of modernism. Instead, he wanted to create space for just passively being. His interest in choral music and the slow-flowing surfaces of Renaissance music made him aware that his music had to do with time. The slow use of time unleashed his musical fantasy: his works entered a musical time that is not goal-oriented but that constitutes a cathedral-like space in which the pillars soar to infinity.

Running parallel to his concept of time are his love of stark scenery and his fascination with Zen Buddhism. He does not, however, think about these things as his style; rather, they are a compositional philosophy incorporating silence, stasis, sounding things out and relegating the self to the background.

“Being in the here and now is what matters to me, not musically striving towards a goal by means of abstract processes. Music does not necessarily need to add up to something in order to be meaningful,” he says.

## Stylistic diversity

The music of Matthew Whittall breathes in time to this philosophy, but his works all have a strong, unique identity, their sources of inspiration ranging from Japanese art and Monet’s impressionism to Mahler, minimalism and progressive rock. *Leaves of Grass* (2005–2009), a collection of preludes based on poems by **Walt Whitman** and composed for pianist **Risto-Matti Marin**, is a sort of style

catalogue reflecting the variety of his sources of inspiration. It is also a declaration of love to art rock.

“I like the heroic joy that classical music has renounced. I wanted it back – that feeling of pure joy. There was nothing ironic about that!”

Minimalism is something close to Whittall’s heart, because here the border between pop and classical is almost non-existent. The endless pulses of minimalism, and its lack of inhibition are full of rugged beauty. And it is precisely the expression of this sparse, pure beauty that lies at the heart of Whittall’s work.



“I believe that true happiness can only exist in art. I want to create such moments with my music.”

This is also what *The Architecture of Happiness*, premiered by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra at the opening concert of its autumn 2014 season, was all about. It was an ode to the Helsinki Music Centre and to the joy the Centre has brought to music in Finland.

“I wanted to get away from nature motifs and to create some “indoor” music that would connect with the built environment. At the same time I wanted to compose a big, bright and

pop-influenced, piece, to show that this is also allowed – not everything needs to be serious and difficult.”

## Nordic landscape inspires

Matthew Whittall is not part of the Finnish contemporary musical mainstream, and this has been noted. This summer the Korsholm Music Festival invited him to be its composer in residence. As the subject of *Devil’s Gate* for oboe, bassoon and piano he took the scenery in Lapland so dear to him.

“The combination of instruments is so joyful and bubbly that I wanted to tell about something lovely, so I chose my hike to the Devil’s Gate gorge. The music describes the simple pleasure of hiking and the structures trace the topography of the landscape.”

His newest piece *The Return of Light*, to be premiered at the end of October, was likewise inspired by the Nordic landscape. In this work commissioned for an anniversary concert by the Helsinki Chamber Choir the voices merge with the sounds of the Tapiola Sinfonietta as a single wordless instrument. According to Whittall, it is possibly his most programmatic work, sparked off by an account by Arctic explorer **Julius von Payer** of the first time he saw the sun rise after the long winter darkness. He wanted to capture the chink in the darkness, the first streak of light and its disappearance in real time, using noise and timbre as his tools. A return to joy again – a Whittall joy that is sacred, silent and pure.

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