

Mihkel KEREM

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME TWO
SYMPHONY NO. 7
SYMPHONY NO. 8

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
Andrew Manze

FIRST RECORDINGS

MIHKEL KEREM'S SYMPHONIES NOS. 7 AND 8

by Paul Conway

The composer and violinist Mihkel Kerem was born in 1981 in Tallinn, Estonia (then still annexed to the Soviet Union), into a musical family. His father, Jaan Kerem, was principal violist of the Estonia Opera Orchestra for forty years. At the age of six Mihkel began studying the violin with his mother, Mirjam Kerem, who taught at the Tallinn Music High School. Before long he started to win competitions and gain diplomas at home as well as in Lithuania and the Czech Republic. From childhood onwards, he has performed internationally as a soloist in repertoire that includes concertos by Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, Vieuxtemps, Korngold and Trandafilovski.¹ Playing in chamber groups, such as the Tobias String Quartet and the Kerem Quartet, has also been a vital part of his musical experience. He has taken on the roles of assistant leader, then guest leader, of the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, leader of the Southbank Sinfonia and the Brandenburg Sinfonia and is currently Joint Assistant Leader of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

He was six years old when he wrote his first piece of music. Six years later he began formal composition studies with Mati Kuulberg² and continued at the Estonian Academy of Music with Jaan Rääts.³ Thereafter he studied with William Mival⁴ at the

¹ He gave the London premiere of Mihailo Trandafilovski's Violin Concerto in 2004.

² Kuulberg (1947–2001), a professional violinist for the first eight years of his career (1966–74), wrote five symphonies, four concertos (for violin, flute, trombone and double bass), three ballets and a considerable amount of chamber and instrumental music, including several sonatas.

³ The prolific Rääts (1932–2022) wrote in an essentially Neo-Classical style, producing, among much else, eight symphonies, nearly thirty concertos, seven piano trios, six string quartets, three piano quintets and ten piano sonatas.

⁴ Composer, broadcaster, writer and teacher, William Mival was born in 1959 in North Wales. He studied with Anthony Milner, Robert Saxton and York Holler and has taught at the Royal College of Music since 1989, leading the Composition Faculty between 2004 and 2021. He has written works for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Belcea String Quartet, the virginalist and harpsichordist Sophie Yates, the Welsh Chamber Orchestra and the choirs of Salisbury Cathedral. His writings include a survey of the performance history of Stockhausen's *Gruppen* for the Cambridge History of Musical Performance, published in 2012.

Royal College of Music in London while he completed his master's degree. He has well over 170 compositions to his name, including nine symphonies,⁵ ten string quartets, a string sextet,⁶ a piano trio, four violin sonatas⁷ and concertos for piano, violin and cello. He received the London International Film Award (LIFA) for 'Best Original Score' for his work on the 2021 film adaptation of George Orwell's *1984*. Recent compositions include the Piano Concerto (2023), premiered in Estonia in August 2024, the Violin and Piano Sonata No. 4 (2024), premiered in Estonia in August 2025, the Piano Trio (2025), premiered in Estonia in October 2025, Symphony No. 9, *To Fight against this Age* (2025), on texts by the Dutch humanist Rob Riemen, and a sinfonieta, *Belle d'Oca* (2025). Groups that have performed his music include the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, the New European Ensemble, the Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Oulu Sinfonia, Joensuu City Orchestra, Camerata Nordica and the Chilingirian String Quartet. He was composer-in-residence at the 2002 Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival in Germany, the 2009 Aurora Chamber Music Festival in Sweden and the 2025 Tallinn Chamber Music Festival. In 2024, he was the recipient of the Annual Award for Music of the Estonian Cultural Endowment.

Although Kerem has never regarded his music as being particularly Estonian,⁸ others have detected links with his Baltic background and, as he conceded, 'I suppose you cannot hide your roots.'⁹ He has identified the music of Shostakovich, Mahler, Ravel and Stravinsky as influences on his writing.¹⁰ A more recent addition to this group of inspirations is Sibelius, who, in Mihkel Kerem's own words, 'has become somewhat of a hero to me over the last few years.'¹¹ He has taken inspiration from people and his own

⁵ Symphony No. 3, *For the Victims of Communism* (2003), was recorded by the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0173.

