

Exposed to reality

Lotta Wennäkoski, who will be 50 in February 2020, is one of today's most celebrated Finnish composers. In September, the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra premiered her orchestral "Om fotspår och ljus" (Of Footprints and Light), which had as its point of departure an opera by the composer Ida Moberg (1859–1947). Wennäkoski's choice of topic can also be seen as a cultural-political statement. Lotta Wennäkoski here reflects on gender equality in the Finnish musical establishment.

Equality in the world of music has been the subject of sometimes quite heated debate in Finland this autumn. It all began with an article in our leading Swedish-speaking newspaper, *Hufvudstadsbladet* stating that only 4.3 per cent of the works to be performed this season by our three main metropolitan orchestras are by female composers. The bulk of the works on the programme are the old familiar ones, i.e. by men now dead, and those of Beethoven alone, for example, amount to more than all the ones by women put together. The debate has since spread to other media, and other statistics have been dug up. One of the most astounding is that 44 per cent of this summer's Finnish chamber music festivals did not perform a single piece composed by a woman.

The fact that the opening move in the debate came from Finland's Swedish-speaking minority possibly says a lot. Because I can remember being surprised as a student back in the 1990s that Sweden had far more female composers than Finland. All in all, the equality debate in our western neighbour seems for a long time to have been ahead of us. I personally raised the issue in the magazine *Rondo Classica* three years ago. As its top priorities, Statens Musikverk (Swedish Performing Arts Agency) quoted children, young people, diversity and gender equality, and a few years earlier, it had earmarked SEK 8 million expressly for the promotion of equality. "A lot needs to be done," I quoted them in my column, "especially in making music by female composers better represented in the repertoires of orchestras and opera houses. We need both conscious strategies and task forces to tackle the issue."

An objective stated in such clear terms is unfortunately still very difficult to imagine in the Finnish cultural climate. Gender equality in music has, it is true, been thrashed out in many a forum and on numerous occasions, at least in musicological circles but also in various projects and festivals. Yet not until this autumn does the topic seem to have penetrated public awareness and been more widely debated. Only now, it seems, has the demand for equality at last been registered by the "establishment" – the "weightiest" and most prominent level of classical music. It is precisely here that attitudes in Sweden possibly differ most from

those in Finland; over there, the striving towards a pluralist society seems nowadays to be taken for granted by "men" as well. ("Men" because biological gender does not in any way directly imply any particular worldview or a need for change.) Three years ago in *Rondo Classica*, I reckoned that the Finns do not even seem to have a particular problem with gender equality, or at least not in the arts. The general atmosphere was, that after all, we have **Kaija Saariaho** and a couple of others, so why go on about it?

A number of things have surprised me in this autumn's debate. Any female composer has, right at the start of her career, had to come to terms with the fact that the active role in the history of music best known to us has beyond all doubt been reserved for a man. The few female composers have been exceptional individuals in many ways, and their music has – from time immemorial and right up to the past few decades – been viewed from the perspective of womanhood more than anything else. It would, after all, be strange if this *did not* still have psychological and structural consequences, even if there were no longer any obvious concrete obstacles to women's composing. The Finns happily subscribe to a view of their country as a paradise where all are equal. It is nonetheless short-sighted to close our eyes to the expectations and demands, both stated and unstated, still imposed on us by gender in matters both large and small.

On the other hand, the performance of classical music all in all relies so strongly on age-old tradition that contemporary male composers may with good reason feel alienated and excluded (to say nothing of other genders). Yet I find it hard to imagine that many of us in any way categorically despise the "canon"; for me at least, many of the orchestral works in the Classical-Romantic canon are quite honestly important and stirring, even though they were composed by men. They are part of the tradition of which I am part. I would, however, quite probably love and respect certain works by women just as passionately if they had etched themselves on my musical memory with the same intensity and through as many repetitions as my favourite works in the canon. We cannot know things unless we are exposed to them.

The reaction to this autumn's equality debate



Photo: Maarit Kyösti

has in many respects been the resolute defence of the way things have always been done, of "quality" and "masterpieces". Where does this innate reluctance spring from, when the statistics could, I am sure, quite easily be slightly rectified? How about some music by, say, **Louise Farrenc** instead of even a little by Beethoven, regardless of whether or not he has a jubilee year? If the New York Philharmonic can, just like that, put on a concert in honour of the City's Pride Week, as it did this year, couldn't Finland, which prides itself on being a modern society, just as well do something similar, if only occasionally? Would it not be possible to find material composed by women suitable for all levels of our music education? It wouldn't be difficult these days, and would set a good example. Could we not make it a point of honour to always ensure that a competition jury, a committee or composer consortium always has a member representing more than a single gender? Why not introduce quotas to boost the pluralist agenda, even just as a start and in passing – until things really get moving?

For it will be odd if the audience aware of the ongoing debate in society do not soon start demanding all this. We are not indebted to Beethoven, but we are to our society.

Lotta Wennäkoski

Footnote

Lotta Wennäkoski will be 50 on 8 February 2020. On that day, the Avant! Chamber Orchestra is holding a birthday concert in Helsinki including works by *Hele, Zeng* and others.

Music by Wennäkoski will be widely performed during the year. The Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by **Sakari Oramo** will be performing *Flounce* at a 'Ladies versus Beethoven' concert in Stockholm in March, and *Uniin asti* (Until the Dreams) is on the programme for a concert by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra in April. Lotta Wennäkoski is at present composing an opera, *Regine*, to a libretto by **Laura Voipio** for the Savonlinna Opera Festival.