

# Interview with Ēriks Ešenvalds

*Andrea Angelini, Choral Conductor, Teacher, ICB Managing Editor*

**AA:** When did your career as a composer start? And later, in the course of your studies, did you realize that music was the path you would follow?

**EE:** I was born in 1977 in an ordinary Soviet-era family in Latvia. My father was the Ambulance driver, but my mom was the music teacher at the Primary school, and she was the first to teach me children's songs and the basics of music.

My first try to write something of my own on a sheet of music paper was during my early years at my native town's Children's Music School where from the age of seven till fourteen I studied music in depth: piano, singing, music theory, music history, chorus, piano duo. I remember that particular ten-minute break in the Chorus Class when suddenly out of nowhere I decided to write eight bars of music on a piece of paper, then I showed it to the choir director, and she played it on the piano. It sounded interesting, but more interesting was her comment: Ēriks, you should write music, perhaps a song to start with. That was the first time that the word 'composing' became something personal to me.

And I did write a song, several songs ... thanks to Whitney Houston, as she was very popular at that time. In the Soviet Union we didn't have any of her sheet music available, so I learned her songs by ear to play on my piano, and was really surprised at just how few chords the songs were made of – Dm, Bb, C, F, C/E, Am, Gm7. I also learned the modulations that helped songs to become more dramatic. So, I learned these

basic things at age of ten, and using them I wrote some of my own songs, but the problem was to find lyrics for my melodies.

Then when I was fourteen, when Latvia was set free and the previously forbidden churches could open their doors again, I became a Christian at my native town's Baptist church. I was glad to find good lyrics in the church hymns for my melodies, and the church choir was the first performer of my quite-OK first compositions. At the age of fifteen, instead of continuing to study music at the Music High-School, I chose to study seriously mathematics and physics, and later to become a student of psychology at the Latvian University. But at the age of seventeen, after one month of psychology studies, I quit the University on discovering that psychology was not my vocation. That was actually a very hard moment in my life, which ruined my "rose-coloured spectacles" as suddenly one evening my room-mate died from a heart attack.

Neuro-linguistic programming was the first practical training in my studies which I didn't like, and soon I figured out some other training to follow, except the hypnosis to be chosen freely. So, I decided to quit the University.

There was nowhere to go as the entrance exams at all the other Universities and Academies had already ended. Except one, the Baptist Theological Seminary, where I was accepted, and there I started to dream of becoming a Christian psychologist or a pastor, at least.

The first year was fantastic, the second year – very boring, because the music which I had buried inside me slowly started to awake in me. And then someone suggested that I show my church choral songs to a professor at the Latvian Music Academy. And I did.

Finally, at the age of nineteen I became a composition student at the Latvian Music Academy, where, actually, I could hardly get in because I didn't have the Music High School diploma,

and the easy church songs, with no instrumental music, were all I had to show for trying to be a composer. But the professors saw my passion for music which had already reached a high level, and they believed in me. They saw something more in me than I could see myself. And only there, walking the corridors of the Academy, I realized I had found the place of my vocation.

That's my path to the realm of music composition.

**AA: Which musicians have most influenced your way of interpreting music? What routes of stylistic research have you followed?**

**EE:** I studied at the Latvian Music Academy for seven years, learning many techniques and styles to write in. That was an extremely powerful, wide and deep education. I also participated in many composition master-classes abroad led by great composers, such as Michael Finnissy, Jonathan Harvey, Phillippe Manoury, Klaus Huber, Ole Lützow-Holm, Guy Reibel, Marek Kopelent. These figures all had really strong contemporary music approaches, but one thing made a great impression on me, and that was the emotions. Their music, though notated in a very complex manner, was full of human feelings and passion. That really inspired me.