⁶ Recorded by the Tallinn Ensemble, also on Toccata Classics TOCC 0173.

⁷ The Violin Sonatas Nos. 1–3 and the Sonata for Solo Violin were recorded by violinist Mikk Murdvee and pianist Sten Lassman on Toccata Classics TOCC 0140.

⁸ Henna Salmela, 'Seven Questions for Mihkel Kerem', https://fennicagehrman.fi/fileadmin/tiedostot/highlights/HL_1-2014_Kerem.pdf.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ E-mail to the author, 9 October 2025.

feelings, but literature and paintings have also provided a spur to creativity. On this subject, he has said:

I find that reliving experiences through composing makes me understand and feel the subject in hand much more deeply and more clearly. Was it Schopenhauer who said something along the lines of music being the art that describes the soul of art itself, while the other arts reflect reality? I find this very fitting here.¹²

Elements of minimalism are present in the two tightly knit symphonic narratives presented here. Indeed, Kerem seems determined to impose restrictions on himself, essentially confining the melodic content of both works to reiterated phrases consisting of a handful of notes. However, these patterns serve as the basis of an ongoing, avowedly symphonic, argument. In the context of elaborating large-scale symphonic structures from repeated, tautly controlled motivic cells, it might be useful to mention another name to add to the list of his acknowledged influences, the Swedish symphonist Allan Pettersson (1911–80), whose Sixth, Seventh and Twelfth Symphonies in particular have continued to resonate with Kerem since he first encountered these works around 2008.

These two symphonies are the last two of four Kerem wrote during the coronavirus national lockdown. All four were inescapably affected by the disorientating atmosphere of that time and each, in its own very different way, reflects something of the circumstances in which it was created. Symphonies Nos. 7 and 8 were conceived as a contrasting pair of works, demonstrating different facets of the composer's symphonic language. Both pieces exclude certain sections and instruments from their orchestral forces to create specific soundscapes. They unfold with the breadth of a natural symphonist, each having the air of a spontaneously evolving organism. Speaking about his approach to his art, Mihkel Kerem has observed that 'Sometimes, when creating, you go very deep into the subconscious and become more of a channel for art than a creator. I usually feel this as a compulsion to write. The subject matter is not in my control then. Writers of novels know what I'm talking about.'¹³

¹² Henna Salmela, *loc. cit.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Symphony No. 7

Kerem has described his Seventh Symphony, written in September 2021, as a ‘very special work’.¹⁴ As he explains,

When I was working with the ideas for it in my head, it wasn’t clear if the orchestras would ever be able to play together as we used to and therefore it was pretty much written with the knowledge that it would never be performed. With that in mind, I was able to be free of any outside influence, whether pleasing the audience, concert promoters, performers or anyone. What I say in this piece is what I really mean.¹⁵

It is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, three trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, percussion (tam-tam, bass drum, side drum, clapper, suspended cymbal) and strings. There are no horns or timpani, a deliberate omission that transforms the sound of a work in which the composer wanted to set a limit upon the colours available to him.

Cast in a single, unbroken movement that adheres to sonata form [1], the symphony is built on a series of tiny motifs, which feature, in varied form, throughout the score. Elements of introspection and contemplation are contrasted with outbursts of motoric rhythmic energy. The music begins quietly in the depths, with two slow, descending chords in the strings followed by a single tam-tam stroke. This passage is followed by the main subject, first heard on the woodwind, which consists of an intricate, web-like cascade of insistently repeated phrases, with instruments entering in canonic succession in different rhythmic groupings, including triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets, sextuplets and septuplets. This seething mass of heterogeneous material is then passed back and forth between the strings and the woodwind, while the brass instruments very gradually build an important stepwise rising motif. When this figure has reached its most fully realised form, an urgent whip-crack on the clapper signals the arrival of the second subject, which follows without a break. Divided double basses give out a series of short,

¹⁴ E-mail to the author, 9 October 2025.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

repeated-note phrases, with the first note heavily accented, underpinned by a bass-drum *crescendo*.

