

Niklas SIVELÖV

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

SINFONIETTA PER ARCHI (SYMPHONY NO. 4)

FIVE PIECES FOR STRING ORCHESTRA

SYMPHONY NO. 3, PRIMAVERA

Malmö Opera Orchestra
Joachim Gustafsson

FIRST RECORDINGS

MY PATH TO COMPOSITION

by Niklas Sivelöv

I remember my first attempts to compose. I was around seven years old, living in Skellefteå, in northern Sweden, and making drafts of symphonies in fantasy keys like K minor and Z minor. It felt like being in some kind of laboratory (not that I then knew what a laboratory was) and it was very exciting to be there – and I still wonder what K minor might sound like! I was writing graphic music – of necessity, since I couldn't read notes at the time: I was playing the organ, drums and a little piano, but only by ear. The style was mainly jazz or folk and popular tunes – but I did have three heroes in classical music: Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. I discovered by myself how a harmony was built and how adding an extra note could make it so distinctly different. I had been drawn to rhythm long before that: I was only two when I smashed my first drum-kit into oblivion. Before I was ten, I had improvised and composed around 50 tunes that I kept in my head – and composition and improvisation are interests that have stayed with me throughout my life.

I was a grand old man of thirteen when I realised that reading music could be quite a good thing to know: I was struggling to learn a Mozart concerto by ear and it took quite some time. So my overall resistance to playing 'correctly', with all the right notes, swiftly changed into an eager learning process with the aim of mastering everything about these strange hieroglyphs.

Later, in 1986 when I was an eighteen-year-old piano student at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, I composed my first pieces that still deserve a place in my catalogue: *The Rage of the Chameleon* for piano and a string trio I called *Divertimento per archi a tre*. I was also taking lessons in composition and orchestration and composed a number of chamber-music pieces during those years at the Academy.

My output of music for my own instrument, the piano, was still rather small. Later, in 1998, there came the *Concerto Classico* for piano and orchestra and some smaller pieces. Later still, in 2002, came the Second Concerto for piano and strings and several pieces for duos with piano, but there were also many failed attempts along the road to solo pieces that were worthwhile. I started to improvise much more again, as I had done in my youth, feeling secure enough to improvise encores at recitals, even releasing a number of albums with mostly improvisation.

After several years with only a few works to show for them – not least because in 2000 I took up a position as a teacher at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen, and I had also a fairly busy schedule as pianist – in 2009 I started to compose again, with a lot more vigour and with readier inspiration. I now had the piano more sharply in focus, and one aim was to bring composition and improvisation together in a coherent and creative way.

A stream of pieces followed, such as *The Album for the Youth*, *Préludes Naturelles* and *Suite in modo classico*, all in 2010, and in the same year I also began to sketch a series of 24 Preludes for piano.¹ I wanted to come up with a cycle in the grand tradition of writing preludes; I was thinking mainly of those by Chopin, Skryabin and Debussy but also of those by Bach. Other important influences were jazz, which has always been a strong interest of mine, and many twentieth-century composers for the piano, such as Prokofiev, Bartók and Stravinsky.

In the earlier part of my career, works for piano and larger ensembles maintained equal importance in my output. But in recent years orchestral music has become increasingly important for me, and I have now written five symphonies (I'm working on No. 6), an *Arctic Fantasy* for orchestra and the *Five Pieces for String Orchestra* heard here, three more piano concertos (making a total of six so far), a Tuba Concertino and more. But who knows how things will turn out in the long run – I might even begin to write for the stage.

¹ Recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0271.

NIKLAS SIVELÖV, RELUCTANT SYMPHONIST

by Paul Mann

‘It was never my intention to write symphonies,’ says Niklas Sivelöv. ‘The first two were written really only for myself, to explore the form.’¹ On those terms he is not doing too badly, since he is currently composing his sixth symphony in as many years. This album contains the first performances and recordings of two of them, as well as a virtuoso work for string orchestra, composed during the same period and also receiving its first recording.

In spite of his formidable reputation as a solo pianist, Sivelöv does not, as a rule, use the piano to compose, which results in an idiomatic style of writing for instruments, especially for strings. His music is characterised above all by kinetic rhythmic energy, contrapuntal resourcefulness and metrical ingenuity. He describes himself as ‘not much of a fan of slowness,’² and it is certainly true to say that the moments of calm in Sivelöv’s music, when they do come, are all the more touching and effective for their relative rarity.

