

Joonas Kokkonen centenary

In the music of Joonas Kokkonen (1921-1996) joy and seriousness, tragedy and reconciliation are never far from each other, and even the most introvert and dark passages are infused with his warm and life-embracing humour and humanistic attitude to life.



Photo: Musik Finland

Joonas Kokkonen's first "mature" masterpiece was the *Music for String Orchestra* (1957), which at the same time as it offers a synopsis and a culmination of his neo-classical period also contains the seeds of his later artistic advancement. This is a work in which Kokkonen reveals an obvious talent for writing for string instruments. He here writes the first of the Bartók-inspired adagio religiosos, slow movements with an almost sacred character, that were subsequently to become one of his foremost trademarks. The fast movements, in their turn, are examples of those lively, and often playful, rhythmical allegros that form a fertile contrasting basis for the slow movements.

Early key works and symphonies

Another early key work is the song cycle *Lintujen tuonela* (1958-59) (*The Hades of the Birds*) for mezzo-soprano and orchestra. The exemplary transparent and exquisitely coloured orchestral setting scintillates in all the colours of the rainbow while at the same time making the solo voice brilliantly audible. It is also a good example of Kokkonen's intuitive ability to write for the human voice and to give the words and poetic wholes a meaningful musical outfit. These skills were to find their ultimate expression in the opera *Viimeiset kiusaukset* (*The Last Temptations*) written 17 years later.

The third key work is the *Third Symphony* (1967), which is usually regarded as the starting point of Kokkonen's free tonal period. It highlights his symphonic thinking and orchestral mastery in an unprecedented splendour. Kokkonen was primarily a man of the orchestra and, above all, a symphonist. His way of developing ideas and organising his material is highly symphonic, and his intuitive sense of counterpoint provides the most stable ground imaginable for symphonic seeds to grow on. In the *Third Symphony*, Kokkonen unleashes his entire musical and sonorous fantasy without compromising the rigorousness of his symphonic principles. Yet where, in his first symphonies, Kokkonen had worked with watercolours and graphics, the *Third* is a rich fresco in oil.

In the *Fourth Symphony* (1971), Kokkonen reaches a mastery equal to that of Sibelius in his two last symphonies. The melodic and harmonious material is more clearly formulated, concentrated and accessible than ever before, coupled with an emotional message that is more immediate than in Kokkonen's earlier orchestral production.

Communication with the listener

The opera *The Last Temptations* was to mark Joonas Kokkonen's international breakthrough as a composer. According to many critics it is the

strongest Finnish opera besides Aarre Merikanto's *Juha*, and it is very hard indeed not to agree on that.

Other important compositions are the three-movement *Opus sonorum* (1965) and *Symphonic Sketches* (1968). These, too, are significant symphonic works. It might also be worth to consider appealing works such as the charming *Wind Quintet* (1973), the nature-inspired tone poem *Inauguratio* (1971) or the cantata *Erekhtheion* (1969) written for Turku University – without doubt one of the best pieces of ceremonial music written in our country.

Beyond these works we might dwell a little on the intricately structured *Sinfonia da camera* for twelve strings (1962); or to examine imposing vocal works such as the touching *Laudatio Domini* for mixed a cappella choir (1966). We might highlight the atmospheric organ piece *Lux aeterna* (1974), the *Cello Concerto* (1969) full of gusto, the exquisite *Sonata for Cello and Piano* (1976), or the charming *Five Bagatelles* for piano (1969).

Considerable space could also be devoted to the three string quartets which as a whole form the most significant contribution to the genre in Finland since Sibelius, or to what is perhaps Kokkonen's most amiable and immediately communicative work, the *Requiem* (1981), which is infused with a deep religious reliance. Last but not least, there is his last important work, *Il passaggio* for chamber orchestra (1987), a late and lyrically tinged descendant of Sibelius' *Tapiola*.

In Kokkonen's refusal to produce anything half-made or half-hearted he appears as something of a kindred spirit to his French colleague Henri Dutilleux. Beyond all this, there is no doubt that it is communication with the listener that has always formed the central focus for Kokkonen. In his music, joy and seriousness, tragedy and reconciliation are never far from each other, and even the most introvert and dark passages are infused with his warm and life-embracing humour and humanistic attitude to life. As we know, there is always light after darkness, and within Joonas Kokkonen's work this is perhaps the innermost essence of his artistic message.

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