

Seven questions for Paavo Heininen

Paavo Heininen, who will be 80 on 13 January 2018, here answers questions about his composing process, work as a symphonist and teacher of the new composer generation.



Photo: Sasa Nurjoki/Musik Finland

Your work as a symphonist has been an important part of your life as a composer. Could you say a bit about this?

The symphonies have of course been an important domain in my career; I might even say the main one. But not in terms of quantity. For me, the symphony has not been a sort of personal credo; it is not a signal like a priest's dog collar or a patriotic coat-of-arms in the way it may sometimes have been for some composers. But it is something that interests me. Composing for the stage has vitally influenced the way I think about the symphony. The traditional generic view of the symphony as something sprouting from a single seed – as represented by my first four symphonies – has been replaced by, should I say, a Mahlerian approach: I have every conceivable idea and all the resources of an orchestra at my disposal.

My 'symphonies', in the sense of a credo or a foray into new territory, have actually been my *Adagio* and *DIA*, that is to say orchestral works that were generically classified as 'concerto for orchestra'. The opera *Silkkirumpu* (The Damask Drum), subtitled 'Concerto for singers, players, words and images' in fact has the same function, on an even greater scale and with weightier meaning. The most important work in my catalogue in recent decades would in this sense be the oratorio *Tē Deum Creaturae*, the first half of which was performed five years ago 🎥.

It has from time immemorial been the custom to denounce over-ambitious concertos as 'symphonies'. In this sense, my long *4th piano concerto* is clearly in the manner of a symphony. But all the more so is the organ concerto *Aiolos* – a nine-movement, 90-minute offshoot of the Bruckner-Mahler tradition.

How do you set about composing a new work?

The first moments are of primary importance in seeking ideas for a composition. The very first moment is the most important, even daunting, and it's good to get past it without realising. The vital vision of the work's identity is also born at this stage, and that includes both the material character and the structure. But something

exists even before the initial moment. There are options and ideas you then become aware of.

Are there any methods in the composition process that repeat themselves?

My composition process is pretty constant. Michael Tippett aptly said that you have to begin composing from two directions, the whole and the details. This creates a sort of operating space, multidimensional variable, or vector, as some would say, in which new ideas, and the order in which you do things no longer matters. You always know the place for and function of new ideas. You then begin writing the score when you have a clear plan. So the order in which you compose it is often not chronological.

You've had a long career as Professor of Composition at the Sibelius Academy. Is it possible to teach composition?

Yes, to a person who's immersed up to their neck, nostrils and ears in the material, experiences and problems of composition. You do need existential commitment. There's no point teaching composition to someone who hasn't got it. You can only say: get yourself some records and listen. There are lots of aspects of composition that you can and need to be able to verbalise. They're the ones that require conscious action. The purpose of composition teaching is, to my mind, to train youngsters to converse with themselves about their work in a way and in terms that are right and do not permit quasi-reflection. Ones that create not snares but enlightenment.

I've enjoyed teaching composition. What could be more fun than debating the thoughts surrounding it – and with talented youngsters? Of course it means I have to probe more and a tad deeper when I'm discussing with students. In a way, I've attended composition lessons for longer than many others!

Your flute concerto *Autrefois* is very different from your other works. How did it come about?

There have been times in my career when I've worked with musical material that is not my own. This was the case when I was asked to reconstruct certain items in our national musical heritage that had got destroyed, such as works by Aarre Merikanto. In the case of Leevi Madetoja and Selim Palmgren it was a question of works that never existed, but should have. The modesty of Finnish chamber music in Madetoja's time would not have invited or summoned him to activate his obvious and immense aptitude for writing for string quartet. And Palmgren never found the leisure to fashion larger entities out of his infinite treasure of short piano inspirations.

The idea for *Autrefois* arose during discussions with Timo Hongisto and Mikael Helasvuo. One evening, after a concert, it occurred to them that the Finnish repertoire lacked a flute concerto from the first half of the 20th century. *Autrefois* was born of the essence of Madetoja, but his world has been allowed to expand a bit over the stylistic horizon of his day. It is, however, somehow clear that the concerto is not just mine. It's a hybrid in which Madetoja serves as an approximate model.

You've been working tremendously hard in recent years. Can you tell us more about these new pieces?

I have, among other things, written duos for every orchestral instrument and piano. This seemed a natural way to do things, having many works of a similar kind on the go at the same time or in quick succession. I then began doing string quartets and composed six one after the other. I've also written a lot of piano pieces, many of which have not been premiered yet.

What would be your advice to a young Paavo Heininen today?

My advice to a young person is usually embodied in the old saying that nothing in human life should be alien to a composer, who should be interested in absolutely everything. But if I were conversing with my former self – as Borges conversed with Borges on a bench by the Charles River – then I might perhaps quote Buckminster Fuller. I would tell him to respect his future self, the extent and importance of his future, by addressing himself to its making – study –, by ensuring that it is thorough and comprehensive and by looking beyond his youthful impatience and ongoing pressures.

Pasi Lyytikäinen