

Antti Auvinen's turbocharged world of sound



Photo: Eija Tero

Few contemporary composers have caught the ear of the public at large as quickly as Antti Auvinen. Returning home in the early 2000s after studying abroad, he crashed into public awareness in 2015 and has since become one of Finland's most talked-about contemporary composers.

Herein lies the core of Antti Auvinen's aesthetics: his untiring search and experimentation in order to find a way of expressing contemporary phenomena in the language of today: "The classical music tradition is extraordinarily rich and long, and an endless source from which to draw. You must nevertheless have the courage to experiment, seek and discover," he says.

Above all, Auvinen is fascinated by timbre and rhythm. Information technology features large in his composition process, as a means of both analysing and producing sound. It augments the traditional toolkit, and the combination of image and sound provides even greater scope. "I do a lot with multimedia – I often use video manipulations, for example, as an element in my music."

According to Auvinen, classical music requires time in a very special way. The processes are often long and slow. "Speed and efficiency, or demands for productivity, are ill suited to the composition of classical music, and all in all to the creation of profound art. Putting broad and otherwise complex ideas into practice calls for sustained and often difficult application to the job on hand." Whereas post-serialism has often been criticised as music devoid of emotion, Auvinen's music is full of feeling. "Art operates with emotions. The most important thing is to delve deeper, to some inexplicable layer."

Breakthrough works

The work that marked Auvinen's breakthrough was *Junker Twist* for orchestra premiered by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra in 2015. The following year, the Tampere Philharmonic performed his *Himmel Punk*. Audiences at both were startled by the high-pressure, explosive

rhythms and timbres. Next came the multimedia chamber opera *Autuus* (Bliss) that won Finland's coveted Teosto Prize. In 2017, the orchestral series became a triptych with the addition of *Turbo Aria*.

These works had not only a novel idiom; they also carried an open underlying statement. *Junker Twist* is a comment on the new rise of the extreme right, *Himmel Punk* on religious bigotry. The seeds of *Turbo Aria* were sown when Auvinen stood gazing at the Mediterranean with his child in his arms; he was reminded of the press photos of refugees trying to cross the sea and a drowned child washed up on the shore.

Auvinen's recent works include *Cantus Fresco Disco* for orchestra and video, a joint commission from the Joensuu City Orchestra and the Jyväskylä Sinfonia. The video shows manipulated 1960s films and the soundtrack also features Finnish soprano *Anita Välikki*. It is a follow-up to *Digital Madrigal* premiered in early 2019 incorporating a video in which processed fragments of archive and language-teaching films dart hither and thither to create a level of their own in the overall soundscape.

Keenly awaited disc

The Ondine label released a profile disc of works by Antti Auvinen in November 2020. Hannu Lintu conducts the Finnish RSO in *Junker Twist*, *Himmel Punk* and *Turbo Aria*. The disc was so keenly awaited that the first imprint went entirely on pre-orders. The first published reviews are not sparing in their praise. *Kare Eskola*, in his radio programme for the Finnish Broadcasting Company, described the music as follows: "The most impressive thing about Auvinen's music is not the energy density but the agonizingly clear yet inexplicable musical images... The almost pitch-less and harmony-less music strikes straight to the subconscious, with its turbocharged rhythms and drifts of thick, muted timbres. The music draws, unasked, emotional energy from the listener, but in return provides catharsis."

Fennica Gehrman has been Antti Auvinen's publisher since the beginning of 2020. His main works to date will be published soon, beginning with study scores of the orchestral triptych (See: New publications). Auvinen also has commissions in the pipeline from the FRSO, the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and others.

Jari Eskola

Antti Auvinen came to classical music later than many of his colleagues. His early piano lessons were exchanged for the guitar, which in turn gave way to heavy rock and its more gritty sounds. Then at around the age of 20 he again headed in a new direction, becoming increasingly interested in contemporary music. "I was greatly impressed by *Helmut Lachenmann*, his refusal to compromise and his questioning of the 'norms,'" he says.

The atmosphere at the Music Academy in Prague during his time there as an exchange student struck him as conservative and stick-in-the-mud. The musical structures and aesthetics were, he said, those of "dead white men in the past". A transfer to the Conservatory in Amsterdam afforded a more varied aesthetic outlook. Composition now became his main subject, gradually pushing aside the guitar. "Amsterdam admitted all sorts of characters and sought to reinforce their individual features."

Untiring search and experimentation

Auvinen's first compositions were for small ensembles. In them, he rigorously beat out paths of his own in the realm of extended performing techniques. In *Eliangelis* for solo clarinet he challenges the traditional writing for a monophonic solo instrument. Multi-layered multiphonic figures create an illusion of polyphony, and the border zones between normal, distorted and pitchless whooshing sounds broaden the clarinet's timbral spectrum. The unconventional sound effects do not give the impression of being pasted-on; they serve the musical content with an understanding of the instrument's inherent nature.

