

# Weaving a web of connections

Cecilia Damström's compositions tackle the crises of our time with wide-ranging topics and emotional states from black humour to all-encompassing empathy. Often the idea for a new piece is born out of scientific facts which transform into musical forms and motives. Her recent orchestral highlight *Extinctions* was nominated for the Nordic Council Music Prize, and her first full-scale opera is on the making.

In 20th century modernism, programmatic music was virtually a taboo, and extramusical narratives were seen as a threat to the imagined autonomy of art. Amid the younger generation of composers, the reality of composing is often quite the opposite: an urge to address the most pressing questions of our time and to create feelings of community. This is the case, in strongest possible terms, for Cecilia Damström. For her, musical abstractionism would be unimaginable. Instead, her music springs from the themes that most occupy her mind.

Her most recent works represent a wide-ranged scale of topics and emotional states typical of her output. Receiving its premiere in Tampere on 18 September with the violinist Elina Vähälä and TampereRaw chamber orchestra, the violin concerto *Earth Songs* is a series of love songs dedicated to different life-sustaining forces of our planet. Scheduled in November, this time with Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra, Damström's new orchestral work *Information* is an explosively dense piece about disinformation. The musical material consists entirely of certain keywords, the letters of which are transcribed into corresponding notes and rhythmically written as Morse code.

"I have read numerous books about the spreading of disinformation, and when I wrote this piece, it all summed up in very elemental things: are we making connections or destroying them", says Cecilia Damström. "There are words like 'lies', 'fear', 'hate', and 'conspiracy', but eventually also 'humanity' and 'love'. The ability to spread information is a unique achievement of humankind and we should use it to unite people."

## Music can inspire hope

As seen in *Information*, when making an impact with music Damström primarily, and consciously, relies on positive feelings: empathy, a love for our home planet, a sense of wonder towards all life. She also keeps referring to the joy she finds in composing, how grave the themes may be.



Photo: Ville Juurikkala

"It's important to inspire positive feelings, only then will you be able to take action. Sometimes I am ambivalent about writing music that doesn't offer enough hope, but all emotions are part of life", she points out. "The young people, especially, experience a lot of despair, and it's important to give voice to this, too, and to show that you are not alone."

One alternative is black humour, as with the orchestral suite *Wasteland* (2021-22) which discussed textile recycling while also recycling musical quotations. The ending of the semi-staged choral piece *Requiem for our Earth* (2019), on the other hand, was dark and dystopian. The violin concerto *Earth Songs* is, in a way a continuation to it, and ends with the orchestra singing words from the Catholic Penitential Act and *Agnus Dei*. "I see it as humanity asking Planet Earth for forgiveness."

## Sonification as a method


Both *Requiem for our Earth* and *Earth Songs* feature video art by Marek Pluciennik, whereas in the accordion concerto *Permafrost*, premiered in February 2024, Damström collaborated with the video artist Irene Suosalo. Damström says she

often experiences music in visual terms. She is constantly reading about climate change from a variety of perspectives, and a new work often begins with some scientific fact forming a musical image in her mind. The clarity of the image is at times accompanied with a sense of bewilderment. *Permafrost* is a good example.

"I was reading about huge craters in Siberia which are formed when the permafrost melts and the methane underneath explodes. Our Earth is literally exploding! It felt simply self-evident to transfer these processes into music: the bubbling of methane, the landslides and the massive explosions."

A commission from the Kokkola Winter Accordion Festival and the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra, *Permafrost* was premiered by the commissioning orchestra with Sonja Vertainen as the soloist, and it was selected to the recommendation list of the International Rosstrum of Composers. Apart from the chemical formula for methane as a musical motive, it also applied hexachords and hexagon shapes referring to the molecular form of ice crystals, a musical element already used in the Teosto prize winner *ICE* 🇸🇫.

“There are plenty of scientific papers about the concept of ‘sonification’, a process of transferring information into a more comprehensible form with sonic means. So far, it has been used little in orchestral music. This summer I discovered that this is exactly what I have been doing for a while”, Damström explains with a laugh.

A recent highlight, the 20-minute-long orchestral work *Extinctions*  which was premiered in January 2024 by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, gained its dramatic arch from a sonification of a graph depicting the amount of species during different phases of Earth’s existence. *Extinctions* was recently nominated for the Nordic Council Music Prize.

“I find it a fascinating idea that different kinds of information make different sounding music”, Damström says. “It also helps you to constantly find new ways to write music.”

## Everything is connected

Damström mentions several encounters with audience members who tell her about experiencing her music visually, often with a sense of relief and joy.

“Everything is connected, in the universe and in our lives. I want to make people feel this, and to invite both the musicians and the listeners to experience that sense of connection through music.”

This was something she felt when her accordion suite *Renewables* – describing different renewable energy sources – was premiered at the Finnish Accordion Competition for children and young people in 2023. The suite had movements for each of the three age categories of the competition. When the pieces were played, Damström was suddenly moved by the feeling that everyone was part of the music coming to life: the children playing it, their teachers, and the siblings and parents who had followed the learning process.

“The piece felt like a golden web of love that connected everyone in the hall. This is the point of art, and life itself, to create golden threads between everyone and everything. Music has the power to do it, we are all part of it when we play and listen. This is what I strive for with every piece I write.”

At the moment, Damström is preparing her first full-length opera, set to premiere in 2026. More information about this exciting project will be revealed in upcoming issues of Nordic Highlights.

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