

“A Giant of Beauty”: Einojuhani Rautavaara

By Andrew Glover-Whitley



Einojuhani Rautavaara in comical sardonic mood

The news of the passing of one of Finland’s greatest composers was slow to filter out into the world, and even slower for people to get a grasp of the fact that this man, who has been called “A Giant of Beauty”, had actually died. He was 87 years of age and had become one of the leading lights in Scandinavian and Baltic contemporary music over the years. He was a leading light in what is slowly becoming known as the Baltic Spiritualist group, or Baltic minimalists.

His music had grown out of the avant-garde of the 1950’s and 1960’s and as it had an impact on all composers some began to question its ideals and attitudes and began looking for an alternative to what they saw as its alienating language. Rautavaara was one such composer along with Arvo Part, Petris Vasks, Henryk Gorecki, Wojciech Kilar and others of this neck of the European woods who began to search for a new mode of expression. He like the others found it in an almost ultra-simplistic language that harked back to tonal sounds and harmonies but without the strict structuring along those more traditional lines. The music became atmospheric and almost at times ambient allowing many of the composers in this region to imbue their music with the light and colours of their native lands. A Nordic soul that had been hinted at in the music of Sibelius, Nielsen, Simonsen, Eller, Petterson and Holmboe, but this time round with a full strong Nordic/Baltic slant that the previous generations had not imagined.

Rautavarra studied music with one of Finland's most modernist composers, Aarre Merikanto (who also taught the likes of Aulis Salinen and Pavo Heininen) and at first accepted the use of 12 tone composition but as time progressed he found this limiting and alienating to audiences and began to find a new path that while staying true to his modernist/avant-garde credentials would allow him to express the world that he saw around him, its beauty and natural essences. He wished to create a new Finnish language that but actually ended up expressed these things, creating a Nordic/Baltic nationalism that was scale Symphonies and Concertos.



I personally first came across his music in the early 1980's when the Finnish CD label Ondine put out a Disc of his Symphonies 1, 2, & 3. This was serial music but imbued with the Aurora Borealis. This was music like no other that I had heard and as I was well into the Manchester school and the Darmstadt Group at the time it perplexed me and confused me as to where it stood in contemporary music of the day. It was fresh and open and spoke of big expanses of sky and lakes of the north in a way most of the music being written then did not, and could not. I in the end rejected it as being old fashioned and irrelevant. Having said that it stayed with me and as tastes changed and the Baltic Spiritualists began to come to the fore with the music of Part, Vasks, and others, Rautavarra's name again cropped up. This time I knew what I was looking at and listening too and with the production of probably his most famous piece "Cantus Arcticus: Concerto for Birds and Orchestra" it convinced me that here was a man to learn about colour and light from.

<https://youtu.be/TO3YRZWLvQo>

This one work alone is astonishing in its simplicity of idea and concept and yet eloquence of execution and skill of material. It is based on taped bird calls found in the lakes of his native Finland that are recorded and played back as part of the work. These are then used as another layer of texture and colour within an orchestrally varied palette. It does not use traditional keys but a modality that stems from the bird songs themselves and this therefore reflects the nature that he knew so well and loved. Nature is in the key of atonality and bears no connection to manmade controls, and so this composition works on a natural level that speaks to our natural rhythms and sensibilities outside that of society. It is a work of wonderful contrasts and subtleties that has no real time, no real structure other than nature and its own slowly evolving senses. A work of pure and honest love by Rautavaara and is a form of homage to what he knew and understood best. A true colour of genius and beauty in a wonderfully varied score.

His other works are very often on the grand Sibelian scale in orchestral terms and his other famous work is his “Symphony No.7 “Angel of Light”” written in 1994 and was originally known as “The Bloomington Symphony” in honour of it being commissioned to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra in Indiana, USA. It belongs to his “Angel Series” of works that are inspired by childhood dreams and revelations. The symphony has gained wide popularity for its deep spirituality since its premiere.

His “Harp Concerto” while not gaining the recognition it rightly deserves outside of the Scandinavian world should be much more widely recognised for the great beauty it contains and although it is not a showy work it stands as one of the finest Harp Concertos of the times.

<https://youtu.be/JPYGRfzfBew>

Discover the music of this fascinating composer and his influence on the post-Modernist ideal and its thoughts. He may not still be a household name but his music will always remain with you.