

Ulf Söderblom has conducted Joonas Kokkonen's opera *The Last Temptations* more than 170 times in all, beginning with the premiere in 1975. He also wielded the baton for the Finnish National Opera revival of the original production in spring 2001. How has 26 years' experience of this opera broadened Söderblom's view of Kokkonen's music?



Photo: Kari Hakki

## *The Voice of Experience on* **THE LAST TEMPTATIONS**



Ulf Söderblom (Photo: Reiner Frommer)

“Joonas Kokkonen’s writing for orchestra was terribly demanding, but he also had a good psychological eye. His music never ever leaves musicians cold,” says Söderblom. “As a soundscape, the score of *The Last Temptations* is infinitely rich. Even though I’ve conducted it so many times, I always find something new in it, and I know I’ll go on doing so. I have the feeling that I’m only now just discovering the right musical solutions and seeing what lies at the heart of Kokkonen’s world of sound: inherent Finnishness combined with ultimate refinement.”

According to Söderblom, the Kokkonen score is wonderfully rich and mature. “It’s the work of a wise composer in complete command of his job. At no time do you tell yourself, ‘this is not his strong point, this leaves something to be desired.’ Everything is exactly as it should be. Just like Mozart, who was simply incapable of wrong orchestration.”

Kokkonen did not start putting his work down on paper until he had formed a complete picture of it in his mind. He had an exceptionally good memory, almost never revised his works and issued very few instructions in rehearsal unless specifically asked.

“I sensed that *The Last Temptations* was a masterpiece the moment it was born. Kokkonen never had any doubts, either, though naturally he felt a bit nervous, like anyone working on a big project.” The success of the opera did admittedly come as something of a surprise to

Kokkonen, and no one ever dreamt in the early days that it would run to so many performances. The musicians have enjoyed doing it. One member of the orchestra once told Kokkonen he always changed his days off so he could play in *The Last Temptations*.

The themes of *The Last Temptations* operate at a universal level. The opera is about the inner religious conflict of a preacher, **Paavo Ruotsalainen**, and about his confrontations with the community and even his immediate family. It has been taken on a number of successful tours, and to such illustrious venues as the New York Metropolitan, but it has never been staged in a non-Finnish production. By contrast, the opera *Aleksis Kivi* by **Einojuhani Rautavaara** could not be on a more Finnish theme yet it has been performed in English in the United States, and many other Finnish operas have been translated into German or other languages. Söderblom, however, feels it is quite immaterial whether the topics and characters of *The Last Temptations* are international or not. What interests him more in the libretto is the life cycle of a go-ahead figure and the issues this raises: “It’s all about the battle of a strong person to achieve something in which he believes. Other things I find interesting in the opera are the human relations and the difficulty which the characters have seeing the most important things in life.”

*Henna Salmela*