

Inquisitive visionary composes a full-length opera

In speaking of **Veli-Matti Puumala** (b. 1965) people usually tend to mention his modernistic attitude to composition. Yet it would pay to approach his music with a more open mind than the various shades of meaning implied by the word “modernist” would suggest. His core opus to date is no doubt his *Chain* series that is one, but by no means the only demonstration of his varied yet difficult-to-define quality as a composer. It is, however, true to say that Puumala has a strictly modernist approach to music

drawing on post-serial trends. But time and again it is possible to find elements inspired by a wide range of sources in his music.

Puumala’s own roots are in “the capital of Finnish folk music”, Kaustinen – something that has perhaps been reflected in the scoring of some of his works and his occasional interest in mod-

ality. The best-known example of this type is *Soira* (1996), one of the *Chain* set, for accordion and chamber orchestra. Representing a different approach is the second movement of the piano concerto *Seeds of Time* (2004) that earned him the Teosto Prize, for this comes closer to the free jazz world of the sixties.

To avoid giving too one-sided a picture of Puumala’s stylistic repertoire, it is only fair to add that his more recent works also bear allusions to the history of modernism. The cadenza in the double-bass concerto *Taon* (1998–2000)

comes close to experimentalism in a beautiful and highly symbolic way. Then again the cello sextet *Umstrichen vom Schreienden* (1997–98) hints at dodecaphony and expressionism.

“The sextet was a sort of musical cleansing rite after the *Chains*,” says Puumala. “I used a row in it, and the gesture world therefore pointed to expressionism. Row technique has since featured in some of my more recent works, and as one of the materials for my opera *Anna Liisa*.”

Apostrophe, composed in 2005, is based on music from the prayer scene in *Anna Liisa*. One of the materials is a slightly modified hymn tune creating a link with tradition. It blends with Puumala’s idiom via the experimental timbres craning their necks at the other extreme of tradition. It must also be remembered that a thorough and fully digested training in composition is audible in the music of Puumala.

“In my day, at the Sibelius Academy, the composition students went to every single course there was on new music. We might even take the course several times; we had such a thirst for knowledge.”

Puumala has himself been teaching at the Sibelius Academy for nearly two decades now, despite being only in his early-forties. He began by lecturing on music theory, and in 1997 composition. In 2005 he was appointed Professor of composition.

Eagerly-awaited opera

The full-length opera *Anna Liisa* is to be premiered at the Alexander Theatre in Helsinki on 18 August 2008. Based on the play of the same name by **Minna Canth** written in 1895, it is a co-production by the Kapsäkki Music Theatre and the Tapiola Sinfonietta in collaboration with the Helsinki Festival. The stage director is **Erik Söderblom** and the conductor **Jan Söderblom**. The illustrious cast of soloists includes **Helena Juntunen**, **Jorma Hynninen**, **Ville Rusanen**, **Sanna Kurki-Suonio** and **Reetta Ristimäki**.

Anna Liisa is the tragic story of a secret infanticide and

the consequences of the crime for the leading characters and their community. There were, according to Puumala, many reasons why this story found its way onto his desk.

“I came across it in 1994. The strong tensions between the characters and the action convinced me that the story was well suited to the opera stage. In time, other major themes also emerged from it, such as reflection on the choices and responsibilities of the individual and society.”

The basic dramatic setup influenced the opera’s musical solutions. The story is carried along both by the soloists and by the orchestra.

“The orchestra is, as it were, assigned the role of narrator. It often describes the psychological tension behind the text.”

The vocal parts were affected by Puumala’s respect for his text and they call for an ability in the singers to grasp challenging rhythmic patterns.

“The music and texts go hand in hand. Some of the vocal rhythms may seem complicated, but my aim was to make them come closer to the stresses in spoken Finnish. This meant breaking away from the conventional, straightforward approach.”

The opera was slow to take shape. The first version of the libretto, also including new texts by **Tiina Käkälä-Puumala**, was written in 1998 and Puumala began the music for it in 2001. In between he wrote some other works, and in the past few years composing has naturally had to compete with his Professorship. Once the opera is finished, a commission from the Ensemble Intercontemporain awaits. ■

Veli-Matti Puumala’s music acquires a new dimension with the premiere of his full-length opera *Anna Liisa*. Though Puumala’s music often has links with tradition, it also reaches out in the opposite direction with bold experiments with timbres.



Puumala with the *Anna Liisa* team (Photo: Marcus Schulte)

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