

Colours Matter to Me

An interview with composer Toivo Tulev

By Brigitta Davidiants

Toivo Tulev is a leading contemporary Estonian composer. His music has been performed at the festivals MaerzMusik, Warsaw Autumn, Klangspuren and many others. In 2006 he was awarded the music prize of the Estonian Music Council. Some of his recent works include Summer Rain for 8 voices (2006); Before, Cello Concerto (2006); Songs for 3 vocal groups, 3 instrumental groups and soloists (2005); Deux, Flute Concerto for flute, soprano and orchestra (2004); Further Shore, Silence, Rain for 7 instruments, tape and video (2003); Be Lost In the Call for sinfonietta and chant (2003); And Then in Silence There with Me Be Only You for 12 voices (2002).

You didn't appear in public at a young age.

No, I didn't. On the one hand, I was inwardly immature and too self-critical. When a person realises he has nothing to show, then why should he do it. However, there were also outward reasons. I got the opportunity to study music at the conservatoire quite late: by the time I was 27 years old. And began with musicology, since composition was not something I was allowed to study. I made the transition through the "back door". It is thanks to Eino Tamberg who supported my wish to change my major after a year and half of studies.

Why weren't you allowed to study composition?

The music I offered to the decision-makers did not suit their idea of politically correct music. It was religious music.

Was that the only reason for your late public appearance?

It was difficult to appear in public. Estonian music of that period was stylistically more defined, more closed, even standoffish. There were hidden but entirely operational borders, founded on self- and ideological censorship and inspired by fear. And I have never fit into generally acknowledged ideological framework. Though I am accepted now. The society nowadays is quite standoffish and success-oriented. But as today's slogans are tolerance and acceptance, so am I tolerated and accepted.

What has your education been like?

I value all the schools where I have studied. The 7th high school gave me a certain flair for and interest in languages, at Georg Ots Music School I obtained the basic music education. One of my teachers there was Anti Marguste, who had clearly defined views on how music should be created and taught. I would add to this list also the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir where I became aware of music in a wider sense, mainly thanks to Tõnu Kaljuste, who has taught me more than I have learned at any school. We sang quite a lot of different repertoire. There was much to learn from the numerous works and the approach to music.

After studies with Eino Tamberg, I learned more about Gregorian chant with Louis-Marie Vigne in Paris and took private lessons in composition with Sven-David Sandström in Stockholm. Then there were master studies at the Estonian Academy of Music and an opportunity to study electroacoustic music in Cologne. Now I have a doctoral thesis to finish.

Who were your greatest teachers?

First one to come to mind – beside my composition teachers – is the violin teacher of my kids, Prof. Endel Lippus. I have learned from him how to be a human, how to care. Then there is Mihkel Tamm who showed me how limited a life can be when it's tied only to material and visible world. Mother Theresa Perciaccante from Bethlehem, whose even-handed joyfulness has always moved me. Sometimes, when I can't decide how to proceed, I picture her and try to imagine what she would suggest. Also Hugo Lepnurm. I have recalled him a lot lately, because he had the human and musician part of himself perfectly balanced. There is a legend about how once upon a time he was offered a chance to perform at the Palace of Congress in Moscow. This didn't happen often at all. He had said no, because he'd promised to play organ on the same Sunday during a service in Kuusalu church. This story is a good reminder of what the balance between a human being and a musician, between musician's ambitions and human straightforwardness and honesty should be like.

You are now yourself a teacher and the Head of the Composition Department at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. Has this just happened or do you do it because it's your mission?

I don't know what a mission is. If a person needs help, I try to assist him. It's rather like that I'm attracted to and motivated by human closeness, not great ideas.

Do you like teaching?

Yes, I do, although I have become a teacher through formal education. However, I don't feel that I was born to be a teacher or that I really need to be one. Since it has happened, I simply try to do the best I can.

Do you belong, in the context of contemporary Estonian music?

Concerning the technique – yes, I do, but the music is such that a self-respecting composer wouldn't take it too seriously, at least not the pieces such as *Der Herr* or *Sans Mesure*. Sure, we don't write music for composers, but I wouldn't mind if they, too, could understand it. I have spoken with some foreign colleagues and sensed that they also divide the music into something that does or doesn't fit into general concert scene. Most of my music doesn't fit there very well. These boundaries are imposed by self-respecting contemporary music festivals, too.

Does our NYJD-festival respect itself?

Yes, but it also respects Estonian music. And that's good. By the way, Erkki-Sven Tüür was one of the first to say that it is music that I write. And thanks to him, the NYJD-festival was one of the first doors that let me in.

When did it happen?

During the first festival, I believe, in 1991.

How do you write music? Do you accomplish everything you wish for?

I still haven't accomplished all that I wish. I would hesitate to say that I'm hindered by technique, but there are many things that could be done in a better way or more convincingly. And everything could be done faster. Sometimes I'm very impatient. I would like to start working on a new piece as soon as possible. If I can't do that, I'll become restless. Naturally the maturing process does not equal the time spent writing.

To an onlooker it seems as if you have a very strict rhythm.

Certainly there is a rhythm, but if I'm able to write down only a fraction of all the thought and sound flow, I become restless. I would like to write down more of what I hear. But I accomplish only a small part. The rest seems to stream past me... The flow that I cannot record hampers my work on other pieces.

