

BY TONY LUNDMAN

Unexpected turns

When the Swede Rolf Martinsson and the Finn Kimmo Hakola in November become the centre of attraction at the Stockholm International Composer's Festival 2008, audiences will be treated to many pleasant musical adventures. Thirty-three works, two of which are premieres, will be included in the ample programme. Tony Lundman, editor at the Stockholm Concert Hall, has met with both composers, who over the last decades have experienced great successes, but their roads to these have also been lined with doubts.



PHOTO: DANIEL NILSSON

Rolf Martinsson

They have hardly met before and are not too familiar with each other's music. But there are common denominators for this year's two festival figures, **Rolf Martinsson** and **Kimmo Hakola**. Perhaps the most important in this context is that both unquestionably write pithy, expressive and seductive music for the symphony orchestra. On either side of the Baltic Sea they are hard at work on the new pieces to be premiered by the Royal Philharmonic in November.

Both seem to have been drawn into the world of music by some sort of undetermined force. One can discern, both in the case of the young Martinsson and the young Hakola, a very special, compelling inclination for classical music. This allurements cannot be explained by classical music being a natural part of their home environment.

Hidden dreams

– I started to play the violin at the age of six, Kimmo Hakola relates. I soon felt it was such a bore to practise etudes all the time that I began to write a kind of nonsense music; I pretended to be a composer. It was like drawings. I loved to draw notes.

Playing with notes and notation was, in a sense, also Rolf Martinsson's way into music. He sat at the piano in his home and wrote oodles of simple piano pieces. The journey into classical music had begun in the local music store, where he happened to find a record with Beethoven sonatas played by **Wilhelm Kempff**.

– I was incredibly fascinated. When I came home from school I always lay down on the couch and listened for hours, following along in the notes. I must have been about 12-13 years old and had just started to take some piano lessons.

And in some sense he started composing at the same time as he started playing, without actually having the technical means to do so. But it was with the piano as his main instrument that he gained admission to the music education pro-

gramme at the Academy of Music in Malmö when he was 19; without any real ambition to become a music teacher.

Kimmo Hakola tells how he, too, drifted over to the piano when his need to play with harmonies became acute and could not be satisfied by the violin.

– I glanced furtively in envy at my sister who played the piano. So I started to play the piano myself and take lessons when I was around nine, but continued with the violin until I was 15. Later, the piano was my main instrument when I began studies at the Helsinki Conservatory.

The thought of becoming a composer was there with Hakola all along, but only as a dream kept strictly secret.

– I read all kinds of books about composers, biographies and the like. I practically lived at the municipal library during the summer months, in a sweltering room. I wrote romantic piano

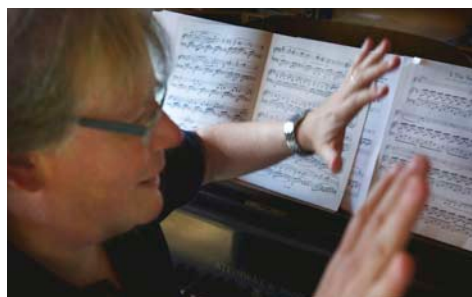


PHOTO: DANIEL NILSSON

pieces, and around the age of 15 I attempted to write a piano concerto in the style of Rachmaninov.

Martinsson's and Hakola's dreams of composing were for the most part kept secret when they were young. On the other hand, for a long time a career as a pianist was a possible alternative for Hakola, while such a course had never crossed Martinsson's mind.

– I practised to be a concert pianist until I was 20 years old, says Hakola. It took time before I could recognise my dream to become a composer.

Einojuhani Rautavaara was my first teacher in composition. When I met him he could read my mind right off and understand how things were. He became my mentor and gave me the technical means without propagandising or steering. But it was much more than music; we could discuss books and all kinds of things.

As for Martinsson, it was not until around 1980 that he passed over from music education into music theory studies and then on to composition classes a couple of years later. The composition programme was then newly established at the Academy of Music in Malmö and he was actually its first student.

Doubts and dead ends

The years went by. About the same time that Kimmo Hakola had an early international breakthrough with his *String Quartet No. 1* in the mid-1980s, Martinsson experienced the stirrings of a creative crisis. During his composition studies he first became a pupil of **Hans Eklund**, later of **Sven-Eric Johanson** and finally of **Jan W. Morthenson**.

