

Notes from our composers

We asked our composers how they have been doing this exceptional spring. What new works are in the pipeline? What music have they been listening to at home? What books have they read, and what TV-series and films do they recommend? These interviews were partly published on Facebook and Instagram during April and May.

KALEVI AHO

My daily schedule has become very regular during Covid. In the morning, I compose 1–2 pages. In the afternoon, I've been for walks lasting 1–3 hours near home or further afield; sometimes I might spend longer at the most distant points. We have some wonderful outdoor recreation routes near Käpylä, where I live. The Old Town Bay is a unique nature paradise. Nor are the fine Paloheinä forests far away, and the Sipoonkorpi National Park is only about 20 minutes' drive by car.

After my daily walk, I've composed another 1–2 pages. At the end of March, I finished my double concerto for viola and percussion. After that, I took a break for a couple of weeks, and then I composed *Am Horizont* for solo viola. Right now I'm working on a double concerto for flute and harp, and it's coming along well.

I end the day with some instrumental music, an opera or a book. In March, when Finland went into lockdown, I dedicated the evenings to Haydn's string quartets, listening to them all in the order in which they were written. I've also spent the late-night hours listening to opera. There've been some brilliant productions on the websites of the world's most celebrated opera houses, and I can watch them all for free. I saw at least 30 operas in April–May, most of which I'd never seen before. My general knowledge of opera has grown considerably during Covid! I've also started rereading some of the classics in my bookcase, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, for example, and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*.

I self-isolated until mid-May, since when I've partly relaxed, and I've seen my 2½-year-old granddaughter again. So life is more or less back to normal. Maybe I'll gradually resume my other social life as well.



Kalevi Aho



Cecilia and her rabbit Viljo.

CECILIA DAMSTRÖM

I was ill with Covid-19 for over two months, luckily not life threatening, but the fever, the respiratory distress and the headaches made it almost impossible for me to work, or even go out. The days when I have the energy to work, I'm now writing on my third piano quintet *Helene – Nuances from the Life of Helene Schjerfbeck*. Quite recently I also finished a new piece for the fantastic violinist Pekka Kuusisto and pianist Tarmo Peltokoski, that hopefully will be premiered this autumn.

I listen to a considerable amount of American music after having been in the USA for a month (in February before the outbreak of the corona crisis). I had the great pleasure to get to know the composers Andrew Norman and Ted Hearne. I have therefore listened a lot to their orchestral and chamber music, as well as chamber music by Lisa Young, Caroline Shaw and Missy Mazzoli.

You can without any qualms read a favourite book more than once. In my case it's the Harry Potter books, which I am at present listening to on Storytel. I'm also reading books about Helene Schjerfbeck, because of my forthcoming work inspired by her. It is consoling to read that even though she struggled with illness her whole life, she was still able to create so much great art.

TOMMIE HAGLUND

The greatest advantage this spring has been spending so much time with my wife Elisabet, as we have both been working from home. It is wonderful to compose when she is nearby. I'm at work with a piano concerto for Niklas Sivelöv. He is phenomenal and I try to discover new

territories in my creativity where light and consolation are to show the way. Then I'm adding a couple of things to my symphony, some genuinely romantic sections. The symphony, will be performed by the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra in Denmark, and by the same orchestra during the next Tommie Haglund Festival in Halmstad, Sweden in April 2021.

I am currently listening to music by the 17th century English composer William Lawes, who wrote interesting polyphonic music that is immensely stimulating to study and listen to. I am also doing an analysis of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata* for my students. It is music that touches on what is happening now; he is close to a total collapse but manages to keep his music and intellect emotionally intact.

I am reading Carl Bark's *Donald Duck*, which keeps me in a good mood, Torbjörn Elensky's *The Fire Child (Eldungen)*, Tony Lundman's novel 8 about Sibelius's Eighth, Spinoza's *Ethics*, Swedenborg's *Heaven and Earth*, and I continually return to John Daverio's book *Robert Schumann, 'Herald of a New Poetic Age'*.



