

Seven questions

for Matthew Whittall



PHOTO: MARI KYTORU

1. *The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra is premiering your new *These Things Remain* for mixed choir, soloists and orchestra in April and touring with it to The Netherlands in May. How did this collaboration come about, and how did the composition proceed?*

Daniel Raiskin, the artistic director of WSO, contacted me out of the blue with an offer I couldn't refuse: to write a piece commemorating the liberation of The Netherlands and Belgium by Canadian forces at the end of World War II, to be toured in those countries after the premiere. The text is based primarily on poetry by Canadian soldiers deployed in Europe during the war, and covers a wide range of images and emotions, from the horrors of the battlefield and war crimes to rare moments of meditative stillness, ending in solemn reflection. An oratorio in miniature, it's in some ways a very simple piece, primarily lyrical. I wanted to avoid any sense of orchestral showmanship, and instead just concentrate on the emotional weight of the collective voice of those soldiers.

2. *The Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra has commissioned you to write a work for its Helsinki Variations series, with a premiere scheduled for next year. The idea behind the commission was to vary a work composed before 1945, and you chose a song by Jean Sibelius. How do you intend to integrate the old with the new in the music?*

I went with a quiet, intimate piece by Sibelius (*Nyt seimelle pienoisen lapsen / To the little child's manger*) that was very personal and familiar for me as a choral singer. The theme is based on a simple ascending and descending Dorian scale, the mode that also colors Sibelius's 6th symphony. It lends the music a harmonically ambiguous, almost Renaissance-like sound, which is another choral repertoire I love. Those ideas will undoubtedly shape the piece, as will the memory of a powerful moment of contemplation I experienced near Sibelius's home at Ainola shortly after I first came to Finland in 2001. The variation technique I plan to use is one I've employed in my choral music: the source material is slowed down greatly, and the individual lines become unmoored and create these wonderful suspended textures. I also plan to use a huge orchestra: six horns, quadruple winds, two harps. The list of instruments the orchestra sent me was enormous, so I decided to use all of it!

3. *Angela Hewitt will once again be the soloist in your piano concerto *Nameless Seas* with the Toronto Symphony in May. The work was first performed in Ottawa in 2017. What inspired you to write the concerto, and how did it come about?*

The idea for *Nameless Seas* came to me during an artist residency in Florida, where I met the New York painter **MaryBeth Thielhelm**. She paints huge, abstracted, almost monochromatic panels depicting the sea in various moods. The sea has always been a refuge for me, since childhood holidays with my family in Atlantic Canada. The vistas, rhythms and moods

of the sea are present to a great degree in the music, as are my memories. The plan for a piano concerto grew slowly over years, and I'd talked with both the original soloists, Angela Hewitt and **Risto-Matti Marin**, about a piece that would link both my countries, Canada and Finland. Amazingly, we were able to put it together with the help of the PianoEspoo festival, Finnish Radio Symphony and Canada's National Arts Centre for 2017, a major anniversary year for both countries.

It's not a great virtuoso display piece, although there are moments of that. I was more interested in poetic and coloristic virtuosity. I still think it's my very best piece, and I'm looking forward to hearing Angela play it again in our homeland.

4. *The British Carice Singers appointed you Associate Composer last year. What prompted your partnership, and what choral works can we expect as a result?*

I first met **George Parris**, the very talented young artistic director of the Carice Singers in my choral composition seminar at the Sibelius Academy. He later sang in the premiere of my piece *Lauantausauna* (Saturday Sauna) and performed it with Carice, and that's what began our association.

We are planning a large-scale piece in English for premiere in 2021. I'm using selections from Robert Louis Stevenson's "Songs of Travel", his great cycle of leave-taking. A couple of years ago I was in a very dark place, and those poems were like a guiding star for me, resigned and bleak, but also serene and accepting.

5. *The *Return of Light* for mixed choir and orchestra is one of the items by you on the *Northlands* CD that was voted *Record of the Year* by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle) in 2017. Many people have said they can sense a sort of meditative neo-religiosity in your music, and others a strong connection with nature. How do you feel about these interpretations?*

I think both interpretations are accurate. I grew up devoutly religious, and the pace and music of Catholic ritual still marks my music to a great degree. (*The Return of Light* is an extended, slowed-down hymn.) But I also learned a deep appreciation of the natural world from my father, so both those themes have been intertwined for me from the very beginning. But I was always more interested in the mystical aspect of religion than mainstream practice, and the mystical

experience is very much tied to solitude in nature. However, I have a very unsentimental view of nature. There's no such thing as natural beauty. Nature just is. The wonder lies in our ability to find beauty in it, and to communicate that experience to one another.

6. *Your piano suite *Leaves of Grass* was inspired by the poems of Walt Whitman. Can you tell us a bit about the work?*

Whitman was my first major discovery of English-language poetry after being educated in French, and it was a powerful experience. At the same time, I found his poetry so musical in itself that I couldn't imagine setting it to music, and the idea of piano pieces on Whitman's images grew, in much the same way Ravel treated the poetry of Aloysius Bertrand in "Gaspard de la nuit". It came as a complete idea, a cycle of twelve pieces, that I held on to for years before finally getting the chance to write it for my friend Risto-Matti Marin.

7. *What other projects or plans are you working on or have in the air for the future? And what, would you say, are the guiding stars in your life?*

I've written a number of concertos, and have plans with various performers for several more, which is fine because I love the concerto form. The idea of channeling a vast musical argument through a soloist is one I've always been fascinated by. The one genre I have yet to break into, but would very much like to work in, is opera. I love the idea of opera without pathos and grand themes, just ordinary people facing life and all it brings with it. Maybe someday...

One thing I always strive to do is pay attention to the passing moment of beauty and, in appreciating it, allow it to expand beyond the moment, to fill our whole mind with its exquisiteness. I remember walking down a street once and seeing a single soap bubble float by me, from no apparent source, just there for no reason, alone. It was a window of pure delight. In being mindful of those rare moments, we step outside the chronological time that fragments our lives and touch on the eternal, something larger than ourselves. The memory of that bubble is something suspended in time, always there, waiting to be accessed again when I need it.

HENNA SALMELA