

Ingvar Lidholm centenary

Ingvar Lidholm (1921–2017) would have celebrated his 100th birthday on 24 February 2021. He was a central figure in Swedish music, first of all as a composer, but also as a conductor, a musician, head of chamber music at the Swedish Radio, and professor of composition at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. He belonged to the Monday Group during the 1940s, the circle of friends including Karl-Birger Blomdahl and Sven-Erik Bäck, who came to play an invigorating role in Swedish musical life for half a century.

Lidholm's music appeared as a personal and powerful alloy of classical culture and Western modernism. It is about what is human, about being a human being. He found inspiration in the ancient world, in love, death and Strindberg.

He was technically precocious. "You seem to have been born on an orchestra podium", he was told as an eighteen-year-old, when he tried to get a foot in at the Swedish Radio. The orchestral work *Toccata e canto* was composed while studying with **Hilding Rosenberg** during World War II and was premiered under the direction of **Issay Dobrowen** in Gothenburg (1945). "It is simply astounding to find in our northern latitudes a youth who proves to be so exceptionally talented and, when it comes to invention, musically gifted with such a rich imagination" wrote his colleague **Gösta Nystroem**, thirty years his senior. *Toccata e canto* combines a lively "objectivity" with Nordic-Romantic singability. This work is still very much alive. When **Herbert Blomstedt** this coming spring pays homage to Lidholm with an orchestral concert in Gothenburg, *Toccata e canto* is on the programme, plus the dramatic *Ritornell*. Blomstedt was Lidholm's friend and "house conductor", and for decades he has performed his music the world over, not least the orchestral liturgy *Kontakion* and the beautifully bizarre instrumental drama *Poesis*.

Antiquity, the Renaissance and death

"Anything you do for the first time is a study", said Lidholm. "And for me everything is a study since I write everything for the first – and the last – time". The exquisite, serial orchestral work *Motus Colores* is such a study, as is its opposite, the massive, expressive and Bartók-inspired *Music for Strings*, one of Lidholm's most frequently performed works.

However, some themes recur. The literature and culture of Antiquity permeates his creativity. "My whole emotional life resounds when I inhabit that world". He transformed Ancient Greek poems such as *Phrasikleia* and *Short is the Time of the Roses* into delicate serial choral movements. The provocative piece for orchestra, *Poesis*, stems from his experiences of Ancient Greek literature and drama. Homeric settings are conjured up in *Nausicaa alone* for the soprano **Elisabeth Söderström**. The choral drama *The Persians* for the men's choir Orphei Drängar zooms in on the immense pain and sorrow of King Xerxes.



Photo: Sten Bellander & Anne Hylkenberg

It doesn't stop at the ancient world. The orchestral work *Greetings from an Old World* is based on the Renaissance composer **Heinrich Isaac's** wanderer's song "Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen" and alludes to the musical practice of the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But it also refers to the migration to America in later centuries. Even death wanders through Lidholm's music. At the age of nineteen he wrote the tender and wondrously mature song *För vilsna fötter sjunger gräset* to **Hjalmar Gullberg's** poem. In *Kontakion* – Lidholm's most frequently performed orchestral work – and in his Requiem *Libera me*, he depicts mankind's collective fear when encountering death.

The human voice

Lidholm loved the human voice. "The voice as spoken is so fantastically rich in nuances, especially those of the emotions. Even without a text. Add to that all the breathtakingly beautiful tones that the human voice can form. With a text there arises in addition a striking counterpoint between the sound and the semantic content."

Laudi, a gateway work to Lidholm's choral music, based upon a church music tradition and Stravinsky's Neo-classicism, was so new and singular that it scared the singers out of their wits. Lidholm professed the Christian faith but seldom used texts from the Bible. *Laudi*, "an attempted song of praise in a difficult time", is sung in Latin, which seems to give Lidholm the courage to achieve a hitherto unheard of power of expression.

Lidholm lived with poetry, from Ancient Greek dramas and tombstones to Dante, Stagnelius, Strindberg and Ekelöf. In Lidholm's hands **Ezra Pound's** *Canto LXXXI* is hammered to an imprinted message and a shimmering piece of filigree-work, and is laid as a keystone to the *A Cap-*

pella Book, which was intended as a pedagogical choral project. In the inimitable choral texture of *...arrivider le stelle* he depicts how Dante and Virgil, after their visit to Inferno, view again the stars of the heavens. In *Stund, när ditt inre...* the baritone voice directs Stagnelius's existential question out into space – and perhaps gets an answer.

In his last published work, *Greek Gravestone*, set to a poem by **Kjell Espmark**, Lidholm created a poignant, cut-in-stone picture of love in the face of death. *Greek Gravestone* is dedicated to **Eric Ericson**, who for sixty years led the Eric Ericson Chamber Choir, the vocal ensemble that has been most faithful in the performance of Lidholm's choral music. Nowadays Lidholm's choral music is performed by choirs throughout the whole world.

Works for the stage

In some staged works Lidholm was part of a team. The poet **Erik Lindegren** was the central figure in the circle around the ballet *Rites*. In Lidholm's music sonorities and rhythms reverberate as in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. It was Lindegren, too, who pointed out to Lidholm the hyperromantic Almqvist fragment *The Poet's Night*, which became an internationally acclaimed cantata.

Lidholm based two operatic works on texts by Strindberg: the TV opera *The Dutchman* and the full-length opera *A Dream Play*. In the latter he was his own librettist and inserted Christian symbolism into the final scene. After the premiere in Stockholm in 1992 the opera has been staged a number of times, in Europe and the USA. *A Dream Play* came to encompass his whole life as a composer; here he put in all his experience, versatility, emotional palette and creative imagination; but also his smile, sympathy and black humour.

Göran Bergendal