Tommie Haglund

MIKKO HEINIÖ

The fact I have not been able to see my grandchildren or go to concerts and the theatre has had the biggest impact on my life this Covid spring. Otherwise my days have been similar to those before the epidemic: I go jogging in the morning and in the afternoon I compose in my study, which has always been at home. I'm working – in rather little day-sized bites – on a concerto for violin, kantele and string orchestra scheduled to be premiered in 2022.



Mikko Heiniö

I always listen to new music on the radio, and I particularly still want to know what people are doing in Finland, even though I gave up doing research into Finnish music and sitting on boards and committees long ago. I've recorded lots of operas off the TV, in good productions; I can enjoy such intoxicants as *The Ring* and *Der Rosenkavalier* as many times as I like. Then there's not only music of interest to me in the professional sense on the net, but also all kinds of curiosities such as Beethoven played on an electric guitar (the brilliant Marcin Patrzalek and Tina S.).

Right now I'm reading the novel *House of Day, House of Night* by Olga Tokarczuk, and next in the pile is Per Olov Enquist's *The Royal Physician's Visit*. And if I run out of books in my silent home, I can always reread things in my bookcase and see how, for example, the Russian classics, or the novels of Thomas Mann I read (in the original language) more or less 40–50 years ago taste today. I watch films by my favourite directors whenever I get the chance; I'm fascinated by the music ingeniously chosen by Stanley Kubrick, the boisterous humanity of Federico Fellini, the existentialism of Ingmar Bergman and the operatic dramaturgy of Sergio Leone. As to TV series, I've been most impressed by Rainer Maria Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* – partly because I studied in Germany back in the day. Just recently I saw a moving documentary about the film director Agnès Varda in which she analysed her work both profoundly and shrewdly – in a way that is familiar to composers.

OLLI KORTEKANGAS

A few premieres have been postponed. In the meantime, I've been working on some vocal music both large and small. Later in the summer I'll begin work on a commission for the 2021 Naantali Music Festival. I'm writing the solo

part in this *Partita concertante* for Arto Noras. I've also got several opera plans pending.

While music by Penderecki is playing at home, I can reminisce over the many good discussions I had with him. Every morning my little old hands attack the piano keys, playing Bach preludes and fugues, Chopin polonaises, Liszt etudes and so on. It's a real tonic!

I read (in Swedish) Patrik Svensson's *The Gospel of Eels* – a wonderful combination of fact and fiction. In the spring, the post brought me Maritta Hirvonen's book about Jouni Kaipainen – an elegant, erudite and extremely readable opus. It also includes a comprehensive collection of Jouni's writings about music. I've got a new hobby, thanks to a hint from my friend [a Grand Old Lady of the Finnish theatre] Seela Sella: every day, my wife and I read aloud to each other for half an hour.

