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 craftsmanship, control, but also the fact that it was essentially a concert for cello, members of the orchestra, composers, academics, and ordinary punters - it is an event that 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 ‘apothecary of the dance’, this latest of Aho’s symphonies to date confirmed that in his early twenties the shy-looking Finns 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 virtuosic, 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 aim is 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.

The essential recording

Symphony No 9, Cello Concerto
Christian Lindberg (bn) Gary Hoffman (vc)
Lahti Symphony Orchestra / Osmo Vänskä
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