

KIMMO HAKOLA

and his box of magic tricks

In this interview **Kimmo Hakola** talks about where he finds his magic tricks, what inspiration means to him and what it is like to have too many attractive options. He also wonders whether contemporary music will have a place in the world of tomorrow and speaks of his most recent works.



Kimmo Hakola (Fimic/Saara Vuorjoki)

One of the salient features of your works ever since the early *Capriole* has been a sudden and unexpected shift in the musical landscape. Do you plan the dramaturgy of your works in advance, and can you tell us something about how your compositions come about?

KH: A work may begin in a number of different ways. Sometimes it may start with a harmonic skeleton, i.e. the construction of a harmonic grammar, sometimes the format alone. To me, the dramaturgy of a composition means form. In speaking of my compositions I prefer to use the term form, because dramaturgy points more to extra-musical effects and things connected more with, say, the theatre or cinema, or that are typical of programme music. So far it's been terribly important to me for the musical idea to have a clear nature and character. The starting point for a piece differs from one work to another. I don't usually like fixing too many parameters in advance, preferring to let the music to follow its own head.

In practice, the work is on my mind throughout the composition process, travelling, sleeping, at meetings, wherever I go. It develops and inhabits a compartment of its own in my brain. I jot down any ideas that occur to me either verbally, or by drawing diagrams, or maybe by playing and storing midi files on my computer. I often have very many such embryo works or brain compartments on the go at the same time. My verbal notes go back as far as the 1980s, and the first sketches for, say, my very wild and complex *A même les échos* for solo violin were in the form of texts. Sometimes these texts also generate genuine literary expression, and my series of

poems *Tuskan saleissa* (In the Halls of Pain), for example, was a therapeutic job before I started on my *Piano Concerto* and served to trigger my creative streak. I later used some of these poems in a composition of the same name.

Once the title, the instruments and so on have fallen into place, the image of the work gradually comes into focus and the music acquires a certain habitus of its own. Everything may, however, change when I shut myself off to compose the work and delve deeper into its world. At some stage I mentally run through the whole work in real time. After this come the most important stages of all: I have to decide whether everything works as planned and in which directions to proceed. My recent administrative jobs have taught me to make decisions. When I was younger, I sometimes got bogged down and depressed for the simple reason that there were too many attractive options. But composing has never been difficult for me because I haven't had enough material or because I couldn't get anything down on paper; on the contrary, there's always been too much material. By the time the *Piano Concerto* at last took off after a couple of false starts, I had enough material for as many as five piano concertos.

The *Piano Concerto* marked a significant stylistic branching-out in your career. Since then, you have been free to do precisely what you want. Despite the abundance of material in a variety of styles, the concerto is nevertheless homogeneous.

KH: Homogeneousness in a work is a kind of system operating at a lower level or beneath the surface on which the structure rests. At thematic

level my compositions make widespread use of the traditional variation of motifs and themes. Another very concrete method for me is to write tonal centres via, say, an organ point or some other texture that is mirrored by the rest of the music. Despite the multiplicity of styles I do not, however, use direct loans; as a rule, I myself write music evoked by some style or image in my mind. Though I claim that there is "Turkish music" in *Arara*, it actually comes from the fairytale Turkey inside my own head. On the other hand I also reflect the listeners' fantasy, and this allows me to open up yet another box of magic tricks when the others have run out. Since this use of stylistic allusions seems to work in repeat performances of a work, I have never regretted it. There is a tremendous lot of fun in the *Piano Concerto* for the music-lover familiar with keyboard literature: it is in fact a comment on all concerto literature, and the listener will find allusions to Beethoven and Brahms, or say Reger and virtually unknown concertos.

Is such a traditional word as "inspiration" important to you?

KH: Yes, it's very important. In my works I apply all my technical know-how, but I'm not the sort of artist who sets out simply to construct music; I need to be in an enthusiastic mood where my imagination runs free – what you might call inspiration. My attitude in life has been to be inventive, and I'm also very curious about the potential afforded by computers. Since *Sacrifice* I've been actively corresponding with IRCAM and I've been kept well informed about what is happening in the music software sector. Apart from music I'm also interested in visual software

and 3D modelling, and I hope at some stage to be able to construct works combining music by me with a visual environment. The most perfect of all would be a DVD opera using 3D technology in which I could do everything myself, stage designs and all. In other words a work that was one hundred per cent digital and that was never intended to be performed or played except from a DVD.

Your oratorio *Le Sacrifice* is possibly your most important work to date. The orchestral version was premiered at the 2005 Helsinki Festival together with the Tarkovsky film of the same name. How does the music stand in relation to this film?

KH: The whole oratorio was in a way a tribute to the life's work of **Andrei Tarkovsky**, his ideas and the films directed by him. The place where the works meet is the landscape in the film, but as the work proceeds, I disassociate myself from the world of the film and use it to build a drama of my own, using my own texts but still in the spirit of Tarkovsky. The point where our paths meet and part is really like a line drawn on water.

As Artistic Director of *Musica nova Helsinki* you have had an excellent vantage point over the contemporary music field. Is pluralism the ongoing trend in contemporary music, and how do you see the future of new music?

KH: The situation with regard to contemporary music is very vague at the moment. I can detect different national ways of approaching composition: we have Italian modernism, composers

writing in the French style, and Germany is a world all of its own. Typical of America are the university composers making a career for themselves on their own campus but quite unknown elsewhere. All in all the cards seem to be well and truly shuffled. The composers who have managed to find themselves a publisher do indeed stand out in the crowd and it's greatly thanks to the music business that contemporary music has managed to get its foot in the concert hall doors. On the other hand, the situation is confused by the fact that we don't know where the world is going as regards music publishing and, say, the recording industry, or what sorts of resources the music business will be prepared to invest in promotion and in singling out new composers.

Pluralism really is a dominant feature of music, but the ghost of strict post-serial Darmstadt is still hovering in the background, though this again is gradually seeking new outlets. Right now, academic composing has least contact with real people. We should ask ourselves who we are composing for: are we writing for ourselves, for our friends, or the public at large? I'm very sceptical about new music because the question is to a great extent: will there be room for it in the world of tomorrow, and will there be a demand for a marginal phenomenon such as this? The marginal may, in the future, survive only so long as it receives public funding.

At the recent Tampere Biennale you had an organ work called *Altar* lasting an hour and performed by you yourself.

KH: The organ is an enormously educational instrument, because it has all the orchestral registers. Through the organ you learn that only certain harmonies or combinations, interval inversions and positions work on certain instruments and in particular registers. If I were teaching composition now, I would have all my students playing the organ. The organ interprets nothing of its own accord: it just produces the sounds, and you have to learn via the phrasing and texture to achieve things that come automatically on the piano, for example, by using the pedals and changing the dynamics.

You are at present working on a major opus for choir and orchestra. Can you envisage the format and duration already?

KH: The oratorio *Song of Songs* is for baritone, large choir and orchestra to a text from the Bible. The biblical Song of Songs – the Song of Solomon – is some of the most beautiful love poetry ever written. The oratorio will probably run to about 40 minutes and its premiere is scheduled for autumn 2006 in Espoo. The male part will be sung by our most beautiful baritone voice, **Jorma Hynninen**, and the female part by a group of seven women singing in unison or in parallel material. The work looks like being very lyrical and bright, even impressionistic. ■

