

CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS

Kalevi Aho

David Fanning argues that the Finnish composer has a strong claim to the title of greatest living symphonist

On May 5, 2004, the now sadly defunct Manchester International Cello Festival saw the premiere of Kalevi Aho's Concerto for Two Cellos and Orchestra. The remarkable thing about this event was not just the music's confident sweep, its teeming imaginative detail and craftsmanly control, but also the fact that – according to cellists, members of the orchestra, composers, academics and ordinary punters – it so easily eclipsed the other new concertos on the Festival programme, all of them respectable works by prominent composers.

A further commission from the BBC Philharmonic soon followed and was eventually fulfilled by the 15th Symphony, first heard in March 2011. Conceived in part as a Beethovenian 'apotheosis of the dance', this latest of Aho's symphonies to date confirmed that in his early sixties the shy-looking Finn has a strong claim to the title of greatest living symphonist.

This is music that takes wing and flies. Not weighed down by ponderous concepts or schemes, never looking over its shoulder at what the rest of the musical world is doing, it is eager for adventure and discoveries of its own. It sits squarely in the humanist tradition, but without dogmatic rejection of anything that may potentially be grist to its mill. It can be warmly emotional or blisteringly energetic, even virtuoso, but is never opportunistic, sentimental or gimmicky. Its combination of inventive resource and know-how is often breathtaking.

'Aho's music can be riotously colourful and is certainly not averse to exploring the outer limits of what instruments can do'

Aho's main teachers were Einojuhani Rautavaara in Helsinki and Boris Blacher in Berlin. But the most obvious affinities in his early works, at least through the first five symphonies up to the First Chamber Symphony of 1976, lie to the east – with Shostakovich and Schnittke. The signature DSCH motif even survives emblematically in later works, such as the two most recent symphonies (Nos 14 and 15), that have left those superficial influences far behind. Other kindred spirits that come to mind are Tippett or Ives. Though his music never sounds like theirs, it does sometimes feel rather like it in terms of openness to the world of music and to the world at large. Yet for all Aho's stylistic inclusiveness, 'postmodern' doesn't feel like the right label. 'Anti-postmodern' would be more like it, because his overriding aims are serious and critical rather than playful or affirmative. Since the musical language follows the humanist line, and because it is deployed with such imagination over (typically) 30-50 minute spans, it suggests engagement with big issues of the day – such as conflict, multiculturalism and the environment – without ever declaring them as a programme or resorting to them as a substitute for musical invention.

No gimmickry, then. Yet Aho's music can be riotously colourful and is certainly not averse to exploring the outer limits of what instruments can do. There is a series of Solos, for instance, hardly any of which have been commercially recorded, all of which are as substantial as



Kalevi Aho (b1949): his music is not weighed down by ponderous concepts

they are adventurous and ferociously demanding on the player. Several even suggest symphonies or concertos *in nuce*. For some astonishing demonstrations of instrumental resourcefulness – in charismatic recorded performances – check out the concertos for clarinet (for Martin Fröst) or contrabassoon (for Lewis Lipnick, on a special instrument with extended high register).

In all there are 15 symphonies and 20 concertos to date, the border between the two genres not always being very sharp. Something like half of the symphonies feature solo or *concertante* instruments – Nos 3 and 9 are alternatively or originally titled *Sinfonia concertante* – while most of the concertos are of a depth and ambition to merit the designation of symphony. Over the last 20 years or so, BIS has done Aho proud, with excellent recordings of all the symphonies except No 6, at least half of the concertos, and a good number of his chamber or chamber orchestra works. Still awaiting CD or DVD champions are his four operas, of which the second, *Insect Life*, is the only one I have seen (some of its music finds its way into the genial yet punchy Symphony No 7).

Like Schnittke, Aho can turn pastiche into either hypnotic fascination or dystopian outrage, and he can make stirring statements in the course of time-travelling between styles. For me these qualities are nowhere clearer than in the Ninth Symphony of 1994, which is at the same time a trombone concerto. Here the virtuoso trombonist Christian Lindberg has to perform roudades on the sackbut that border on the incredible, and to produce startling chordal effects in the cadenza. Yet the abiding impression is of higher goals: to tell us what it feels like to be a thinking person in modern times, and to suggest how we might absorb the bombardment of our senses and sensibilities. ☺

THE ESSENTIAL RECORDING



Symphony No 9. Cello Concerto
Christian Lindberg *tb* Gary Hoffman *vc*
Lahti Symphony Orchestra / Osmo Vänskä
BIS © BIS-CD706 (2/96)