

Matthew Peterson: The Wanderers

The Wanderers for choir and orchestra is Matthew Peterson's second symphony. It is a story about the forests, lakes, hills, and blast furnaces in his home district of Dalarna, about man's age-old relationship to the earth, and about being in the prime of life.

Matthew Peterson was born in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and grew up making music, hunting black grouse and fishing on the prairie. As he continued to study composition at St Olaf College and Indiana University, he was bowhunting white-tailed deer in the vast forests, once famously serving the composition department a whole roasted leg of venison.

– I remember that I bought a jar of Swedish lingonberry jam for our professor **Sven-David Sandström** to have on the side. Earlier in my studies I paid for extra lessons in composition with meat... I was different!

These landscapes, their flora and fauna, their smells and sounds have all made a lasting impression on Matthew Peterson. During his years in Indiana he met **Per Mårtensson**, the artistic leader of the Gotland Composer School in Sweden. On a Fulbright scholarship, Matthew came to Visby to write a chamber opera, *Voir Dire*. In 2018 in Stockholm, when he and his wife Sara were expecting their first child, the couple decided to move to friends in Smedjebacken, where

they could live a life centered around their outdoor lifestyle. Matthew was now back in the woods.

The unity

During the years 2024-2026 Matthew has been composer in residence with the Chamber Orchestra of Dalarna (Dalasinfoniettan), located in the region of Peterson's home. His second symphony, *The Wanderers*, is a joint commission by Dalasinfoniettan and the Swedish Radio Choir, and the goal has been to weave the two together into a new kind of sound organism.

– The Radio Choir has shaped my development as a composer of choral music. It is one of the world's finest ensembles, but here I was thinking about the individuals I have come to know during our previous collaborations. I have seen their faces before me while composing and I hope that the strength of my passion for these texts will rub off on them. It is a demanding musical work in which the singers are active during almost the whole 55 minutes.

The location

In *The Wanderers* Matthew Peterson wanted to create a work of universal resonance while remaining rooted in Dalarna: known for the beauty of its forests and fields and for its wood industry and mining. Would it be possible to fit all these things into one work? He hit upon two poets who have become part of the Swedish Volksgeist: **Dan Andersson**, from the forests around



Ludvika, not far from Smedjebacken, and the esoteric **Gustaf Fröding** from Värmland.

– Reading these texts is a sensual, rather than an intellectual, experience for me. I smell the



scents of wild rosemary, bog myrtle and moss, and the fermented aroma of the mouldering cranberries from last autumn. When I think of Dan Andersson's words "when stars shine over whirling endless moors," then I know. There is a unique sort of loneliness out on the bog on an October night, a sort of uncertainty and uneasiness. It becomes a different kind of place when I hear the call of the crane on an early morning in June.

According to Matthew Peterson, our belief in man's ideas as the pinnacle of art is too one-sided. There is another world that opens up when one forms a relationship to a location and its fauna: mankind's age-old relationship to the earth is an inexhaustible topic.

The language

What initiated the compositional process was Matthew Peterson's own translations of poems by Fröding and Andersson. He simply picked out the passages he felt were appropriate to translate without losing the power of the text and combined them to form a new unity.

– It was as if I were composing a text. I had the freedom to integrate choir and orchestra as I wished and enjoyed discovering that the poets' amazing alliterations worked unexpectedly well in English: "Vad som av vinden viskas" became "What the wind whispers".

The four movements of the symphony each have a special location: the forest at night, the field in the sunshine, a fiery forge, a small lake in the woods. In hindsight Matthew Peterson discovered that there was one more level to the texts. In the forest, a feeling of getting lost, and in the iron works, of dreariness: Am I a human being or a beast?

– I understood that the text about the sun and the meadows is about how I feel: a 40-year-old man with children – I am a father and a composer, I cultivate the land and build on my house. I have a force within me to generate life in so many ways. Humankind has an incredible capacity to create!

