Magnus Lindberg in conversation
Moving between extremes
A leading Finnish composer discusses some of his recent music with Joshua Cody and Kirk Noreen

Joshua Cody

Compared to Ur, Related rocks is very different, and is composed from a conspicuously eclectic group of stylistic sources. As Related rocks is the more recent work, does it represent a current trend in your writing?

Magnus Lindberg

That’s an interesting question, since, when I look back over my compositional career, I’ve never felt that I underwent a rupture in terms of style. It’s a matter of an organic process, and my teacher, Paavo Heininen, had a fantastic understanding of variation form: the idea of doing very different things in the same way. Of course we refer to Stravinsky as the composer who constantly changed himself, but I would say he never changed: he was Stravinsky from the very first piece up to the very end. It comes down to the consistency of method, and Stravinsky happened to have a fantastic one, which enabled him to feed his creativity with the material at hand, without losing his own creative personality.

JC

Like you, Stravinsky was celebrated on the continent, especially in France; and both of you come from outside the continent. Maybe there’s a cultural connection here between the relationship to style.

ML

This is an interesting issue too, of course: the notion of being outside of a cultural tradition versus inside, and the bearing of that sense upon stylistic decisions. Again, I’ve never felt I’ve undergone a particular stylistic rupture, but at the same time I acknowledge a certain eclecticism – the difference between Ur and Related rocks, to use our example, in terms of how they actually sound. But I wouldn’t say they’re so different.

JC

You’re sharing our program with works by Tristan Murail, with whom we spoke yesterday. We are at as late a point as possible in the twentieth century, and what is somewhat surprising is Murail’s sense of connection to the French musical tradition, through his teacher, Messiaen, back to Debussy and even Dukas. He feels relatively unaffected by other twentieth-century compositional developments, like the Viennese; he thinks the priority history textbooks give to the Schoenbergian ‘revolution’, for instance, is exaggerated. For him, the single crucial event would not be Schoenberg’s conversion to serialism, but the advent of electronics. Your influences, on the contrary, are extremely varied: perhaps here we have another illustration of the difference between the continental composer and those, to use your word, on the periphery.

ML

I think it does. Tristan, of course, is a continental composer, having been brought up in a culture where becoming a composer was not particularly unheard of, where there were, in fact, schools of thought to follow. As far as Schoenberg – without going into a discussion about the artistic value of his music, which I, by the way, think is fabulous – still there was a man who was deeply concerned with the future of music over the next century; having given us some of the most beautiful tonal works, like Verklärte Nacht and Gurrelieder, built on the visible remnants of the tonal world, he realised at a certain moment that he had to do something radically different, and it remains radical. I’m not the one to say whether he made the right decision. But I definitely think that he showed us what our century, which is soon over, was about, in that one cannot stay to a certain script; tradition is constantly reinvented, and Schoenberg remains the strongest exemplar of this idea.

And I have the deepest respect for other lines of development: those from Fauré, for example, from Berlioz, from Rameau, even, that many French composers identify with. Of course this is, perhaps, one of the advantages, for me, of being from the outside; when we look back into history and think about the fight between composers like Brahms and Wagner, for example, we see that they weren’t so far apart from each other, really, because we have the luxury of distance in time. Perhaps I enjoy a sort of similar distance, but in geography. And I think there are many links between Tristan’s music – which I admire tremendously – and that of some German composers, for example. We’re all in the same boat.

Of course, Schoenberg paid a high price for giving up the tonal model, the framework. He was a

This dialogue is an edited transcription of an interview with Magnus Lindberg, which took place before an Ensemble Sospeso concert given in New York on 11 November 1999, at which Related rocks and Ur were performed.
great musician, and by dragging the balance towards the parameter of pitch, his rhythmic sense, and even his formal sense, became very simple, almost reverting to the Baroque. I think that was a very sensitive and sincere feeling of a genuine artist, doing what he felt was necessary at that moment.

JC

We spoke of this very point too yesterday: the famous contradiction between Schoenberg's experimental use of harmony and his conservative use of form. Tristan seems to agree with Pierre Boulez, who felt that in this sense Schoenberg's music ultimately failed to live up to its promises of breaking free of tradition. But Helmut Lachenmann has a very different diagnosis: that this obvious contradiction was entirely intentional, that Schoenberg was making a very strong aesthetic statement, almost postmodern in its violence. And you have a third opinion, that it was almost sentimental on Schoenberg's part to look backwards as well as forwards, purposeful and not ironic.

