

Klas Torstensson's expedition

There are people who climb the highest mountains or dive into the deepest sea caves. Adolescents who sail solo around the world. And then there are composers who explore pristine soundscapes. Klas Torstensson is such a composer. He dangles from cliffs, wanders over tranquil plains, weathers gusts of winds ... while working in his loft at home. The result is an amazingly strong and rich oeuvre which has been performed, praised, and admired all over the world.

Klas Torstensson (1951) was born and raised in Sweden. In the 2012/2013 season he is composer in residence at the Concert Hall of the 21st Century in Amsterdam. Torstensson has been living in the Netherlands since 1973 but his Swedish roots have crept into the music. A universe of snow and ice; rugged, yet clean as a whistle.

Torstensson holds that composing requires heroic courage and monkish patience. 'I think I must be the most painstakingly slow composer on earth', he once remarked. He can easily spend a year on a composition that lasts barely a half hour. Only after outlining the overall form, the character, and the gestures of a piece does he define the exact pitches and instruments as well as the music for each instrument. His scores, brimming with details and articulation marks, never lose sight of the big picture. It shows in his music, which is like a giant wave dragging you into an adventure. Resistance is futile.

Listening to Torstensson's music is an experience that affects the senses to the point of hallucination. Feral percussion erupts and reverberates through the space. Powerful passages of the wind section whip up a storm while the string and woodwind players produce clouds of sound that paint shimmering colours on the inner eye. But there is also silence. Torstensson offers numerous shades of stillness; whispering, crispy, or ominous, as if in the eye of a hurricane.

Older pieces such as *Barstend Ijs* (1986) or *Stick on Stick* (1990) possessed a lot of drive but now a more lyrical dimension has come to the fore starting from his opera *The Expedition* (1999), about Swedish explorer Salomon August Andrée's ill-fated journey to the North Pole. Towards the end of the piece, the lover left behind by expedition member Nils Strindberg imagines how her heart gives out when it is buried in snow and ice. We hear the staggering emotional outburst of a woman who knows she has been abandoned for good. In this way, Torstensson arrives at boundless beauty and poignancy: 'In the end, it's all about love. And death.'

Based on this insight, time and again Torstensson manages to touch sensitive chords. *Self-portrait with percussion* (2006) contains excruciatingly beautiful chord progressions that will tug the heartstrings of even the most hardened critic. In *Fastlandet* (2007), cosmic forces guide us to the forlorn birdcall of the cor anglais, surrounded by dead silence. And then there is the brilliant *Violin concerto* (2010) where the soloist floats away into otherworldly Scandinavian folk melodies. 'Sublimated homesickness', as Torstensson calls it.

At first glance his music seems to focus on the confrontation between paltry human beings and omnipotent nature but the story could just as easily be told from the opposite perspective. For what are all those mountains, valleys, mesmerizing colours, and silent plains if not the landscape of the human soul? Come and join Klas Torstensson's musical expedition.

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