

The diversiform musical ethos of Tapio Tuomela



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Cultural interaction. Passion coupled with pragmatism. A synthesis between the classical musical heritage and ethnic identities. Respect for the intrinsic worth of each and every one. These, according to his composer colleague Jyrki Linjama, are the cornerstones of the musical ethos of Tapio Tuomela.

I well remember the first time I met Tapio Tuomela, at a piano masterclass in 1979. He was a student in the class and I was its janitor. When it came out that I was studying composition and my instrument was the violin, Tapio, without more ado, fished the score of a new composition out of his briefcase and began asking me about violin bowings. This says something about the enthusiasm and pragmatism that has accompanied him not only in his composing but also in his many administrative capacities and his networking, both Finnish and international.

Cultural interaction

Cultural interaction is an important feature of Tuomela's composer profile. There was concrete evidence of this in his artistic Doctorate some years ago, focusing on versions of one and the same vocal work in different translations. For example, the differences between the French versus English versions of *Fissure* for baritone and chamber ensemble, extend far beyond the phonetics and syllables. They mirror different worlds; they are studies of two different perceptions of reality.

Leonard Ratner writes of the beginning of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* in his book *Classic Music* (p. 112): "This effervescent melody, free as it seems, is still subject to the law of the strict style, to the rule of old Grandpa Fux." The same thing occurs to me, *mutatis mutandis*, in the music

of Tapio Tuomela. Its stylistic and textural solutions may be very wild and dramatic even, yet always in the background is a feeling of classical breeding, of a thorough grounding in not only composition but also the piano and conducting. His innovative solutions spring from his versatile appropriation of tradition.

Practical experience and enjoyment

Tapio Tuomela's practical experience as both a pianist and a conductor is especially marked in the *Piano Concerto* he wrote for Iiro Rantala in 2008. It is a work that weaves tensions between simple metrical shapes and their cunning disruption. In its attitude to time Iiro Rantala is able to draw widely on his experience of jazz, to say nothing of the space set aside in the score for the soloist to improvise. The enjoyment of music-making and the energy radiating from the outer movements is offset in the slow one by frail nature sounds and appealing nostalgia.

The Saxophone Concerto *Swap* (2012-13) is in many respects a sister work to the Piano Concerto. Its special feature is the dense, virtuosic tossing of material between soloist and orchestra. The multiphonics and extended string-technique timbres integrate convincingly with the orchestration, which could be characterised by a Richard Strauss-type paradox: the sound is simultaneously transparent and full.

Vocal dimensions

Composition studies in Finland in the 1980s often concentrated on things like set theory and gesture metamorphosis. Tuomela recalls how refreshing it was to study in New York and to contemplate the cultural and human signification of music more richly and more directly in his composition lectures: what does music signify? How does music signify?

Delving deep into such questions has opened up routes to vocal music and especially opera. *Äidit ja Tyttäret* (Mothers and Daughters, 1998-99), to a libretto by Paavo Haavikko, takes a fresh look at the Lemminkäinen myth in the Finnish national epic, *The Kalevala*, and not without humour. The opera's synthesis of modern classical music and age-old Finnish ethnicity is a veritable *tour de force*. It dramatizes various aspects of the

Kalevalaic world: both unadorned sensuality and zeal, mortal fear and the driving force of love. The love incantations are concrete manifestations of a folklore that violates the traditional expurgated, censored versions.

Synthesis of the classical music tradition and ethnic identities is a fundamental element of Tuomela's vocal works, the texts of which are often taken from ancient Finnish folk poetry. The underlying mood of *Mothers and Daughters* is tragic, and in this respect it ties in with his more recent operas. *Antti Puuhaara* (2007-08), based on a folk tale, combines the tragedy of marginality with a strong feel for nature by various vocal means: for the human voice is ultimately the richest and most fascinating source of sound. The opera *Neljäntienristeys* (Crossroads) premiered in Oulu last year is based on a novel by Tommi Kinnunen that addresses inter-generational tensions in the status of women, spiritual violence and sexuality.

Tuomela has firm links with the northerly regions of Finland, through both family ties and his hobby: fishing. The elemental power of the arctic nature is reflected in many ways in his scores *Jokki*, *Vuohenki Luohti* (The Song of Vuohenki) in the Sámi language for mezzo-soprano and orchestra, and the third symphony *Crossroads* using material from the new opera. Meanwhile, the way he gives voice to the marginalised, his respect for the intrinsic worth of each and every one, reflects the human-oriented ethos of his work.

JYRKI LINJAMA

Footnote

Tapio Tuomela will be 60 years on 11 October. A concert presenting his latest vocal works will be held on 16.10. at the Helsinki Music Centre. The program includes also a world premiere: Three Folk Ballads for mezzo-soprano and ensemble written for Virpi Räisänen and the Zagros Quartet.