

HARRI VUORI,

COLOUR-PAINTER AND SYMPHONIST

Harri Vuori is best known as an orchestral composer, as a painter of rich textures and radiant colours. With the dawn of the new millennium came symphonies and concertos as well.

If the environment has any effect on creativity, then composer Harri Vuori (b. 1957) surely works in optimal surroundings. His home is in Järvenpää, a small town some thirty kilometres north of Helsinki, in an area that was already attracting artists a good hundred years ago. Ainola, formerly the home of **Jean Sibelius**, is right nearby, and a school for the artists' children was once held in the house where the Vuoris now live.

"It really is wonderful to work in an environment with such vibrations," says Vuori. "I don't really like cities, or at least not for long. I need silence. I can then hear things in my head more easily."

Vuori's recent achievements bear out the truth of his words. He is by nature a calm, reflective artist who nevertheless exudes creative determination. He is known especially for his orchestral works dominated by a rich and magnificently multicoloured world of timbre.

"True, my orchestral works have been more audible in public than those for smaller line-ups, and I do regard the orchestra as a vast source of potential inspiration," he admits. In the same breath he nevertheless points out that in terms of number, he has actually composed more chamber works. He would also be interested to try some vocal music, and perhaps an opera, too.

Rich timbres and spectral harmonies

Vuori has taken his time as a composer, and he has travelled a long way from the neoclassicism of his youth, via the modernist experiments of

his student days to his present idiom infused with colour. One of the first manifestations of his mature style was the orchestral *Kri* (1988), which was also his diploma assignment at the Sibelius Academy.

The music of *Kri* is dominated by rich timbres and spectral harmonies. Similar in style, with their resonance, echoes and reflections are the next two orchestral works, *S-wüt* (1991) and *The Mandelbrot Echoes* (1995). The second of these was named after the fractal theories of **Benoit Mandelbrot** the mathematician. Although Vuori does sometimes apply quite constructive-sounding sources, they always remain no more than initial stimuli and never hamper his style.

"I've used spectral harmony a lot, but being aware of the dangers involved, I avoided it for many years and waited, thinking maybe I might find some new perspective on it. I have also used a lot of twelve-note two-octave scales, constructed so that I can extract from them phenomena comparable to tonality. I can't work up any enthusiasm for strict dodecaphony and its derivatives any more than I can for the avoidance of tonality merely for the sake of it."

Intensive chamber music period

Chamber music for a long time occupied only a minor role in Harri Vuori's output. Then from the mid-1990s onwards it began to appear at a brisker pace. This was the period of the violin sonata *Towards the Azure, Beyond* for chamber ensemble, *Didgeridoo* for tuba and piano, partly inspired by the folk instrument of the Australian aborigines, and *Invitation to the Nocturnal Dance* for two violas and harpsichord.

All in all Vuori seems to have become increasingly prolific since the mid-1990s. It was also at about this time that he wrote the set of four Shakespeare songs *From Day to Dream* for tenor and viol. This thus continues the use of early instruments that began with *Invitation to the Nocturnal Dance*. Also in the same chamber music vein have been *Galdr* for bass clarinet and French horn, the flute quartet *Twilight Songsters*

(Hämärän laulajat) and the flute-clarinet sonata *Grey Owl* (Harmaa pöllö).

There are, Vuori feels, some clear differences between composing for chamber ensemble or for orchestra:

"Somehow I find it more revealing than orchestral music. The wealth of instruments in an orchestral work in some way stimulates my invention, but I still think it's extremely useful to write music for smaller ensembles now and then. In an orchestral work you don't necessarily need to make a distinction between what is said and how it is said; the mode of expression may be – and often is – an art in itself. But chamber music, and especially a solo work, is quite the opposite: because there are few instruments, the message takes precedence at the expense of the presentation, so you have to be even more explicit.

"I have possibly used special instrumental effects more widely and more prominently in my chamber music than in the orchestral works. The handling of rhythm is also different, because there's not been so much danger of lack of synchronisation. The most complex rhythms and the quickest reactions between instruments are to be found in my chamber music."

Vuori the symphonist

This intensive chamber music period was followed by a return to large ensembles in the orchestral *Over the Moon, Under the Sun* (Ylitse kuun, alitse päivän, 2002) representing the familiar, picturesque Vuori steeped in colour, but the very next orchestral work, *Mythic Images* to some extent already marked a turn in a new direction.

"Mythic Images is a sinfonietta, a little symphony. I had at the time been commissioned to write my first symphony and was debating structural solutions with a view to that as well. I wanted to test my wings in creating a sustained drama and felt that concentrating mainly on timbre might make the listener 'live too much in the present' and forget to follow the thread



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running right through the work. On the other hand I maybe just wanted an approach that was a bit different for a change,” he says.

The *first symphony* was a commission from the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra completed in 2003 and premiered in December 2004. It is music constructed in broad arches culminating in shamanistic rhythms in the closing movement. Lasting 40 minutes, it is Vuori’s biggest work and rests on two simple kernels. In his striving to develop his material he confesses to be a Sibelian symphonist.

Vuori has already been commissioned to compose a *second symphony*, for performance in November 2007. It will, he says, be “lighter, airier and more capricious than the first.” The harmonies will, after a long interim, once again be based on spectral thinking.

The second symphony has been commissioned by the town of Hyvinkää in honour of both its own 90th anniversary and that of the Republic of Finland. It will be performed by the Hyvinkää Orchestra, of which Vuori has been

composer-in-residence since 1997. His two concertos, for bass clarinet and for saxophone, were also written for it. The solo writing in the two concertos differs, he says:

“In my *Bass Clarinet Concerto* the soloist is an extremely important part of the orchestra, and, as it were, has more to say than the others yet without standing out by virtue of a different texture or big solos. The set-up is perhaps in a way like that of a Baroque concerto. In the *Saxophone Concerto* the soloist is, by contrast, nothing short of a superego, the presenter of all the musical material that is taken up by the other instruments in different ways, leading it in their own directions. All in all the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra is much more complex in this concerto, and there are even some major confrontations.”

The future looks bright for Harri Vuori. The second symphony is not the only interesting commission waiting to be written, since he also has orders for concertos, vocal and other works. Nor does he rule out the idea of an opera:

“The thought of an opera is constantly on my mind. It’s just that no one has commissioned one yet, and nor have I found a suitable libretto to motivate me to start writing one without a commission. But I have been looking out for one.”

A concert of works by Harri Vuori will be held at the Järvenpää Hall on 12 January 2007. Among the items on the programme will be *Songs of Dreams and Death*, *The Moon in Three Windows*, *Twilight Songsters*, *Beyond*, *Les mouvements interrompus* and other chamber works.

Further information about Harri Vuori and his works with [sound samples](http://www.fennicagehrman.fi/highlights.htm) can be found at www.fennicagehrman.fi/highlights.htm