

# Kalevi Aho on the threshold of his eighth decade



PHOTO: ROMAIN ETIENNE

*On the threshold of his eighth decade, Kalevi Aho (70 years old on 9 March) is in his best form ever. New works are born at a steady rate in the composer's workshop, and in his case quantity never encroaches upon quality. New experiences and those that are tried and true: both are equally necessary for Aho, who is continually seeking new challenges, who always pours new, fresh wine even into old vessels.*

tos. It has already been played close to 70 times across the world with soloists **Colin Currie**, **Martin Grubinger** and **Alexej Gerassimez**.

## Symphonic Frescoes

Among this year's premieres we note four concertos – a *Double Concerto for Two Bassoons* (Warsaw 18.1.) a *Concerto for Guitar and Chamber Orchestra* (Rovaniemi 10.5.), a *Triple Concerto for Violin, Cello and Piano* (Antwerp 11.5.) as well as a *Concerto for Bass Clarinet* (Jyväskylä 4.9.) – but also four additional pieces to Aho's continually expanding suite of works for various solo instruments, plus a quintet for piano (left hand) and a string quartet (Tokyo 10.11.).

But the highlight of this year's premieres must nevertheless be the master symphonist Aho's *Symphony No. 17* which will be premiered by the orchestra, of all the world's orchestras, that

**AHO'S LUST FOR** discovery and general curiosity seem to be unceasing. Every new work is a unique project that doesn't resemble any other; the conceptual angles of approach are continually changing and the tone language is so multifaceted and flexible that there is never a risk of repetition.

It's unclear what kind of record this might be, but the fact that Aho for this current year has no less than fourteen premieres scheduled certainly gives some indication of his productivity. Some follow one another so closely that Aho, who makes a point of being present at his premieres, cannot possibly make it to them all.

As usual when it comes to this composer, the concertos play a central role. Aho, who with the harp concerto *Mearra* in 2016 completed his project of composing concertos for every conventional instrument of the orchestra, has in addition written concertos for more unusual instruments and instrument combinations. And with his to date 31 solo concertos he has now surpassed his friend **Pehr Henrik Nordgren** (1944-2008, with 29 concertos) as Finland's most prolific actor in the genre.

Aho's *Sieidi* for percussion and orchestra, has become one of the most performed Finnish concer-

understands Aho's music best, namely *Sinfonia Lahti*, under the direction of the Aho expert **Osmo Vänskä** (Lahti 4.4.). This symphony which was given the visually pregnant subtitle *Symphonic Frescoes*, with its 63 minutes, is Aho's longest, and the movements – *From the Depth*, *Scherzo macabre* and *Distant Songs* – can also be performed separately as independent tone poems. Aho, who has always been partial to less common instruments, has incorporated a contraforte (an elaborate contrabassoon) and a lupophone (a kind of bass oboe) into the orchestra.

The fact that the *Sixteenth Symphony* (premiered in September 2015) was composed for a large string orchestra, percussion – including flat bells, an ocean drum, a spring drum, a Japanese binzasara and dobaci, as well as a Chinese moon gong – and mezzo-soprano (to a text by **Gertrud Kolmar**) is once again a good reminder of Aho's clearly expressed unwillingness to repeat himself.

## Gripping correspondence

Considering the fact that Aho is himself a violinist, his string orchestra production is surprisingly scanty, hence a welcome addition was also *Letter to*

*the Netherworld* (*Kirje tuolle puolen*), premiered in Kokkola on 19.1 (the day Pehr Henrik Nordgren would have been 75) by the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra and **Juha Kangas**. Aho's fourth work in the genre, it is an equally gripping as suggestive, sounding correspondence between him and his esteemed colleague.

Aho has nowadays even a festival named after him in his home town, Forssa. *Musica Kalevi Aho*, with Aho as artistic leader, will have been held a total of four times this coming summer (28-29.6), and here we have the opportunity to enjoy Aho's music, as well as that of his colleagues, in an idyllic mill town. Last year the wind quintet from the Berliner Philharmoniker were the special guests and what is interesting about this year's programme is that the most recent Aho piece is the brand new



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*Solo XVI* for harp, while the earliest was written already in 1967 – *String Quartet No. 1*, which will only now get its premiere.

True to his usual habit, Aho has many pokers in the fire, and he is accustomed to being booked up years ahead. As of the present, Aho has experience in most genres, even though works for choir and orchestra are still conspicuously absent in his opus list. And personally I hope that he will for the first time in nearly half a century return to the string quartet as an artistic means of expression. New experiences and those that are tried and true: both are equally necessary for Aho, who is continually seeking new challenges, who always pours new, fresh wine even into old vessels.

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