

# Benjamin Staern

## – from Threat of War to Dancing Fairies

Benjamin Staern is one of Sweden's most performed and distinctive composer personalities. We have heard his music in concert halls, on the opera stage and at festivals. Now, for the first time, his orchestral music is being presented on CD with the eagerly awaited album 'Worried Souls'.



Photo: Mats Bråder

– The album has been arranged in the form of a standard programme for a symphony orchestra, says **Benjamin Staern**. First an overture, then a concerto and lastly a symphony. You can also look at it as an Italian dinner: Antipasti, primo piatti and secondo piatti.

Featuring the Gävle Symphony Orchestra conducted by **Emil Eliasson** and **Karin Dornbusch** as clarinet soloist, the album presents orchestral works from 2000 to 2014. Staern wanted to go back to the very beginning with *The Threat of War* 🎧, which was his debut.

– I was 21 years old and affected by several wars that were raging in the world just then, for example in Congo Kinshasa and the Balkans, and created a work based on strong contrasts. At that time I was deeply interested in Expressionism and Schoenberg's atonal aesthetic, Benjamin recalls. I often hear that the piece sounds like music from a 'film noir', and that is probably quite correct, as I am something of a film buff. The piece became part of the project "Composers of Tomorrow", which was organised by the Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra.

The second work on the record is the award-winning clarinet concerto *Worried Souls* (2011) 🎧. The title alludes to Staern's thoughts on artists' troubled souls in a dystopian society. – I had been to an exhibition about futurism and its evil mechanisms, and besides had Chaplin's "Modern Times" fresh in my memory. So, I created a fantasy about the tensions that can arise in a harsh, industrial civilization, where individuality loses out.

As Benjamin started to write the concerto his father, conductor **Gunnar Staern** passed away.

– To honour him I incorporated his initials into the music. For some reason he used the letters GES in his signature, which gives G, E, Eb. If you play around with these tones, it becomes a little bluesy, and the piece starts out in a searching, indecisive mood.

The album ends with Staern's First Symphony, *Polar Vortex* 🎧, which had its premiere with **Leif Segerstam** in 2014. It is a dramatic and very expressive work.

– Indeed, it is a sonic journey around the world, music with inner images, focusing on climate change, weather and so-called polar vortices. The names of the three movements are quite telling for the theme: *Frozen City*, *Northern Lights* and *Volcanic Eruption*.

The album's three works are connected by themes related to the composer's concern about what is happening in the world, themes that feel as topical today as when the works were composed. They also have the narrative technique in common.

– When I began composing them, I wrote a list of key words linked to sounds. In the case of the clarinet concerto, it was words like factory, worker, robots, machines and short circuits. Sounds that audiences can relate to. I then transformed the sounds musically and structured them. But I never point out to the listeners what they should listen for in my music. It's more interesting when people come up to me afterwards and talk about what they heard. I enjoy that much more.

Benjamin Staern is a synesthete which in his case means that tones and sounds appear in specific colours, something that influences his composition process on an intuitive level.

– For every tone I see a colour, and if I hear more than one tone, I see a number of colours simultaneously. It's like looking at a painting by Mondrian. It is also about form. In a curving legato I see something Kandinskyesque before me or works by **Paul Klee**. You can view it as a tool that helps me keep track on the form. The colours function as reference points in my memory. Pianissimo has soft nuances, while forte has bright and shiny colours, Benjamin explains.

During the period 2023-26 Staern is an artistic partner, together with conductor **Jessica Cottis** and others, with the Västerås Sinfonietta. His first contact with the orchestra was the premiere of the chamber orchestra version of *Sånger om bländvit kärlek* composed for alto **Anna Larsson**.

– The meeting came off very well, the musicians described it as a successful "blind date",

and after that they asked me to work with them. Within the scope of the project, two existing and two new works are to be performed. They will also record an album with my music.

The flute concerto *Dancing Fairies* written for the soloist **Laura Michelin** and premiered in October 2024, was the first of the new works. It is a reflection over **August Malmström's** well-known painting, which hangs in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Stockholm.

– I have always dreamed of writing something relating to Nordic folklore, says Benjamin. In this concerto I imagined the flutist as one of the fairies in the painting and the orchestra as her chorus, singing and dancing in the moonlight.

Compared to the clarinet concerto, *Dancing Fairies* is more lyrical and impressionistic in its style. The second piece for the Västerås Sinfonietta will be a double concerto, in concerto grosso style, for violinist **Malin Broman** and pianist **Simon Crawford-Phillips**.

Staern has just completed a piece for the male choir Orphei Drängar (OD), *Du ska tacka dina gudar*, to be premiered in April. At present he is working on an orchestral piece for the Norrlandsoperan Symphony Orchestra, that will be followed by his very first string quartet for the Marmen Quartet.

– In addition, I am composing a duo for trumpeter **Håkan Hardenberger** and the German hornist **Stefan Dohr**, scheduled to be performed in August. This was inspired by the cantankerous and heckling fellows on the balcony in *The Muppet Show*, Waldorf & Statler, and I intend it to be a humorous duel between the two musicians concludes Benjamin Staern with a smile.

Tor Billgren

The album 'Worried Souls' was released in February on Swedish Society Discofl (SCD1190)  
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