



# EINOJUHANI RAUTAVAARA

AVANT-GARDIST, MYSTIC AND UPHOLDER  
OF VALUES

**Einojuhani Rautavaara once said that he has always wanted his life to observe the tripartite Brahminic division: the young soldier (avant-gardist), the patriarch (upholder of values), and finally the recluse (mystic).**

Rautavaara's development as a composer can indeed be roughly divided into three main periods. The late 1950s and particularly the early 1960s produced his most experimental and avant-gardist works. His style of composition then took a new turn in 1967, with the *Independence Cantata* (Itsenäisyyskantaatti). Since then, he has devoted himself mainly to commissions, as a result of which many of his works, especially many of those composed in the 1970s, have intentionally been inspired by a desire to create audience-friendly *Gebruchsmusik*. The start of the third period more or less coincides with beginning of the 1980s, during which he married (in 1984) his second wife, the singer **Sinikka (Sini) Koivisto**.

By the time Rautavaara was 50, in 1978, he had already made his "withdrawal decision": from then onwards there would be nothing but composition – no writing about music, no radio talks, no panels, meetings or representing

societies. Ten years later, having celebrated his 60th birthday, he relinquished the chair in composition at the Sibelius Academy. It was not, however, until he reached the "recluse" stage that Rautavaara really made his international breakthrough. As a result, he has in the past few years in fact been more in the news than ever before because of performances of his works and many significant interviews.

## Iconoclast

This tripartite division does not, however, tell the whole truth about the life of Einojuhani Rautavaara the composer, since the three tendencies mentioned at the beginning have really and truly been manifest in his work from the very outset. His first preserved work *Three Symmetric Preludes* (1950), is modernistic and atonal, while the piano suite *Fiddlers* (1952) both upholds and reassesses traditional values; it is, after all, based on folk music. The *Fid-*

*dlers* and *A Requiem in Our Time* (scored for brass, 1953) were the works with which Rautavaara really made his breakthrough and they are still among the compositions by him most frequently performed. In *Icons* (1955), his main piano work of the 1950s, Rautavaara reveals his fascination for (Orthodox) mysticism. His early output already includes works that may be classified purely as *Gebruchsmusik*.

In the 1950s and early 1960s Rautavaara seemed to be intent on experimenting with and comparing completely unrelated musical premises and to be seeking a path of his own in the jungle of conflicting aspirations. His real avant-gardist experiments culminated in the *Arabescata* of 1962. This symphonic work does, for example, adhere strictly to serialism, and the second movement is based on motifs mapped on graph paper. The premiere of *Arabescata* in 1963 caused quite a scandal that was even taken up by the daily press; **Paavo Berglund** refused to conduct it and the composer himself had to step into the breach. This inspired the cartoonist Kari to publish a cartoon in the leading Finnish daily, *Helsingin Sanomat*, that to some extent alludes to the graphical sketches for *Arabescata*. In it a member of the metro committee arrives at a recording of new music with a map of the metro and asks a spokesman from the orchestra to demonstrate how the metro plan would sound.

Then in the 1950s and 1960s Rautavaara succeeded in achieving a synthesis of what were fundamentally opposing trends in composition. In his third symphony (1961), for example, one of the cornerstones of his symphonic output, he combined a 12-note technique designed for the control of atonality with a luxuriantly romantic and, one might say, outright Brucknerian approach to sound. The TV opera *The Mine* (Kaivos, 1957-60/62), a political work inspired by the Hungarian uprising of 1956, is likewise based on 12-note technique.

## Gebruchsmusiker

There were two reasons why Rautavaara addressed himself more to listener-friendly *Gebruchsmusik* in the late 1960s. One was that he had "had enough" of strict structuralism,

Hans Lydman and Jorma Hynninen  
in the opera *Aleksis Kivi*

(Photo: Kuvasuomi Ky Matti Kolho)





which was beginning to seem oppressive. The other was purely practical, i.e. the financial need to accept commissions for the most varied combinations of instruments. He did not, however, feel he was compromising himself, or that honouring his numerous commissions in any way restricted his freedom. For as he says in *"Elämäni on musiikki"* (My Life is Music, in Finnish, published in 1980), a book edited by **Juhani Aromäki**, *"It's actually all been fun. The first thing anyone producing art must do is accept the limitations: you don't have complete liberty to do anything. A trumpet in B flat simply cannot play a top G."*

