

HENNA SALMELA

Pianist, conductor and composer **Tapio Tuomela** seeks a new message in his music beyond what has already been heard and experienced. He is also a festival director who examines composition from the performer's and listener's perspective and speaks of accessibility.

Tapio Tuomela used to be regarded in Finland as half-performer, half-composer. He began his career as a pianist and conductor before applying for the Sibelius Academy's composing class and later studied composition at the Eastman School of Music in New York and the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin. During the past decade he has concentrated almost exclusively on composing. In 1992 he had two placings (*Transition* and *The Escape Ladder* 🎵) on the list of Recommended Works at the UNESCO Rostrum, and he has won many prizes and awards in Finland and abroad. His output includes two symphonies and two operas, the more recent of which, *Mothers and Daughters*, was nominated for the Nordic Council's Music Prize in 2004. He has been Artistic Director of the Viitasaari Time of Music festival since 2000.

In his music Tuomela draws on themes from the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala (as in the orchestral *Lemminkäinen*) or ideas inspired by the scenery and culture of Lapland (such as *Jokk* 🎵) or *Vuohenki Luohti / The Song of Vuohenki* 🎵). Born in Kuusamo near the Arctic Circle, he calls himself a northern boy and a nature lover – his hobbies include skiing and fly fishing. He also likes languages and reckons that his knowledge of Russian and French has afforded him many contacts with music folk in France and Russia.

CONTACT IMPORTANT

Tuomela is a professed Modernist in the sense that the composer should, he says, at least try to seek a new message beyond what has already been heard and experienced. There is, however, a danger of becoming too distanced from emotion and losing contact with the listener. As 'bait' the



TAPIO TUOMELA

– a musical triathlete
who concentrates on
composing

Tapio Tuomela
(Photo: Jean-Michel Gueugnot)

music composed by Tuomela in the 1990s used folk music-like elements such as those he first introduced with his opera *Mothers and Daughters*. His purpose has never been to recycle material; he is simply inspired by the direct, forthright approach of traditional music.

He has also composed for solo instrument, and chamber music; one of his most often-performed works in the past few years has been his *Quintet No. 2 for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano "Pierrot"*, a commission from the 2004 Kuhmo Chamber

Music Festival. Tuomela recalls that it was performed no fewer than seven times in five countries in the space of one year. His recent commissions have, however, been primarily for orchestral music: *Lemminkäinen* (2002), commissioned by the Lahti Symphony Orchestra and *Nordan* (2002) by NOMUS, to name just two examples. He is now working on a piece for piano and orchestra commissioned by the Joensuu and Vaasa orchestras for spring 2009. Tuomela has also received a request for a cello concerto from **Anssi Karttunen**.

One of the most interesting projects now in the pipeline is *Antti Puuhaara*, a sort of melodrama or folktale for narrator, instrumental ensemble and eight-part vocal ensemble. It has been commissioned by Musicatreize of France, directed by **Jean-Claude Berrutti** and will be premiered next spring in the “Finlandais” season in Paris. It is also to be released as a DVD. Though it includes a narrator and spoken dialogue, it is essentially choral music, a genre familiar to Tuomela.

Just completed is an *Organ Mass* scheduled to be premiered in Stavanger in autumn 2008. Parts of it have already been performed in Espoo in autumn 2007, and Tuomela has since added three more movements. He is also planning a set of bilingual songs: settings of the same poem in two languages. “Language and articulation have been dictating the texture ever since the days of Monteverdi,” he says, mentioning **Emily Dickinson**, **Christian Morgenstern**, **Niilo Rauhala** and **T. S. Eliot** as poets who appeal to him. Soprano **Soile Isokoski** and pianist **Marita Viitasalo** have promised to perform the first of these song pairs.

HACKING AT THE SCORE WITH A MACHETE?

In 2003 Tuomela put the finishing touches to an orchestral work he calls *Lappic.double* (Double Sinfonietta) not yet performed in full. The material is from a work he composed for the Provincial Museum of Lapland and one movement of it was played in a concert by the Chamber Orchestra of Lapland. An ambient work designed to be heard at the Museum, it is located in three rooms so that the sounds mingle in a fascinating way. The plan is for the work to be a feature of the Museum for ten years, and according to the provincial daily *Lapin kansa* it may have up to a million listeners in the space of one decade.

The *Symphony No. 2* of 2005 commissioned by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) has also had a large audience as the concert by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra was broadcast. It got an enthusiastic reception and the critics praised its beautiful, translucent sound. The composer must, says Tuomela, be fully convinced of a work’s merits when it passes out of his hands, but he has nothing against revision at a later date. He is in fact right now compressing his Second Symphony so that it will last under 30 minutes in performance.

With his long experience of conducting



Tuomela’s opera *Mothers and Daughters* (Photo: Finnish National Opera/Heikki Tuuli)

and working with musicians, Tuomela tries to make his notation clear and performer-friendly. Musicians often get frustrated, he says, by uneconomical notation and have difficulty motivating themselves into attacking the job on hand with a clearing saw or machete. “The notes as they sound are frequently at odds with those on the page, and the players often ask in rehearsal why the composer had to express something that simple in such an awkward way,” he says. “Maybe some composers have no practical personal experience of ensemble work.” Tuomela himself was for a long time a rehearsal conductor at the Finnish National Opera.

More attention will, he feels, probably be paid to this now that rehearsal times have become significantly shorter in Finland than they were “in the good old days”.

ACCESSIBILITY

And what about the audience, the people who actually listen to the music? Does Tuomela’s role as a festival director afford him new perspectives on composition and is he, as gatekeeper, more or less obliged to view composing from a different, broader perspective? This is, he agrees, an interesting subject, the key word being accessibility. In addition to being a creative composer, he tries to approach his music from the listener’s angle. In piloting the Time of Music festival at Viitasaari he tries to regenerate ideas and to bring different actors together by introducing such genres as pop, folk and religious music, and music & text or image. He

feels he could perhaps start asking himself whom the work is intended for and in what context. Why should, say, the audience at a concert of orchestral and opera music not be seen as having a different profile from that at a chamber recital? Because, he claims, they really are different.

While the composer should be aware of this, he should not, according to Tapio Tuomela, be prepared to make concessions over his vision or conscious compromises. Every composer must have his own credo, and he is ultimately accountable for his choices to himself alone. But Tuomela does admit that the idea may be reflected subconsciously in his style; it may hover in the background and influence him in just the same way as, for example, the composition teacher’s finger raised in warning in the recesses of the mind or the predictable, presumed reaction of the critical listener. Tuomela is not bothered by reviews, because they lag so far behind the composition process that by the time they are printed the composer could scarcely care less what they say.

What, then, can the composer expect of the future? Greater openness and liberation; ever closer contacts with the player and listener. Tuomela lists some concrete hopes: it would be nice to hear Nordan or the new, shorter 2002 version of Lemminkäinen performed in Finland. And the Sibelius Academy is giving a concert dedicated to his chamber music in September 2008. “Hopefully we’ll hear some new songs, too!” ■

🔊 Sound samples are available at www.fennicagehrman.fi (highlights)