

A portrait of composer Veli-Matti Puumala, a man with short brown hair and a goatee, wearing a dark grey t-shirt. He is resting his head on his right hand, looking thoughtfully towards the camera. The background is a textured blue wall.

Composer **Veli-Matti Puumala** (b. 1965), Professor at the Sibelius Academy and winner of the prestigious Finnish Teosto Prize, has set out to alter our concept of time. In his music, the seconds measured by the clock fuse with an inner, empirical perception of time.

Veli-Matti Puumala

– a master of time

As one of his pupils, I have been in a position to engage in some profound conversations with Veli-Matti Puumala on sometimes surprising subjects. One day, for example, it was – ice-hockey. I had been sneering at Finland's national sport in the manner of a true cultural snob when he looked at me and said: "Ice-hockey's a fine game. It moulds your concept of time. Minutes can pass without anything really happening, and then suddenly everything is electrified for five seconds and someone scores a goal."

Listening to Puumala's music likewise moulds our concept of time. At the most magical moments, time ceases to have any meaning, is transformed into a nocturnal fragrance as in the closing *Tra le braccia della notte* movement of his piano concerto *Seeds of Time* 🎧).

A concerto of many dimensions

Seeds of Time was born in 2004 as a joint commission from the Oulu, Helsingborg, Sjaelland and Stavanger orchestras. Premiered with Swedish virtuoso **Roland Pöntinen** as the soloist, it was an immediate success and won Puumala the Teosto Prize for 2005. A large-scale work lasting 40 minutes, it poses no small challenge for its performers but its astounding originality makes it all the more rewarding.

The musical motifs of this concerto are drawn from the most varied of worlds: modernistic filaments of sound, piano textures with a whiff of Romanticism, even 1950s jazz. In Puumala's case these are not just stylistic allusions; they are a means of creating several superimposed concepts of time. Now and then, as right at the beginning of the concerto, time comes to a complete halt in static "windows". According to Puumala, these afford a view of a different time that stands still and does not move.

Another thing that fascinates Puumala is space. For many of his orchestral works, the players can be placed unconventionally, thus generating new aural impressions. The chamber orchestra for *Seeds of Time* consists of small groups of instruments from different families playing material that is to a greater or lesser degree uniform. For the performances conducted by **Susanna Mälkki** the players sat in small groups, whereas **Hannu Lintu** preferred a traditional seating arrangement. In other words, the conductor is free to choose.

Timelessness in twelve minutes

Mure (2008), composed for the Ensemble inter-contemporain and Susanna Mälkki in 2008, divides the chamber orchestra into two groups. Again, superimposed time planes are what interest Puumala. The flowing runs in the "controlled chaos" of the opening section are counteracted by assertive comments from the brass and interjections evocative of hi-hat jazz. The music arrives at an unavoidable dead-end and a dramatic silence broken by two bass-drum beats. An ethereal, Puumala-ish episode then follows in which all sense of time vanishes before stealthily returning to a more active world. For Puumala, the journey from time to timelessness is not impossible even in a work lasting only 12 minutes.

Notwithstanding his infinite attention to detail, Puumala also exploits the potential of a large orchestra. *Rope*, premiered by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra under Hannu Lintu in 2012, is scored for triple woodwinds, a large brass section, strings, and a big battery of percussion instruments complete with piano and harp. The title evokes images of tight-rope walking, but also of the sturdy ropes that fasten ships. Once the stormy swell has abated, string

and brass waves shot with micro-intervals rock the boat like heavy rollers from a distant ocean.

Delicate portraits of mourning

Ever since the 1990s, the music of Puumala has often incorporated a modal element. The little town, Kaustinen, where he was born hosts a big folk music festival, and some may catch echoes of this in his modernist idiom. Composed for the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra in 2008, *Memorial Fragment* breaks folk music elements down into their tiniest components. Little folk-fiddle pieces float like motes into a void, where they are distorted into a delicate portrait of mourning. Scored for string orchestra, *Memorial Fragment* is a tribute to another Kaustinen composer, **Pehr Henrik Nordgren** (1944–2008).

One of the most recent works by Puumala is *Tear*, premiered by the Tapiola Sinfonietta in March 2013. The name, he says, reflects tearing strands woven into thin, rough, rustling textures. It also calls to mind another meaning of the word: deeply personal, tearful emotions. Players in the medium-sized chamber orchestra are also singled out as soloists as the work proceeds.

The line of orchestral compositions, starting with the early *Tutta via* 🎧) (1993) and continuing with such works as *Chainsprings* 🎧) (1995–1997) recently released on CD by Alba along with *Seeds of Time*, has seen some weighty additions in the past few years. Veli-Matti Puumala has rapidly become one of the leading Finnish composers of orchestral literature.

LAURI MÄNTYSAARI

Footnote:

Puumala's latest orchestral work *Rime* was premiered on 20 September by the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra and Tuomas Hannikainen.