

Nature in music

How do Finnish composers describe their relationship with nature, and how is it reflected in their music? The landscapes of the north have, in particular, been an inspiration for many, as have the sea, light and birds. But is nature still, as it was for Sibelius, the source of a profound experience and beauty? Or is it more and more a cause for concern on which a composer can take a stand in music?

Anyone listening to the music of **Matthew Whittall** may sense his love of nature. There are many examples in his work list. *Devil's Gate* for oboe, bassoon and piano was inspired by the scenery in Lapland dear to him and, he says, the musical structures trace the topography of the landscape. *The Return of Light* for chorus and chamber orchestra was sparked off by an account by Arctic explorer **Julius von Payer** of the first time he saw the sun rise after the long winter darkness. "A return to joy – that is sacred, silent and pure."

The piano suite *Leaves of Grass* was inspired by the poems of **Walt Whitman**. Whittall was able to unleash his imagination in depicting nature with pieces such as *Lingering Last Drops*, *Out of the Rolling Ocean* or *A Noiseless Patient Spider*.

In his piano concerto *Nameless Seas* (dedicated to **Angela Hewitt** and **Risto-Matti Marin**) the piano acts as a channel for elemental forces surging up from the orchestra, floating on its constantly shifting surface. In the finale, *Unclaimed Waters*, it is engulfed by a series of ever-taller waves, ultimately dissolving into a rippling continuum of sound.

Whittall nevertheless says he has a very unsentimental view of nature. There is no such thing as natural beauty for him – nature just is. "The wonder lies in our ability to find beauty in it, and to communicate that experience to one another."



Photo: Helena Tuomela

Born in Kuusamo near the Arctic Circle, **Tapio Tuomela** calls himself a northern boy and a nature lover – his hobbies include skiing and fly fishing. He still has firm links with the northerly regions of Finland and this affection for the arctic nature and its elemental power is reflected in many ways in his works.

He got the idea for *Jokk* for chamber orchestra during a fishing trip to the River Näätsämö. *Vuohenki Luohi* (*The Song of Vuohenki*) for mezzo-soprano and orchestra is a setting of a text by the Lappish poet **Nils-Aslak Valkeapää** in the Sámi language. The poems describe living in Lapland and how tradition is passed down through

generations, still keeping its strong connection with nature. Similar feelings are expressed in *Lapic* for chamber orchestra (2003) and his third symphony, *Crossroads*.

All four string quartets by **Kai Nieminen** have been inspired by the wintry atmosphere and light of Maritime Lapland. *Gestures of Winter* (No. 3) bears the epithet *Time Around Northern Night Skies...* and No. 4 is entitled *Sogni del mare*.

Nieminen's works often have an extra-musical stimulus, and the Mediterranean south is as important to him as the northern winter. His first symphony, *Selva*, was somewhat transformed during the final stage of its composition, when Nieminen woke up in the middle of the night and the mist (*nebbia*) enshrouding the landscape demanded to be let into the music. The bird motif in the fifth movement is entrusted to a piccolo. In the flute concerto *Palomar*, the solo part evokes images of a bird that flits across the nocturnal sky. The idea for this came to Nieminen while he was staying in Rome and the insistent birdsong kept him awake in the heat of the night.

The sea is an important element for **Olli Kortekangas** – a keen outdoor person who has spent most of his summers by the sea in the SW Finland archipelago. Kortekangas does not draw direct parallels between nature and composing; if any exist, they are only subconscious. His works do, however, bear titles such as *Mediterranean Sea* (choral suite, 2002) or *Sea Stones, Shore Stones* (*Merien kivet, rannan kivet*) for choir and strings. The subjects of his songs are often earth, sea and light.

Kortekangas pays great attention to the choice of texts. An example is the symphonic cantata *Seven Songs for Planet Earth* (premiered by the Choral Arts Society of Washington in 2011). It addresses the relationship between man and nature. The commissioners requested a work with an ecological slant to its text and Kortekangas

chose poems by an American farmer, poet, and environmentalist, **Wendell Berry**. The cantata ends with these enigmatic words:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's life may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.



Photo: Sari Tuompolainen

Nature is like a 'life-long companion' for **Kalevi Aho**. He spends his summers in the beautiful scenery of his seaside villa in Turku, where there is always something to do outside, such as chopping firewood. And the birds provide such a concert that he feels sad when summer ends and they fall silent.

Water, waves, wind or birds may find their way into the scores of Kalevi Aho. He became very familiar with the Lapland landscape, especially with his *Luosto Symphony* (No. 12). This was premiered out of doors, at the foot of Luosto Fell, with the audience spread across the hillside. The impression made on Aho by the extreme northern seasons and light is also apparent in his *Eight Seasons* concerto for theremin. Its movements depict the eight distinct seasons in Lapland. Endangered flora also occupy a place close to his heart, especially the rare pasque flower (*Pulsatilla patens*) growing in a place shielded from passers-by to which he makes a pilgrimage every spring.

Aho is not afraid of being outspoken about the present state of our world. "Overpopulation, the destruction of our biodiversity, global warming – these are all grave problems in the light of which the future does not look good and we may face major global catastrophes. Nature nevertheless generates a link with something genuine," he says. "We humans need beauty, silence and the starry sky."

"I always strive to pay attention to the passing moment of beauty and, in appreciating it, allow it to expand beyond the moment, to fill my whole mind with its exquisiteness. In being mindful of those rare moments, we touch on the eternal, something larger than ourselves." This quote from **Matthew Whittall** can be applied to music and nature – or to anything we choose to cherish and appreciate.

Henna Salmela



Photo: Gerd Bousman



Photo: Päivi Kortekangas