

Seven questions for Tobias Broström

Tobias Broström will be featured composer of the Stockholm Concert Hall's Composer Weekend Festival 2023. And this past October his First Symphony was premiered by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and Santtu-Matias Rouvali.

You have written many orchestral works and solo concertos earlier. Was there anything special about composing a symphony?

To write a symphony entails obligation, it requires something special from you. For the last 10-15 years I have worked with long lines in my orchestral works and tried to master that, so when a request came from the Gothenburg Symphony for me to write a large-scale work (a real whopper, as they put it) to be played after the intermission, I knew that it was time. I had really high expectations for myself so, yes, it was special, but also a lot of fun. I decided to rely only on what I know how to do, and write the work with joy, and the symphony landed right where I wanted it to. It leans towards the Late-Romantic symphonic tradition with freedom in form and structure, but with concrete themes and motifs that are repeated.

The symphony bears the subtitle *Albedo* and is the second part in a trilogy of orchestral works inspired by the world of alchemy and Jungian psychology. Do you see any connections between these worlds and the musical world?

It is a process of personal development. I went through a crisis at the time when I composed my Concerto for Two Trumpets, *Nigredo* (the black phase). The symphony, *Albedo* (the white phase), deals with increased self-awareness, and how to be forgiving to myself. And finally, my coming orchestral work, *Rubedo* (the red phase), is about finding my identity again and attaining my new personality. This is how the theme ties in. It is my personal journey that is reflected in the music.

On 31 March of next year we will get to hear the symphony again in connection with the Stockholm Concert Hall's Composer Weekend. It will be four full days with your music spanning over 20 years – from your breakthrough work, the percussion concerto *Arena*, to the premiere of the third part of your orchestral trilogy, *Rubedo*. How does this feel? And how has your music developed over the years?

It feels wonderful, of course! You start thinking back to what you have achieved. Just before the pandemic broke out, *Arena* – now that you mention the work – was performed in Nuremberg. I was then reminded of the artistic and creative freedom that I experienced when I wrote the piece some 20 years ago. It was like Christmas Eve! An enormous joy of discovery. Sometimes I miss that feeling today, but instead you get to embrace all the experience that you've gathered throughout the years. There are things that recur in what I have composed, e.g., modal/bitonal



Photo: Magdalena Palmbröstom

ideas when it comes to harmony. These were with me at an early stage and have been developed further over the years. But rhythm is the strongest driving force for me, then comes harmony, which is also of vital importance. The melodic element has been developed from having played a minor role in the beginning, to being given a more prominent place in my recent symphony.

During the first concert with the Royal Philharmonic also one of your internationally most frequently performed works, the trumpet concerto *Lucernaris* (2009) will be played by Håkan Hardenberger. Here, you have also added live electronics to the orchestral parts, which is unusual in your works. What effects did you want to achieve with this?

I wanted to work with live electronics together with the orchestra in an integrated and ambient fashion. I had an idea to spread out the sound of the orchestra all over the auditorium with surround sound. I recorded violins, and above all Håkan's trumpet, processed the sounds and created loops.

Guests at the festival will include your home orchestra, the Helsingborg Symphony. They will perform your Violin Concerto written for Karen Gomyo and the percussion concerto *Arena* with Johan Bridger. What has enticed you to compose so many solo concertos?

It has to do with a personal collaboration that one cannot achieve when working with a large symphony orchestra. Working together with soloists can vary a lot depending on who it is. Håkan gets very much involved, and I like it that way. I enjoy

a bit of resistance, someone who calls into question and someone who pushes me. It is relevant and vital. And I have worked together with Johan Bridger ever since secondary school, and we still collaborate. He is able to realize most of my ideas.

We will also get to hear your orchestral arrangement of Erik Satie's *Vocation from Le fils des étoiles*. What is your relationship to Satie?

I discovered Satie in my late teens and experienced him as a wonderfully free and eccentric artistic soul. *Le fils des étoiles* sounds a lot like jazz of the 50s, with its piling-up of parallel fourths, despite having been written in 1891! My arrangement is a student work that I did already in the second composition class of 2003.

The festival will be rounded off with chamber music performed by the Stenhammar Quartet, pianist David Huang and Johan Bridger, including the premiere of your Piano Quintet. What role does chamber music play in your creativity?

It is difficult to write chamber music, especially if you – like myself – prefer to work with a great variety of timbres. It is a completely different kind of composing, pared down and naked, with nothing to hide behind. I would like to write more chamber music even though it is in the world of the orchestra that I feel most at home. Just now I am longing to write more vocal music, preferably for choir, that is great fun. But above all I want to write opera. Perhaps there is someone who will jump at that.

Kristina Fryklöf