

## Klas Torstensson

NÄSSJÖ, 16 JANUARY 1991

Klas Torstensson studied music theory and composition from 1969 to 1973 at Folkliga Musikskolan Ingesund and musicology at the University of Göteborg. In 1973 he moved to the Netherlands, where for four years he composed electronic music at the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht. In 1974 he took up residence in Amsterdam, that year making his first contact with the Asko Ensemble, which was to have great significance for his development as a composer.

Torstensson has retained his Swedish nationality but in practice, certainly in musical practice, he is a Dutchman, although this does not mean that his music has a typically Dutch flavor. In as far as his complex music is related to a tradition, however, it is closer to that of Xenakis and Varèse than to contemporary Dutch music in which composers, regardless of their style, generally opt for a certain economy of means. Torstensson also works with other contemporary music ensembles. For example, he has composed for Orkest de Volharding (Järn) and the Hoketus ensemble (Spåra). During the 1986 Holland Festival Torstensson's grand 'intermedia' project *Barstend Ijs* [Breaking Ice] was staged. His next project in particular, the *Licks & Brains* trilogy, drew international attention. He was awarded the Matthijs Vermeulen Prize in 1991 for his large-scale orchestral piece *Stick on Stick* (1990). The work, which had not yet been performed at the time of the award, was premiered in 1993. Earlier that year, his *Urban Songs* for soprano, computers and ensemble, a work in part composed at the IRCAM, was performed by the soprano Charlotte Riedijk and Ensemble InterContemporain. Most of Torstensson's compositions have been published by Donemus, which has also issued LP and CD recordings of several of his works.

Torstensson thinks of composing as designing 'listening scenarios'. Regardless of the complexity of the work, his main concern is always what the finished product will sound like. It is because of this that he always strives to work with musicians, not only while the piece is being composed, but afterwards as well. Little is left to chance in his meticulously planned scores.

Torstensson strives to create multi-layered, labyrinthine textures: ensembles split into sub-ensembles, which then interact with each other. The listener may choose, so to speak, from various trajectories. 'I don't seek to give substance to thought, but direction', he explains.

The starting point in his music is often of nearly elementary simplicity, as

is the goal. How may a chord be reached from a single tone, velocity from sluggishness, unison from polyphony, agreement from conflict?

However it is the intervening motion, the different musical strategies and the – possibly unsuccessful – attempt at rapprochement that form the essence of his music. The image of an obstacle course is certainly applicable to Torstensson's work. The music repeatedly returns to its starting point, often given in the opening measures, only to set out again in a different manner. As new attempts progress new obstacles emerge, old strategies are given another chance, and new ingredients are gradually added. Thus the overall form takes on the semblance of a series of variations which, however, involve continual development, exploration, and extensions of the material.

From Torstensson's propensity for describing musical situations and processes in terms of such metaphors as 'tone clouds', 'evaporation' and 'granular structures' (metaphors that also turn up in many of the titles he gives his pieces) the supposition arises that he tends to approach musical material as though it were physical matter. This view is in part linked with his background as a composer of electronic music, but also with the great emphasis he places on the physical aspects of sound, a typical characteristic of his music. It is manifested in, among other things, his interest in the generally known and as yet unexplored acoustic resources of musical instruments. *Solo*, for bass saxo-

phone, probes in its first pages into the sounds the instrument can make when played without the mouthpiece. *Koorde*, for two pianos, has a middle movement in which the instruments are prepared in various manners. In his orchestral piece *Stick on Stick* Torstensson employs iron pipes and metal plates, as well as the conventional percussion instruments, and he meticulously specifies their dimensions and the sounds he envisions.

The bodily activity of the performer also plays a large role. The physical exertions of playing in the previously mentioned *Solo* are further accentuated by breathing and throat noises the composer specifies. The accelerated breathing and sighs of the musician take on, aside from the theatricality of a literal illustration, an autonomous musical significance. The performer makes various attempts to move from one musical 'situation' to another and employs whatever tactics needed to reach this goal. Seen in this light, the musician's struggle to produce the notes is merely a component of the abstract, composed struggle that is enacted in the notes, or, more accurately, sound material.

Torstensson's music is decidedly aperiodic, for rhythm is also subjected to constant tension. Even synchronous playing, often a priori in other music, becomes part of the discourse. It requires constant exertion. Torstensson gives shape to the 'out-of-synch' playing coupled to that effort by spreading the succession of asynchronous notes through the ensemble in such a way as to give the illusion of motion through space. Literal, mechanical repetition is also employed, but then as a musical equivalent of stasis, of the contentless quality that surfaces when all energy has been consumed. Exemplary of this is a passage in *Stick on Stick* in which nearly the entire orchestra gets stuck in repetitive, rhythmic hand clapping.

Pitch and intervals are mere contributors to the scenario rather than its prime conveyors. At crucial moments, pitch is of great importance, but only as an element of color, for example when (quasi-) diatonic sounds in open spacing are placed in an atonal and dissonant environment. When Torstensson employs such contrasting material, he often consciously selects sounds calculated to evoke particular images. In *Barstend I/s*, for example, references are made to a kind of music – Indonesian *ketjak* – that epitomizes a tropical atmosphere. Only in a more recent work like *Urban Songs* do quasi-quotations begin to come clearly to the forefront, with undisguised references to a Lebanese folk song and rap music, which are dissected into phonemes and fragments and interwoven like trace elements into an amalgamation of instrumental, electronic and vocal dimensions that blend and contrast with each other.

*The Last Diary* (1994), written for the Asko and Schönberg ensembles, closes with an exceptionally prolonged (by Torstensson's standards), gradually coagulating *rallentando*. In part through the declaimed solo part, this section

makes a strong dramatic impact. The increasingly fragmented texts are taken from the recovered diary of the Swedish Arctic explorer Salomon August Andrée, who perished on the polar ice in an ill-fated balloon expedition in 1897. The same material served as a basis for his opera *Expeditionen*, the composition of which had occupied Torstensson since 1994. Plans for a staged performance fell through, and the work was finally premiered in concert form during the 1999 Holland Festival. In spite of this setback, things have gone well for Torstensson: his music has found its way to many venues and festivals in a variety of countries all over the world, making him one of the most successful and cosmopolitan composers of the Netherlands.

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