

UUNO KLAMI: The View from the Podium

The centenary of the birth of the Finnish composer Uuno Klami has been conspicuously celebrated this year. In September a two-day symposium was held in his honour in Helsinki, music by him has been performed at numerous concerts, and his life story has been told both in the press and in the new book (in Finnish) "Uuno Klami, his life and works" by Kalevi Aho and Marjo Valkonen. Concert audiences have in fact been regularly spoilt with Klami's music, which has long been standard repertoire of the Finnish orchestras. But what do the performers themselves have to say about Uuno Klami? Wherein lies the secret of his perpetual popularity, and what technical challenges and interpretations does his music offer? To find out the answers to these questions, we interviewed Tuomas Ollila, who has this year conducted music by Klami at three concerts and on disc with the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra.

Henna Salmela: Klami is, after Sibelius and Rautavaara, one of the most frequent names on the Finnish concert programme. What do you consider to be the secret of his undying popularity?

Tuomas Ollila: In his music Klami succeeded in boring deep into the very bedrock of the Finnish soul, and this undoubtedly explains his popularity with domestic audiences. He also has points in common with



many different musical styles and composers. But although he did, as we know, like to shop around, he seldom overstepped the mark. I think it was **Toivo Kärki** who once said that the secret of a good tango lies in its sounding sufficiently familiar. The same could be said for the music of Uuno Klami.

HS: This year you have conducted Klami's oratorio *Psalmus* in two different performances. According to the Sibelius scholar **Erkki Salmenhaara**, *Psalmus* is one of the rare Finnish works on a par with those of **Jean Sibelius**. Would you personally bracket Klami with Sibelius or any other composer?

TO: Not really. I look upon *Psalmus* as a Finnish masterpiece, but it carries virtually no Sibelius associations for me. Musically it's extremely original. The unusually powerful text also contributes a lot to the overall impact, because it strongly moulds the musical idiom. True, it is possible to pick out quotations from Puccini and there are echoes of Sibelius's fourth symphony, but there's nothing unusual about that.

HS: *Psalmus* was originally considered an extremely difficult work, especially for the choir. After its premiere in 1937 it was not performed again for another 23 years. Has time ironed out some of the difficulties, or how hard is it, would you say, from the orchestra's, the choir's and the conductor's point of view?

TO: Looking at it today, I wouldn't say that the choral part is in any way a stumbling block. The singers do, of course, have their work cut out, and there are some very tricky passages, especially for the male chorus. As far as the orchestra's concerned, it's not a particularly difficult work, though Klami has a very gritty way of writing music. He is widely acclaimed as a good orchestrator, but it's not so easy to make his music sound properly – you really have to work at it. Klami experimented widely with his orchestration; in that sense he liked taking risks.

HS: Your readings of *Psalmus* have differed considerably from that on the Finlandia recording made in 1988 with **Ulf Söderblom** conducting. What liberties have you taken, especially with the tempos?

TO: I used to try to conduct Klami's works as they were written, as if I were documenting them and observing the original metronome

markings. But for some reason it just didn't work for me. I somehow feel that the original tempos are all too slow for the rhythm of life today. My own tempos are, generally speaking, relatively fast, but in Klami's case possibly even a bit faster than normal. His works just seem to work better that way.

HS: The most frequently heard work by Klami, the *Kalevala Suite*, has been given some 20 performances in the past five years. *The Sea Pictures* and *The Cobblers on the Heath Overture* are also among his most popular works, both getting nearly ten performances between 1996 and 2000. You yourself have conducted the *King Lear Overture* and the original version of the violin concerto, and you've recorded both symphonies with the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra. Do you have any particular favourites?

TO: The *Kalevala Suite* is my out-and-out favourite. It just seems to work of its own accord, both the orchestration and the tempos. The *King Lear Overture* is a powerful piece but you have to work hard to make it sound right. It's got all the ingredients of the *Kalevala Suite* in miniature, as it were. And there's nothing to beat the Klami works on national themes. They've got humour and folk music in a heady combination, as in the *Cobblers Overture*, which virtually has the last word on the use of humour in this Klami genre.

HS: How have your orchestras and audiences reacted to Klami's music?

TO: To begin with the players may be very critical if the notes don't immediately fall into place. You often have to work hard at Klami's music. But the audience reactions have been distinctly positive, often better than I expected. On our tours of the provinces, for example, the audience regularly gets genuinely carried away. The music of Uuno Klami seems to have something quite special about it that appeals to the Finnish ear and just suits our national character.

Henna Salmela



Tuomas Ollila (b. 1965), is conductor of the Tapiola Sinfonietta. In 2000 he has made guest appearances with the Melbourne, Sydney, Dutch Radio, BBC Wales, Scottish Symphony and other orchestras.

Photo: Heikki Tuuli