

Seven questions for Karin Rehnqvist

Karin Rehnqvist has had an eventful spring including the album release and performances of her prize awarded 'Silent Earth' and a world premiere in Helsinki. At present she is working on a dream project, an opera for children with intellectual disabilities.

1. Your most recent work, *Take the Milky Way*, was given its premiere in Helsinki on 26 April. Could you tell us something about it?

Take the Milky Way is written for mixed choir and baroque orchestra, a very exciting combination of instruments to write new music for. It depicts in text and music how we humans are suspended in space, where invisible threads bind us together. The piece consists of four movements and is quite varied; at times very rhythmical. At

the end one extremely high and one extremely low tone are sustained, while the choir moves in-between them and sings about how we continue our journey together into the unknown.

The Helsinki Chamber Choir and Nils Schweckendiek premiered the work. They celebrated their 20th anniversary and had commissioned four new pieces (!).

2. Your acclaimed "climate oratorio" *Silent Earth* was performed just a few weeks later by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and its choirs, conducted by Eva Ollikainen. The work was awarded the Nordic Council Music Prize in 2022 and was released on an album in February. As in *Take the Milky Way*, you collaborated with author Kerstin Perski, who once again takes us into outer space. Do you see any similarities between the two works?

Yes, there is a musical and a textual kinship. Both pieces are very topical, they are about humanity's vulnerability in our time. But whilst *Silent Earth* is definitely serious and dark, *Take the Milky Way* rather instils hope. It is an exhortation, one could say, to do the impossible. "... Reach out your hand/pull the fallen/free the light/from the dark hole..." A kind of fight song, if you prefer.

3. Over the last year Gehrmans has also published a number of your earlier works. One of these is *Hymn for choir and orchestra*, scheduled to have its UK premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival on 17 June. It was originally written for the wedding of the Swedish Crown Princess Victoria and Daniel Westling in 2010. How did you go about composing for this very special occasion?

In order to get ideas, I imagined myself as a princess in a pink tulle skirt. The piece is lively and sonorous. There is no sadness, just pure joy.

4. Your orchestral work *Arktis! Arktis!* is something entirely different, depicting the harsh Arctic landscape. Could you say something about the background?

In 1999 I had the opportunity to participate in a Polar research expedition up in northern Canada. The icebreaker was crowded with researchers, and we were flown out to the tundra to gather material and

various kinds of data. The experience was overwhelming. When I returned home, I wrote this piece – jointly commissioned by the Swedish and the Scottish Chamber Orchestras – and it has since become my most performed orchestral piece.

5. At present you are working on an opera, created especially for children and young people with intellectual disabilities, but which is also suitable for everyone from the age of 6. The work is due to be premiered in February of next year. What is this opera about?

The title of the opera is *The Journey to Arareko*, and it is scored for three singers and four instrumentalists. The story is based on a children's book about how a lizard and a boy together manage to find water in the Sonora Desert. Mercedes Gómez, a harpist and author from Mexico, has written the libretto; Lisbeth Hagerman, who works a great deal with dramatic art for children with varying disabilities, does the directing. When it comes to writing for children who perhaps don't even have a language, there can't be too much text. Repetition is crucial. But it can be sad, joyous, and even a little crazy.

The producer is Musik i Syd. A more extensive version for 10-12 musicians is also planned.

6. You have worked extensively with music for children and young people. What is important when writing for children, and are there any special challenges?

It is vital to know which children you are writing for, so that it is on the right level when it comes to both degree of musical difficulty and content. You need to rely on your inner child and even get help from the children. They are full of creativity. On one occasion when I was writing music for children's choir, I asked them for help with finishing the sentence: "I get so angry when ..." Then I got answers like: "I get so angry when my screen time is up". I would never have hit on this myself.

7. What do you have in the pipeline – is there a dream project?

Right now, I'm fully occupied with the children's opera – it's so incredibly inspiring! At the moment, it truly feels like my dream project.

Kristina Fryklöf

Footnote

More works by Karin Rehnqvist to be published include:

Ljus av ljus (Light of Light) for children's choir and orchestra (2003)

Day is here! for eight voices and strings (2018)

...and so the day ends for saxophone quartet (2024)