– Given Morthenson's hard-line structuralism, things were at a deadlock right away for me then. He was tough as a teacher. In retrospect I realise that it was good for me, but all in all it was a quite a motley education.

A glance at his catalogue of works shows, nevertheless, that Martinsson composed on a regular basis above all chamber music. But he did it with a sort of gnawing feeling that he was not being true to himself. It would be several more years before he gave in to the music he really bore within himself, music that was not "modernistic" and adapted to the current art music aesthetics.

As for Kimmo Hakola, he suddenly stood out as Finnish music's great promise after **Magnus Lindberg** and **Kaija Saariaho**. His first string quartet won the coveted international Rostrum Prize for composers. He composed a number of

and success stories

forceful chamber works in the following years, among them *A meme les échos* for solo violin and *Capriole* for bass clarinet and cello, for which he won the Rostrum once again. But it was also at this time that Hakola's creativity reached a dead end. This was partly due, paradoxically, to the very success that he had had. His self-criticism had become devastating.

– I stopped composing. For me it was not a matter of difficulties in aim and direction or such.

I felt that my music was not good enough. I had won the Rostrum twice and received a lot of commissions, with heavy deadlines to meet. I went around with the feeling that everyone expected something fantastic. I just couldn't go on. I was forced to cancel everything.

Kimmo Hakola changed environments. He needed to get away from the music scene in Helsinki and settled in Kesälahti, in Northern Karelia, close to the Russian border. To speak of isolation is no exaggeration.

– I went fishing and for walks in the woods. I mostly played a piano in a village church, improvising a lot. I had contact only with my immediate family. I was unhappy and didn't want to compose. True, I had tried again and again, but in the end I had been forced to accept the situation and to give it time.

Creative liberation

Gradually music started to grow forth once more in Hakola. Tentatively; but it was hardly a modest return to musical life that he achieved: an enormous piano concerto of 55 minutes' duration – moreover Hakola's very first work for orchestra. The year was 1996. **Jukka-Pekka Saraste** conducted the premiere with the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and **Jaana Kärkkäinen** as soloist.

– It took five years before I was finished. It's a very important and personal work where I did something that I really yearned to do: search for my own expression.

While Hakola was putting the finishing touches on his piano concerto – a sometimes almost chaotic review of nearly the whole piano literature, "It is my pianist debt that is paid" – Rolf Martinsson in Malmö had reached a decision. Either he would give up composing entirely or he would yield to the musical desire that throbbed within him.

– Everything had seemed so hopeless when I tried

to write music. I felt hard pressed by the need to compose in a certain manner. But then **Gunilla von Bahr**, at the time director of the Malmö Symphony Orchestra, put her trust in me with a commission. It was then that I decided to do my quick-change number and wrote my first large-scale orchestral work, *Dreams*, inspired by **Akira Kurosawa's** film of the same name.

Now a highly expressive Martinsson made his appearance. He permitted himself to roll around in great, swelling sonorities and did it with a conspicuously virtuosic handling of the orchestral body. He acquired these skills by assiduous studies of such masters of instrumentation as Ravel and Lutoslawski. But above all he had given in to his inner music.

Rolf Martinsson was reborn as a composer of *Dreams*. Kimmo Hakola needed privacy and a total of five years' work on his piano concerto to do the same. For both this occurred in the mid-1990s, and for both this would liberate enormous creativity and productivity.

Martinsson gravitated towards a kind of late-romantic idiom, Hakola towards pluralism such as works like *Capriole* had already indicated. For both Martinsson and Hakola it is perhaps above all a matter of a good and productive relationship to music history.

– My music can be called pluralistic, says Hakola, but it's still vital to write coherently. For me "style" is mostly a question of technical means or musical material. Such things can be perceived as jazzy or classical, but the totality comes from the tradition that one grew up in. And this totality is my mother tongue and contains everything from renaissance music to more recent music. **John Cage** has said that the past doesn't interest him, just the future. I am of course also interested in the future, but it's history that keeps me breathing.

I'm interested in all types of "intertextual" relations in music. In my works there are no quotes at all, but there are allusions: I give hints; I conjure up atmospheres that can lead one's thoughts to other music.

