

Part Uusberg: Renaissance Man of Rapla

Cara Tasher, conductor and teacher

Despite his very busy calendar and rigorous composing regimen, Pärt Uusberg and I corresponded via email together, just a few weeks shy of his thirtieth birthday on December 16th. In 2014, my UNF Chamber Singers fell in love with his piece *Siis vaikivad kõik mõtted* and then recorded his better-known *Muusika*. These two stunning works drew my interest to enquire more deeply into the composer, his life, and his works.

Cara Tasher: *Many people think of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania together as the Baltic choral giants. Are there any salient features that you can identify as more specifically “Estonian” in regard to choral music?*

Pärt Uusberg: I must admit that I am mainly more familiar with Estonian choral music, and of course I know a bit Latvian and Lithuanian music, but have not got too deeply into those yet. If there is ever something really unique in any nation’s music, it’s the folksong. In this case, it stems from a tradition that is over a thousand years old. I personally feel very close to the Estonian folksong, *regilaul*, on which one of our most famous composers Veljo Tormis has based many beautiful arrangements. I have also used Estonian folksongs in some of my compositions. Recently I have been living and studying in Lithuania and have become more familiar with the old Lithuanian folksongs *sutartines*. As I have been listening to Lithuanian music so much, I feel that many Lithuanian composers have been influenced by *sutartines*. I have also had the opportunity here to attend a specialised class for foreign students where together we sang through many different

sutartines. Through the study of these *sutartines*, it is interesting to notice that there is something similar to *regilaul*, but also something which makes it particularly Lithuanian; it's even difficult to put it into words. Having experienced living here and at the same time having had many opportunities to sing *sutartines*, it seems to me evident that they go somehow together with that land. And I think, that probably singing and listening to Estonian *regilaul* over a significant length of time in Estonia would also help a foreigner deepen the understanding of our culture and more fully understand Estonia through its music.

What was it like to conduct 10,000 people on your piece Muusika in the open air? (And, congratulations on yet another of your pieces being chosen for the next Youth Song Festival for 25,000 singers!) Please tell us more about the Summer Song Festivals.

It was a very interesting experience for me. I must admit that it was rather more a dream than a reality, not in the sense that I have been dreaming of conducting in a Song Festival – actually I haven't, more in the sense that in the moment itself, those two and a half minutes were rather dreamlike. Somehow time stopped, but also, just after finishing conducting, I felt like it all had lasted for only 10 seconds so it was kind of a paradoxical experience in the case of perceiving time. I have not experienced something like that since then.

Laulupidu, the song festival, has been very close to my soul since I was a baby. My mum is a choral conductor and I have been attending song festivals since I was in her womb. I must admit that when I was a child and youngster, my love for the song festival was unconditional. Back then I did not know much about the festival, how it is organised and I also did not note the differences between the amateur choirs and orchestras

and the professional ones. I truly loved the atmosphere of *Laulupidu* and I greatly enjoyed singing there together with thousands of singers. Nowadays I experience it a bit differently. Although I was aware that, by delving too deeply into the study of music, many people lose their childlike astonishment of the art, I decided to study music professionally. Dealing with music every day changes your sense and understanding of music. I still love the atmosphere of the song festival, but musically I enjoy a Sibelius or Brahms symphony more than a 2-3 minute *a cappella* song written for an amateur choir and performed outdoors (and nowadays supported with sound amplification). Of course it is still a magical moment when 25,000 people sing together, but that is not even so much about the music, it is something more... and I am very happy that this kind of tradition lives on in Estonia!



Pärt Uusberg and Arvo Pärt

Describe your compositional process

In a way I think that maybe it is not good idea to talk too much about writing music. The beauty of composition is that you are really alone with yourself, meeting your soul and I would not like to put it into words. Of course, I could still talk about more practical things. For example, it has been very important to me to write music every day (excluding holidays, of course) ever since I had my first composition lesson with my teacher Tõnu Kõrvits, who told me: "Why do you think, that you are different from a pianist or a violinist, who has to practice his/her instrument every day?" I appreciated his lesson and I have tried to maintain a disciplined routine. I still have some periods where I do not write at all, and during the summer I have often gone for quite a long period without writing any music. I need that to kind of digest everything I have collected in my brain, and to kind of forget it. Then I return to composing after the break maybe more fresh and open minded. When I write regularly, I try to work about 3-4 hours every morning. Of course, that kind of practice has come into my life since I have started to identify myself more professionally as a composer. I started composing actually before studying composition, and back then I did not write every day; I did it more for fun, and when I had time. Now I have commissions and deadlines, so I need to plan my time quite strictly. I must admit, that in a way I miss the freedom of composing what I want when I want, but I also feel that, by writing more routinely, my commissions are improving. Maybe some day the freedom will come back, and then I will have even more knowledge and experience to express my feelings and thoughts in music.

