

Light and Shade and Literature: Finnish Composer Kai Nieminen Talks about his Music

BY MARTIN ANDERSON

It's logical, you might think, that Sibelius' status as national icon gives classical music an unusual prominence in Finnish life; and it follows from there that the legendary conducting classes of Jorma Panula should be able to generate the raft of musicians who occupy so many of the world's podia. But it's less obvious why Finland should have produced so many good guitarists. One of the most prominent is Kai Nieminen, who is also now rising to prominence as a composer. A Naxos CD came out last year [8.572061] with the flute concerto *Palomar* of 2001, the clarinet concerto *Through Shadows I Can Hear Ancient Voices* (2002), the orchestral *Vicoli in ombra* (1995); the flute soloist Patrick Gallois also conducts the Sinfonia Finlandia of Jyväskylä, where Nieminen lives. It's natural that he should write guitar music, of course, and indeed there's a CD of his guitar music played by John Mills on the Finnish label Pilfink (*Aquarelles*; JJVCD-24). Chatting to the composer via Skype, I asked first about the surprising prevalence of concertos in his output. "As you might have seen on my website [www.kainieminen.net], I just finished my eighth concerto, a horn concerto. It started with the piece on the Naxos CD, *Vicoli in ombra*—that was the piece with which, for some reason, people became interested in what I was writing. Now it looks to be a really promising world, to have the chance of writing music and live as a composer." So all these concertos and the other orchestral pieces detailed on Nieminen's site (and at the site of the Finnish Music Information Centre, www.fmic.fi) are commissions? "Yes, all I am doing now is commissions. I'm very lucky, I have to say."

Another feature linking his works is that they seem to have a poetic impulse. "Oh, yes: I have always liked the poetic way of thinking. It might come also from the reason that I am a guitar-player, so I've always enjoyed that a phrase goes to silence and comes from silence. I like small phrases which then bring up the big forms—and you always begin a story with 'Once upon a time' or saying a few things in the beginning. The main idea is to continue from that, so it's a very interesting thing that the little things are important. Actually, Arabic philosophy is interested in the plucked instrument, and I was, too, when I was young: I remember in the '70s when I first started my life with guitar and music, and I really felt something interesting in the idea that you have a plucked sound; how long it is living? When I was studying with Julian Bream, in master-classes, he talked about this Arabic philosophy of when the sound is born, it might live a very short time if you compare it in time to ten thousand years; it's very short. But the Arabic people are very positive—they say: 'If you are interested in it, it might live longer.'"

That's almost an echo of the spectral school of composition in Paris—of composers like Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey—which influenced Nieminen's compatriots Magnus Lindberg and Kaija Saariaho earlier in their careers. Although Nieminen's music doesn't sound anything like theirs, it suggests a similar focus on the minutious, on the tiny qualities of something. "I like the spectral idea. From guitar music I am very interested in a single tone and its colors; I can touch a string and produce that one tone with so many different colors, so it's spectral for me from the start. I knew Falla's *Homenaje* in the original guitar version, so when I came across the piano version

and then the orchestral version, I understood that the instrument I played was already an orchestra in itself. I wrote a piece for violin and strings called *I Can Hear Northern Lights II* [in 2004; the first version is for oboe and string quartet or strings] which picks up some of these spectral ideas. The Northern Lights can come as a tiny flash or a huge wave, so it starts with a little rhythmic idea in a solo from the first violin but also has this feeling of a larger, freer pulse. Where I am living, up in Lapland here, the Northern Lights are very dear to me. So I am interested in impressions, too.”

The poetic titles of Nieminen’s pieces underline the narrative manner of his music. “I like a narrative quality but still I feel it is the idea that is important; it’s not because the music can’t be narrative, but so many people have different experiences. I’m just trying to give a little glimpse towards what I was thinking when I was composing. Also, although you see people writing sonatas, concertos, and so on, somehow the other art-forms don’t come so close. I think the future of any art will be that all these art-forms have to find something together, as in opera—but I think there’s a chance of doing it without opera. I remember when you reviewed my Naxos CD in *Finnish Musical Quarterly* you were talking about Takemitsu.” Well, there’s a similar interest in color, atmosphere, a fondness for harmonic stasis... “Exactly. That guy is a house god! And I’ve recorded quite a lot of his guitar music on a Pilfink CD [*In the Woods*; JJVCD-21]. Also in Takemitsu’s music, you start from small things and create bigger things; in that way I feel the same. But I don’t feel rhythm in the same way as Takemitsu: I feel it more in the European way. Takemitsu has his own special meditative rhythmic thing—which I love, of course, but it comes from Japanese culture itself. He was always talking about people being in a hurry and all that—and we are the same in Finland: The further north you go, the less you are in a hurry.” In Jyväskylä Nieminen won’t feel the same pressures as in Helsinki, and even in Helsinki you won’t feel the same pressures as in Berlin, Paris, London, New York... “No, no. I know the Heathrow thing, because I’ve often been guest teacher at the Royal College of Music in Cardiff. Heathrow Airport is a real mess! So when I get back to Jyväskylä I feel really relieved. I came here to study musicology in ’73 and since then I have been away for only one year, teaching in a little village up north. Then I came back.”