Your works seem to be a meeting place for the most differing ideas. How do they merge?

When I'm writing, the picture seems very mottled, almost syncretistic. In fact, the seemingly distant visions are united by a single theme. On a philosophical plane: if a boy loves a girl and finds the feeling beautiful, then at some moment he will start looking for the source of this simple human emotion. It seems as if an 8th-century Hindu, 16th-century Carmelite and 12th-century Iranian poet are unrelated, but actually they are bound by the same passion. I realise that this is not a quest for wisdom in a traditional sense.

There are certain periods in life when a person is more open to different influences. When at that period you happen to come across people who matter, their influence can be enormous. In my life, they were Mahatma Gandhi at first and a little later mother Theresa from Calcutta.

Your music combines different styles, from sonorism to minimalism.

Colours matter to me, both in common sense and in music. I try to deal with colours, which make me feel good in long term. Perhaps this attempt to sustain a certain mood for longer period relates to minimalism. However, when I keep going, the flow of timbre alternation becomes also important. But in this I try to be gentle and look for constancy. I avoid kaleidoscopy and a wilful destruction of a certain state of mind. All decisions, even decisions about colours, can be very simple. And yet the decisions made on the basis of "like" and "dislike" are fundamental. They endure. We don't have to analyze them.

It has always seemed to me that in your works, you stop time. Does this feeling result from some hidden compositional technique?

Yes, I realise it when people talk about some piece being especially long. And then they find out that it was 6 minutes long, not fifteen or sixteen. Speaking of techniques – yes, it is related to a certain covert repetitive technique, which appears to be seamless.

When I started writing, the musical time didn't mean much to me. I didn't even know how to write so that the music would be a movement from point A to point B, which are tied together by time. The pieces were short, compressed and reminiscent of icons, where the gaze stops, moving from one element to another. Those pieces were rather more interesting to see than to hear. Perhaps I have carried this sort of transfixed gaze over to the music I write nowadays.

Which instrumentations do you prefer?

I'm mostly working on commissions, although I try to use every chance to write music unrelated to commissions. A commissioned work usually prescribes the instruments used. If the number is small, I'm more tied up. If it is greater, then I can play. Theoretically, the possibility of achieving soundscapes that please me is more likely in the second case. Though it doesn't mean that with limited number of instruments you can't vary the sound infinitely. But the sound is then defined and bound by timbre and playing technique. In that case the variation would have to happen in the percussion section with its undefined content, thus enabling the joy of discovery to continue.

Some years ago I felt that you preferred instruments to vocal.

And so it was at first. I didn't have contacts with singers. But the state of play with our singers is wonderful. And today it is more exciting to go down that particular road. The last concert comprised only vocal works. It has been remarked upon that majority of my works – also instrumental works, such as concertos for flute and cello – are closely related to the word. Although the word may not always be audible.

A special role the early music plays in your life has been noted. Is the early music experience reflected in your works?

Well, eventually all musical and non-musical activities as well as the entire range of preferences are reflected in a person's works. When I think about music that I prefer to listen to, then on the one hand I'm very interested in contemporary music. But most of it won't fit into selection that I would listen with joy and pleasure. And most of early music does fit there. I have asked my students if they like to listen to their music before going to bed or while having their morning coffee. The honest answers were that they wouldn't do it if they wanted to feel good. At this point a question arises: why would you write music that you yourself don't want to listen to and whose presence you find taxing?

My interest in early music had also a practical side. To prepare concert programmes, I've had to work with numerous scores. Naturally this influenced my own works, sometimes in the form of quotations from early music. But those have been rather recollections based on listening experience and then evolving into strings of associations. *Music for a While*, *Amictus nube*, *Consummatum est* come to mind. Each of them entails a small dose of early music, which on the one hand gives structure to general musical development and on the other hand could provide a key to understanding – if the quotation is heard and recognised, of course.

And on this sort of a map, what place do the studies of electroacoustic music have?

As life has turned out, I haven't had a chance to get very much involved in that field. There has been no time to sit in the studio and do all the technical stuff that I don't really know how to do. I need constant assistance and this kind of work gets very time-consuming.

But would it fascinate you?

Oh yes. I have some thoughts in this area and for the next year's NYDD-festival I'm writing a piece for flute and live electronics.

You have sung in ensembles Vox Clamantis, Choeur Gregoriaen de Paris and Heinavanker. Yet you have led the early music ensemble Scandicus, which is not very well known.

Well, it couldn't be very well known since our goal wasn't to give concerts. *Scandicus* had many people coming and going. It was founded in 1995 as *Schola Gregoriana* and most of its programme related to contemporary or earlier music. This phase is behind me now. All that I learned I can now pass on in liturgical context, by teaching singing to the sisters in St Bridget convent in Estonia and Turku convent in Finland. And I'm doing it for already thirteenth year.

I seem to vaguely recall that once you were inspired by rock music.

Probably many of us have been in a school band. Perhaps it wasn't any more than that but I still have interest in certain genres that are not really accepted in academic circles or at least are frowned upon. Sometimes I listen to very loud, hard rock at home or in my car.

What exactly?

I like to listen to Led Zeppelin, Robert Fripp, Robert Plant or Jimi Hendrix, a favourite of mine, a wonderful composer.