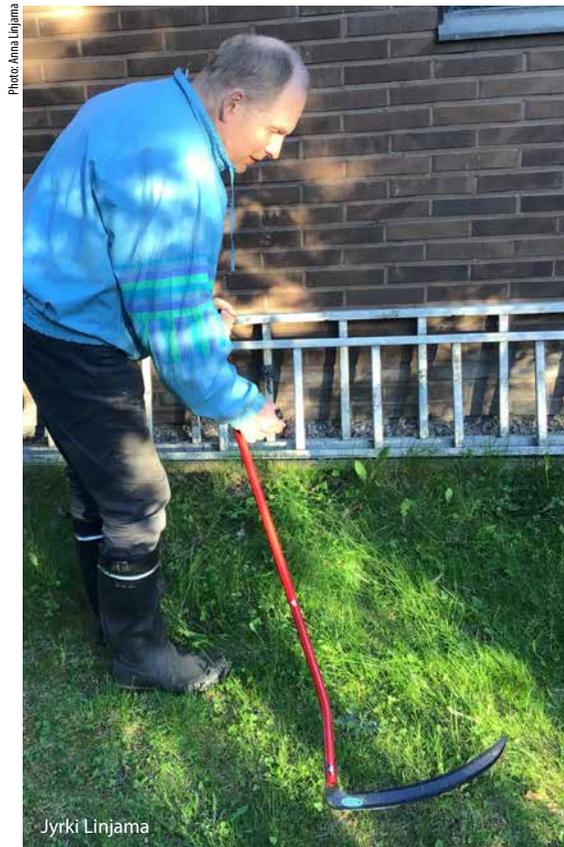
We recently watched Sally Potter's *Orlando* on the TV, for the lovely Tilda Swinton as much as for the director. We've also got absolutely hooked on the brilliant French spy thriller *Le bureau*. And we shouldn't forget to get out in the open air for some exercise at times like this, on the contrary! We've been watching the coming of spring and summer, closely spied on birds, and even been out in the boat.



Olli Kortekangas

JYRKI LINJAMA

My home has been filled with all sorts of sounds this spring. I've heard a lot of piano pieces for beginners, because my wife has been teaching from home and has been remote demonstrating to her pupils. Among the music I've listened to on disc is choral music by Britten, to lend my own composition project impetus. I've read David van Reybrouck's work (in Finnish translation) about the history of the Congo, a momentous book in many respects. Before that I read Graham Green's novel *A Burnt-out Case*, and van Reybrouck fills in the background to this. Green's book is a profound scrutiny of the relationship between art, colonialism, religion and the media, and I recommend it to all Western



Jyrki Linjama

arts professionals! I've seen two very rewarding documentaries: one about Astor Piazzolla and the other, *Honeyland*, about agrarian life in North Macedonia.

I'm naturally sorry that performances have had to be cancelled, but in other respects my work as a composer has continued as before. At general level, I reflect on the numerous ways the crisis is unearthing cultural problems. If, instead of taking a holiday in Thailand, you spend the money on a bicycle so you can ride out and admire the beauty of a nearby meadow, you will have taken an important step on many scores: by breaking the spell of must-have fashionable trends in general and scaling down the tourist industry in particular, by genuinely reducing overconsumption and by enhancing the right sort of physical activity in everyday life and your relationship with nature.

Shattering the illusion that no borders exist also helps us to perceive the paradox of existence: when is the time to do what, and in what way? Re-actualising questions such as this in everyday life also comes close to the composer's work ethic. Basically, my own work has for decades been exploring the border zone between life and death, both in general and especially via liturgical texts. I have in the process gradually become increasingly aware of the shadow and fragility of existence: in this sense, the ongoing crisis involves many feelings with which I'm already familiar.



MATS LARSSON GOTHE

I spent three weeks, full-time, this spring, just completing the work (proof reading and corrections) on the orchestral parts of my new opera *The Promise*, which will have its world premiere at the Stockholm Royal Opera in January of next year. Now I have begun a new piece for the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, part of a project with the nature photographer Joakim Odelberg. When that is ready I will start working on my next opera.

Normally I don't have the time – or for that matter the stamina – to listen very much to music, but I did hear the entire *St. Luke Passion* by James MacMillan this last Easter. A fantastic work by a fantastic composer whose music is performed too seldom in Sweden.

My reading goes on as usual, but at a snail's pace. Having finished *The Gospel of Eels* by Patrik Svensson, I have – out of pure curiosity – started to read *The Last Pig* by Horace Engdahl. It consists of short aphorisms, one of which reads: "What characterises modern opera is that the singer and the orchestra give the impression that they are performing different compositions." I don't know if I should take the insinuation personally or if I should try to prove the opposite.

