

Daniel Börtz at 80

Daniel Börtz is without a doubt one of Sweden's major composers. He will be 80 years old this year and his birthday will be celebrated with several premieres as well as with jubilee concerts.

For Daniel Börtz, the fundamental existential questions are of vital importance. His definitive breakthrough came in 1991 when he collaborated with **Ingmar Bergman** on the opera *Backanterna (The Bacchae)*. The following year the Stockholm Concert Hall devoted their international composer festival to his music. Almost forty works were performed during the festival, which was a huge success.

Some years later, in 1998, when Stockholm was the European Capital of Culture, his opera *Marie Antoinette* had its premiere at Folkoperan. It is today the second most frequently performed modern Swedish opera, after **Karl-Birger Blomdahl's Anjara**.

The big orchestral works, especially the symphonies – or sinfonias as he chooses to call them – are often grandiose and rich in sonorities. Bruckner – and even Mahler – are mentioned as predecessors and sources of inspiration. During the 1990s the melodic and singable elements acquired more scope in his music. A number of solo concertos were given titles relating to vocal music: *Songs and Dances* for trumpet and orchestra, *Songs and Shadows* for violin and orchestra and *Songs and Light* for clarinet and orchestra.

Sinfonia 13 & 14

Börtz's *Sinfonia 13* had its premiere in May 2019 at the Stockholm Concert Hall. It forms the third part in a triptych which also includes *In the Darkness of Voices* for choir a cappella with texts by **Göran Sonnevi**, and the full-length opera *Medea*, based on **Euripides'** drama. *Sinfonia 13* contains ten texts from **Kjell Espmark's** book 'The Creation', in which both anonymous deceased and historical figures are struggling to become alive, in the poems and in us. We encounter war, flight and persecution.

– At first sight the three works in the triptych seem quite different, but all of them originate in a fundamentally dark outlook on life, where only mankind itself has the capacity to influence the world in a brighter direction. This music comprises the blackest darkness, violent aggressiveness and the mildest tenderness. You might perhaps think that *Sinfonia 13* could just as well be called an oratorio as a symphony. But firstly, for me maybe the most important ingredient in

an oratorio is a choir, and in *Sinfonia 13* there is none; and besides, I seem to have used the 'symphonic paint brush' to a very great extent in this work, explains Daniel Börtz.

The work consists of three parts, and in addition to the richly adorned orchestra there are two reciters, as well as three singers, a mezzo-soprano, a countertenor and a baritone. At the bottom of this is a will to expand the whole instrument that is the orchestra. Indeed, Börtz also has a highly developed sensitivity for the voice and the nuances of the text. His thirteenth sinfonia, too, is by far the longest.

– In these three "building blocks" – the choral work, the opera and the sinfonia – there are furthermore features in common dealing with mankind's relationship to both nature and to how we behave in this world. Which is vital in the times we are living in now, with all the frightful, oppressive things going on around us.

Sinfonia 13 is probably the darkest piece Börtz has ever composed. With *Sinfonia 14* for string orchestra he wanted to find a new direction.

– I turned everything over and took a look back at my own *Sinfonia 1* from 1973, he says as we talk on the phone.

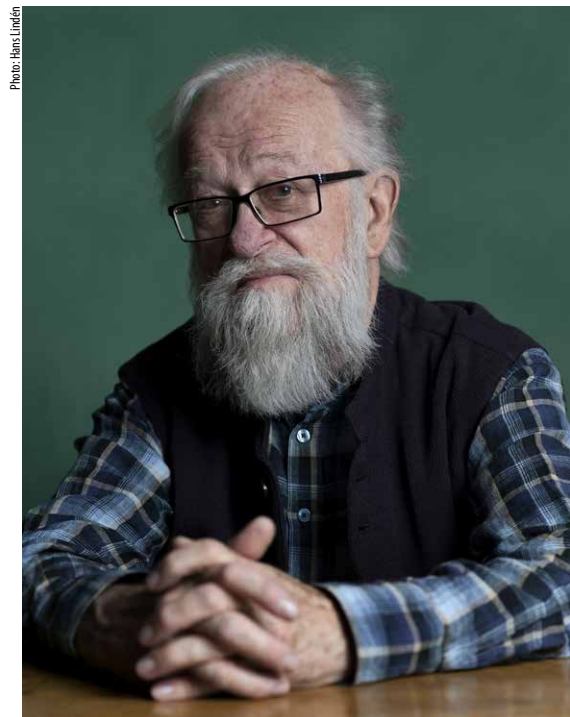
And in a manner similar to that in the first sinfonia, *Sinfonia 14* begins with a soft chord in the major that grows and finally explodes. It was composed expressly for *Musica Vitae* on the initiative of the orchestra's former concertmaster and artistic leader, the violinist **Malin Broman**. In a commentary in connection with the premiere in Växjö on 12 February of this year, Malin said that "Daniel Börtz's music is always deeply moving, and *Sinfonia 14* contains everything: it is dramatic, beautiful and fervent".

Double Concerto for One & Sinfonia 15

The collaboration with Malin Broman dates back to the 1990s. Börtz has also written expressly for Malin the *Double Concerto for One*, to be premiered this March.

– At first I intended to write a viola concerto, but after hearing her in some context play both the violin and the viola I realised that I could actually use both instruments in one and the same concerto. In principle, it is designed so that the outer movements are for viola and the middle movement for violin. We didn't have a commission for this work, but when it was ready the Norrköping Symphony Orchestra said they wanted to perform it, and since then a number of other orchestras have shown interest. I am really quite pleased with this, says Börtz.

After the double concerto Daniel Börtz found time to compose yet another sinfonia, his 15th.



It was written during the pandemic years 2021–22 and is scheduled to be premiered by the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic in November 2023. His commentary on the music hints at drama as well as dynamics.

– In *Sinfonia 13* the orchestra's "alternative instruments" are given a sizeable role, e.g. the alto flute, the English horn, the bass clarinet, etc. In *Sinfonia 15* these instruments – plus the piccolo, the E-flat clarinet and others – have been brought out further. They play roles in the borderland between light and darkness. They dare to be provocative and with their voices build bridges over what is black and threatening. At times their conviction of something better fails, and the shadow or the darkness enters in. But sometimes there are: light, tranquillity and warmth. That is what *Sinfonia 15* is all about.

There is always musical activity going on in Daniel Börtz's head. He will be 80 in August and does what he wants. In **Sara Norling's** biography about him from 2017, he says: "With the right of age I feel a greater freedom to surprise myself and I sometimes let the means of expression decide for me. When you are young it is more difficult to affirm things, as you want to be strict and true to your ideals, or what the heck you may call it."

And what we can count on Daniel Börtz in the near future affirming and surprising both himself and us with, we will soon surely see in the form of chamber music, he discloses.

Göran Persson