**AA: Choral music lives and prospers mainly because it combines the sound with the word: in the first place there is intelligibility; the sound that is perceived by the ear must be chosen with care and, if a word has to be sung, it is indispensable that one can listen without fatigue. What are the strategies that make possible this perfection?**

**EE:** There are moments in my choral works, such as "Sun Dogs", "The First Tears", when the musical description of an unseen

landscape, or horizon-less space, or dramatic pain, steps out of the linguistic frontiers, and only pure music then brings the torch to the final climax, or summit, or "Mariana Trench". Such a vision is very demanding, and to express it purely without any lines of poetry, in my view, is like the highest aerobatics. But before it, of course, there are lyrics to start the story that the song is about. I have learned first to find the idea or story of the piece; then I go to the library to find perfectly suitable lyrics; and only then I have my nibbled pencil and a blank music sheet and at my piano I compose the piece. I am very demanding in choosing the poetry. I lose interest in poems which have "technical" words, such as tram, electricity, broadcast; also vocabulary terms are zero in my music world. To me, music is the one who leads the charge. But I cannot do without the lyrics as well.

**AA: The human voice is probably the most beautiful among musical sounds. If you had to point out (in addition to the possession of a natural talent) the technical requirements for practising the art of composing for choir, what you would choose? What advice would you give to a young artist immobilized by the fear of failure?**

**EE:** Sing yourself every line/voice you have written! Swim deep into the beauty of polyphonic writing. Study techniques and listen to recordings a lot, really a lot.

**AA: Your works have been performed by high-level choirs. What is your relationship with the performers of the music you compose?**

**EE:** My task is to share with them my naked and true heart which has lived the piece entirely. This is no time to lie. Sometimes there are performers who decide to go their own way (and I don't understand why I have been invited, perhaps just

for a photo?). But then there are those truly precious ones who listen to the composer and try to dig deeper, work harder, expanding their comfort zone. And that is a real collaboration, several of them particularly come to my mind now: Andris Nelsons and the Boston and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestras and Choruses working on my “Lakes Awake at Dawn”, “Whispers on the Prairie Wind” performed by the Utah Symphony and Salt Lake Vocal Artists with ACDA chorus led by Thierry Fischer and Barlow Bradford, Stephen Layton with Polyphony and Trinity College Choir recording two CDs with my music, Richard Nance and Pacific Lutheran University Choir working on my “Northern Lights”, great recording sessions with the Latvian Radio Choir, the “Latvija” State Choir and “Kamer” youth choir; Ethan Sperry and his outstanding choirs, also Toronto Orpheus Choir and Robert Cooper, and, of course, Chor Leoni led by passionate young conductor Erick Lichte. I cannot keep silent about Donald Nally and The Crossing Choir, also Iowa State University Cantamus Women’s Choir and Kathleen Rodde, and the Netherlands National Children’s Choir and Wilma Ten Wolde. These superb collaborations have brought the best artistic results. And it is no secret that I have been involved in many competitions, judging both choirs and compositions, and my ears have always longed for the best sound.

**AA: And the relationship between architecture and music is also interesting: the sound produced depends not only on sound sources, but on the way in which sound waves are reverberated. Which ‘choreography’ is best suited to bring out the best in different compositions?**

**EE:** I have always hoped to have the best venues with the greatest acoustics. Though I am not the producer; and thank God for that! To waste my creative time on those practical details is not my vocation. But what I do like, particularly in large scale works, is to draw different arcs of the equal

parameters of the piece as much as possible, blending the piece into one united form.

**AA: The rhythm can be irrepressible and dominate the melody or, differently, can be the background for a piece, just barely perceptible. What message can a composition conceal?**

**EE:** Parallel dramaturgy, hidden melody or motif, rhythmical patterns, dynamic scaling, etc. are just a few of the many powerful tools of composition. One can describe the composer as a painter, or film-maker, or an actor performing live improvisation without any predictability. This is the most interesting part in the composition: which tools to choose to make the compositional idea or story come alive. If I am like a hippie dreamer or philosopher while thinking about the idea, then I am like a welder during the technical process of the composition. And there is no excuse if the philosophy and welding don't fit together.

**AA: What are your future plans?**

**EE:** Not plans, but dreams: film music! And one particular dream is this: I want to compose music for a feature about Sara Teasdale, the great American poet, whose poetry and life have touched my life. Truly, that's my dream. "I hope" is not the right word to describe that inner feeling about her quasi-transparent poetry which is soft and fiery, dark and deep, luminous and cold, and full of passion and love. She was brave to name those feelings that people sometimes found themselves wordlessly imprisoned in. She was not perfection, nor I am, but her poetry had the dimension of timelessness. The sand flows, waters and clouds flow, and there she stands on the St. Louis bridge catching another glimpse of eternity.

