

Seven questions for Mats Larsson Gothe

You have just recently been in London where your orchestral piece *Submarea* 🎧 was performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra and Santtu-Matias Rouvali. Could you tell us about the piece and its performance in London?

“In February of this year five Nordic works – one from each Nordic country – were premiered by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra in a collaboration with the underwater filmmaker Joakim Odelberg called ‘Nordic – A Fragile Hope’. *Submarea* was my contribution and it functions as a concert opener in which the music could be experienced as traveling farther and farther down into the ocean depths. The concert with the Philharmonia Orchestra in November formed part of a series called ‘Nordic Soundscapes’, which aims to focus on our vulnerable nature and the problems we humans have inflicted on it. It was fantastic to get the opportunity to work with Santtu-Matias and this excellent orchestra!”

After focusing on opera composition for some time, you have received several orchestral commissions in recent years – in addition to *Submarea*, a *Cello Concerto* and *Symphony No. 4*, which had its premiere during the Baltic Sea Festival in August of this year. Can you tell us more about the symphony?

“In my Third Symphony I reused music from my opera *Blanche and Marie*. This time I wanted to write a symphony from scratch, constructing long lines out of a homogeneous musical material. The spark that set it all off was my anger over a meaningless war that had just broken out when I began composing. This gave the music an essentially dramatic character. Knowing I would be writing for the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, I could tailor my music to the musicians I knew there, resulting in many different solo contributions, as well as a focus on various groups such as trombones and tubas. I try more and more to utilize the contrast between tutti and smaller groups in the orchestra. Everything should be heard. While the score may appear sparse, there is still a surprisingly full sound.

Next year will see the premiere of your *Cello Concerto* with the Stockholm Royal Philharmonic. Can you say something about this work and your collaboration with the soloist Torleif Thedéén?

“Torleif and I go way back. I have previously written a *Concerto for Cello and Winds* (1999), as well as the double concerto *Sisyphus’ Dreams* (2010) for him and violinist Cecilia Zilliacus. He has also performed my piece *Epilogos* for cello and piano a number of times. Therefore, it felt natural to write a new concerto for him, with the whole palette of expression that I know he masters. Torleif has a fantastic tone – powerful,

Photo: Maria Gothe



yet infinitely emotional, with a melancholy undertone that I love! And we are now both in our sixties so, consciously or subconsciously, a retrospective character, with an awareness of ‘having entered the second half of our lives’ has been creeping into the music.”

At present you have returned to opera composing, with an opera about author and Nobel Prize winner Selma Lagerlöf for the 50th anniversary of the Wermland Opera in 2026. Can you tell us a little about the project?

“Maria Sundqvist, who also wrote the libretto to ‘Blanche and Marie’, has created a very fine narrative about Selma Lagerlöf, whom we meet at a late stage in her life. Rather tired and burnt out, she says that she only ‘lives by force of habit’. Then suddenly something happens that stirs her to come alive again and gives her a new lease on life at the age of 70. I won’t reveal more than that just now. Sundqvist has written an ingenious and moving libretto, also with a good sense of humour – something that I enjoy working with. Moreover, the work will be premiered by the Wermland Opera in Karlstad, where I attended

secondary school in the 1980s, so this feels just great! As I grew up in Värmland, Selma has been a constant companion.”

Your latest opera *The Promise (Löftet)*, which was staged again early this year by the Royal Opera in Stockholm, contains many fine choruses. As a result you were awarded the Royal Swedish Opera Choir’s Prize and also received a commission (*Pigeons*) from the Swedish Radio Choir. What is your relationship to choral music? Is it something you would like to work more with?

“Writing for choir is both fascinating and a real challenge. It requires that you find a simplicity that gives maximum returns. Making things overly complicated seldom benefits the outcome. Composers such as Sven-David Sandström and Anders Hillborg have written choral music that is very interesting. As for myself, I would like to write works with a faster tempo – although it needs to be carefully balanced to avoid becoming chaotic. In Sweden there are many top-notch choirs with a great variety of aims and working methods. I therefore want to write music that reflects the versatility of these choirs and can be adapted to different levels and contexts. To my

great delight, we have now started to publish the choruses from *The Promise* separately. And composing for choir and orchestra is indeed wonderful!”

You have just finished your work in the jury for the International Uno Klami Composition Competition together with composer colleagues Kalevi Aho, Lotta Wennäkoski and Magnus Lindberg. What was the most exciting part of this task?

“We received some 230 scores for the competition, 5 of which we selected for the final round. It was very instructive and interesting to read through the scores, and to reflect over the relationship between intention and notation. A score that contains interesting details might not communicate by forming a whole in concert, but a score that perhaps looks simple on paper can be heard as perfect in form when it is performed. Moreover, it was a privilege to spend time in the company of the other composers in the jury, a real vitamin injection sorely needed for a person who works mostly alone as a creator of music.”

What will your next composition be? You have spoken about a fifth symphony that would be something completely different from your Symphony No. 4. In what way?

“I ponder a great deal about what it is that communicates with the listener. What is it that enables one to grasp an extended musical course of events without losing focus? I have had very good response when it comes to my operas, where I have a text and thus a built-in dramaturgy to relate to. But purely instrumental music is more difficult. It is easy to give birth to new ideas, but how do you manage them in the best possible way so they become tools to express something bigger, such as human emotions? Form is crucial to me, though I feel that I sometimes do things too quickly for audiences to keep up. Yet, I strive for musical variety and to avoid monotony.

Now I want to make the best use of my time, and I have a feeling that I need to work in large forms – opera and symphony – to do myself justice. My fifth symphony, I imagine, will be entirely seamless. Perhaps a work in one movement lasting about 20 minutes (the same length as Sibelius’ 7th) and with a lyrical expression that flows slowly without interruption (like a slow movement à la Mahler, e.g., the last in his 9th). That is at the top of the list now. If the 4th was dramatic, I think the 5th should be infinitely warm and intimate.”

Kristina Fryklöf