

Marie Samuelsson: It starts with a sound idea

“Marie Samuelsson has for a long time been a central voice among Swedish composers. In her Concerto for Guitar, Violin and Orchestra, the unusual soloist combination interacts with the orchestra in an elegant and playful manner. By means of concentrated material crafted in great detail, urgent themes of nature and cycles are given shape. And in this work Samuelsson creates her own unique musical ecosystem.”

On 27 November Marie Samuelsson received Sweden's most coveted prize for composers, the Great Christ Johnson Prize, for her double concerto *The Crane's Beak* (*Brandnäva*) from 2019. It was conductor Christian Karlsen and guitarist Jacob Kellermann who contacted Marie Samuelsson about their idea for this concerto. The Gävle Symphony Orchestra commissioned the work, which had its premiere in November 2019, together with Karlsen, Kellermann and violinist Catharina Chen.

Samuelsson found her inspiration while taking a walk in Tyresta National Park, south of Stockholm. She caught sight of a sign that showed a tender little blue-purple flower, the Crane's Beak. The text explained that the flower's seeds only grow when heated up, as for instance after a forest fire. In between fires the plant bides its time in the soil. It was after the extremely hot summer of 2018, when forest fires wreaked havoc at their worst in Sweden. And the Crane's Beak bloomed in Tyresta.

– I found this exceedingly inspiring, that in the midst of the devastation something still managed to grow. Here was the threat from climate change and the subsequent forest fires, but there was also a glimpse of hope, the power and the will to live that this fragile little flower represented.

Marie relates that she collaborated closely with guitarist Jacob Kellermann.

– We worked a lot with expanded playing techniques on the guitar. This was really exciting as I had not worked so closely with a guitarist before. Among other things, I listed key words that had to do with the theme: dry green leaves, drops of water, flames, fire, ashes, seeds that sprout, blooming, recovery; words that I thought could inspire Jacob. How could these words be transformed into music? Jacob gave suggestions as to how it could sound and then I continued to work from there. The key words were also included in the score and mark out the different sections in the music.

The premiere was very well received and got excellent reviews. Many people came up to Marie after the premiere to say that they had been deeply moved by the music.

– I also think that the subject in itself had an impact. It was so relevant. Contemporary art music can be very abstract for unaccustomed listeners, but if you have a title or a theme that opens a path into the music, it might be easier to communicate about it. This has always been the way that I work. I believe that art music can create space for reflection, not only musically but also to process current subjects of urgency.

Marie Samuelsson often derives musical material from current issues.

As in *Five Seasons*, written on commission from Musica Vitae as a modern commentary on Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. It deals with heat waves and torrential rains, new insects and plants that thrive in an ever warmer climate. Here the viola is central, instead of the violin, and we hear sounds from rain, squalls, insects and the chirping of birds. The work includes poems by Mimmi Palm, which are read in between the various seasons.

– These are actually poems written with love for the different seasons. It was my intention that the climate theme would function as an opposite pole and create a tension between the beautiful and the threatening. The idea was that this should lead to reflection. How long shall we still have the seasons?

The work was premiered by Musica Vitae during the Båstad Chamber Music Festival 2017 together with Vivaldi's music and was subsequently taken on tour. It was also performed during the Baltic Sea Festival in Stockholm. Samuelsson's *Five Seasons* was then interpolated between the movements in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

We find sounds from nature also in the work *In the Eye of the Wolf* (*I vargens öga*, 1997) where a lone alto saxophone is accompanied by howling wolves on tape. In her latest orchestral work *Calls for New Times* (*Läten för ny tid*, 2021), written for the 30th anniversary of the Norrlandsoperan Symphony Orchestra, she was inspired by bird sounds that were later transformed into music. But Samuelsson is not only inspired by the sounds of nature but also by the sounds of the city, sounds that are all around us.

Marie tells about her compositional process.

– What is typical for most of my music is that it begins with a sound idea that I try to concretize into music. I often start at the piano and improvise. My composing is based on a musician's way of thinking rather than on mathematical or theoretical ideas. I transfer my improvisations to notes and then I develop these ideas in the score.



Samuelsson has written all types of works: orchestral music, operas, pieces for solo instruments, chamber music, choral works, etc.

– It is awesome to think that I have been active as a composer for 40 years! I started to write music for dance when I was 27.

Now she enjoys working with the younger generation on the musical scene.

– For example, I'm going to write a piece for the Swedish-Irish quintet Ensemble Getögon, which consists of four wind players and percussion, plus electronics. I might even join in with them and sing. One has to renew oneself, you know. But we'll see if it will be live or on tape, don't know if I actually dare to do it...

I have also collaborated with conductor Bobby Collins and the Sound Ensemble from Seattle. He also came over with some young composers to work together with KammarensembleN in Stockholm. And then I meet with former students whom I coach. I have more time to do this kind of thing since I retired from my teaching position at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm.

After having written for many different constellations of musicians Marie has a dream project that she would like to realize.

– Yes, I would really like to write a work for string quartet and orchestra. I already have lots of ideas for this.

Kristina Fryklöf