His **Third Symphony, *Primavera*** (2018), owes little to its forefather *Spring* symphonies by Schumann and Britten, or for that matter to Stravinsky’s famous musical eruption. If the work is possessed of any influences at all, one might sense a ghost of Sibelius, especially in its rigorous motivic development and reliance on ostinato, although Sivelöv is very much his own man. The work is concise, sprightly, clear-headed and often extremely delicate. Its three movements play continuously for a little over twenty minutes, although with clearly audible demarcations of structure. Around half of its duration is taken up by the first movement, *Allegro molto e giocoso* [1], a top-heavy structural plan which is deployed still more effectively

¹ Conversation with the author, 1 September 2020.

² *Ibid.*

in the Fourth Symphony. Although the barest outlines of traditional sonata form might be discerned, the movement is better understood as a process of continuous variation. Ideas tumble out in profusion, cross-fertilise themselves and fuse together. Neither is the music entirely bucolic or pastoral, taking on, at times, a more atavistic, primal character.

The second movement [2] is among Sivelöv's most intensely beautiful creations, all the more telling for its brevity, in which more of the sounds of nature one might expect from a 'spring' symphony are to be heard. Over a sustained, chorale-like texture, melismatic melody lines are shared between solo oboe, clarinet, horn, trumpet, violins and cellos. Only once does the music break out in a sustained *forte*, as if all the strands have coalesced. It calls to mind e e cummings' intensely beautiful evocation of spring:

Spring is like a perhaps hand
(which comes carefully
out of Nowhere) arranging
a window,into which people look (while
people stare
arranging and changing placing
carefully there a strange
thing and a known thing here) and
changing everything carefully [...]³

The final solo-horn note of the movement is seized upon by the whole orchestra heralding a vigorous *Allegro molto* finale [3], the opening section of which disguises its constant $\frac{4}{4}$ by means of an elaborate variety of metrical displacements, so that listeners without a score could easily be forgiven for thinking that they were in the midst of a complex labyrinth of changing time-signatures. (This is a favourite Sivelöv trick, which recurs in both of the other works recorded here.) A change to $\frac{3}{4}$ forms a transition to the much slower central $\frac{4}{4}$ section, in which a chorale is adorned with delicate runs and trills, intensifying and leading to a climax. An exuberant timpani solo announces the coda, a joyous gigue in $\frac{9}{8}$, in which elements of material from the first movement can

³ e e cummings, *Selected Poems, 1923–1958*, Faber and Faber, London, 1960, p. 8.

also be heard. Although the vitality of the music is unmistakable, Sivelöv avoids any clichés about the joys of spring by means of a somewhat ambiguous conclusion in which the closing bars appear to fragment, as if the listener were still in the midst of spring, with more yet to burst into life around him. The work is dedicated posthumously to the composer's father, Gunnar Sivelöv (1932–2020), who died shortly after this recording was made.

The *Five Pieces for String Orchestra* (2016) were originally composed for the Toccata Classics 'Music for My Love' series, a project where Martin Anderson has commissioned over 100 composers to write music in celebration of his late partner, Yodit Tekle, who died of cancer in 2015. The *Five Pieces* are intended as a memorial to Yodit, a consolation to Martin and a gift to their young son, Alex. The two slow movements are therefore complemented by three others of immense rhythmic drive and energy: in the midst of death, we are in life.

Stravinsky is sometimes identified as one of Sivelöv's influences, which can perhaps be felt most strongly in the *Vivace* first movement [6] of these *Five Pieces*. The second piece is a *Valse triste* (*Adagio espressivo*) [5], but even here sentiment is not allowed to take hold for long, and there is a contrasting middle section in a very different kind of $\frac{3}{4}$ time. The waltz, when it returns, sounds still more fragile and quickly dissolves, leading directly into the third movement (*Allegro molto*), another brief outburst of rhythmic vivacity. It is, however, in the *Lamento* (*Adagio ma non troppo*) [7] that the dark heart of the work is to be found. This is funeral music, crepuscular, tomb-like, almost ritualistic, with intense, fleeting recitatives from solo violin and viola, as if inconsolably casting flowers into the grave. The finale [8] sweeps all the gloom away, its vigorous, almost balletic metrical intricacies belying, as in the finale of the Third Symphony, a stable $\frac{4}{4}$ metre. The ending is especially effective, abrupt and surprising, as if the final page of the score has been torn out.

Sivelöv's *Fourth Symphony (Sinfonietta per archi)* (2019) has its origins in music dating from more than thirty years ago, in the late 1980s, with a first movement, *Allegro moderato* [9], based on a passacaglia written as a student exercise – although the listener expecting a straightforward example of the genre in the manner of Bach,

with clearly discernible variations on a bass ostinato, would struggle to make out the far more complex procedure at work here. The movement unfolds as a kind of puzzle, in which the passacaglia theme is deployed in fragments, as if variations on an unheard, or merely implied theme. It is not until almost nine minutes into the movement that the passacaglia theme is revealed in its original form, in the cellos. The whole thing is a tour-de-force of sustained inventiveness, deploying almost every trick in the book, its technical challenges posing a serious workout for any string orchestra.