With the principal ideas now introduced, the rest of the symphony consists of an exploration of their expressive potential, presenting them in stark juxtaposition and in tandem, sometimes telescoped and, at other times in augmented form. Of note is Kerem's subtle use of percussion to intensify the mood, as heard in a restatement of the secondary material over which side-drum strokes develop into rhythmically irregular rolls, or in a later passage where, over swirling strings, a succession of bass-drum strokes is heard at intervals first as septuplets, then reduced to sextuplets and so on, down to a two-note figure. At the heart of the piece, the tenacious, chief theme of the symphony is given to the brass section, a hectoring, clipped, *staccato*-laden manifestation of the material, all the more unsettling for being delayed. Once the musical argument has reached a naturally climactic point, the textures start to thin, a couple of carefully placed silences seeming to confirm an irreversible loss of momentum. Eventually, a muted solo viola begins a slow, descending version of the main idea, which is passed on to muted second violin and then to muted first violin in numbed relay. Ominously, the closing bars mirror the opening gesture of the work on strings and tam-tam. Given the restless, constantly shifting and evolving nature of the music, a traditional sort of resolution would surely have been incongruous: it has not been a goal-oriented narrative. Consequently, the final, resonating tam-tam stroke feels as equivocal and inconclusive as the similarly open-ended gesture at the end of Elgar's Third Symphony, as elaborated by Anthony Payne. In both cases, the listener is left with a feeling that care has been taken to leave matters unresolved.

Symphony No. 8

Though Mihkel Kerem's Eighth Symphony was written in January 2022, he already had this soundscape in his mind for some time. Yet, as he confessed, 'I always knew this was the world of Symphony No. 8 and not 7'.¹⁶ There are three movements, all of them equally important in the overarching narrative. They run continuously and flow

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

so naturally from one to another that some time may elapse before first-time listeners become aware that a new movement has begun. The orchestral forces required are modest, and carefully chosen. They comprise one each of flute, alto flute, oboe, clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two flugelhorns, timpani and a string section consisting of violas, cello and double basses only. Among this strikingly individual line-up, it is worth noting the presence of an alto flute, which plays a prominent role; moreover, trombones, tuba and percussion have been excluded, and trumpets replaced with bugles. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the scoring is the complete absence of violins. This omission was made because Kerem 'wanted to express a more mellow, but also slightly odd and empty world. In a concert performance, I imagine the seats of the violins being there, but not occupied'.¹⁷ Rows of unoccupied chairs would undoubtedly make a powerful spectacle, yet even without any such visual indications, listeners to this symphony are unlikely to remain unaware of the critical, determining effect the absence of such a time-honoured mainstay of the orchestra has on the character and atmosphere of the music. Another central aspect of the symphony is that it forms one big *accelerando*, without ever changing metre.¹⁸

Marked *Mesto* (sad, mournful), the opening movement [2] is very spaciouly conceived. It begins statically, with a series of widely spaced, repeated chords on alto flute and bass clarinet. Considerable care is taken to establish the melancholic mood suggested by the musical indication before the main theme begins to take shape. It consists of a sequence of three notes rising stepwise, first heard also on alto flute and bass clarinet. Initially, this phrase is presented in the major key, but it is later slightly varied with the third note flattened to create the beginning of a minor scale. A significant moment is reached when the clarinets give out a six-note phrase reminiscent of the first six notes of the recurring trombone theme that attends Sibelius' Seventh Symphony. Presently, a timpani roll appears, quietly at first and then gaining in intensity before eventually dying away. In the meantime, an undulating figure has emerged on strings

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Another orchestral work that carries off a similar sleight of hand is Esa Pekka Salonen's overture-like *Helix*, which is, in effect, a nine-minute *accelerando*.

and, just as their winding lines become spikier and more chromatic, so begins the second movement, marked *Comodo* (to be played in a relaxed, unhurried tempo) [3]. The woodwind instruments soon appropriate these sinuous phrases, creating an almost liquid, swirling flow.¹⁹ Eventually these rolling paragraphs are transformed, first into rising quintuplets and then into rising sextuplets. Over another prolonged timpani roll, the violas intone the six-note, Sibelian figure with lyrical expressiveness. As the timpani roll persists, so the music increases in volume and the third movement steals in. The marking for this fleet-footed finale [4] is *Volante* (lightly, quickly) and the material, which develops ideas and motifs from the previous movements, is purposeful and resolved. When the smooth *ostinato* patterns in the violas and cellos are transformed into brilliant *staccato* figurations, the music seems to take wing. Once again, a sustained timpani roll builds tension, leading to a final utterance of the six-note theme, now intoned majestically on flugelhorns and unmistakably refencing the Sibelius trombone theme. Its close relationship with the principal, rising-three-note motif of this symphony is made clear in the closing bars, which soar ecstatically, bringing the work to an emphatic conclusion. In the liberating, cathartic closing section of his Eighth Symphony, Kerem envisaged the flight of a large bird over the sea; when he had composed it, he felt an immense sense of relief, as if he had come through the clouds of his Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Symphonies, and finally seen sunshine again.²⁰