Many of the most popular works by Rautavaara were indeed written in the late 1960s and the 1970s. These include the instrumental concerto performed most of all, the cello concerto of 1968, his most famous composition, the *Cantus arcticus* for birds and orchestra of 1972, his most frequently performed choral work, the *Lorca Suite* of 1973, one of the finest pieces in the male choir repertoire, *The Book of Life* (Elämän kirja, 1972), and the little Christmas mystery *Marjatta, the Lowly Maiden* (Marjatta, matala neiti, 1975) for children's choir, soloists and instruments.

The cello concerto was followed in 1969 by Rautavaara's utterly romantic first piano concerto composed above all so that he himself could play it. For he is reputed to have admitted to having a complex because many of his colleagues, such as **Einar Englund** and **Joonas Kokkonen**, were superb pianists who had even held recitals of their own. The soloist at the premiere was Rautavaara himself, and by the time he had performed it with six or seven other Finnish orchestras, he no longer had a complex.

The choice of stylistic genre for the comic opera *Apollo contra Marsyas*, 1970, was again influenced by a similar complex. Rautavaara later said that as a schoolboy he always envied the people who could play well and improvise jazz to an admiring audience. *Apollo contra Marsyas* has elements of jazz and pop, and by getting these out of his system, he managed to overcome his complex.

## Angels, birds and unicorns

The works by Einojuhani Rautavaara of his middle period do nevertheless include a few of an experimental nature. The most notable is perhaps the unconventional cantata *True & False Unicorn* for three reciters, mixed choir,

ensemble and tape to a text by **James Broughton** (1971). The cantata incorporates elements of jazz, catchy American-style musicals, and a national-anthem collage interspersed with tape music. He also explores novel worlds of sound in his *Music for Upright Piano and Amplified Cello* (1976).

According to Rautavaara, the "modernity" of a work depends not on the material or technique employed. He says many of the composers who look upon themselves as avant-gardists read modernism like the Jehovah's Witnesses their Bible, *"observing the instructions on diet issued by Moses but denying the mystery of Christ"*. In his opinion, interest in devices of a specific kind should never prevent the composer from seeing his goal. He compares the composer obsessed with his structures to the blind king: *"The blind king is always falling over. He thinks that's life. He cannot see the garden."*

The mythical unicorn turns up again later in *Serenades of the Unicorn* (1977) and *Monologues of the Unicorn* (1980), both for guitar; the unicorn seems to be the composer's alter ego, the personification of the artist, at times semi-divine and at others a wretch and a villain.

Many of the works composed during the middle period also contain traits of Rautavaara the mystic. The choral work *Vigilia* (All-Night Vigil, 1971-72) was originally composed for Orthodox divine worship and was inspired by the impression left by a visit to Valamo monastery made while he was a child, the Valamo churches, their gleaming onion domes and the intoxicating ringing of the dozens of church bells on the island. Rautavaara later produced an abridged concert version of the *Vigilia* in

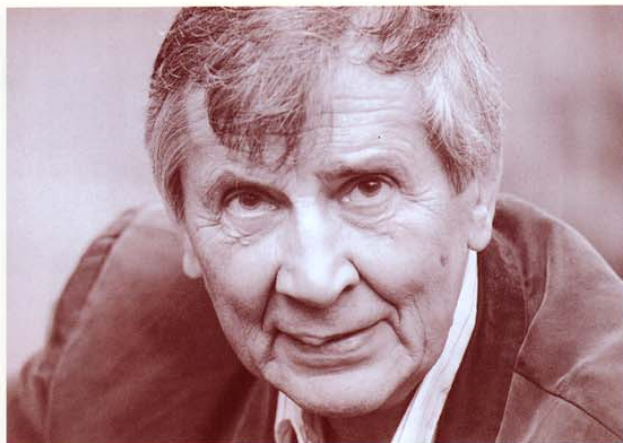
1996, the record of which was an immediate success. The secret to the success of the *Cantus arcticus* also lies in its dissociation from reality. The orchestral part is in itself very simple music, but the *Cantus* is raised to a completely different plane by the taped birdsong engaging in counterpoint with the orchestra. The birds in the *Cantus arcticus* are not just any birds: they are sacred birds that give the work a supernatural element.

