

# Olli Kortekangas

## and the power of the human voice

*Olli Kortekangas (b. 1955) is one of Finland's leading composers. His powerful, dramatic music often features the human voice and is text-driven as well as narratively oriented.*

In recent years, Kortekangas has written several chamber operas, lasting about one hour each. These represent a merger of chamber music and Lied and feature one or two characters. The topics in these operas delve deep, touching on traumas and sore spots.

*Oma vika* (Own Fault, 2015) 🎧 for baritone and small ensemble (clarinet, violin, cello and piano) was commissioned by baritone **Sauli Tiilikainen** and is about a father coming to terms with his daughter's suicide. For Tiilikainen, this came from personal experience, and in fact the libretto by **Michael Baran** is mainly based on Tiilikainen's diary entries. "It is highly exceptional for a singer to wish to perform something based on such a painful personal experience. That brought a rare personal dimension and a unique depth to the performance," Kortekangas explains. He takes difficult topics as a welcome challenge: "Art should focus on talking about heavy topics."

### Exploring ethical choices

In 2021, Kortekangas completed a church opera titled *Ende und Beginn* (End and Beginning) 🎧 for baritone, dancer and four musicians (organ, clarinet, cello and piano). The idea came from bass **Nicholas Söderlund**, who had acquainted himself with the life of **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, a German priest whose thinking was unconventional for his time. Kortekangas was keen to work on this, as he had already touched on the relationship between Bonhoeffer and his fiancée **Maria von Wedemeyer** in his opera *Marian rakkaus* (Maria's Love) performed at the Savonlinna Opera Festival in 2000.

Bonhoeffer is one of the most important theologians of the 20th century. He is particularly remembered for taking part in a conspiracy to overthrow Hitler, after which he was imprisoned. During the two years that he spent in prison before being executed, he wrote an enormous volume of notes, poems and letters. The libretto for Kortekangas's church opera is in German and



Photo: Maarit Kyösti

draws on Bonhoeffer's *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* (Letters and Papers from Prison).

In this opera, Kortekangas explores the ethical choices of an individual: to combat a greater evil, one must accept a lesser evil and live with the resulting pangs of conscience and take respon-


sibility for one's actions. A Bonhoeffer quote that is a favourite of Kortekangas is: "When a human consciously takes upon himself the burden of guilt, he and he alone is responsible for it. He will inevitably be harshly judged in the eyes of other humans, he himself will be liberated through his conscience, but in the face of God he can only hope for mercy."

Because this is a church opera, including the organ seemed only natural. The work incorporates three organ Toccatas that may be performed separately as a set. The role of the dancer reflects Bonhoeffer's thoughts and feelings. *Ende und Beginn* will next be performed at the Birgitta Festival in Tallinn in August 2024.

The third heavy topic tackled by Kortekangas is dementia. His monologue opera *Koria tätti* (Fancy Aunt, 2021) for soprano, clarinet, percussion and piano was premiered in 2021. In the libretto by **Tommi Kinnunen**, an old lady suffering from dementia and shut up in her room contemplates her life. "It's a sad and tragic but empathetic story," says Kortekangas. "It's also a jarring perspective on a time only a few decades ago when someone could simply be locked up and put away with no regard for their rights."

Each of the above three monologue operas has only a small instrument ensemble, but if anything, they pack an even more intense punch than something with a larger orchestra.

### Songs of Meena

The human voice has been a hugely meaningful resource for Kortekangas throughout his career. Many of his choral works have become lasting favourites. The orchestral song cycle *Songs of Meena*,  premiered in 2022, was written in collaboration with soprano **Tuuli Takala** to showcase her expansive vocal and expressive range.

The cycle consists of six songs setting poems by **Meena Alexander** (1951–2018) selected in cooperation with the poet herself. "Meena lived in the USA but had roots in India. Her poetry reflects a European-style cosmopolitan thinking and a broad-based education in visual arts and literature," says Kortekangas. "Meena also wrote about her childhood, her formative years. There is a special kind of warmth in these texts." He goes on to stress: "Of course, my music isn't meant to repeat what the text already says. It has a narrative level all its own." *Songs of Meena* was commissioned by the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, and the premiere was conducted by **Osmo Vänskä**, who had previously commissioned Kortekangas to write for the Minnesota Orchestra.

### Premieres in 2024

Kortekangas's premieres in 2024 include the chamber music work *Piir* (Border) premiered in Estonia in May. Setting texts in Estonian for reciter, singer, flute and guitar, it explores the theme of borders. "A border can be a blessing or a curse," notes Kortekangas. "It's a cliché to say that we should tear down all borders. Some borders are necessary because they define who we are."

The work has eight movements, three of which contain text written by **Elo Viiding** for this purpose. A border can, of course, also be a metaphorical one. "*Piir* is at once chamber music, Lied and melodrama, all of them but also none of them. The text is read, recited and sung," Kortekangas explains. The work was premiered in Valga, a town on the border between Estonia and Latvia, and performed on the next day in Narva. Next year, *Piir* will be performed on the border between Italy and Slovenia.

Kortekangas's most recent opera is *Isfågeln* (Halcyons), setting a libretto in Swedish by **Johan Bargum** and scheduled to be premiered in autumn 2024 in Kokkola, followed by a guest performance in Helsinki. The characters in the opera are drawn from Classical mythology. "Although there is a lot of humour in this piece, ultimately it is about the power of love and the possibility of forgiveness. Even Zeus can feel remorse," says Kortekangas.

The next major event is the premiere of the *Guitar Concerto* commissioned by the Saimaa Sinfonietta in Mikkeli on 6 November, followed by a performance in Lappeenranta the next day. The soloist is **Janne Malinen**.

In recent years, Kortekangas has developed an interest in church music. He has returned to his earlier pursuit of choral singing and has participated for instance in performances of passions. "I've begun to deal with matters of faith in my music, and my relationship with the most profound issues of human existence is less problematic now than it was when I was young. I've realised that life is a process of continuous learning, both mentally and professionally."

Pekka Hako

**"Of course, my music isn't meant to repeat what the text already says. It has a narrative level all its own."**