

Albert Schnelzer: "A will to tell a story"

Soft, bright, strings

Albert Schnelzer's music is rhythmically striking, but also replete with lyrical and beautiful features. There are expressive outbursts as well as sensitive intimacy, and a palpable dramatic intensity. He is today one of Sweden's most frequently performed composers, and commissions from orchestras and ensembles continue to pour in.

– I am indeed thankful that my music resonates with many people and that I can in this way share my sound cosmos with others. I write the music that I myself want to hear. It's not more complicated than that. When I listen to something I have composed and get a strong, positive gut feeling, then I trust in it. That the music has a sort of intrinsic quality.

Schnelzer has often described his entry into music as "a will to tell a story", and it is just this narrative character that makes his works often captivating for audiences as well as musicians. His recently premiered work *Tales of Darkness and Sorrow* is no exception. He derived inspiration from the somewhat darker parts of many of our best-known fairy tales, such as H.C. Andersen's Big Claus and Little Claus, where murder and other horrors succeed one another until Little Claus finally entices Big Claus to drown himself in a stream.

– It is written in one single long movement, but with a number of tableaux that create a balance between the bizarre and the emotional. I have found my models in famous ballet suites, such as Ravel's *Mother Goose* and Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. It is hard to match Ravel and Stravinsky, but I can still find the seeds to a celestial, shimmering Ravelian atmosphere. In *Tales of Darkness and Sorrow* there is also, just as in *Petrushka*, a challenging and virtuoso piano part that requires a very able pianist.

The work was premiered by the Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra, which was in fact the first professional orchestra to play Schnelzer's music. That was almost 30 years ago. Now some 100 orchestras the world over have performed his works. Among them, the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, that for the celebration of the city of Gothenburg's 400th anniversary, commissioned a large oratorio for soprano, baritone, mixed choir and symphony orchestra, which was given the sea-scented title of *SALT*.

– It was to be something big and appropriate for the celebration. What I decided on was the

Photo: Hans Lindén



Albert Schnelzer

connection to the sea and travel. Gothenburg has always been a gateway to overseas, and it has a special history with the America emigrants in the 19th century. It was here most of them left for their journey across the Atlantic. The sea is central, vast and awesome. You get the scent of salt in the air. The soprano symbolizes the sea and the baritone is man, the migrant.

Schnelzer's international stature is borne out by prestigious commissions, among them a work for the 40th anniversary of the reopening of the Alte Oper in Frankfurt. The result was the orchestral piece *Through the Eye of the Pegasus* 🎵 premiered at the anniversary concert in 2021 by the Frankfurt RSO under the direction of their new principal conductor **Alain Altinoglu**. – The commission came in the middle of the

pandemic. At first I didn't understand how it happened. As it turned out, Altinoglu had premiered my concerto for orchestra, *Brain Damage*, in Gothenburg. He suggested to Alte Oper that I could write a new piece for the reopening. It was such an honour! The opera house has a fantastic history, a great many iconic works have had premieres there.

The music depicts the history of the opera house through the eyes of Pegasus. For at the highest point on the gable of Alte Oper there is a statue in copper that portrays the mythical figure. The music pulsates with rhythmic energy, but there are moments when time seems to stand still. – I have derived the main theme from Mahler's Eighth. It stands for divine creative power and in this way the music is linked up with history. It is

structured organically on several different levels, which somehow live their own lives, but nonetheless merge into each other. There are more levels to discover the more you listen. The piece is multi-layered – like a good book!

Swedish folk music is the main source of inspiration for the new soprano saxophone concerto written for **Anders Paulsson**, due to be premiered by the Dalasinfoniettan this coming spring. – All of a sudden I wanted to write a piece that would express my love of Swedish nature. The Nordic sound. The Swedish melancholy. The Swedish landscape. If you look at our own music history there is a tradition to get involved in. We have grown up with Alfvén's *Midsummer Vigil*, *A God in Disguise* by **Lars-Erik Larsson** and other masterpieces. This music, claims Schnelzer, is in our DNA. – How would I capture this Swedish-ness? The first movement is a triplet polska. But it is folk music on my terms – and I take enormous liberties! The second movement is a depiction of the Arctic Starflower, the province flower of Värmland, where I was born. The last movement is a declaration of love to Swedish folk music, where I have tried to capture the feeling of running through pools of water, which we have all done as children. Also, the solo instrument gives me strong associations to the Nordic soundscape. The introduction to one of the best-known Swedish orchestral works, Alfvén's *Dala Rhapsody*, is played on the soprano saxophone.

Another notable work is *Apollonian Dances* 🎭, originally composed for violin and piano. – Violinist and conductor **Hugo Ticciati** asked me to make a version for chamber orchestra and percussion for the O/modernt Festival with **Evelyn Glennie** as soloist. Since then it has become one of my most frequently performed orchestral works. This autumn Evelyn will appear in performances at both the George Enescu Festival in Bucharest and Bridgewater Hall in Manchester.

Other works enjoying international success include the Balkan-inspired *Aksak & Ciphers*, the Clara Schumann homage *Burn my Letters – Remembering Clara* 🎧, and the second violin concerto *Nocturnal Songs* 🎧 written for **Ilya Gringolts**.

– I get to meet so many fantastic people and musicians. One day I'm at home in the studio, the next day I'm in Bologna, Berlin or Los Angeles. Every such occasion is a vitamin injection, Albert Schnelzer concludes.

Göran Persson