

Kalevi Aho on a new threshold

At Kalevi Aho's composer workshop in idyllic Käpylä, a district of Helsinki, new works are born at a steadily fast pace by means of a substantial dose of intuitive imagination and rigorous routine, as well as good old-fashioned craftsmanship. For Aho, the coming year will probably mean that some extra public attention is just round the corner, but he himself admits that he has never been particularly fond of jubilees.

Kalevi Aho is on a new threshold to his fourth quarter of a century: he will be 75 in March 2024. But he won't hear of any pleasantly peaceful pensioner's life or, for that matter, any excessive celebrating. For Aho composing is as natural as breathing, and seldom does a day go by without his writing down notes. Except, possibly, when he is travelling to attend one of his premieres.

And when it comes to premieres, quite a few accumulate during just one year. Usually about five new works – not counting minor pieces for various occasions, arrangements and adaptations – are created during an average year, and Aho has no intention of slowing down. Typically, he has commissions booked two years or so ahead, and as soon as one work is finished he immediately starts on the next.

A normal workday for Aho is generally divided into two (for the most part) working periods, one during the day and one during the evening, with for example a walk in the woods as a well-deserved breather in between. Aho is one of the last of the Mohicans not to use digital aids in his compositional work, and an explanation for his prolific productivity is that he has a decidedly intuitive manner of composing.

He never makes sketches, the score rather develops in its entirety by means of pencil and eraser, bar by bar – usually 2-4 pages in a workday – nor does he revise his works. What is written is written, and that is what it was intended to be.

In other words, a compositional craft that in our time is rare, and a working method which of course requires enormous professional skill, as well as a considerable degree of sheer routine. The dramaturgical and formal aspects are established in parallel with the sonorous, harmonic and rhythmical structures, and the instrumentation is an indispensable part of the compositional process itself.

A great day for chamber music

Needless to say, this also holds true for the *Symphony No. 18*, a work which Aho will be putting the finishing touches soon. This work commissioned by Saimaa Sinfonietta is first in line among the jubilee year's premieres with performances in Mikkeli and Lappeenranta in February 2024.

Besides numerous other performances of Aho's works and a recording of his *Symphony No. 17* in Lahti, two additional premieres are definitively scheduled for the year 2024: in April a *Double Concerto for Violin and Cello* in Oulu, Finland and in August a *Trio* for the unusual medium of accordion, double bass and percussion.

Kalevi Aho's birthday, on the 9th of March, will then be celebrated in the spirit of chamber music with a concert at the Helsinki Music Centre as part of the chamber music series of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Yet Aho is definitely a man of the orchestra and his favourite genre, besides the symphony, is the solo concerto. We count to date no less than 39 concertos by him. And as a curiosity it can be mentioned that no less than four such works – a concerto for piccolo clarinet, one for alto flute, a double concerto for flute and harp, and one for viola and percussion – were premiered during a mere month and a half in the spring of 2022.

The recent premiere, a *Baritone Horn Concerto*, took place in early June in Kotka, while *String Quartet No. 4* will be heard for the first time a few weeks later, soon after Aho's own festival, *Musica Kalevi Aho*, in his hometown Forssa. Even a fifth string quartet is awaiting its premiere, while a concerto for kantele and strings and a fourth accordion sonata (for an accordion with quarter-tone intervals) are high on the list of commissions.

Every year a jubilee year

Furthermore, in the autumn, just in time for the Helsinki Book Fair, the biography *Kalevi Ahon elämää ja tekoja* (*Kalevi Aho's Life and Works*), written by his childhood friend Hannu Lahtonen, will be published in Finnish. It is really not a question of a traditional type of life story with accompanying in-depth analyses of the compositions, but the emphasis will primarily be on how the works came to be and how they were received.

Kalevi Aho is thus on the threshold of his life's fourth quarter of a century, at the same time as 57 years have elapsed since his (in actuality) first opus, *String Quartet No. 1*, appeared (Aho composed it when he was 18 years old). He has not given his works opus numbers, but if he had done so the number for *Symphony No. 18* would be somewhere around 220. For all that, Aho has never been a scribbler who churns out heaps of pieces just for the sake of it, rather for him composing is an indispensable part of daily life with its need for expression. Even though every artist naturally thirsts for attention in some form, Aho willingly admits that he is not especially fond of jubilee years or unnecessary celebrating in general. For him, every year is a jubilee year or, if you will, a working year. And every day in the composer workshop means seconds of unique music waiting to reach the listeners' ears and, at best, to utterly move them.

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