



# Running and composing

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**Mikko Heiniö is writing his third opera, and his long days at the computer and grand piano keyboards usually end with a jog of over ten kilometres, each metre corresponding to one hour he will probably spend working on the opera before it is finished. But what do running and composing have in common?**

**M**ikko Heiniö has a passion for running. He goes out jogging four evenings a week, covering some fifty kilometres in all. His personal marathon record – and that means 42.195 kilometres – is 3 hours 20 minutes. Last summer he decided to test his physical condition while composing at his summer place at Kangasala and accordingly ran the Cooper test – something he had not done for ages. The result: 2,850 metres. “Not bad for someone of over 60,” he grins. It came as something of a surprise, seeing that he is nowadays far more relaxed about jogging than he used to be.

“I no longer feel a compulsion to achieve,” he says. “I just run as the mood takes me. I know what my pulse rate is without measuring it, and I’m no longer bothered how long I take. Really the only thing that matters is the total time I can devote to running.”

## Good technique and steady pace

Running is also vital for Heiniö if he is to stand the pace of work. It’s a good idea to end a long stint at the keyboard with a 10–15 kilometre run. Heiniö does not compose while he is jogging, but he may think about what he is going to say the following day at, say, the board meeting of the Finnish Composers’ Copyright Society Teosto or the Society of Finnish Composers. Rather, he uses running as a means of getting away from work. And the exercise does him good, because composing is mostly sitting at a keyboard.

According to Mikko Heiniö, running and composing have a lot in common. “As a performance, running is minimalist, an even timeline. But you need a good technique to run the marathon, so you can learn to maintain a steady pace and performance. I don’t think of either composing or running as a process but as a state into which I project myself. When I run, I enter a state in which I regulate my pace so that I can in principle run for goodness knows how long. If I step up the pace – and especially if I start off too fast, as many do in their first marathon – I may not reach the finishing line. Running becomes a form of self-imposed torture. I just have to convince myself that this distance is going to take me such and such a time, but I can do it if my speed is right.

“Composing an opera demands a similar appropriation of time, pacing myself correctly over a period of maybe more than three years. On the other hand a composer has to accept the fact that even if a piece of music takes only a minute or two to perform, writing it may take a whole working week. I also have to know how much musical information those minutes can carry, in other words at what speed the listener will be able to keep up, or when he will begin to flag.”

Heiniö likens composing to a runner’s interval training: “The dramatic structure of the music demands that the tempo, the frequency of the events, varies. In interval training, quick spurts may alternate with relaxed jogging at intervals of, say, a kilometre.”

Heiniö took up running as a counterbalance to work back in 1994. “I was in the country writing my piano-concerto ballet *Hermes*, my first music drama, and had difficulty getting to sleep after working for 12 hours. So I decided to try out Hermes’s winged sandals,” Heiniö laughs. Running became part of his work as a composer and over the first four years his running diary recorded over 10,000 kilometres and ten marathons.

## A composing marathon

The figure 10,000 also crops up in his “opera diary”. For that is the number of hours he says he spent working on his opera *The Hour of the Serpent*. “The input-output ratio of composing this two-and-a-half-hour opera is rather modest: the actual work takes four-thousand times as long as performing or listening to the opera,” he laughs. And goes on to calculate the hourly rate he has

earned: "It does not really fall on the salary scale for any occupation."

Even so, he once again agreed to take on a job that all in all, from the opening words of the libretto to the first-night performance, is to last for more than four years. This was a commission from the City of Turku to compose a historical opera as the culmination of the city's year as Capital of Culture in 2011. Set in 16th century Turku, Stockholm and various parts of Sweden, it is about the Swedish **King Eric XIV** (1533–1577) and his wife, **Karin Månsdotter**. The librettist is a partner familiar from *The Hour of the Serpent*, **Juha Siltanen**. Heiniö has already written the first act and the beginning of the third and is at present working on the second. The opera is due for completion in time for spring 2011 and will be premiered in the autumn.

"People usually say that the hardest point in the marathon is around 30 kilometres, when you may feel you have hit a brick wall. If you can then succeed in psyching yourself up, you may even increase your speed towards the end. I haven't nearly reached that stage with my opera, but two years from now I will know whether I have paced myself correctly, and whether I was suitably geared up. In running the marathon, you always reach a point when you wish the whole grind was over. Luckily that thought never crosses my mind during a composing marathon." ■



Drawing by Ante Johansson /Tietokuva