

Rolf Martinsson – a master of orchestration

As Rolf Martinsson marks his 70th birthday, we look back on a career spanning four decades – an artistic journey defined by meticulous craftsmanship, powerful orchestral writing, and close collaborations with many of today's leading musicians.

Photo: Josef Sjögren

I remember the first time I heard an orchestral work by **Rolf Martinsson** and the lasting impression it made on me. It was in late spring 1983 when I went on a school trip with my high school class to a concert with the Malmö Symphony Orchestra. On the programme was his new piece *Symphonic Poem*. I had earlier heard a few of his works on the radio, but this orchestral piece was something entirely different. I was immediately captivated by its sonorous impact and great wealth of variation within the scope of a dense musical development. Just a few years later I began my studies in composition with Martinsson at the Malmö Academy of Music. During the subsequent years not only did I have the privilege to receive his instruction but also to follow Martinsson's artistic development and how his extensive production started to take shape.

Early works

Martinsson's early works from the 1980s and 1990s were often written for various chamber music combinations, at times with rather unusual instrumentations. What these works had in common was a certain sense of curiosity, the will to explore different musical possibilities, intonations and material. The general tone of the music betrays influences from Impressionism, with distinct traces of Debussy and Ravel, and even from **Arnold Schoenberg's** and **Alban Berg's** worlds of expression. For Martinsson, the craft of composition has remained of vital importance ever since. It is the means by which to capture the artistic vision in the best way possible, and to clearly communicate it to musicians and audiences. Clarity in instrumentation and notation is of decisive importance for capturing musical ideas. Martinsson says that his major driving force is his relationship to the musicians. He is often praised by musicians who testify to how his cordial attitude results in his getting the maximum out of the instruments. "I know how pleased I am when it sounds the way I intended", says Martinsson, and he adds, "It is now close to that ideal..." There is no striving for calculated adaptation in this, according to him, "It is rather that I have my idea ready, it always comes first, then I formulate it in the best possible way with notation and instrumentation".



Mastery of orchestration

From the mid-1990s Martinsson's main focus has been on orchestral music. Here his sound apparatus has broadened, but at the same time he has been faithful to his roots. His orchestral work *Dreams*, inspired by **Akira Kurosawa's** film, was a breakthrough in the large-scale format and led to several commissions, not least the trumpet concerto *Bridge*, composed for and dedicated to **Håkan Hardenberger**. It has become, not only one of Martinsson's most performed works, but perhaps also one of the most frequently performed Swedish orchestral works internationally. In this work Martinsson's interest in both the virtuosic treatment of the solo instrument and orchestral sonority reached a mature stage of development. Martinsson pos-

sesses a remarkable command of orchestration, characterized by profound craftsmanship as well as strong individuality and originality. He knows how to utilise the orchestra both in a chamber-musical and ethereal manner, with refined use of, e.g., harp and percussion, but also in a dynamic and forceful way. For instance, the final minutes of the concerto are unrivalled in Swedish music when it comes to discharge of orchestral energy.

After his success with the trumpet concerto, many musicians queued up to get new solo concertos composed for themselves; among them, trombonist **Christian Lindberg** and clarinetist **Martin Fröst**. These are tailor-made works to suit each artist's personality. The most recent ex-

ample is the horn concerto *Soundscape – A Walk in Colours* for **Felix Klieser**. The concertos have often also resulted in a series of solo pieces with a connection to the larger compositions.

A congenial partner

A particularly significant collaboration over the last decade has been with the soprano **Lisa Larsson**, for whom Rolf Martinsson has composed numerous works, from large scale song cycles, such as *Ich denke dein*, to chamber compositions. Vocal music was already early on vital for Martinsson, as he was an avid choir singer in his youth. There are a number of choral and solo vocal works in his early production, but it was not until the collaboration with Lisa Larsson that his composing in this genre really took off. With her Martinsson found once again a congenial partner. According to Martinsson, the optimal cooperation between composer and soloist is based on openness, sensitivity, flexibility and mutual respect, and this is just how he describes the relationship. “Lisa Larsson is a brilliant and devoted interpreter of my works”, says Martinsson, “and she has a keen musical intuition and a profound feeling for my tone language. Her curiosity and interest in creating continually new musical solutions have been a great source of inspiration for me”. Their work together also sparked Martinsson’s interest in sacred music, leading to the widely performed *St. Luke Passion*, now nearing a hundred performances since its premiere. He is currently preparing a major *Requiem* for soloists, choir, and orchestra, scheduled to premiere in Växjö in November 2026.

Since the spring of 2025 Martinsson has been professor emeritus at the Malmö Academy of Music. Throughout his many years as a pedagogue, he has worked to convey the craft of composition to coming generations. He says that it is vital to be careful about formulating one’s idea; but also “to dare to write the music that one really wants, for this has long been a tough struggle for me. I will say that what you are thinking about now when you are 20 or 25, will to a large extent be what you think is right when you are 50, so why wait until then to affirm this. I believe there is a great deal of truth in that”, says Martinsson.