

Finnish composer Jyrki Linjama here talks about inspiring communities and composing modern church music. He likens the genesis of his works to patient gold panning. Music should, he says, defy time and stretch out to eternity.

Seven questions for Jyrki Linjama

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

One important source is direct physical and auditive contact with the instrument. I try to listen and, as far as possible, play the instrument I'm composing for as much as I can. It's a method my teacher, **Einojuhani Rautavaara**, greatly encouraged.

I like composing vocal music and the contacts with poetry. Translating the words into musical meanings and symbols is an endlessly rich realm of experience and interpretation, both for the composer and for the listener. Language and music also have lots of structural and timbral things in common. These abound particularly if you have a sufficiently open and refined notion of language and have the vast wealth of material inherent in modern music at your disposal.

For me, music is also a natural way of belonging to an inspiring community in which all sorts of colleagues occupy a fundamental role: players, singers, conductors, to say nothing of theatre folk if your work involves opera and the stage. I do not subscribe to the 19th-century concept of the composer as a solitary hero: my work is possible only because people in our culture have been singing and playing, dancing and conducting rites for so long.

2 How would you describe your composition process and your musical language?

Jarmo Sermilä recently formed an anagram from my name: 'aj aj min lyrik!' [in Swedish, translate as 'oh oh my lyricism!']. It's a fitting one, because sensitivity, a veritable mimosa-like quality, has been like a red line running through my work. To counterbalance this, I seek aggressive tones and means of bridging these worlds. At the extremes in speaking of tonality I could mention white noise and the beginning of the chorale *Wachet auf*. I'm not greatly interested in such extremes or all in all getting stuck on a single point. The music of composers like **Alban Berg** and **Bent Sørensen** speaks to me, for it operates inventively across the whole wide field opened up between different perceptual extremes. My composition process is seeking the right field for the work in hand and the right path within it. Patient gold panning that is at worst tiresome and at best out-and-out rewarding.

3 How are spirituality and its various aspects manifest in your works – and how do you hope to put them across to the listener?


The Christian liturgy rests on a tremendous drama: a journey from darkness to light and the celebration of communion. The long Mass tradition has created a fine substrate for the entire Western concept of music. I find being part of this tradition fascinating, and in this sense I'm not even able to divide music into spiritual and secular. If the music is alive, it also

breathes. Music (like the liturgy) offers means of articulating the profoundest of questions with the greatest of sincerity; in so doing, it can have great collective significance.

We live in a time of ever-greater ecocatastrophe, of dwindling human trust and of selfishness. Against this background, I don't believe in the topicality of music; rather, it should defy time and stretch out to eternity. It should be critical and cause friction. This way, it may create the potential for true interaction that breathes, both horizontally and vertically. And hence for growth and change.

This being the case, the church should nowadays also be far more interested in good new music! I'm trying to promote dialogue between my profession and the church in the association for composers of church music we have founded.

4 Which of your works have a special meaning for you?


The cantus firmus [CF] melodies (Gregorian chant and the Protestant chorale) I use signify lots of things. The hymn in my *Veni redemptor gentium* for organ articulates the age-old Advent themes and aspects of arrival, from the timid groping of the beginning to the marked closing movement. The CF material in my *Sonata die chiesa*  for piano sets the mood for each of the four movements. The first, *Miserere*, keeps on repeating the simple two lines of the Psalm. The twilight of the music lets in the light in the second movement (*Bells*) with a Gregorian Hallelujah melody. The light reaches its zenith in the quick texture of the third movement (CF *Veni Creator Spiritus*) and retreats into translucence in the polyphonic finale, the material of which is the German melody *Es sungen drei Engel*. In my new, second string quartet (*Allerheiligentag III*), the material is a Finnish folk chorale for All Saints' Day. I love combining an uncouth folk melody with a sophisticated composition technique and instrumentation. The finale is a funeral march, a long resignation from the sonorously rich timbres of the beginning to the great bleakness of the end.

5 Which instruments do you feel especially close to – and how are they reflected in your works?

I play the violin and have sung in choirs, my wife is a pianist and my children have experience of the French horn, Baroque violin and other instruments. Members of my extended family have been very active in church music, playing the organ and harpsichord. It is, I think, an advantage for a composer to have as direct and as concrete a relationship as possible with how things are actually going to sound. So the instruments I've quoted play a considerable role in my works.



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Being a violinist, I'm also interested in well-tempered Baroque tuning systems. In my *Sonata da chiesa* for harpsichord , for example, I enjoy the chance of using really pure fifths and (almost) pure thirds.

6 What book and record would you take with you to a desert island – and where would that be?

The book would be the Bible (the Vulgate version) and the record that made by the Tallis Scholars of the "*Sicut lilium*" motet and Mass and other things by Palestrina. The island would be in the Turku archipelago.

7 What compositions do you have in the pipeline?

I've started composing a solo violin work for **Kaija Saarikettu** and next summer's Kaustinen Chamber Music Festival. Kaija and I have a long history of working together and I'm really looking forward to the project. My song cycle *Himmeä, kirkas, himmeä...* (Bright, Dusky, Bright: settings of poems by **Eeva-Liisa Manner**) is to be premiered at the Helsinki Lied Festival in November. The musical quality of the texts appeals to me, and the poems I've chosen mention two composers: Vogelweide and Bruckner. Manner is a modern Finnish classic, and addition to being structurally strong, her texts have a clarity, a sacred feel and a richness of content I greatly value. My church opera *Kolme kirjettä Laestadiukselle* (Three Letters to Laestadius) is to be performed in Oulu Cathedral in October, and it's nice to have it performed at the very heart of the region where **Lars Levi Laestadius** founded his Pietist revival movement.

I've got one more especially interesting project scheduled for next year. I've just finished a piece called *Via crucis*, 14 meditations for organ and the way of the cross. **Titta Tunkkari** is doing a solo choreography to my music. The project is also interesting in that it's my first contact as a composer with dance.

Last year I wrote my very first string quartets, nos. 1–3. The second, *Allerheiligentag III*, has just been premiered at the Kimito Island Music Festival, and the Zagros Quartet will be performing the first and third next summer.

HENNA SALMELA