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Olli Kortekangas and the beauty of polyphony

Early autumn 2010 finds composer Olli Kortekangas working on several commissions: a piano concerto, an oratorio, and a work for children's choir, the last two commissions from America. A new opera, *Yhden yön juttu* (One Night Stand), for the opening season of the new Helsinki Music Centre is also coming along nicely.

The piano concerto will be premiered in April 2011 by **Paavali Jumppanen** and the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra. Though Kortekangas has written concertos before, this one, for piano and orchestra, is the first of its kind.

"It's in one movement but falls into five parts, and it lasts about half an hour" he says. "I want it to be a concerto in the best sense of the word. In other words, though it is thematically clear and the orchestra is important, the piano has a prominent role and is what carries the story along. The piano part is challenging but also brilliant."

The fascination of chamber music

Though Kortekangas loves choral music and opera most of all, he is now finding himself fascinated by chamber music.

"Over the past three years I've written several big chamber works. These include the *Divertimento* (2007) for solo cello, *Crossing the Five Rivers* (2008) for viol and organ, and *Pietà* (2010) for soprano, viol and harpsichord. Last winter I also did two parallel works, *Boreas* for clarinet and string quartet for musicians from the Oulu Symphony Orchestra, and *Aveux* for oboe and string quartet as a commission from the Uusikaupunki Crusell Week."

The processes of composing chamber music and opera differ considerably. As Kortekangas puts it:

"If doing an opera is like making a cream gateau, chamber music is like baking rye bread. Working with little forms and small ensembles is infinitely challenging and educational. The actual performance is rewarding, because you can follow what the individual players are doing in a way you can't in opera or orchestral music."

Olli Kortekangas is composing several works side by side. "If doing an opera is like making a cream gateau, chamber music is like baking rye bread," he says.

Chamber music and working with early instruments – especially the viol – have made him think polyphonically again.

"Polyphony in fact comes naturally to me, because I've always felt I think of music in linear terms. Could this be because I used to be a chorister? Of course all music has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension, but in most cases one or the other dominates. It's fascinating to explore the potential of polyphony and the various layers of the music, and on the other hand transparency, even in such larger-scale works as opera."

One Night Stand

Kortekangas's new chamber opera, *One Night Stand*, is a commission from the Sibelius Academy and will be premiered in the opening season of the new Helsinki Music Centre, in October 2011.

"One Night Stand is a spin-off from my previous opera, *Daddy's Girl*, in that in early 2008 **Markus Lehtinen**, who conducted the world premiere of *Daddy's Girl* at the 2007 Savonlinna Opera Festival, suggested a follow-up by the main people involved, this time under the aegis of the Sibelius Academy." The libretto for the new opera is, like that for *Daddy's Girl*, being written by **Michael Baran**, dramaturge at the Finnish National Theatre.

"Right from the start the new opera has been constructed from the perspective of the Sibelius Academy's voice students. Markus Lehtinen was of the opinion that the project should include a degree of experiment and pedagogical dimensions. *One Night Stand* is reminiscent of a musical in that it has lots of roles, and when a character isn't singing a solo, he or she sings in the ensemble or chorus."

Commissions from the United States

The demand for works by Olli Kortekangas is not confined to Finland. He has, among other things, received two choral commissions from America, the first of which led to the second. The commissioner of the first is a leading US symphonic choir The Choral Arts Society of Washington, which requested a work with an ecological slant to its text. The other commissioner of the work is the Tampere Philharmonic. Performances have already been fixed for Washington, San Francisco and Tampere.

"My new piece is called *Seven Songs for Planet Earth*, and the words are a collage of bits from works by different writers. These include **St Francis of Assisi** and the contemporary US poet **Wendell Berry**. I also use folk poetry. Lasting about 40 minutes, it has a big choir and orchestra and two soloists, so it could be described as an oratorio. It will first be heard at the Kennedy Center in Washington at the end of May 2011."

Kortekangas reveals that his new work also has parts for a children's choir, rather like the chorales in Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.

"Because I also wanted it to have a children's choir, the Children's Chorus of Washington inspired by the Tapiola Choir and **Erkki Pohjola** will also be taking part. On top of all this, the Chorus placed a commission of its own," Kortekangas gleefully reports.

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