

An interview with Hakola

Kimmo Hakola views the world through the eyes of an endlessly curious child. He speaks here of how he shook off his symphony phobia, of the metabolism of musical life, of his plans for compositions, and of the advice he would give his young self.

The Finnish RSO is to premiere your first symphony in December 2018. How would you describe its composition process?

The symphony has been a difficult genre for me. I put off composing my first symphony and calling a work a symphony until very recently. I've got a few works I thought I would call a symphony, but I wanted to wait for my aesthetics of the genre to mature. This phobia may well have been overdone, but the door is now open and symphonic thinking will in future occupy a central role in my work.

Writing concertos has been like a red line running through your career.

I have written my concertos for musicians whose art has deeply spoken to me. It's been a case of mutual enthusiasm, I think. I wrote my *Clarinet Concerto*,  for example, for **Kari Kriikku**, my *Violin Concerto*  for violinist-conductor **John Storgårds**, and my recent *Double Concerto for Violin and Viola* for **Minna Pensola** and **Antti Tikkannen**. The soloist, his or her charisma and mastery, is always the source of inspiration for my concertos. This explains their different modes of expression. I can also relate to the way my soloists make music; I get a strong sense of our being kindred spirits that has then brought us closer together.

Your works often have some surprising elements. It might be a Mongolian folk melody, or Klezmer fireworks – but always cleverly integrated with the work as a whole. Do you deliberately aim at surprise and excitement?

When I was younger, surprise was maybe a sort of additional dramaturgical dimension for raising the music as an experience to a new unpredictable level. All in all, I've tried to create music the behaviour of which is not obvious from the first moment. Things like controlling the perception of time and guiding the listener's observations. Some might say there are game-theory structures in my composing. Perhaps, but I'm also interested in perceptual psychology. I nevertheless want to stress that music is freedom: the perceptions and experiences of every listener are "right".

Where do you find the ideas and inspiration for your music?

I draw inspiration from everything imaginable. I view the world through the eyes of an endlessly

curious child. I examine and study things, phenomena, and allow these adventures plenty of time. Sometimes I call an expert in the field I'm studying to ask why a problem that's been puzzling me hasn't been solved in the way I thought. These discussions have been the salt of my life.

Which of your works would you particularly single out?

My opuses number about 100 at the moment. The public and music gatekeepers have chosen some as their favourites and these are played a lot. It's often the way that new gems are discovered hidden among a composer's works only after his or her death. That's just the metabolism of musical life. I don't want to guide this process. All my works are dear to me. It's most important for the composer and the publisher to put the composer's works in some sort of order while he's still alive, so that future generations can find all the necessary information about them – and for the material of works to be finalised. On the other hand, I don't know of a single composer who's had such good fortune.

Looking back over your career as a composer, what advice would you give your young self?

There are certainly things I could have done differently. I'm a perfectionist, and I went through a period of very severe self-criticism when I was young; looking back, those years were very exhausting, but important to later stages in life. I knew so early in life that I wanted to be a composer that I never seriously considered doing anything else. This explains why I've withstood many difficult things in the job.

It's no good trying to be a composer for extra-musical reasons. You can model yourself on trends and your teacher's music when you're training, but if you don't later discover a genuine language of your own, your artistic work may cease to have any sense and future.

I've been lucky in that my music was understood and my career supported early on. I also got a publisher when I was only just starting out: that, too, meant a lot for my professional autonomy.

What sorts of things do you value in life?

Physical and mental wellbeing are of the utmost importance to me if I am to survive in everyday life, manage my time and the sometimes hectic pace of life, and I actively work to achieve them.

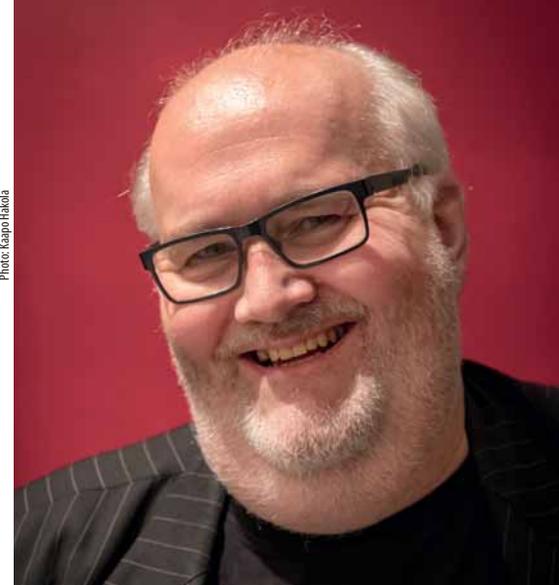


Photo: Kaapo Hakola

Warm relations with the people dear to me also give me strength. I try to look at myself from time to time, and to learn from my mistakes. And I'm a listener: many of my friends appreciate the fact that I will if necessary give them my full attention. I don't really comment or advise; it means focusing as equals on the things that really matter.

What is your relationship to chamber music?

Chamber music is an important genre for me. I've first tested many new musical, technical and stylistic ideas in chamber music. My four string quartets are, you could say, aesthetic manifestos. My teacher, **Einojuhani Rautavaara**, used to claim that string quartets are a composer's philosophy. I notice that in the *Piano Quintet* I'm working on right now, the blending and separating of piano and strings simply conjures up orchestral ideas.

What are your plans for the future? Will we be hearing any of your works when you celebrate your 60th birthday later this year?

In the past few years I've devoted a rather large proportion of my time to committee and other administrative work – I've become a sort of professional sitter-on-boards. It's been an important phase in my life, and I've been able to put into practice and develop fields of expertise in a way I would never have had a chance to do if I'd just been an artist. As a composer, I'll be concentrating on symphonies – now that I've made a start on this genre and feel I'm sufficiently mature to be a symphonist. And I've long been planning to do an opera making greater use of my visual and textual knowhow as an all-round work of art.

Scheduled to be premiered towards the end of the year are both the symphony and another orchestral work, and I've got a focus concert coming up at which I'll be playing the piano part in the premiere of my *Piano Quintet* and conducting a new piece for ensemble.

Henna Salmela