

# Mikko Heiniö's unusual piano concerto hybrids

*Mikko Heiniö once joked that he wouldn't even attempt to write ten symphonies, but that ten piano concertos would be a bit more unusual. Unusual and untypical his concertos are indeed, exploring the worlds of choral music, dance, opera and jazz with a disregard for artistic borders.*

**Mikko Heiniö** (b. 1948) has composed two symphonies, three operas and numerous other works for very different combinations of voices and instruments. His piano concertos, which already number nine, nevertheless represent the only genre he has returned to again and again. Why?

Back in time, his musical awakening was prompted very much by his affection for the piano – his own instrument – and for the concerto as a form of composition. It is also in his concertos that he has been most inventive, actively seeking alternative modes of expression and revolutionising the generic concept. Many of his piano concertos are indeed fantastic hybrids full of surprises, intelligence, fantasy and seductive appeal, and the pianist is always an integral element of the texture rather than a lone virtuoso soloist.

Every new work should, in Heiniö's opinion, succeed in conjuring up something unique, so that the listener will feel it would have been a great pity had it

never been composed. He aims at a specific, distinctive concept for each when deciding on his instruments, the way the piece will fit the performing venue, and any multi-art aspects he can work into it.

The first two piano concertos had already been written before Heiniö embarked on his composition studies and he has subsequently withdrawn them. The *Third* (1981) was premiered by **Liisa Pohjola**, his piano teacher at the Sibelius Academy. It clearly differs from his other concertos and (like the *Fifth*) represents the traditional format. It has a challenging, virtuoso solo part for which the orchestration leaves plenty of breathing space. As usual in Heiniö's works, percussions occupy a prominent role. Right up to the climax, the concerto is constructed using a sort of canon technique, the different sections of the orchestra each in turn imitating the piano.

Acting as foils to the soloist in the *Fourth Piano Concerto* (*Genom kvällen/Through the Evening*, 1986) are a mixed choir and a string orchestra. The dreamy text by **Bo Carpelan** blends via the choir to become part of the glittering fabric. The piano part underlines the moods and colours the content, but it also allows the soloist to show off. *Genom kvällen* evokes associations with Heiniö's *Landet som icke är* (*The Land That Is Not*) for children's choir and the world of the church opera *Riddaren och draken* (*The Knight and the Dragon*) with its impressive vocal writing.

The *Fifth Piano Concerto* (1989) begins with a violent *Agitato* that integrates the piano with the orchestra, as it were, with its repetitive cluster chords. As the work proceeds, it gives way to transparent arpeggios and its role becomes more lyrical and noticeable. Sounds muted and plucked at times lead the soloist into mystical spheres. The ending is almost excruciatingly beautiful orchestral music that has points in common with Heiniö's symphony *Possible Worlds*.

The *Sixth* and *Seventh Piano Concertos*, *Hermes* (1994) and *Khora* (2001), are sister works and their powerful, intensive topics point to Greek mythologies and their psychoanalyti- ▶▶▶

►►► cal interpretations. Heiniö composed them both as dance works and installations in close partnership with choreographer **Tiina Lindfors**. *Hermes* is scored for piano, soprano and string orchestra, while *Khora* has five percussion players instead of an orchestra. Both concertos can also be performed in concert versions.

Rhythm has always been an integral part of Heiniö's music, and his passion for this can be traced back to the rock bands of his youth. The rhythmic beat springs both from the body and from various generic traditions, culminating in *Khora*, which also bears West African echoes. But then Heiniö did, after all, spend several periods at the Villa Karo in Benin, composing and learning how to drum. "The body's expressive power, the performer's transformation into a grand illusion, the intensity of the presence... Collaborating with Lindfors and the ERI Dance Theatre, I seriously began to believe in the magic of music theatre," he wrote.

In the *Kuukonsertto* (Moon Concerto, 2008) commissioned by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Mikko Heiniö once again sets off along a new path, and comes up with more surprises. Pairing the piano is a mezzo-soprano, and the music has an operatic feel and clear elements of Lied. There are also some quotations from and variations on the song *Kung Erik* (King Eric) by **Hugo Ingelius** and **John Dowland's Galliard to Lachrimae** for lute. According to Heiniö, the listener may not always be aware of these lyrical melodies, but the scent is nevertheless there. The *Moon Concerto* is a kindred work to Heiniö's highly-acclaimed opera *Eerik XIV* (Erik XIV) and proceeds like a drama, as if from one scene to the next. Sometimes it is the piano's job to comment on the singer, at others to carry the music along.

Heiniö's most recent concerto is once again a leap into new territory. *Nonno* for amplified piano and big band (Piano Concerto No. 9, 2011) was a commission from the UMO Jazz Orchestra. At first, Heiniö decided to give jazz a wide berth, even though there are some strong pointers to jazz in some of his earlier works, but in the end he got carried away by the characteristic big band sound. And this he successfully combines in *Nonno* with orchestration steeped in colour.

Mikko Heiniö is already warming to the idea of writing a tenth piano concerto. It could be scored for piano, wind quintet and string quintet, but he is also toying with other options. One thing is, however, certain: it will once again be a new, exciting and unique addition to his series of piano concertos.

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