An awareness of, sensitivity to, suggestion of light in music is something one finds across the Nordic area: the Norwegian composer Ragnar Söderlind, for example, writes music which is much more explicitly symphonic in manner than Nieminen’s but one is still aware of some kind of play of light. “I am very keen on light and space.” Is it a deliberate reflection of his surroundings? “Some of it. From my window I can see quite a lot of sky, and nature around me. So even though I am living very near the city, Jyväskylä is a very special kind of place in that it has quite a lot of nature inside the city, and a lot of lakes, of course. We Finns need a sense of water and sky and these small mountains we call *tunturi* and *vaara*. Somehow I feel those phrases are in nature: You can feel them also when you look at the skies and see the clouds—something that’s not in a hurry like the people on the earth. The more these Internet things come, the quicker they want to go—but where are they going is the question.”

Why then, despite this concern with northern calm and luminescence, do so many of Nieminen’s works have titles in Italian? A new Pilfink CD (JJVCD-79) offers a violin concerto called *Il viaggio del cavaliere... (inesistente)* written in 2005, and a concerto for viola, harp, and twelve strings by the name of *La Serenissima* (2006); they’re

accompanied by an orchestral piece called *In Mirrors of Time* (2000/2007). “Maybe you can hear on the new CD that there are some ideas that come from a big respect for the old masters from Italy. Many years ago I started to be a member of the Fernando Sor guitar-competition jury; it took place in Rome, in the Spanish Academy. All that Italian culture I learned to understand from ’81, when I was first there. There are so many what you might call musical mountains which you have to learn about, but when you are so close, when you live in Italy, it’s too near to Puccini and Vivaldi and Corelli and Verdi and so on—there are so many of these masters that the people who live in those surroundings are in trouble of finding something different. Look at Benjamin Britten when he wrote his last piece, *Death in Venice*; and he wrote the last string quartet on the same idea (and it’s still a very English piece even though he had his inspiration from Venice). Even though I have my music combined with Italy, it’s still something to do with the Finnish world. To return to what we said about Takemitsu, he was about east and west, and I think my work is south and north. I have quite a lot of things in my scoring from central Europe, the German schools and French schools, the Spanish *vihuela* culture from the fifteenth century (which is actually great music), and then the Italian culture which we all have to study—*bel canto* and all those things. But still, there’s something raw and interesting in not to study anything: I mean that when you are in Lapland, you don’t have people building those big churches and monuments that you have in Rome; there’s so much nature that if you bring a person from abroad to Finland, they’re just amazed about the woods in Finland, the lakes, how the people have left nature alone. In composition you have to be the same: You learn many things, you get influences from many people, many composers, many times, but still you have to find your own language, to be somehow raw.”

Has Nieminen’s background as a guitarist had an effect on his scoring? After all, one might say he paints with water-colors rather than with oils. “Well, I have a commission to write a symphony! I wanted to grow up to understand what was the idea of a symphony. My good friend Jorma Panula has given me quite a lot of good information on those things, because, as you say, he knows well these Sibelius mountains. That’s why I need to mature, to understand what is the word ‘symphony’. Something of that already exists in this violin concerto, especially in the first movement, the ‘Battaglia’—it has something to do with symphonic thinking and motivic development.” It’s also the most modernist music on the CD—in context: The quasi-atonality in the violin concerto sits alongside the archaizing tendency of *La Serenissima*. What pulls these different stylistic directions together? “I think it’s this communication between old and new, and maybe the shape of the phrases. I always thought about this business of two-bars-two-bars-four-bars. When we are discussing things, we don’t think about two bars or four bars, or one short sentence and one long one; we don’t put our discussion into a shape where all phrases are equal or the same length. That’s also something that has interested me in literature. In the blues you have these rules as to why a piece is the blues, you have to have one chord as long as that chord, and so on. But in nature all these things don’t exist.” Two of the works to hand are concertos, of course, and the “discussion” between the soloist and the concerto can’t be sectional in that sense, so the genre itself ought to impose a kind of fluidity. “That’s true. And there must be an argument between the orchestra and the soloist. I remember when I wrote the flute concerto for Patrick—that’s *Palomar* on the Naxos CD—there’s an Italo Calvino book