Paul Conway is a freelance writer specialising in twentieth-century and contemporary British music. He has reviewed for The Independent, Tempo and Musical Opinion and provided programme notes for The Proms and the Edinburgh, Spitalfields and Three Choirs festivals. His book Moorland Symphonies: An Introduction to the Music of Arthur Butterworth was published by Lyrita in 2023.

¹⁹ In the introduction to his monograph *Modern Estonian Composers* (Koduma Publishers, Tallinn, 1972, p. 4), Harry Olt recalls that Estonia 'has fifteen hundred lakes' and that 'the plains in the northern part of Estonia are enlivened by rivers with picturesque rapids and waterfalls'. It is possible to envisage dynamic water features such as these when listening to the rippling, cascading figures of the central movement of Mihkel Kerem's Eighth Symphony.

²⁰ E-mail to the author, 9 October 2025.

Andrew Manze is widely celebrated as one of the most stimulating and inspirational conductors of his generation, thanks to his extensive and scholarly knowledge of the repertoire, together with his boundless energy and warmth. He held the position of Chief Conductor of the NDR Radiophilharmonie in Hannover from 2014 until 2023. Since 2018, he has been Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. In April 2024 he was appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, starting from September of that year.

His time as Chief Conductor in Hanover saw him lead the orchestra in highly successful tours of China in 2016 and 2019, as well as a return to Japan in 2022. He and the orchestra made a major series of award-winning recordings for Pentatone, focused on the works of Mendelssohn and Mozart. The first recording in the Mendelssohn series won the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik. He has also recorded a cycle of the complete Vaughan Williams symphonies with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra for Onyx Classics.

From 2006 to 2014 Andrew Manze was Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra. During this time he made a number of recordings with them, including the Beethoven *Eroica* (Harmonia Mundi) and a cycle of Brahms symphonies (CPO). He was also Principal Guest Conductor of the Norwegian Radio Symphony Orchestra from 2008 to 2011, and held the title of Associate Guest Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra for four seasons (2010–14).

In much demand as a guest conductor across the globe, Andrew Manze has long-standing relationships with many leading orchestras, including the Royal Concertgebouworkest, the Munich Philharmonic, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Bamberg Symphoniker, Oslo Philharmonic, Finnish Radio, Mozarteumorchester, Salzburg, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, RSB Berlin and the Dresden Philharmonic. He recently made his debuts with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, and returned to the Hallé Orchestra, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and the Salzburg Festival.

In North America he has been a regular guest at the Mostly Mozart Festival in New York, and in recent seasons has conducted the Boston Symphony, New York and Los Angeles Philharmonics. The 2022–23 season saw him make his operatic debut with the Bayerische



Photograph: Benjamin Ealovega

Staatsoper in Munich, conducting performances of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* alongside Schoenberg's *Erwartung*. Other highlights of recent seasons include debuts with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and the London Philharmonic and Swedish Radio Orchestras.

After reading Classics at Cambridge University, Andrew Manze studied the violin and rapidly became a leading specialist in historical performance practice. He was named Associate Director of the Academy of Ancient Music in 1996, and then Artistic Director of the English Concert from 2003 to 2007. As a violinist, he released an astonishing variety of recordings, many of them award-winning.

Andrew Manze is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music and Visiting Professor at the Oslo Academy, and has contributed to new editions of sonatas and concerti by Bach and Mozart published by Bärenreiter and Breitkopf und Härtel. He also teaches, writes about and edits music, as well as broadcasting regularly on radio and television. In November 2011 Andrew Manze received the prestigious 'Rolf Schock Prize' in Stockholm.

andrewmanze.com

The **Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra** is the oldest continuously operating professional symphony orchestra in the UK. The origins of its concert series date back to the formation of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society by a group of Liverpool music-lovers in 1840. The Orchestra is central to the cultural offering in Liverpool, being the largest music organisation and one of the largest artistic organisations in the city. The RLPO gives over 100 concerts each season in its home, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, and has long been an ambassador for Liverpool through an extensive touring schedule throughout the UK and internationally. Domingo Hindoyan joined the Orchestra as Chief Conductor in September 2021 and has extended his contract until 2028.