In the 1970s Rautavaara also discovered his angels. To begin with they give the impression of being demonic, ominous harbingers of darkness, as in *Annunciations* (1976-77) for organ and symphonic wind orchestra, *Angels and Visitations* (1978) for orchestra, and the double bass concerto *Angel of Dusk* (1980), to my mind one of the most impressive of all the Rautavaara concertos. In the smaller-scale flute concerto (1973) the soloist is called upon to perform on all four members of the flute family. The violin concerto (1977) seeks to extract the very soul and essence of the violin, and the most recent concerto, also one of the finest by Rautavaara, is the second one for piano (1989).

## The recluse

The 1980s and 1990s have been a time of synthesis as Rautavaara has laid aside more and more of his outside obligations. In many of his works he combines stricter motif work, such as row technique, with a more liberal, spontaneous idiom. The next of his operas, *Thomas* (1982-85), is to my mind the finest he has ever written and deals with the ousting of the old Finnish culture based on the world of the Kalevala by modern European, Christian culture.

Photo: Heikki Tuuli







Together with the Christmas mystery Marjatta, the Lowly Maiden and the choral opera *Runo 42. 'The Abduction of the Sampo'*, Thomas constitutes a major-dramatic trilogy delving deep into the roots of the Finnish ethos.

The libretto of *Vincent* (1986-87), his next opera, is based on the life of Vincent van Gogh, treated with considerable liberty by the composer. Rautavaara also addresses the tragic fate of the artist in his chamber opera *Aleksis Kivi* (1995-96), which includes settings of some of the most moving poems by the great Finnish poet after which the opera is named. The heroines in *The House of the Sun* (Auringon talo, 1989-90) are two Russian emigrants who bring their past with them to their new life and try to preserve and cherish their past picture of reality, impervious to the real world surrounding them. In his TV opera *The Gift of the Magi* (Tietäjien lahja, 1993-95) Rautavaara returns once more to the landscapes of his childhood; the events of this beautiful Christmas opera are set in Helsinki in the 1930s.

### **"The symphony is an anachronism"**

The 1980s and 1990s have seen the return of Einojuhani Rautavaara the symphonist. Not until his third symphony (1961) did Rautavaara succeed in convincingly creating a large-scale orchestral work in several movements. The result is undoubtedly the most Brucknerian symphony in Finnish music and its reception was exceptionally warm. The original version of the fourth symphony (1964/69) nevertheless signified a step backwards, being very short and sparse for a symphony and failing to elicit much of a response in either audiences or critics.

In 1980, possibly discouraged by his uneven series of symphonies, Rautavaara wrote that symphonic thinking was in his opinion an anachronism. He then went on to say that his best compositions sought to discover a style of thinking that was not of a symphonic nature or motivistically calculating and did not progress towards one single specific objective.

Before the decade was out Rautavaara had nevertheless decided to set about rehabilitating his symphonies. In 1984 he produced a revised version of the second, and in 1988 subjected the first to the same treatment, reducing the number of movements from four to two to form an unconventional symphony consisting of a grandiloquent first movement followed by a scherzo-like finale. He then solved the problem of the fourth symphony by striking it from his list of works and calling *Arabescata* (1962) his fourth, since "*Arabescata was, after all, originally planned as a symphony!*". By the 1980s the ideologies preventing him from calling *Arabescata* a symphony in the 1960s had been replaced by new ones.

The one-movement fifth symphony written in 1985-86 is one of the best orchestral works ever written by Rautavaara. Its form is interesting: it could be likened to an unwinding spiral opening outwards that now and then keeps returning to some former style, but always on the outermost ring of the spiral, as it were. The sixth symphony, *Vincentiana* (1992), is again colourful music rich in fantasy and is based on the material in the opera *Vincent*. Finally the four-movement seventh symphony, *Angel of Light*, was to become by far the most successful of all the Rautavaara symphonies. Commissioned by the University of Indiana (Bloomington) and composed in 1994, it was originally titled *The Bloomington Symphony*. For its recording in 1996 it was, however, given a new, more poetic name, and the disc has sold extremely well, especially in the United States and the UK.

Painting:  
Pekka Hepoluhita