behind it where an old man is looking to his world in small novels. It was Calvino's last book before he died. He doesn't mind so much about changing the world: He's just trying to think what it is now and what it was before—but he's not involved in the changing of the world. In the Violin Concerto the violin is more trying to change the world; you know the old story in Cervantes where the knight is trying to kill the windmills. So there are two different things. This violin concerto is the third concerto I wrote. That year I was furious about many things, and I tried to put many of those feelings in this 'Battaglia' but after that I am starting to dream again, as in 'La luna nella torre,' 'The Moon in the Tower' [the second movement of the concerto]. What can we do with the world? We can't change it, so let's try to enjoy it." So the toughness of the first movement was Nieminen working out some personal frustrations? He gives a knowing laugh: "Yes, something like that!" With luck, then, someone will enrage him before he sits down to his symphony. "That would help a little, that's true."

Have Nieminen's various concerto commissions come from players themselves, then? "I was very lucky to meet Patrick Gallois in 2000 in Tampere, in Finland. Jorma Panula was conducting an orchestral piece I wrote for his 70th birthday. After Patrick heard that, he said: 'Why don't you write me a flute concerto?' And that's how it started. From 2000 to 2010 I've been writing quite a lot of concertos. The Horn Concerto is No. 8; it's going to be performed next week. That's for Tommi Hyytinen—he's done a great solo-horn recording for Pilfink [*Reflections of Light*; JJVCD-38]; it sold out. A very good horn-player, and a really nice guy. We started to talk about these things two years ago. Then there's a harp and strings; nothing else. And Erkki Palola, the soloist on both concertos on the new CD? "He is the first violin of the Helsinki Philharmonic, and he also plays viola. In the seventies we ended up playing Boccherini together: I was playing guitar and he was playing in the string quartet. After that I wrote him a solo piece, a capriccio [*Storia di Astolfo sulla Luna*; 2000]. Then he asked me: 'Why don't you write me a violin concerto?' That's the way it goes. When that was performed in Vaasa, with the Vaasa orchestra [in March 2005], he then said: 'Why don't you write me a viola concerto?' And now these are on this CD. The harp soloist in *La Serenissima* is Anni Kuusimäki, who is the principal harp of the Helsinki Philharmonic; she makes a wonderful sound."

A visit to the Pilfink website (www.pilfink.fi; the word is the Swedish name for *passer montanus*, the Eurasian tree sparrow) reveals a catalog of some thirty classical releases (plus others in other genres)—more Nieminen (works for kantele, the Finnish folk zither, on JJVCD-60), and much contemporary music from elsewhere in the world. Nieminen explains: "The company is based in Joensuu. They're really trying to keep new classical music on the podium. I'm very happy that on this CD we have the Pori Sinfonietta and Jukka Iisakkila, the conductor. When the Naxos CD came out, people said: 'OK, they're from Jyväskylä and he's from Jyväskylä,' but now on the next CD there's nothing from Jyväskylä apart from the composer! The Pori Sinfonietta is a very good little orchestra on the west coast of Finland, and they're doing a great job there. With Jukka Iisakkila they're doing the Berg *Wozzeck* somehow, which is not easy for the players.

"I made a number of recordings of solo guitar for Pilfink. There's a sonata there [*Night Sonata(s)*; JJVCD-37] which I think you might be quite surprised by, because it's more modern than any of the pieces here." Is Nieminen still active as a guitarist? "Very

