

Karin Rehnqvist: “Music, where are you heading?”

On 27 August, after a delay of two years, **Karin Rehnqvist's** *Silent Earth* finally will receive its Swedish premiere during the Baltic Sea Festival in Stockholm. The Swedish Radio Choir, Symphony Orchestra and conductor **Dima Slobodeniouk** will perform the half-hour-long work that was described as “bewildering and powerfully encouraging” in the nomination for the Nordic Council’s Music Prize. Rehnqvist takes us out among the planets, where we can see the earth from a distance, in silence, and tells here more about this work.

What prompted you to compose *Silent Earth*?

The text is written by **Kerstin Perski**, with whom I have worked for many years. We got to know one another when we did the children’s opera *Beauty School* (*Sötskolan*) together. I became fascinated with her ability to create texts that have mythological depth, but at the same time are of current interest. In November the opera *Stranded* (*Strandad*), which we have worked on together, will have its world premiere at the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm.

In *Silent Earth* we have worked with improvisation. The theme is the crisis that we see today, both when it comes to the climate and to the politics surrounding this issue. It is a crisis that I feel I must respond to – it is quite simply difficult not to speak of it. So Kerstin and I sat one evening and indulged in fantasies. In our imagination we were on another planet where we could see our own beautiful earth at a distance, in silence. There was something consoling in this. The title *Silent Earth* is also equivocal; the word *silent* can mean both calm and quiet. Based on this, I did some improvisations for voice and piano which she responded to with texts that captured the atmosphere in my improvisations. Then I wrote completely new music to these texts.

What kind of work is *Silent Earth*?

Silent Earth is written for choir and orchestra, without soloists. So the choir has to carry the whole textual expression. I have worked with more concentration than ever on the interplay between the voices and the instruments of the orchestra. I’ve let them coalesce or be contrasted with one another. It has turned out to be very dramatic music, and I almost had a fright from the power of it when I was composing. But as it is composed for two of the world’s best choirs (The Netherlands and the Swedish Radio Choirs) I have felt free to pull out all the stops.

This second movement is special for me. When a sketch was ready, I let it rest. Later I thought that it had become too romantic. I felt like a painter, wanting to paint over what was beautiful with dissonances and darkness. I often work by letting the music lead me – but in this case it was more obvious than ever. I ask: Music, where are you heading? Where is mankind going? I don’t have any answers – the music shows the way. It is

a kind of examination of life and what it means to be human. And then what the music conveys is up to each and every listener to determine.

The percussion as well plays an important role in *Silent Earth*. I have experimented together with percussionist **Johnny Axelsson** and we have both found new modes of expression.

How do you relate to the theme of the work?

I am very concerned about climate change and today’s political landscape, including the right-wing extremists. And I think that we all must do what we can – and there is no time to lose.

Can you believe that they are still building coal power plants, even though we know how the burning of fossil fuels affects the atmosphere! The glaciers are melting and the permafrost is disappearing, we have weather extremes and wildfires – and yet we are not ready to make sacrifices. It is indeed strange how we humans behave. But I also know that it can be hard to strike a balance, I experience this both in my private life and in my profession. We therefore need to reflect, to feel, to cry. We need to be open for impressions.

“We learn when we feel”, says **Eva Bojner Horwitz**, Professor of Music and Health at the Royal College of Music. I believe that music, especially, has a particularly strong capability to channel our emotions. But it shouldn’t be poster art. You have to be open for interpretation.

The work had its premiere this January in Amsterdam. What was it like?

It was dramatic. The concert had already been postponed two years because of the pandemic. Amsterdam had opened up after a long lockdown only a few days before the concert and the Concertgebouw had finally been given permission to admit audiences into its large auditorium. But then, just a day before the concert, we were informed that the conductor, **Dima Slobodeniouk**, had taken ill with Covid. The Choir’s principal conductor, **Gijs Leenaars**, had to hastily catch the night train from Berlin. There were



Photo: Agnes Thor

no couchettes available, so he took the opportunity to study the score all through the night. As luck would have it, I knew nothing about this before all problems were solved. The concert was a very powerful experience. At the Baltic Sea Festival in August, Slobodeniouk is scheduled to conduct the Swedish premiere of the work, for which I am very happy and grateful.

Janna Vettergren

Footnote:

Silent Earth was composed for the Netherlands Radio Choir and Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Swedish Radio Choir and Symphony Orchestra at the request of the NTR ZaterdagMatinee – Radio 4’s concert series in the Concertgebouw – and the Swedish Radio, for the Baltic Sea Festival. The work is nominated for the Nordic Council Music Prize 2022.