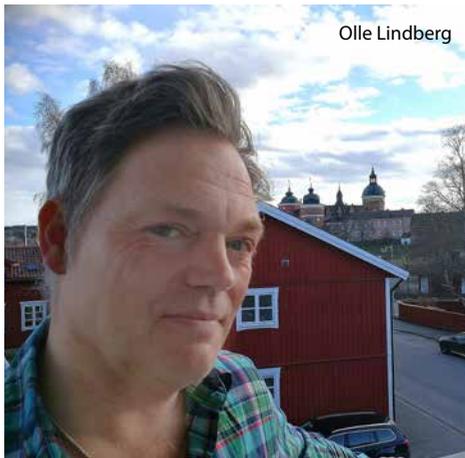
OLLE LINDBERG

My wife Agnes and I are both working as freelancers, and we were looking forward to our best spring ever, but... For instance the premiere of my *Stabat Mater*, that should have taken place in Ystad last April, will have to wait until next year.

My most recent deadline was *Lines Written in Early Spring* to a text by William Wordsworth, commissioned by the fantastic Stockholm-based men's choir Zero8. I have also tried teaching online (arranging and ear training) for the first time. It actually turned out quite well!

I listen a lot to Bach; not only J. S. but also works by his sons, as my wife and I play in the quintet BachEnsemble Sörmland, whose repertoire is exclusively music by the Bach family. We adapt/arrange the music for the instruments we have within the group.

It must be 10 years since I have read so much – there is always something positive with a crisis. A number of Scandinavian thrillers and some historical biographies. I recommend Niklas Natt och Dag's exciting book *1793*. Horrifying but very well written. As for TV programmes, we are just now watching the HBO series *John Adams*, about the second US president and the exciting period at the end of the 1770s. Speaking of HBO, no one should miss the series *Chernobyl!* Reality always surpasses fiction.



Olle Lindberg

PASI LYTTIKÄINEN

I have even been teaching composition from home this spring. I've listened to a surprising amount of music during Covid, to do with my job. I've had time to listen to the links sent by colleagues to interesting works. One of them was *Pur ti miro*, from the opera *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, that Eero Hämeenniemi mentioned on Facebook. It's been regarded as a duet by Monteverdi, but the actual composer would appear to have been Benedetto Ferrari. Ascribing music to the wrong composer is not unique, but this nevertheless raised some interesting reflections on authorship.

Though I'm mostly working with acoustic ensembles, I've also been inspired by the electro-acoustic music of Natasha Barrett. She uses sounds in all sorts of ways, weaving them together to form magnificent textures, just as in orchestral music. I also received a new disc of music by Tuomas Turriago, of him performing his own works for solo piano. A fantastic musician!

I read quite a lot. *Hiljaisuuden kosketus* – about silence – by the Finnish Greek-Or-



Pasi Lyytikäinen

thodox nun Kristoduli was suitable bedtime reading when the media and world events were being fed us like a thriller. As for TV, I favour programmes that provide some light relief, but sometimes I want something more profound, and was impressed by the film *Paths of the Soul* by Zhang Yang about Tibetan pilgrims.

I'm particularly cheered to hear that the Seinäjoki City Orchestra is beginning its autumn season in an unusual way, with a streamed concert consisting entirely of my works. And what is more, one of them is a premiere.

ROLF MARTINSSON

I worry about my loved ones and myself getting infected by Covid-19. I am also worried about the effect the pandemic has on musical life. Personally, I have lost some 25 performances, a fate I share with many of my fellow composers and musicians.



Rolf Martinsson

Photo: Louise Martinsson

I have a full-evening operatic work commissioned by the Stockholm Royal Opera, so there is no lack of employment for me. I will also finish the revision of the German version of my *St. Luke Passion*, scheduled to have its premiere in March 2021 in Zürich, with Lisa Larsson as the Evangelist; and then I have a new "dream project" that is still a well-kept secret...