Based on the films that you have acted in or composed scores for, it seems that you have an interest in social justice and addressing current issues through film. Describe some ways in which you have programmed, composed or performed music that brings these to light in the choral art form

The truth is, that I did not choose the topics of the films

that I have been connected with. When I was a youngster I also dealt with theatre a bit and because of that I had a possibility to act in a movie. I must admit that I even did not like the topic of the movie which I acted in (*Klass*) very much. The music that I have written for films has always been commissioned. Of course, it is very sad that there are kind of silly things in our world like school violence or deportation, but in art, I believe more in beauty. I think that there are different artistic figures – the ones, who are fonder of innovation and are also sometimes fond of being socially active as an artist. And there is another type of creative person, more conservative and not too socially active as an artist. I am for sure the second one. For me, writing music is more of a possibility to communicate with eternity – to leave my message. And what is the message? It is just the way I sense and love music and, through it, the world. Music for me is the most beautiful part of eternity. It just is eternal and we are not, and there is nothing we can do about it. So through music, I can communicate with souls who have already left here 500 years ago. Singing or listening to old music gives the possibility to kind of feel time and its live energy that was written down on notepaper long ago. So, being involved in music makes us immortal and opens a larger space of communication.

What is your dream commission?

My dream is actually not to write commissions at all. My dream is to be free to write what I want whenever I want and to take as much time as I like to complete it. Writing a commission and musically exploring an idea that comes freely to my mind are two very different feelings. I do not know why, but it has been my life-long dream to write a symphony. That is why I decided to study classical composition. I do not yet know if I am able to write one, and another question is what kind of symphonic piece could you call “a symphony” nowadays?

But I hope that one day there will be a performance of my symphony J. Also, I would like to write at least one opera and a Requiem.

Do you have advice for other aspiring composers?

I would like to quote my teacher Tõnu Kõrvits: "Every composer has his/her own song to sing, just sing yours!" He also said that it is important to serve the music, and that is why he believes it is important to write music every day! I agree with him and respect these two points a lot.



I know you are headed soon to study conducting in Vilnius with Vytautas Miškinis, please describe your journey until now

I was born in a little town called Rapla (circa 6000 inhabitants). I studied in an ordinary high school there, but

I had a lot of interesting optional after school activities: studying the trumpet in the children's music school, singing in my mum's choir (*Riini manda*), and I was involved in the school theatre. I was also active in sports and was a national champion in both pole vault and discus (although Rapla is very small and those events were not the most popular J)! Later, I played volleyball. My love for choral music began while singing in my mum's choir, where I felt a lot of warm feelings. I loved choir camps and even ordinary choir rehearsals made me excited. Many of my lasting friends sang in that choir, and now some of them sing in my chamber choir that I created in 2008 (*Head Ööd, Vend*). Private trumpet lessons with Aigar Kostabi were also very important to me because they showed me the way to professional music. Actually, at first, I wanted to become a trumpeter, but I was not very successful due to my high levels of performing anxiety. In 2005, my life changed significantly when I moved to Tallinn and started studying choral conducting with Heli Jürgenson at Georg Ots Music School. Since then I have been dealing with music as part of my every day routine, for almost ten years. After finishing Georg Ots Music School as a choir conductor, I decided to continue my studies in composition at the Estonian Music and Theatre Academy with Tõnu Kõrvits. I still divide myself between being a composer and a conductor and it has been difficult to decide if that is a good idea. I think that there are pluses to doing both, but they each take a lot of time, and if to want to go more deeply into one, it makes it a bit difficult doing both. Currently, my number one activity is composing, but conducting provides some variety. Also, conducting my own music makes it easier to express my compositional intention, so that is probably the main reason why I continue conducting.

Pärt Uusberg (1986) is an Estonian composer and choral conductor. He graduated as a conductor from the class of Heli

Jürgenson at the Tallinn Georg Otis Music School in 2009. In 2014 he completed a degree in composition with Tõnu Kõrvits at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. Always an active choral singer, Pärt began in the Riinimanda children and youth choirs conducted by his mother Urve Uusberg. Throughout the years he has also sung in the Estonian Youth Mixed Choir (Taavi Esko and Kadri Leppoja), Voces Musicales (Risto Joost), and World Youth Choir (Ragnar Rasmussen and Josep Vila i Casanas). In 2008 Pärt created his own chamber choir Head Ööd, Vend (Good Night, Brother), which has become known for beautiful church concerts as well as successful performances at choral competitions. Pärt has also been working with the Estonian Youth Mixed Choir and Mitte-Riinimanda Youth Choir. Several of Pärt's choral compositions have already become popular and have acquired critical acclaim. Head Ööd, Vend has also recorded a CD with his compositions that is available on <http://www.emic.ee/>

Edited by Mirella Biagi, UK/Italy