

An Oasis for Concentration. Metamorphoses in the Music of Helena Tulve

Interview with composer **BY IA REMMEL**

“**O**ur time has quick rhythms, edgy passages, enormous amounts of information, technology. On the other hand, it has a strong need to balance this jumpiness and this need manifests itself in a very slow movement, in search for organics.” Helena Tulve has also said that to a certain extent, music is a hideaway. Helena Tulve’s music concentrates, fills the space, and creates a crystalline, hi-tech world. The key words to Helena’s inner and outer being are concentration, tension, steely strength, instantly reacting thinking and sensitivity. Helena is Estonian-like and foreign. Her music encompasses the oriental focus on slowness and the sense of infinity, French airyness and capricious rhythms.

Helena Tulve has been so far the only student of Erkki-Sven Tüür and also studied with Jacques Charpentier in Paris. Numerous premieres of her works that became well known were followed by the greatest acknowledgment so far: orchestral piece “Sula” [Thaw] won the 1st prize at the international composers’ rostrum in 2004. Then the composer received the award of the Estonian Music Council, Republic of Estonia Culture Award and became “Musician of the Year” of the Estonian Radio. Helena Tulve wrote her latest and largest composition, chamber opera “It Is Getting So Dark”

Helena Tulve.



being the composer in residence at the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir. Her auteur CD album “Sula” was published in 2005. Helena Tulve works at the Estonian Academy of Music as lecturer of composition.

All creation is probably continuous striving for ideal. What is your ideal in music?

I’m attracted to flow of music, its elusiveness. The idea that music is like water. I love slow music. Slowness is a counterbalance to rush and clutter of details; slowness enables the better sense of processes and seeing things that may be overlooked in rush, even if its careful rush. At present it is still somehow very much on the agenda for me. I’m reading Sten Nadolny’s “Discovery of Slowness”. The book makes me see things in a different perspective. Coming back to ideals, the slowness is not exactly an ideal, but I’m attracted to it, especially when it coincides with concentration.

Your music often focuses on a carefully chosen detail.

Often it is very difficult for me to listen to quick music with a lot of brilliant details. They slip by me at an incredible speed and I feel sorry that I was unable to enjoy them. I think it is squander.

Your music is generally crystal clear and transparent. Often it has been emphasized how important the sound/tone-colour is in your music.

Actually I have never thought of tone-colour as a goal per se. It has evolved through other things. Tone-colour comes through the choice of instruments and images. It is important to play with space and density. I imagine what kind of space the tone-colour could create, whether an open, round space or densely filled with a texture.

Whence does the impulse to compose come from?

At first there is of course a so-called technical impulse, the commission, which makes me start the search. It depends greatly also on the kind of instruments I will write music for. What follows is kind of an inner process, a design of inner space. In “Sula”, for example, all those processes were really clear.

Do you have the ready title in the beginning or do you name your

work later?

Usually I have the title ready. Sometimes it also happens that I finish the piece and then change its name. But the title should be tied to the image underlying the composition. An image or space or phenomenon or vision.

Nowadays the titles are rather poetic hints. Does the music also reflect some link between different art forms?

Compared to other art forms, music is a bit more abstract, thanks to its evaporating material. Position of music differs from that of, say, art or film. In music, the more general characteristic features, power, lyricism, poetry, play greater role. But still, music has common associations with other art forms. Build-up of the form in time in film or theatre may be very similar to that in music.

What about the social side of music, does it have any influence on society?

Because music is elusive, nowadays its direct social subtext is quite inconspicuous. In certain cases it may not be so, but then the social side of music will not manifest itself in music, but rather in trappings/paraphernalia.

How would you transfer your soundscape into colours?

Perhaps there is one bright line that would stand out. For me, contrasts are not inherent. In case of contrasts or opposites I will rather move onto trajectory between the two. Usually I don't put them very clearly side to side.

What has impressed you the most or deeply influenced you in music?

There has been an enormous lot of interesting, but for me, some things are more than simply interesting. One of the first awe-inspirers was the plainchant during the music history lessons by Toomas Siitan. I couldn't know then that there'll be time when I'll take it up. In fact, for me the plainchant is my musical mother tongue.

Later, everything we heard at Erkki-Sven Tüür's was a great discovery. One of the composers to astonish me was Scelsi, but among the first and continuous favourites is Berio. In his music one can hear the influence of traditional music. Water was very important to

the composer; perhaps it explains the gurgle in his music. I feel very close to music of Claude Vivier and the latest works of Grisey.

Discovery of world music is important to me – the Lebanese music, sufi music. The process is still continuing. I can't claim to have a somewhat scientific interest towards this kind of music, but therein have crystallized some characteristics that speak to me very loudly.

What kind of means of expression do you prefer?

I relate to heterophony, to seemingly arbitrary variances in similar motion – very characteristic means also in traditional music. And melody is very important to me, not so much the one voice, but the melody in wider sense, melody as principle or linear current. The current must carry energy and expression; everything else must be in its service. Energy processes work by restraining and releasing tensions, as if stretching the elastic band. Following the example of plainchant, I tend to oppose clear-cut metric structure. Usually I avoid emphasizing the first beat.

I try to link the musical material according to so-called chain principle, by finding spots where two ideas link. I do the same in joining the tone-colours of instruments. In two tone-colours, there are always some similar and some different characteristics and it is always possible to find such a spot where transition from timbre to another is feasible. I pay attention to such spots, so as they wouldn't come about simply by luck. This I have learnt by experience.

Should music be approached emotionally or should it be more like intensive thinking process?

One can lean towards one or the other point of view, but the listening tends to be rather an emotional activity. Because the musical material is not spread in front of the listener at once, the process of listening requires concentration. Therefore the listening may also be analytical. For me it's most important to listen with the heart. But I don't think that a very intellectual process cannot also be emotional at the same time. So to sum it up: rational emotionality, the union of the two.

In your opinion, what place does the contemporary music have nowadays?



Classical music is certainly particular. The division in the pyramid of interests and needs is very clear. There are people with no interest in classical music and they are the majority. There's no point in forcing them and the composer cannot oblige them to great lengths and still be honest with oneself. Wide popularity is not a goal per se for me. People can be educated to become music-friendly and it's important. Those who are curious and open will come into contact with the world of classical music at one point or another.

I think that in some sense the new music is better suited to the rhythm of our era than the music of the past. In order to enjoy Bach, for example, certain level of preparation is needed. Anyway, one must learn to listen and there's never too much of learning to listen.