The RLPO is one of the most active orchestras in the UK in the commissioning and performing of new music, with over 300 works premiered and commissioned in the last twenty years. In recent seasons, it has given the premieres of major works by Eleanor Alberga, Ludovico Einaudi, James Horner, Dani Howard, Emily Howard, Sir Karl Jenkins, Sir James MacMillan, Joanna Marsh, Grace-Evangeline Mason and Roberto Sierra, alongside pieces by Liverpool-born and north-west-based composers, among them Gary Carpenter, Nneka Cummins, Stephen Pratt, Phoenix Rousiamanis, Mark Simpson and Carmel Smickersgill.

The Orchestra gives frequent broadcasts for BBC Radio 3 and Classic *fm*, and over one million people in 180 countries listen to Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

recordings each month on Spotify. The Orchestra and Domingo Hindoyan also feature on several Medici.tv broadcasts with soloists who include Sheku Kanneh-Mason, Nobuyuki Tsujii and Sonya Yoncheva.

Recordings are an important part of the Orchestra's work, and recent releases on the Onyx Classics label include Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 and *Souvenir de Florence; Music from the Americas I: Venezuela!* in a programme of music that includes works by Inocente Carreño, Evencio Castellanos and Juan Bautista Plaza; *Verismo*, an album of orchestral intermezzi from Italian operas; an album of works by Puerto Rican composer Roberto Sierra; and a disc of French works by Roussel, Debussy and Dukas – all conducted by Domingo Hindoyan. With their Principal Guest Conductor, Andrew Manze, releases include the complete Vaughan Williams symphonies and *Job: A Masque for Dancing* (also all on Onyx Classics), the complete Beethoven piano-concerto cycle with Boris Giltburg, conducted by Conductor Laureate Vasily Petrenko, who has also conducted the Orchestra in the complete symphonies of Shostakovich, Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky.

The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra received the 2024 *Gramophone* Classical Music Album of the Year Award in the orchestral category for a Vaughan Williams recording with Principal Guest Conductor, Andrew Manze, making this the Orchestra's third *Gramophone* Award. Other notable recognitions include the Award of the Association of British Orchestras, the South Bank Sky Arts Award for Classical Music, two Royal Philharmonic Society Awards, a *BBC Music Magazine* Award and many more.



Recorded on 6 and 7 June 2025 in The Friary, West Everton, Liverpool
Recording engineer: Chris Tann
Producer: Andrew Cornall

Booklet text: Paul Conway
Cover photograph: Emily Mowbray
Cover design: David M. Baker (david@notneverknow.com)
Typesetting and lay-out: ALN Design, St Albans

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

© Toccata Classics, London, 2026 © Toccata Classics, London, 2026

Toccata Classics CDs are available from online retailers and can also be ordered from our distributors around the world, a list of whom can be found at www.toccataclassics.com.

If we have no representation in your country, please contact:

Toccata Classics, 16 Dalkeith Court, Vincent Street, London SW1P 4HH, UK

Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 E-mail: info@toccataclassics.com

MIHKEL KEREM Orchestral Music, Volume Two

1	Symphony No. 7 (2021)	25:21
	Symphony No. 8 (2022)	26:56
2	I <i>Mesto</i>	14:24
3	II <i>Comodo</i>	6:08
4	III <i>Volante</i>	6:23

TT 52:17

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
Andrew Manze, conductor

FIRST RECORDINGS

Press comment on Volume One (TOCC 0173, with Symphony No. 3, *For the Victims of Communism, Lamento* for viola and strings and String Sextet):

‘I enjoyed this release enormously. Kerem is an interesting composer of great skill, and he clearly has something to say’
—Colin Clarke, *Fanfare*

‘a highly expressive blend of two parts traditional tonality, one part modernism and one part postmodernism, sounding in the symphony not unlike Shostakovich in ironic mode, though sometimes reminiscent of a contemporary version of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*’

—Byzantion, MusicWeb International