



Seven questions for Žibuoklė Martinaitytė

Next trending Baltic composer. Her music shimmers, sparkles, vibrates and pulses in a fascinating play of colour. Highly personal and tremendously powerful instrumental language. Luminous arrays of orchestral colour which yield to thrilling discoveries in harmony and sonority. These quotes are examples of how Martinaitytė's music has been received. Here she tells about her works as well as other topics such as the concept of beauty and erasing the egocentric approach.

1. You started your creative career in Lithuania and Europe but are now rooted in the USA. What are the biggest differences between these cultures for you as a composer, and what prompted you to move to New York?

Perhaps the biggest difference is the scale of the USA cultural context and its inherent diversity. The reason I moved here was personal. It was love at first sight – with my husband, who is an American, and then much later with New York City itself.

2. Your music aims at a narrative that is not a story in itself but rather a sequence of emotional states that create transitions in listeners' minds. Could you say more about this and how it manifests in your works?

Emotional states are often hard to verbalize. They need to be experienced. That's precisely why I don't explain an emotional story or narrative that is embedded in a piece. For each listener, the story will be different because it will resonate with their subjective emotional history. I am continuously surprised by the "stories" listeners hear in my music. It is almost worth writing them all down! Of course, for me that emotional narrative is very subjective and every time I hear a passage or a fragment in the piece, it triggers a particular memory.

3. *Saudade* is one of the four orchestral pieces on the recent Ondine CD. The next performances will be by the Bruckner Orchestra Linz in December 2021 and by the New York Philharmonic in February 2022. *Saudade* means "longing" in Portuguese. Why did you end up with this title?

Longing is the emotion that permeates most of my music. Perhaps it results from living far away from my native culture and language. It is an inexpressible feeling that usually resides deeply hidden in the subconscious mind and only surfaces in the music that I write. *Saudade* means not only a simple longing; it is almost an existential metaphysical notion that encompasses a wide variety of longings we have as human beings. I think the piece carries quite a bit of sadness – of nostalgia that is audible in the chosen harmonic modes. This almost "animalistic" or primal quality that longing has is expressed through special instrumental techniques such as singing and playing in brass instruments or bowing a cymbal placed on a kettle drum. Both effects have a howling, soul-wrenching sound quality. As though the feeling of longing becomes an animal that lives within us and from time to time needs to cry out... to let us know it is there.

4. Beauty is a key word in your music. You say it is a quality that has been neglected and almost forgotten in contemporary music. How do you wish to revive it in your works?

My preoccupation with the concept of beauty probably has something to do with the name I was given – Žibuoklė, which in Lithuanian is the name of a flower. What do flowers give us? Beauty of a very fleeting and impermanent nature. That same temporality of beauty is what I am looking for in my music. Some moments I compose give pleasure to our senses. In this case, our hearing. They are extremely short-lived, just as the blossoms of flowers. The notion of aural pleasure is mainly based on the physiological as well as the psychological effects certain sound structures, pitches and rhythms have on us –

such as pure intervals or harmonies rooted in the natural harmonic series or repetitive rhythmic patterns.

5. Pianist Gabrielius Alekna calls the *Chiaroscuro Trilogy* for piano and strings a masterpiece which he absolutely loves. According to him, it is a blend of New York postminimalism and deep East-European dramatic expression. *Horizons* and *Millefleur* are two other orchestral pieces on the recent CD. Can you shed more light on these works?

The *Chiaroscuro Trilogy* is not the usual piano concerto where the soloist has a chance to show off technical abilities. There is a very intimate relationship between the soloist and chamber orchestra with no distinctly dominating roles. They are both closely intertwined and often function as a part of one texture. Light and dark are taken as metaphors for the sonic expression where darkness is carried through low registers and indistinct harmonic and rhythmic characteristics, whereas light has an abundance of overtones and rich timbral colors. The piece contains various gradations of light and darkness, and the texture consists of repetitive cells or gestures – like particles of light.

Horizons plays with distances – with sound near and far. As if the viewers looking at the horizon were constantly shifting their gaze between a distant line that is the horizon, which is far away, unreachable and not clearly visible, and something that is near. In a way it is a constant zooming in and out of focus in the aural sense. The constantly shifting perspective constitutes the backbone of this piece. As a result, there are several simultaneous musical narratives: one that is taking place in the distance where we can't

clearly see or hear all the layers or configurations of texture, but we can perceive an overall larger structure. Then there are other things happening nearby. They are seen in minute detail as though through microscopic lenses. There is one ephemeral moment in the piece where all we hear is a very subtle play of overtones – a glissandi of natural harmonics in the cello section. It reminds me of looking very closely at a spider web and seeing all the intricacy of the thinnest, almost immaterial lines.

The same microscopic approach to musical material is used in *Millefleur*, "a thousand flowers", a title borrowed from 15-16th century European tapestry technique. When you look at the Unicorn tapestries at the Cloisters museum in New York, you can see a background of a thousand details, tiny flowers and plants surrounding the figure of a unicorn. In my *Millefleur* I take this multiplicity of microscopic details as my main focus because the orchestral texture provides a lot of potential for that. The main image emerges out of those myriad details. Both these pieces cover the extremes of the perceptual spectrum. You can know the world by looking through a microscope as well as a telescope.

6. Could you tell us something about you that we don't yet know – your interests or other important pastimes?

I love nature. Every summer since I was a child I have spent some time by the deepest lake in Lithuania. Now that I'm living in New York, going to nature has almost become a restorative must. To wander in the forest, to listen to the ambient sounds and most important to disconnect from technology. It is part of what I call "mental ecology" or "mental hygiene" that every urban dweller needs. Another important part of my life for the past 20 years has been a Buddhist practice that includes daily meditation as well as a certain view, behavior and philosophy that is applied to daily life. Buddhism gives a useful prism, a perspective through which to see the world – reminding of the interconnected nature of all phenomena and at the same time erasing the egocentric approach that we, as creators, can easily slip into.

7. What are your next projects or dreams?

I've got lots of dreams, but not all will become reality! One project I'll be working on next year is a piece for voice and orchestra. The human voice has such a unique sound, and more than that, it is also a gateway to the soul. It is not only a musical instrument; it also has a spiritual dimension. After many years of composing only for orchestra and being familiar with its vocabulary, I finally feel ready to add a new layer: the magical touch of the human voice.

Henna Salmela