



PHOTO: P.L. SOBANK

MIHKEL KEREM (born in Estonia in 1981) lives in London and is the leader of the Brandenburg Sinfonia and a section principal in the Camerata Nordica. He has also given recitals and been the soloist with several orchestras. He is a prolific composer, with over a hundred works to his name. These include three symphonies, three concertos and numerous works for various combinations of instruments. His own instrument, the violin, occupies the central position in his chamber music.

Kerem started composing at an early age and finished his first violin sonata when he was 13. He studied composition in Estonia and later at the Royal College of Music in London. He has been the Composer in Residence at the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival and the Aurora Chamber Music Festival. His music has a strong emotional power and an Estonian feel, and he often approaches painful themes in works combining Minimalism, a meditative quality and a motor-like drive.

Seven questions for Mihkel Kerem

1. *You were very young when you wrote your first violin sonatas. Yet to the listener they sound mature, intense and even passionate. How is this possible for a teenager?*

When you're writing music or creating any other form of art, the age of the creator is hardly ever relevant. Naturally experiences of life add to your knowledge, and your skills develop as you get older. Sometimes, when creating, you go very deep into the subconscious and become more of a channel for art than a creator. I usually feel this as a compulsion to write. The subject matter is not in my control then. Writers of novels know what I'm talking about.

2. *Your music seems to have links with the Estonian musical idiom even though you're a musical cosmopolitan who's travelled the world. Which composers have made the biggest impact on you?*

I have never thought my music was very Estonian. Others have always said so. I suppose you cannot hide your roots. Shostakovich, Mahler and Ravel have been a great inspiration for me. And Stravinsky. When I was younger, I felt very much influenced by their music. Later I learnt from their orchestration skills, their development of music and use of time.

3. *You have composed three symphonies. The most recent is one that makes a statement, in which you describe the pressures on people living under a totalitarian regime.*

The idea to write the third symphony 🎧 came from my composition teacher at the Royal College of Music in London, **William Mival**. The idea was for a work lasting 15 minutes. I had some ideas, but

somehow I couldn't translate them into music. At the same time I started reading Solomon Volkov's "Testimony", Shostakovich's memoirs. This sent me into the world I was born into and my parents' descriptions of the times before that. While realising the ignorance of people who had not experienced this, more disturbingly was the idealisation of these times by the people who had lived in them but had already forgotten the reality, only ten years after the collapse of the Soviet regime.

I felt the need to do my bit to remind people of the dangers of forgetting the past. It was a difficult work to compose, but an important one for me as it is the first piece of music I wrote and one I feel so strongly about.

4. *Is there any particular chamber music piece of yours that carries special significance for you?*

I suppose the most important chamber work for me is my *String Sextet* 🎧. It has also been played the most, as both a chamber and an orchestral work. I am also proud of my three Sonatas for violin and piano and also the nine String Quartets and *Expression Suite* for string quartet that I feel a little selfish pride about, and the two Wind Quintets. I guess they represent a little philosophical struggle in me. Sometimes I believe one person is stronger than a group, sometimes the opposite.

5. *You have a very long list of works, considering that your main job is playing the violin. How do you marry these two sides in practice?*

I find these two worlds marry very well ...till someone asks and I start thinking about it. I feel the need to express myself in both ways and I can't

imagine life without either one of them. The only time I find it difficult is when I have a deadline on a new work and a very important performance coming up at the same time.

6. *Can you say something about inspiration?*

Inspiration comes from a lot of places. Human beings and my own feelings used to be my greatest inspiration. Lately, I have found inspiration in books I've read, stories I've heard or paintings I've seen. I find that reliving experiences through composing makes me understand and feel the subject in hand much more deeply and more clearly. Was it Schopenhauer who said something along the lines of music being the art that describes the soul of art itself, while the other arts reflect reality? I find this very fitting here.

If I had to pick some works of art to take with me on a desert island, they would be George Orwell's novel "1984" and Bernstein's recording of Mahler 9 with the Berlin Philharmonic or the New York Phil, whichever is closest at hand at the time.

7. *What about your forthcoming projects? Where are you performing at the moment, and what sorts of composition plans do you have?*

I just had a great project directing the Camerata Nordica in Sweden, introducing some Estonian classics to the world. As for my plans for compositions, I tend not to say too much about them until they have realised. It's a bit like talking about an unborn child.

HENNA SALMELA