ML

I guess I'm a bit classical, in the sense that I have faith in equilibrium as a goal; we have seen so much art pushed to the extremes, neglecting totally the idea of balance. In trying to write music I've felt a very strong impulse to the notion of equilibrium, and when I push an element to an extreme I feel an urge to withdraw somewhere else. I think Schoenberg was very sensitive in that respect. Another composer I'm reminded of—he happens to be Finnish, but that's not why I bring him up—is Sibelius who, of course, is often considered traditional and conservative. He was not necessarily traditional; he used harmony traditionally, but what he achieved with that was certainly as modern as Varèse. Incidentally, I find many interesting links between Varèse and Sibelius, those wonderful composers, both often misunderstood by commentators on musical modernism.

And anyway, what is modernism? How can someone define it? I'm a bit opposed to these definitions. A work like Tapiola by Sibelius is one of the breakthroughs in terms of being an entirely contemporary work of modernism, for its time.

Kirk Noreen

Can we talk about Related rocks? It was commissioned by the IRCAM, as was Ur. But before we speak about the use of electronics in the work, what does the title mean?

ML

Well, it's not a programmatic title [sic]. As far back as the mid-eighties I had had the idea of writing a work for two pianos and two percussionists. At that time, my major concern was how to build a bridge between these very different instruments.

Of course the piano, in our century, has been mainly used as a percussion instrument; I wished to stress that point of view. Now, at the very time when I was involved in building up the dramaticurgy of the work, I happened to see a geological exposition, and was struck by the immense natural variety of stones, rocks, minerals, collected from far corners of the earth; and it was at the same time a completely unified assemblage. And this struck me as a beautiful metaphor, not just for the work I was composing, but for how I feel about music in general: the notion of taking very different sound objects, and exploring, from different perspectives and different distances, qualities they share. At that moment I also realised I would use electronics in the piece, not as a bridge between the pianos and the percussion, but to create a space within which the different materials can be handled. Perhaps it's also kind of a trio: maybe a Bermuda Triangle. If I could borrow from Elliott Carter, the work could easily be called Triple duo: two percussionists, two pianos, and two electronic channels.

There are two sources of the electronic sounds. Some are transformations of the sound of the baroque cello. And another source was the sound of a huge grand piano, which I literally destroyed; I sampled the physical destruction of the instrument.

JC

Since we're setting your works with those of Tristan Murail, I should ask you what you learned from studying with Gérard Grisey.

ML

Those were important years for me, in the early eighties. I had been working with electronic sounds from the beginning; my first contacts with electronic music go back to the early seventies, at the Sibelius Academy. In fact, we approached ideas of electronic music theoretically, because we had very little equipment; when I went to the Electronic Music Studio of Stockholm, I finally had the chance to put my ideas into reality. Electronics have long been important to me, in spite of the fact that I consider myself an instrumental composer; it seemed a very natural way of adding expression to music.

This was the importance, for me, of studying with Gérard, since his aesthetics are based on an empirical approach to sound; ultimately, music is the 'output', whether acoustically or electronically produced. What one does in the studio is what one does with an orchestra.

And in spite of this, sound itself is something that is not of crucial, defining importance for my music. Of course I like sound; but to build up an entire work on concepts of sound as such is not something I try to do. Because there is a strong classical impulse in my makeup, perhaps stronger...
Magnus Lindberg: Related rocks (excerpt) (© 1999 Chester Music Ltd and reproduced by kind permission)
now than it was in the eighties, the goal is to reestablish a balance between musical parameters, after having brought these parameters to such extremes over the past few decades. I like trying to meld together these parameters, to create an illusion, at least, of balance between modes of expression.

JC
The twentieth century is fascinated by these very extreme forms of expression. But I must say that your music is sometimes associated with this trend. In fact, the IRCAM brochure quotes you as saying – I paraphrase from memory – 'It's the extremes that interest me, nothing in between'. But perhaps you're talking about extending techniques to extremes while balancing them, inclining them all the while towards tradition. The notion of neoclassicism you're suggesting is much broader than Poulenc's neoclassicism. Could you expand on this?

ML
It's a very complicated matter. What is extreme today, anyway? From a certain angle, the determination and standardisation of modernism is itself contradictory, since modernism is supposed to be based on change and progress. If the modern spirit is alive and continuous, then it will not necessarily continue to push parameters to their extremes, for ultimately that would become retrogressive. And conversely, rediscovering balance might be a force of renewal.

JC
Historically it's not uncommon for a particularly intense, creative period of exploring, rethinking, and transforming language – certainly the case in these last few generations of musicians – to be followed by a movement to synthesise.

ML
That's very true. One dilemma for my generation was a certain uneasiness with an environment in which what was appropriate in terms of style was negatively defined, based on taboos, things one was not allowed to do. We strongly felt that this was a rather awkward creative environment, and it might just be a difference of language, but we wanted an environment that presented options that were allowed.

