

# Finland's contemporary music scene from a historical perspective

Finland is one of the world's foremost mecca of contemporary music. The "**Society of Finnish Composers (Suomen Säveltäjät)**" currently has 237 living composers, ranging in age from the oldest, **Jorma Panula** (b. 1930), to the youngest, **Tara Valkonen** (b. 1999). Many festivals specialized in contemporary music have been held as events for them to perform their works. These include "**Musica Nova Helsinki**" and "**Time of Music (Musiikin aika)**" festivals that present contemporary works from Finland and abroad; "**Tampere Biennale**" which focuses exclusively on composers from Finland; "**Avanti! Summer Sounds festival (Suvisoitto-festivaali)**" which emphasizes contemporary repertoire; "**Korsholm Music Festival**" which focuses on specific composers and etc, are all dedicated to contemporary music, and there are countless other smaller music festivals. This is an astounding number considering that Finland's population is approximately 5.5 million, or one 22nd of Japan's population. In the programme of Finnish classical music concerts, it is customary to include contemporary works in addition to classical works (Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, for example, has included works by living composers in 18 of the 30 programs currently announced for the period from January to the end of May this year). How was this musical soil nurtured in Finland in the postwar period? In order to understand this, in the following section we explore the postwar situation in Finland.

In 1944, Finland, which had lost the war, was burdened with a large amount of war reparations to the Soviet Union, but in 1945, the following year, the "Society of Finnish Composers" was established with the aim of securing the economic status of composers. In 1951, the monumental "**Sibelius Week**" music festival was inaugurated. This shows how strong the people's desire for music was.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Finland entered a period of economic boom, and the government began to provide more and more support for music culture. The numerous music festivals mentioned above also began during this period. In the midst of this momentum, a group of radical composers founded the "**Ears Open Society (Korvat auki!)**" in 1977. Among the founding members were **Magnus Lindberg**, **Esa-Pekka Salonen**, and **Kaija Saariaho**, whose works are included in this program, as well as other composers still active in the forefront of the international music world.

In particular, Saariaho, who has been living in Paris since 1982, has created an astonishing variety of music, thanks to his experience at **IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique)**. Through the use of electronics, Saariaho has found a way to translate her sensory elements of color, smell, and light, etc. into music. In the six operas she has composed, the addition of emotional narrativity and contemporaneous psychological descriptions has opened up new directions for opera and, by extension, new areas of "emotional expression" in music as a whole. Saariaho is the most international composer since Sibelius.

Since the late 2010s, however, Finland has been losing its status as a "mecca for contemporary music" and has been cutting back on funding for cultural programs, a trend that has accelerated, especially as neighboring countries have become embroiled in warfare. As Saariaho said on March 23, 2003, when he was awarded the prestigious title of Member of the Academy of Fine Arts in Finland: "Finland is a country that has made music the core of its identity, and has risen to international fame precisely thanks to its music. I have myself received a lot of support from the Finnish government. (...) But I am afraid the golden age I experienced is ending now. In present-day Finland, cultural policies are considered a negligible footnote, that is being managed without the guidance of bigger ideas and abandoned to market forces, if not to the far-right."

But she concludes the above comments as follows: "My young colleagues, I dedicate this honorary title to you and share it with you. It starts a chain of transmission through which I will remain among you always."

The "paradise" as it was called one day is now inexorably caught up in the great problems of the world. However, I cannot help but hope that the younger generation of musicians nurtured by Finland will overcome this predicament and create music with even greater intensity. I believe in Saariaho's wish to continue the "chain of transmission" to the next generation.