At the same time one can maintain that both Martinsson's and Hakola's compositions give vent to extremely dramatic temperaments. Both say that they often look upon creativity as a kind of narration, and both are inspired by the visual. Martinsson's *Dreams* is of course inspired by a film as well, and Hakola for his part feels a strong artistic affinity to the film director **Andrei Tarkovsky**



PHOTO: STEFAN BREMER



Kimmo Hakola

– the large-scale work *Le Sacrifice* for soprano and orchestra was inspired by his film *The Victim*. In Hakola's case this dramatic vein has also thus far resulted in three operas.

Solo concertos

The pleasurable in Martinsson's and Hakola's music has, among other things, been manifested in terribly virtuosic and entertaining solo concertos. Martinsson's trumpet concerto, *Bridge*, and Hakola's *Clarinet Concerto* are a couple of telling examples. The former with an extravagance à la **Richard Strauss** blended with "forbidden" Hollywood sentimentality, the latter with the soloist plunging into a wild klezmer dance. For Martinsson's part, he has so far composed as many as five solo concertos, but *Bridge* was his really big international breakthrough. It is with strong emotions that Martinsson remembers the period.

– It was to be my first solo concerto and I gave it my full concentration – 110 per cent. At crucial places in the music the soloist **Håkan Hardenberger** and I tried out the passages together. That support is always vital for me, I like to be able to form my work after the circumstances and the current soloist; then it becomes personal.

When it was time for the first rehearsal in Gothenburg Martinsson sat in the auditorium, nervous and overstrung. The conductor, **Neeme Järvi**, stepped up to the podium and started to conduct the orchestra.

– When the sea of strings appeared a ways into the concerto Järvi suddenly shouted "Wooonderfuul". But I was so tense that I didn't hear what he said but thought that he was angry at something, laughs Martinsson.

That was the beginning of the work's triumphal march throughout the world.

The Finnish clarinetist **Kari Kriikku** has turned Hakola's *Clarinet Concerto* into a dizzy display of virtuosity, but in this context it is also interesting to note what different working methods Martinsson and Hakola employ. Unlike

➤ Martinsson, Hakola usually does not work closely with anyone when composing the solo part.

– In somewhat the same way as with the violinist **John Storgårds**, Kari Kriikku has meant a lot to me throughout the years. Many people have asked if we collaborate when I compose, but this has not at all been the case. I write the music, then I send it to him and then he plays it. It's as simple as that. We both have roots in Ostrobothnia in Finland and have joked about the possibility that this could have something to do with it: we don't discuss, we just do it.

Passionate composers

It is a short stroll from Rolf Martinsson's house in Limhamn down to Sibbarp's marina. Idyllic, indeed, but one can probably still not call the composer Martinsson an idyllist. The surroundings are certainly inspiring but Martinsson's music actually has few pastoral features. On the contrary, its energy is rather urbane and violently passionate. Martinsson's relationship to music is also passionate. For behind the methodical person who meets deadlines and keeps track of papers one finds a musician who for long periods devotes himself entirely to composing.

Kimmo Hakola tells us that he has similar intensive periods of composition. He sets aside what he calls white days or weeks in his schedule, which are also reserved for conducting. During these periods he devotes himself entirely to composing without counting hours. He takes me down to the water line in the Brunnsparken area in Helsinki. It was the proximity to the water that made him fall in love with Helsinki.

– The orchestral work *Maro* is an expression of my fascination with the water, as well as my concern about the future of the Baltic Sea. It's the only work of mine that has a political undertone; there is no programme but it's a very rhetorical piece.

It will soon be time for the Composer's Festival 2008. For both Rolf Martinsson and Kimmo Hakola it will be the absolutely biggest continuous presentation of their music ever. Do they think about the audience when they compose?

– No, says Martinsson. It is my own experience of beauty and my gut feeling that guide me. But I do understand that my music can perhaps be a little more accessible than some other more "modernistic" music. But that is no end in itself – even though I have been criticised for being too audience friendly.

– Yes and no, says Hakola. I have something like a test laboratory in my head when I write a piece. What I do is close my eyes and imagine the concert hall, how the musicians and the conductor come in. They start to play. And then I follow my score and am at the same time one of the listeners in an imagined audience. ■