

# “Life is a privilege” – Harri Wessman at 75

Harri Wessman’s music comes from a place of optimism. Many of his pieces were written for a particular musician or ensemble. At one point, he realised that there was little material available for young musicians that was interesting and written with serious intent – yet at a suitable level of technical demand. This marked the start of an expansive pedagogical composition project.

At school as a child, Wessman listened to Tchaikovsky and Scriabin and established a ‘Neo-Pathos’ school with his musician friends. Erkki Pohjola had just joined the Tapiola Secondary School as music teacher. The choir and orchestra that he established became a fruitful laboratory for Wessman’s earliest compositions.

Later, Wessman developed an interest in French music and jazz, and in between the two he discovered George Gershwin. “I was delighted by the richness of his harmonies and his incredible melodic vein.” Among the classics, Wessman was the most attracted to Brahms, who knew how to “show how a melody evolves”. He draws a line from Mozart to Prokofiev, representing music much like his own: positive and optimistic, yet never shallow. Another line runs from Beethoven to Shostakovich, more severe and more pompous and not quite as close to Wessman’s sensibilities.

Harri Wessman studied composition with Joonas Kokkonen, who by then was the grand old man in Finnish music. Kokkonen emphasised the importance of organic growth in music: how a small germ grows first into a sapling and eventually into a tree. Wessman often builds his musical saplings out of alternating tones and semitones, which hints at Impressionism but also has affinities with Baroque rhetoric on the one hand and jazz on the other. Critics and scholars have had a hard time pigeonholing Wessman.



## Music made to measure

Most of Wessman’s works were written with a specific musician or ensemble in mind, whether commissioned or not. At one point, Wessman realised that there was little music available for young musicians in the early stages of their studies that was interesting and written with serious intent – yet at a suitable level of technical demand. This marked the start of an expansive composition project in which Wessman’s aim is to eventually produce repertoire for all instruments at all grade levels of Finnish music institutes.

Many of these pieces were inspired by the personality of a specific young musician or student. Anyone who has heard works such as *Five horn pieces for Jenni Kuronen* or *Mirabella’s Cello Album* will know that this is not ‘children’s music’ but music that is rewarding for performer and listener alike. The only difference between these and concert pieces is that they only require technical proficiency appropriate for the student’s skill level at the time.

Mirabella is the younger of Wessman’s two daughters, both now adults. The cello album began as she was studying at the celebrated East Helsinki Music Institute, where the Szilvay brothers from Hungary were producing brilliant results in string instrument tuition for

beginners with their Colourstrings method. Although Wessman was comfortable with his skill in playing the cello, he acknowledges that Csába Szilvay gave him new ideas for how to write idiomatically for the instrument.

Many of Wessman’s concertos were also made to measure for young musicians. The *Trumpet Concerto* that he wrote for the final examination of a 17-year-old student in 1987 has entered the core repertoire and has been recorded twice to date.

## It’s all about interaction

Composers and their listeners ascribe a wide variety of functions to music. Some feel that it should reflect the problems caused by humans and global crises, while others see music as a bringer of joy. “Life is a privilege,” says Harri Wessman. His music is optimistic, full of life, providing food for the imagination and respecting the craft of the musician. Wessman considers not only the performers but also those who listen to his music. His ideal is to write music whose information content is consistent with the receptive capability of humans. Complexity is not a virtue for him, let alone an end in itself. He feels that music should include material facilitating interaction not just between performers but also between performers and the audience.

“I once discovered the exact sound that I had always dreamt of – mostly as a consequence of my jazz harmony studies with Eero Koivistoinen – which involved using hybrid bass chords in my own idiosyncratic way. I would like to think that that music is communicative.

“I am grateful for the musical ideas that I get in my sleep – often in the morning – and I have a stack of music paper on the shelf above my bed so that I can jot them down. You have to refine your material further, of course, but that’s different. I think that whatever goes through the washing machine of my dreams will be easier for others to understand than something laboriously constructed sitting at a desk.”

Anu Karlson



Harri Wessman and Siboné Oroza

Photo: Anu Jaantila / Tapiohan laulu

## FOOTNOTE

[Latest publications by Harri Wessman](#)

*Pan and the Nymph Pitus & Towards the Night* for flute and guitar  
*Summer Variations* for viola and piano  
*Three Caprices for Konstantin Weitz* for violin  
*Fyra Årstider på Finns (Four Seasons at Finns)* for violins, violas and piano  
*Five Aphorisms (arr.)* for flute and guitar  
*Capriccio* for wind ensemble  
*Suite* for two violins and string orchestra  
*Concertino No. 2* for piano and chamber orchestra