

HENNA SALMELA

The man behind the music

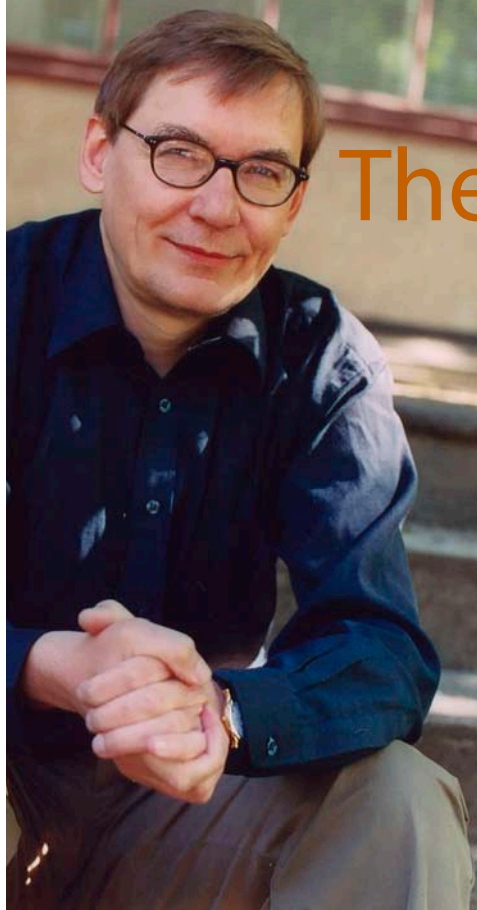


PHOTO: MAARIT KYÖHÄRÄ

Kalevi Aho says on the eve of his 60th birthday: “I have a basic tendency towards melancholy. Yet nowadays I still feel like **Leoš Janáček**: it’s a joy to be alive. This change in my attitude to life is indeed at odds with what is happening in the world right now.” Who exactly is the man behind this prolific musical output, international acclaim and serene exterior?

in finding a new perspective in which to immerse himself. The new elements are never just pastiche-like impressions; they are integrated with the music through and through. It is difficult not to draw a parallel between his symphonic output and his inner life processes. The mood of *the eighth* is of a spiritual striving towards the light. In the *ninth symphony* 🎧 he adopts a different time perspective, cleverly orchestrating a jolly, carefree Baroque theme to suit his personal idiom. *Luosto* 🎧 brings to life a new type of epic narrative that grows into a veritable Gesamtkunstwerk brimming with wild and primitive forces. *The thirteenth* challenges traditional symphonic form by describing different human characteristics by musical means, while *the fourteenth* features Arabian and Chinese hues and hypnotic rhythms.

Aho’s inner world

How, then, to describe the inner world from which Aho draws his ideas? His phenomenal visions he preserves, he says, in his memory, which serves as a library from which to choose the musical material for each work. Some experience or mood may attune his mind all the time he is working on a composition. So what are these visions on which he feeds? His *fifth symphony* was stimulated by the traffic in Helsinki’s Station Square: “The impression was chaotic, yet there was also order in it.” A concert or, say, an art exhibition may also prove to be a decisive experience. “The initial impetus for my *14th symphony* was seeing some video works by the Iranian artist **Shirin Neshat**; their powerful mood gave it a certain ‘*Befindlichkeit*’, to use a term of **Martin Heidegger** meaning attunement or state of mind”. Then again, the decisive impetus for the *The*

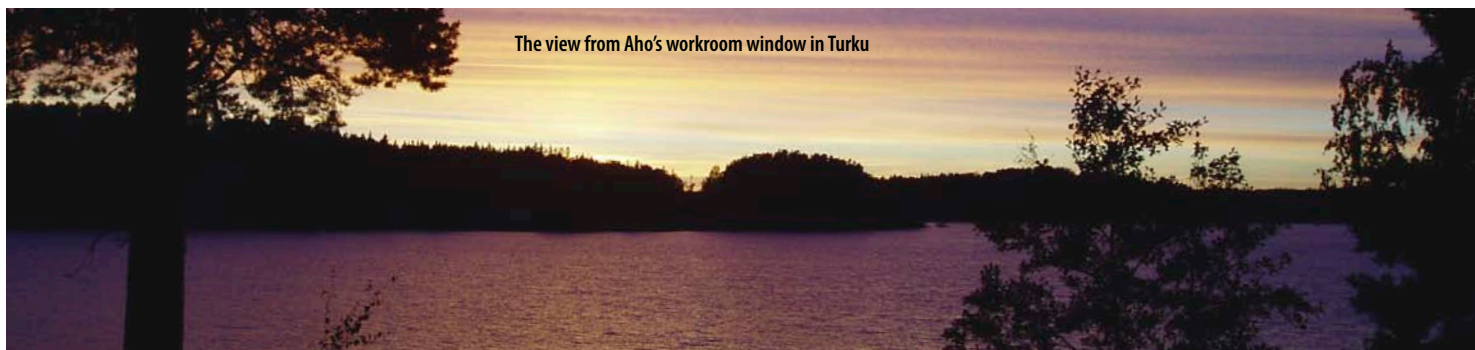
Bells (Saxophone Quartet Concerto) was the sound of the Kaustinen church bell tolling at the funeral of Aho’s colleague and friend **Pehr Henrik Nordgren**. “As I had already composed quite a lot of the concerto, I had to completely rewrite the first movement.”