I hardly ever listen to music when I am in the process of composing. It disturbs my inner hearing, but I listen to music all the more between my periods of composition. My wife is a pianist, and her practising pieces from the piano repertoire is what can be heard at home right now, a short distance from my study; it is part of the cosy atmosphere in our home environment.

When it comes to reading I recommend Alex Schulman's *Burn All My Letters*. I am presently reading Tony Lundman's *8*, which is a thriller novel involving Sibelius's Eighth Symphony.



Karin Rehnqvist

Photo: Agnes Thor

KARIN REHNQVIST

I'm always composing from home, so there has not been a great difference in that respect. But I am also professor at the Stockholm Royal College of Music, and our campus has been closed, and all teaching and meetings have been done online. I have spent a lot of time in front of the computer. Luckily we live close to nature, and my husband and I have taken walks every morning. Most of all I have missed seeing my children and grandchildren.

At the beginning of this spring I put the finishing touches on my *Silent Earth*, which was to have been premiered by the Netherlands Radio Choir and Symphony Orchestra at the Concertgebouw in April. But the performance has now been postponed until 29 January 2022. I have also completed a piece for women's choir, *As Long as the Moon Shall Rise*. It was commissioned by the Women's Choral Society of the

University of Oslo for their 125th anniversary.

I hardly ever listen to music at home. It disturbs my composing. But I have listened to the concerts that were streamed from Berwaldhallen in Stockholm. They have been excellent, and it is touching and consoling that the musicians cannot refrain from playing.

I love to read poetry. A highly acclaimed debut is Erik Lindman Mata's poetry collection *Pure*. Then I would recommend *Bloodhoof* by Gerður Kristný, a work of poetry that I have set to music. It is an immensely powerful text and a beautiful book.

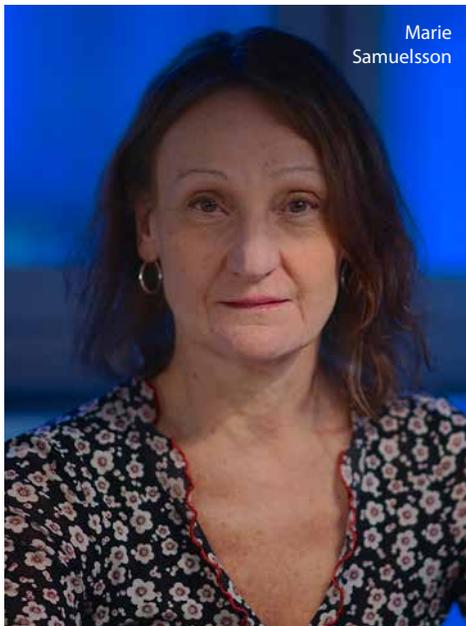
MARIE SAMUELSSON

Like most people I have been more socially isolated during the Corona spring. I have been doing all my work from home, including teaching. I feel such great joy and respect for all the talented students that have kept on struggling with their music. More than ever we realize that we are all social beings that are linked together, and need to support one another, also in art and music.

I'm now composing music for an international exchange project for chamber ensembles, a commission from The Sound Ensemble, based in Seattle. This is an exciting collaboration where we present Swedish and American composers in a programme. I started this together with composer and trombonist Ivo Nilsson and conductor Bobby Collins. This programme is coming to Sweden as well, and if everything goes as planned it will be performed by KammarensembleN here.

Then I'm looking forward to receiving a libretto for a spectacular chamber opera that I will compose for 'Man Must Sing', an opera company based in Gothenburg. It is fantastic to be able to compose music in projects with such affable and competent colleagues.

This spring I have listened to all my students' music, of course. Moreover, I have listened in



Marie Samuelsson

Photo: Josef Oostkall

private, to music that calms me. String quartets by Schubert and a new album, *Mixing Colours*, by Brian Eno's brother Roger Eno, and *The Viola in My Life* by Morton Feldman.

I recommend you to read Olga Tokarczuk's *The Books of Jacob*. A weighty volume both physically and qualitywise. An impressive literary work!