The central *Adagio* [10] occupies unusual territory for Sivelöv in that it is easily the most vivid, pictorially descriptive music on this recording. The atmosphere is both religious and haunted, populated by the ghosts of lost souls. The opening section of the tripartite structure hovers ambiguously between simultaneously operating metres of 3 and 4, into which a chorale theme is interwoven with spectral harmonics and delicate strands of recitative. The middle section is pure tone-painting – wind in a deserted graveyard – and when the chorale returns, its already unstable nature is attended by new melodic strains and underpinned by an incessant dotted rhythm, as if being quietly and relentlessly marched into its own grave.

Although entitled *Scherzo*, the closing movement, *Allegro con brio* [11], is a joke only in the sense that it seems lighter in the face of what has preceded it. It is once again based on an older work, this time one for two pianos, and, as in the finales of the *Five Pieces* and of the Third Symphony, Sivelöv disguises a stable $\frac{4}{4}$ metre to ingeniously (and sometimes humorously) disruptive effect. Its virtuosity is broken up by two slower chorale-like passages, but a sense of momentum is never allowed to leave the music entirely, and the *presto* coda sweeps all before it, hammered home by two decisive *sforzando* footstamps.

Paul Mann is a conductor with a discography of more than 40 recordings, almost half of which are on Toccata Classics. His activities as a conductor have taken him all over the world, guesting throughout the UK, Europe, Scandinavia, the Americas, Japan, South East Asia and Australia. He also works as an editor for many major publishers, and prepared the editions used for this recording.

Joachim Gustafsson has established himself as one of the most versatile Nordic conductors. He has worked with most of the Scandinavian opera houses and orchestras. His operatic debut was at the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm in Verdi's *Otello*. He is a frequent guest conductor of the Orquesta Filarmónica de Bogotá and has recurring engagements with the Aarhus, Gothenburg, Malmö, Norrköping and Odense Symphony Orchestras and the Copenhagen Philharmonic, to name only a few. His operatic engagements have included work at the Malmö Opera and Danish National Opera. He is also Artistic Director of the Haglund Festival in Halmstad, on the west coast of Sweden, between Gothenburg and Malmö.



The **Malmö Opera Orchestra** was founded in 1991. Since then it has developed and grown musically and has firmly established itself in the musical world. The Orchestra, consisting of 62 musicians, is characterised by its ability to master a wide range of styles: the classic operas and musicals, as well as contemporary music drama and ballet music. Every season the Orchestra performs a number of symphonic concerts, along with gala and chamber concerts. Over the years it has made several recordings of symphonic music and operatic performances; indeed, it made one of the earliest recordings released by Toccata Classics, with the Symphony in D, Op. 30, by Sir Donald Tovey, and the Prelude to his opera *The Bride of Dionysus*, conducted by George Vass (TOCC 0033). In 2015 Leif Segerstam became the Honorary Conductor of the Orchestra after he completed his term as Principal Conductor. The current Principal Guest Conductor is Steven Sloane. Martin Brommann is the Orchestra Manager.

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‘a fascinating, involving disc by a multi-faceted musician. The recording is terrific throughout, with plenty of presence.’

—Colin Clarke, *Fanfare*

‘what I left with was a subtler enjoyment of the way his mind has assimilated so much iconic Western classical music, which then enters his own compositions like benign ghosts. [...] This is fascinating music that is made approachable by the composer’s lucid writing. Finally, Sivelöv plays a fine Steinway D that has been captured in flawless recorded sound.’

—Huntley Dent, *Fanfare*



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NIKLAS SIVELÖV Orchestral Music

Symphony No. 3, <i>Primavera</i> (2018)	22:25
❶ I <i>Allegro molto e giocoso</i> –	10:20
❷ II <i>Adagio</i> –	4:17
❸ III <i>Allegro molto</i>	7:48
<i>Five Pieces for String Orchestra</i> (2016)	18:09
❹ No. 1 <i>Overtura: Vivace</i>	2:20
❺ No. 2 <i>Valse triste (Adagio espressivo)</i> –	3:48
❻ No. 3 <i>Allegro molto</i>	2:24
❼ No. 4 <i>Lamento (Adagio ma non troppo)</i>	5:48
❽ No. 5 <i>Finale: Allegro</i>	3:49
<i>Sinfonietta per archi (Symphony No. 4) (2019)</i>	22:36
❾ I <i>Passacaglia: Allegro moderato</i>	12:49
❿ II <i>Choral: Adagio</i>	5:21
⓫ III <i>Scherzo: Allegro con brio</i>	4:26

Malmö Opera Orchestra

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Joachim Gustafsson, conductor

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