The music

– The musical motif consists of three tones: F – G flat – A flat. These three tones can form both the major and the minor modes, depending on where we are in the scale. And this produces a kind of ambivalence that feels so right for the theme, a fluctuation between light and darkness. This appears on all levels and in different layers: from melodies in the foreground to structures deep within the construction, the motif permeates the whole work. I like limitations and usually work in this way. It leads to

a singular sonority for each individual work, which holds together the tone language.

For example, we hear the motif in the first movement's chorus ("we are weary") and in the second movement as brilliant, repeated sixteenth-notes. In the third movement it grows into a brutal bass line. In the fourth movement we find one of Matthew Peterson's favourite passages in the piece: when the choir sings about the mirror-like surface of a woodland lake, we hear the motive in a long melody against its inversion, heading in different directions, climbing in the canon of the orchestra, and in the bass.

The wanderers

At the end of the Ice Age, people crossed the Bering Land Bridge and settled in North America. Matthew Peterson has likewise moved between continents.

– We are a wandering species. We seek, we explore, we adapt. Curiosity may be why we've flourished. I'm a wanderer myself, though deeply rooted here in Dalarna.

But the wanderers in the title of the symphony do not refer to Peterson himself, Fröding or Andersson. They refer to us who listen, to us who sing, to us who together experience the symphony; to all in whom the work arouses any feeling.

– It is awesome when you come to think of the symphony as a form and the significance it has had. Beethoven's 9th, Mahler's 2nd... Works that have resonated across eras and places!

Janna Vettergren

The Wanderers was premiered on 21 March in Berwaldhallen, Stockholm and another performance was given 22 March at the House of Culture in Falun, with the Swedish Radio Choir and Dalasinfoniettan; conductor Claire Levacher

Quote:

"Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience; to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder upon it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of the moon and the colors of the dawn and dusk."

Kiowa writer and scholar N. Scott Momaday (the first Native American writer to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize).

March–June 2026

BENJAMIN STAERN

Fight – Union – Clinch

String Quartet No. 1
Marmen Quartet
13.3. Växjö, Sweden

LOTTA WENNÄKOSKI

Blended Notes

Soma Ensemble, Sitkovetsky Trio
13.3. Oulu, Finland (Oulu Music Festival)

Zelo

London PO/Robin Ticciati
23.3. London, UK

MATTHEW PETERSON

Symphony No. 2 – The Wanderers

Dalasinfoniettan, Swedish Radio Choir/Claire Levacher
21.3. Stockholm, Sweden

KIMMO HAKOLA

LÄPIKAJOT Op. 120

for cello and electronics
Earth Ears Ensemble
15.4. Tampere, Finland (Tampere Biennale)

JOEL LINDBERG

Oknos

Norrbottnen CO/Isabelle van Keulen
22.4. Piteå, Sweden

TIMO JUHANI KYLLÖNEN

Loiste Op. 105

Tina Christensen, organ
23.4. Kemi, Finland

LARA POE

Whirligig

Oulu SO/Rumon Gamba
6.5. Oulu, Finland

ALBERT SCHNELZER

Concerto for Soprano Saxophone and Orchestra – Arctic Starflower

Dalasinfoniettan/Claire Levacher, sol. Anders Paulsson
8.5. Falun, Sweden

TOBIAS BROSTRÖM

Symphony No. 2

Gothenburg SO/Santtu-Matias Rouvali
27.5. Gothenburg, Sweden

Den stora karnevalen (The Grand Carneval)

Jönköping Sinfonietta/Johannes Gustavsson
31.5. Jönköping, Sweden

OLLI KORTEKANGAS

Le bonheur de vivre

Marko Ylönen, cello
11.6. Helsinki, Finland

TIINA MYLLÄRINEN

Shades (Guitar Quartet)

Kekkonen Quartet
27.6. Porvoo, Finland (Summer Sounds Festival)