JC
Instead of Victorian prohibitions.

ML
Exactly!

JC
'Ur' is a German prefix denoting something that is prototypical, primitive, primal. It's also the name of an ancient Sumerian city.

ML
Well, speaking of origins, the origin of Ur is an earlier piece, Kraft, for orchestra and electronics. The two works are very closely linked, aesthetically. In fact, I wanted to create with the five instrumentalists of Ur the illusion of Kraft's orchestral sonority, the sonic mass of the hundred-and-some musicians on stage that Kraft involved.

KN
How did you decide on Ur's instrumentation – clarinet with violin, cello, bass, and piano?

ML
I originally conceived of a more traditional chamber ensemble: flute, clarinet, violin, piano, cello – essentially the Pierrot ensemble. But in this case, it felt too classical. Replacing the flute with the double bass created an imbalance in the ensemble that perfectly matched the work's nature. Now I've spoken so much about classicism, but Ur is a work that is concerned less with balance; it's a work that leans. Sometimes people call it aggressive, but I don't think of music as aggressive, not in my vocabulary; I don't understand what that
means. But it's definitely a sound portrait that is skewed, starting with the presence of the clarinet, which is unlike the string instruments but shares their material. Again, I started with the idea of a small group of instruments suggesting the sound of a large ensemble, so it necessarily pushes the instrumental expression in that sense; it's a piece for virtuosos, and the electronics lend a kick.

**ML**

I wanted the clarinet to be fully integrated with the other instruments, a kind of chameleon that plays many different roles to simulate the sound of a large ensemble. This is one of my favorite challenges in writing chamber music. *Steamboat Bill Junior* went even further; I was trying to create the illusion of a full orchestra with just two instruments. They desperately try to do everything in their power to create this brief illusion, and are utterly restricted.

**JC**

The sense I have with *Ur* is that the composition occupies itself with rebalancing this essential imbalance. I don't want to suggest that your music is schematic, but I'm wondering if this reflects a compositional practice for you, the notion of setting up a situation of imbalance and composing out the asymmetry.

**ML**

That's a very good point. It is something that has always fascinated me. I have a similar sense in the recording studio, too, where I feel that a record should not necessarily replicate the live performance, but interpret it. I like discs, again, that lean in this sense, even literally: being left-handed, I prefer the sound learning to the left. But yes, I find inspiration in learning, inclining, unbalanced starting points.

**KN**

Do you use symmetry?

**ML**

I do use it, particularly in building harmonies: I like symmetrical pitch assemblages, sometimes combined with a purely auditory collection underneath – literally underneath, emphasising the bass as a distinctive level. One of the most important lessons I learned was from Berio, who remarked that the orchestra remains a hierarchy – soprano, alto, tenor, bass – which, however simple an idea, was provocative for me.

**JC**

Another imbalance?

**ML**

In a way. But I'm not as afraid as Stravinsky was, say, of symmetry. Sometimes symmetry itself is beautiful, of its very nature.

**KN**

And again, harmony itself does not take precedence over other parameters.

**ML**

Well, hierarchy is a very complicated issue. On this point, one of the very beautiful examples is Ligeti, who is the composer who very cleverly avoided harmony in a sense, with wonderful works like *Atmospheres* and *Apparitions*. Of course it sounds a bit contradictory, but in producing those clouds of pitches, harmony was, very elegantly, avoided.

**KN**

It was a byproduct.

**ML**

Absolutely. Ultimately, even Ligeti had to resurface, with the Horn Trio, for example. Over the last few years harmony has regained its importance in my music as well as becoming a crucial expressive device. For me, it is usually determined pre-compositionally, and working within a harmonic framework has enabled me to treat other aspects of expression very freely.

Yet again, we are at the notion of imbalance, a slightly contradictory way of working with music: more and more, I like to fix harmony, as a sort of identification of a certain work; in spite of its prominent role in composition, it is mainly there to free me up to attend to other aspects that might be even more interesting. So there you go: I'm deeply concerned with harmony, and yet it is the aspect of composition that is the most predetermined methodically.

**KN**

It's less intuitive?

**ML**

In some ways, yes, in the sense that it usually plays the role of the abstract model with which I begin conceiving of a piece.

**KN**

And yet it is expressive, in that it's formal and even functional.

**ML**

Yes. I've been thinking very much about functional harmonies in an essentially atonal world. I'm jealous of composers like Wagner and – why not? – Mahler, for whom the building blocks of harmony were grammatical as well as simply lexical. It's obviously quite a difficulty to create your own functional syntax in the post-tonal era. But this is the subject of an entire seminar.