ALBERT SCHNELZER

Things have not changed that much. Of course some performances have been cancelled and I really miss the meetings with musicians, orchestras, conductors and audiences.

I have just completed an oratorio for the 400th anniversary of the city of Gothenburg, commissioned by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, and scheduled to be premiered in February 2021. The work bears the title *SALT*, and its themes are the sea, travel and migration, things that permeate the history of Gothenburg and that always are topical, especially these days. This is indeed a dream project for me and it has been fantastically inspiring to work with.

A work that I have listened to a great deal this spring is Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*. It is enormously powerful and, moreover, amazingly orchestrated. Well-wrought down to the last detail and a work in which you continually discover new layers. Otherwise, I have a really broad range in musical taste and enjoy everything from AC/DC to Dirty Loops and Jacob Collier.

At present I am reading a collection of short stories by Neil Gaiman simultaneously with *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. Some of my favourite authors who are almost always interesting include Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie and Ian McEwan. But if you haven't read *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen, you should absolutely do so. I highly recommend it.

BENJAMIN STAERN

Since March I have been working at home instead of going to my studio. I have written a new piece, *En strimma hav/A Streak of the Sea*, for El Sistema Sweden and the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. A few other projects are in the pipeline, including a new symphony for the Royal Philharmonic to be performed on the occasion of my own Composer Weekend at the Stockholm Concert Hall next April! It will be a companion piece to Lili Boulanger's *D'un soir triste*. I am really thrilled about the festival!

The music I'm listening to at present includes tunes from musicals of "The Golden Age" performed by the John Wilson Orchestra, the British singer Adele, and operas by various composers including Aribert Reimann, Philip Glass, George Benjamin, John Adams, Aulis Sallinen, Beat Furrer, Verdi, Puccini and Wagner.

I'm reading just now Alex Schulman's *Burn All My Letters* and Antoine Laurain's *The President's Hat*. I also watch some TV-series, including *Unorthodox*, *Freud* and *The Crown*. And I recommend Peter Jackson's documentary about the First World War, *They Shall Not Grow Old*.



Benjamin Staern

ANN-SOFI SÖDERQVIST

I am living on the island of Ingarö, just outside Stockholm. It's really beautiful here at this time of the year, and I go for long walks in the forest every day with my dog Kenzo. I am doing just fine. It has been a little lonely of course this spring, but there have been a lot of phone calls.



Ann-Sofi Söderqvist and Kenzo

At present I'm writing a double concerto for trumpet, trombone and orchestra for Joakim Agnas, Karl Frisendahl and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic. It is both exciting and challenging.

I listen to old favourites like Shostakovich's *First Cello Concerto* in a brilliant recording with Mischa Maisky and the London Symphony Orchestra. The first time I heard the recording I was deeply moved and have continually returned to it for over 20 years. Dianne Reeves is another favourite I enjoy coming back to. Miles Davis has followed me throughout my life, and still does. The music goes straight into my central nervous system.

Just now I am reading *The Club* by Matilda Gustavsson. Very thought-provoking! If I were to recommend a book, it would be *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt. It is a text that stands up for the role art plays in our lives, that emphasises how vital art is. Last autumn I wrote a piece for the guitarist duo Gothenburg Combo based on that novel, and then I reread it. The reading experience was just as powerful, if not more so, the second time.

TUOMAS TURRIAGO

I'm working on no fewer than seven compositions, the uppermost being two pieces for saxophone and piano with a pedagogical orientation commissioned by Kalle Oittinen. I'm thinking

of writing them in a sort of Latin vein and to discover some neat, diverse effects and special techniques that are nevertheless within reach of the basic-level player. These works should be ready in about September.