**AA: Could you give a message of encouragement to all lovers of choral music? Why should they continue singing and conducting?**

**EE:** As you said, the human voice is probably the most beautiful among the musical sounds. There are so many great choral works written in different styles, ages and stories. Go away into these choral libraries and explore them! It's a fantastic experience to sing these books, finding yourself in the farthest horizons, the coldest winters, the deepest love and many other true stories.

**AA: If you were not a composer, what would you have liked to do in your life?**

I would probably have been a doctor, a good doctor to help people.

**Ēriks Ešenvalds** is one of the most sought-after choral composers working today, with a busy commission schedule and performances of his music heard on every continent. Born in Riga in 1977, he studied at the Latvian Baptist Theological Seminary (1995-97) before obtaining his Masters degree in composition (2004) from the Latvian Academy of Music under the tutelage of Selga Mence. From 2002 to 2011 he was a member of the "Latvija" State Choir. In 2011 he was awarded the two-year position of Fellow Commoner in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge University. Ešenvalds is married and has four children. Ēriks Ešenvalds has won numerous awards for his work, including the Latvian Great Music Prize (2005 & 2007). The International Rostrum of Composers awarded him first prize in 2006 for The Legend of the Walled-in Woman; he was made a laureate of the Copyright Award in 2006 and was "The Year's New-Composer Discovery" of the Philadelphia Inquirer in 2010, the same year he was nominated for the British Composer Award. In 2011 the Kamēr Youth Choir's CD "O Salutaris" featuring choral music exclusively by Ēriks Ešenvalds won the Latvian Music Records Award as the best academic music album of the year. In 2014 the "Latvija" State Choir's CD At the Foot of the Sky featuring choral music exclusively

by Ēriks Ešenvalds won the Latvian Music Records Award. Ēriks Ešenvalds' compositions have been premiered by ensembles including the Britten Sinfonia, the Choir of Trinity College Cambridge, the Holst Singers and Imogen Heap, Polyphony, the Choir of Merton College Oxford, the Latvian Radio Choir, the "Latvija" State Choir, the Kamēr Youth Choir, Sinfonietta Rīga, the Bavarian Radio Choir, the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, the Netherlands National Children's Choir, the Swedish Art Vocal Ensemble, Salt Lake Vocal Artists, Temple University Philadelphia, The Crossing, Portland State University Chamber Choir, the Choir of the West at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, and The University of Louisville Cardinal Singers, and The University of Mississippi Concert Singers. In 2007 the Latvian National Opera staged his first opera *Joseph is a Fruitful Bough*. His music has been performed at numerous international festivals including Klangspuren in Austria, the Schleswig-Holstein in Germany, Tenso Days in France, the Haarlem Choir Biennale in the Netherlands, Voices Now in the UK, ACDA National and Regional Conferences and the Spoleto Festival in the USA. At the 2014 World Choir Games, held in Riga, he composed the Games anthem, gave a major presentation on his work, acted on competition juries, and had a large-scale production premiered by the Latvian Voices and The King's Singers. Ēriks Ešenvalds' premieres this season include *Lakes Awake at Dawn* for the Boston and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestras, *Whispers on the Prairie Wind* for the Utah Symphony and Salt Lake Vocal Artists with ACDA chorus at the 2015 National Convention in Salt Lake City, *The Passion according to St Luke* for Latvian Radio Choir and Sinfonietta Riga, a new opera at the Latvian National Opera, and pieces for Chor Leoni Vancouver, University of Miami Glee Club, ChorWerk Ruhr and others. April 2015 saw the world premiere in Riga of a new multimedia symphony based on the Northern Lights, with premieres in the USA, Australia, Germany and the UK to follow. His compositions appear on recordings from Trinity College Choir, Cambridge on the Hyperion label and from VOCES8 on Decca Classics. Edition Peters Artist Management is managing Ēriks Ešenvalds commissions and workshop schedule. Ēriks Ešenvalds is published by Musica Baltica ([www.musicabaltica.com](http://www.musicabaltica.com)).

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