

Jyrki Linjama – a composer exploring fundamental questions

A critically inquisitive and questioning composer, Linjama creates large-scale works on serious topics. His sensitive emotional expression is always based on an awareness of the darker dimensions of existence.

“Both composition and liturgy explore fundamental questions, which is why they are so good together.” This quote is a good description of **Jyrki Linjama** (b. 1962) as a composer. In his music, spiritual and musical impulses are closely intertwined, often even when the work is not religious in nature. Linjama’s attitude as a composer is more critically inquisitive and questioning than explicitly declarative. Underlying his sensitive emotional expression is always an awareness of the heavier, darker dimensions of existence.

Linjama’s output includes a wide variety of works in different genres: two church operas, large-scale choral-orchestral works, three violin concertos, orchestral works, vocal and chamber music. No single configuration is dominant. “My composition is practical. The work and genre that interests me most is always the one I’m working on at the time,” he says.

Jyrki Linjama studied composition at the Sibelius Academy under **Einojuhani Rautavaara** and **Paavo Heininen** and graduated with a doctorate in music in 2003. He continued his studies at the Royal Conservatoire the Hague and the Berlin University of the Arts under **Witold Szalonek** and in Budapest as a private student of **Zsolt Durkó**.

Linjama’s career, which began in the 1980s, has not seen any radical stylistic changes. The connection with the Viennese School and



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twelve-tone technique that emerged during his years of study forms one of the starting points for his totally chromatic, often lyrically expressionistic style of composing. For him, however, the twelve-tone technique is more of a tool than an all-encompassing structural principle. “It offers opportunities to explore the material, but traditional dodecaphony can also turn against itself,” says Linjama.

Gregorian melodies

Linjama’s music takes on an added dimension from the Gregorian melodies he often uses. They appear in his works, sometimes as surface-level melodic material, sometimes as cantus firmus or otherwise embedded in the fabric. They do not, however, introduce any neo-tonal or other neo-simplistic element, nor are they necessarily associated only with spiritual works. Linjama has also composed a polska, for example, based on a Gregorian tune.

The Gregorian starting point is evident in two groups of works of different kinds. Since 2006, five of the composer’s works have been entitled *Allerheiligentag*, ranging from solo pieces to orchestral works. Linjama says that he is attracted by the beautiful sound of the word itself. All works in this group are based on the same Finnish folk chorale and the requiem topos it creates. *Allerheiligentag II* (2008) for orchestra is the most powerful of these works. *Allerheiligentag III* (2018) is the second of Linjama’s three string quartets.

Underlying Gregorian melodies are also the common factor behind Linjama’s four *Sonata da Chiesa* pieces. These sonatas form a more coherent group, as they are all solo works: the instruments are piano 🎹 (I 2010), organ (II 2014), harpsichord 🎹 (III 2015) and guitar (IV 2022). Of these, the guitar piece also bears



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Die Geburt des Täuflers performance in Austria.

the additional title “Missa brevis”, as its four movements resemble the structure of the mass.

The *Liturgical Concerto for Organ and Strings* (2005) is “liturgical” in the same spirit as, for example, Honegger’s *Symphonie Liturgique* (No. 3). The three movements of the work are related both to the concerto form and to the liturgical form; the titles are *Kyrie*, *Gloria* and *Agnus Dei*.

Great works on serious themes

Jyrki Linjama’s major works include his two church operas. *Die Geburt des Täufers* (The Birth of the Baptist, 2010) was commissioned by the Austrian Carinthischer Sommer festival. The theme is the birth of John the Baptist as told in the Gospel of Luke. The opera has also been spun off into a four-song suite, *Lieder der Elisabeth* (2011). Also related is the four-movement song suite *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (2012), set to texts by the 13th-century mystic **Mechthild von Magdeburg**.

Linjama’s other church opera, *Three Letters to Laestadius* (2017), is about the Swedish Sami botanist and priest **Lars Levi Laestadius** (1800-1861), who inspired an Evangelical Lutheran revival movement. In the opera’s story, Laestadius, on his deathbed, receives three letters from women in the present day whose fates reveal the darker side of Laestadianism and horrify the priest. The work offers a reflective and critical perspective on the distorted interpretation of spiritual legacy. The form of the work follows the structure of the mass and is, in a way, situated between opera and liturgy.

Alongside the operas, Linjama’s main output includes two large-scale vocal works that reflect on serious themes. The *Finnish Stabat Mater* (2012) interprets the familiar Stabat Mater text as a Finnish translation. This time there are no Gregorian melodies, but instead a connection to the archaic Finnish lament tradition. The instrumentation includes the kantele in addition to strings. The composer’s other large-scale vocal work is *Vanitas* (2013), based on the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Jyrki Linjama’s pragmatic approach is illustrated by the fact that the choral part tends to be a little more simplistic, while the orchestral part has a harmonic and tonal richness.

Kimmo Korhonen

Footnote:

Jyrki Linjama (born on 23 April 1962) celebrates his 60th anniversary this year.