I have an insatiable hunger for music and listen to all sorts – often and a lot. Here at home, I listen to not only contemporary Finnish music but also the classics programmes on Yle Radio 1. I listen to the radio a surprising amount. I'm more or less taking a break from the standard classics, but instead I've launched a project inspired by the biography of Jouni Kaipainen: as

Photo: Hilka Miettinen



Tuomas Turriago

far as possible, I'm listening to every work mentioned in the book, preferably at least twice, once without the score and once with the score in front of me (if I can find it). I've just come across Berg's string quartet op. 3, for example. I also listen to works by my Finnish composer colleagues a lot. The amount of good music being composed in Finland at the moment is simply incredible! I also listen to quite a lot of jazz, Latin, and pop as well.

The biography of Jouni Kaipainen edited by Maritta Hirvonen and *The Diary of Anne Frank* have been at the top of my book pile. As to TV series, I've got a weakness for crime thrillers, though right now I'm watching *La Otra Mirada*. I would also recommend films by the old masters. I love Buñuel and Fellini, for example.

LOTTA WENNÄKOSKI

This spring I've been composing the opera called *Regine* commissioned by the Savonlinna Opera Festival, and this would in any case have involved sustained, solitary work. So in this sense, life hasn't changed much, but some performances I'd been looking forward to have been cancelled both in Finland and abroad. The rest of the family have of course been at home more, and their choice of music is what we hear. Given the choice, I prefer silence.

Most of all I've been reading up about the opera's leading character, Regine Olsen, such as the biography *Kierkegaard's Muse* by Joakim Garff and various works by Kierkegaard, such as his essays on, say, Mozart and *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. I've always got a scattering of poetry books on my desk, and as to my favourite books, they seem to do an annual round. Now, as I write, it is already summery, but in the spring, when the ground is still bare and the light is harsh, I usually read T.S. Eliot. As I did this spring.

The opera takes up the whole day at the moment, but I do dig out old works and the solutions I made in them from time to time – especially when musicians or conductors query details. Last year I had several conversations about *Hava* for sinfonietta, for example, and this was my work that got most performances last year. I've also been looking at my guitar concerto *Susurrus*, because in the evenings I've been doing a new version of the harp-violin duo *Tocca* for this year's Our Festival. *Tocca II* is to be premiered at the end of July.

MATTHEW WHITTALL

I did a lot of running during the coronavirus shutdown, and I'm in much better shape, but



Lotta Wennäkoski

I've honestly not gotten much composing done. It's been stressful, and between supporting my students in their own projects and dealing with other obligations, I haven't had much mental space for creativity. But I'm looking forward to returning to composing this summer. I'm currently working on a solo piece for harp, which is a very challenging instrument to write for. I also started working on a very spacious, quiet, meditative piano piece. Every day I sit down

and add a little music, without thinking about where it's going or how long it's going to be. It's not a commissioned work, I'm just writing it for myself. That's something I realized I'd forgotten how to do along the way, and it's been a therapeutic exercise for me.

I have been catching up on a lot of new classical music, especially orchestral. I've had Anders Hillborg's *Sound Atlas* on repeat. It's a gorgeous, formally and aesthetically daring piece. Otherwise, I cook a lot, and cooking music has to be relaxing: Diana Krall, Stéphane Grappelli, Cassandra Wilson, many of my old favorites.

Between keeping up with my son's schoolwork and my own work, there has been less time than you'd think. But it's a good time to get into my stack of unread books. I'm a fan of non-fiction. Right now I'm reading a recent first-person account of walking the entire length of the Nile, from its furthest source in Rwanda to the Mediterranean. But coming up is John le Carré's latest novel, *Agent Running in the Field*, a book by my favorite nature writer, Robert Macfarlane, and a book on current politics and society by a Canadian countryman, Michael Ignatieff.

My recommendation for people trying to find something to watch is *Battlestar Galactica* or *The Wire*, the two greatest TV series ever made. For documentary, Ken Burns's extended films on World War II or the Vietnam War are endlessly absorbing.



Matthew Whittall

Photo: Sana Vuorjoki