The most important thing in a composition is, Aho says, its emotional countenance. Music must affect the emotions, but in order to do this convincingly, the composer has to be able to distance himself from his feelings. “In a way, composing is, for me, a schizophrenic business: a work may be stimulated by a strong emotional experience, but when I come to compose it, I have to examine that experience as an outsider, from a distance. If you write something in a burst of emotion, you usually find when you calm down again that the form does not altogether work.” Aho also knows how to regulate himself and does not crave tight schedules. If a work is coming along well, he likes to stop from time to time to let his soul catch up.

Hard work and discipline

Aho’s compositions are also the result of persistent hard work, cast-iron technique and confidence that the music will find its right mode of expression in the process. Being an orderly, disciplined composer, he delivers his commissions in good time. He is not prey to impulse, and nor does he hang around waiting for inspiration. Instead, he sits himself down at his desk, confident that the right musical form will present itself in due course. Sometimes he gets excited by things such as the book by **Herman Rechberger** on rhythm in Arabian music or the lute playing of **Munir Bashir**. “I’ve got lots of Bashir’s CDs and other classical Arabian music. These influences are manifest both in the *14th symphony* and in

The view from Aho’s workroom window in Turku



the *Oboe Concerto*. My latest orchestral works also have rhythmic patterns of an Oriental nature but no Arabian rhythms as such.”

Aho is also fired by books. He has a vast knowledge of literature and reads very fast – just as he speaks, thinks and makes decisions. He has composed settings of Chinese poetry (*Chinese Songs*), used texts by **Mawlana Rumi** (*Love is a Black Lion*) and **Pablo Neruda** (*The Book of Questions*) – but all in Finnish translation, for he never tires of extolling the expressive richness of his native tongue. The works of **Thomas Mann**, **Fyodor Dostoevsky** or **Volter Kilpi** are not just feathers in his cap but endless springs from which to slake his thirst again and again. He enthuses over the language of Kilpi, the poetic inventiveness of which has to be savoured slowly, a little at a time, and in the same breath speaks in glowing terms of the humour in the national epic, *the Kalevala*. As a composer Aho is a Postmodernist who has nothing against the Romantic spirit but who could, as a person, be called an aesthete. He revels in the beautiful, moving and eternal.

Behind his peaceable exterior, Aho can nevertheless be critical and outspoken. Without being pushy, he makes his voice heard through his polemic articles, for example, and does not mince his words on the evils of the modern world. He is opposed to the global market economy and business in which insatiable greed has become a virtue. “Overpopulation, the destruction of our biodiversity, global warming, turbo-capitalism – these are all grave problems in the light of which the future does not look good and we may face major global catastrophes.” He has also addressed social issues in his operas, especially *Insect Life*.

Growing optimism

In spite of everything, Aho has become more optimistic with the passing of the years. In summer he relaxes amid the beautiful scenery of his seaside villa in Turku, usually from the end of May to the middle of September. He keeps fit by cycling to the shops, walking and such pursuits as chopping firewood. “There’s always something physical to do at my summer place. In recent years, for example, some huge fir trees have died and caused a lot of work. I just hope my present good health continues for a long time to come.”

“I’m quite happy on my own; I’m a potential hermit. I don’t mind company, too, but I don’t shine at parties. Many of my works still have a certain melancholy touch. I have a basic tendency towards melancholy. Yet nowadays I still feel like **Leoš Janáček**: it’s a joy to be alive. This change in my attitude to life is indeed at odds with what is happening in the world right now. But at personal level it feels as if more and more light and positive life energy is welling forth from my innermost being.” ■

For a performance list, work list, sound samples and in-depth material on Kalevi Aho see www.fennicagehrman.fi/highlights.htm