much: I'm going to perform next week a new concerto that was written for me; it's by Ari Romppanen, a young composer from Helsinki who has just graduated from the Sibelius Academy." Then what's the next big thing in Nieminen's diary? "The next big thing is the symphony. I've started thinking about it, but I've got more than a year before the first performance." And how does the compositional process work with him—do the ideas arrive complete, as small motifs...? "Various things. Sometimes it might be a very small idea: It might be a bird song, for example. There's a very special little motif in the violin concerto which is [at this point Nieminen whistles a rising scale which settles on eight repeated B flats]. It's a bird." Not a pilfink? He laughs: "No! I was recording one of my guitar CDs in northern Karelia. There's a place there called Koli; you might have heard about it. I had never heard that before—a bird singing up a scale. And it was there the next year, too, so it lives there. I tried to trace the bird, but now it's inside the violin concerto. There was a funny thing when Patrick asked me to write the flute concerto. I was in the Finnish Embassy in Rome. There's an institute there called Villa Lante. When Patrick wrote me an e-mail there, I had just had a concert in one of the churches in Rome and was coming there at night. The room was so hot that you had to open the window, and who was outside but a blackbird. And you have to decide if you are going to sleep with the window open or closed: If it's closed, it's so hot that you can't sleep, and if you put it open, okay, there's a bird. I think you know what happened: I left the window open, and then *Palomar* came into the world. Same with the bird from Koli in the violin concerto, especially in the first movement, the 'Battaglia.' I had an idea about a knight from the Middle Ages; that's why I'm using these trumpets and horns—you can hear the fifths there. I've always loved things that are archaic, old somehow. And we have a lot of these old stories in Europe: Dante, Cervantes, and many, many others. So this bird thing came as a help, because I needed something softer in it. And you know *Lasciatemi morire?*" Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna*? Yes, of course. "Did you hear it there? It's there because that's what happens in a fight—somebody dies. And 'Rondine,' the third movement: At my home, when these birds from the south come here, especially the swifts, they have a big fight by my house about where to live. So there was another fight—'rondine' means 'swifts.' And 'Nel bosco del san Gral' means a place where there's always people trying to find a holy grail; you can decide yourself whether they find it or not in this piece!"

Does *In Mirrors of Time* have a poetic subtext? "Yes, there's a text by Emily Dickinson. { The CD booklet explains it is her: "Time does go on— / I tell it gay to those who suffer now— / They shall survive— / There is a sun— "They don't believe it now." Nieminen continues: "A friend of mine who was a clarinet-player and composer, Lasse Eerola, had a lot of problems in his life, so I decided to think about how time works and how you would feel if you knew when your time was to go from here. He knew somehow, when he was visiting me for the last time in 2000 or something like that; you could tell that he didn't want to live anymore. When I heard that he had died, I decided to write this piece. I mentioned that he was a clarinetist and composer. If you listen to the first movement of my clarinet concerto on the Naxos CD, you will hear the same theme on solo violin as the main theme in *In Mirrors of Time*, and if you're very careful, you'll find the same theme for a brief moment in *La Serenissima*. I like these detective stories, the kind of things like Agatha Christie wrote, so I like hiding characters. And the Emily Dickinson poem is so good that it becomes quite a lot of the piece. And then in *La*

Serenissima you can see that the movements are called ‘Come le onde...’, ‘Come un chorale [sic]...’, ‘Serena dopo la Tempesta’. You know the famous Giorgione painting, *La tempesta*, in the Accademia in Venice? It’s a very small one, maybe eight by three, but so many people have analyzed it; I think something like fifty people have made some big examination of it—what does it mean? Why is it there? It’s almost like the Mona Lisa in Paris. And then you have the Ponte dei Sospiri, the Bridge of Sighs. All these things were very inspiring for me when I was there. When you think of the place, you have water, you have bells, which means also the Catholic religion; then you have the fact that it is sinking—two months ago there was so much water that people needed rubber boots. So it’s a kind of memory, in a way, and also a big homage to the artists who lived there, like Britten, Thomas Mann. Then there’s a very good book by an Australian guy Robert Dessaix; it’s called *Night Letters*. It tells about the area around Venice. The writer of these letters is dying and as he writes to his friend he is forced to think back on his life. So I tried to encourage people to think a little backwards. Even though you are writing modern music, it’s always important to see that tradition has something very important to tell us.” *La Serenissima* is also the most sheerly beautiful piece on the CD. “Well, it’s such a beautiful place.” Indeed, it is: Venice is everything that the traveler’s hyperbole promises. Music moves me to tears with relative ease, but only four visual stimuli have: The Taj Mahal, the Tut-Ankh-Amun exhibition in Cairo Museum, King’s College Chapel in Cambridge—and Venice. Every corner you turn on the Grand Canal brings another staggering sight; before long it was more than I could take and I burst into tears. “Absolutely; I agree. That’s why I’ve used this little chorale and if you listen carefully, you might find a kind of Monteverdian influence there. And he was in Venice, too, of course. So it’s a homage to beauty. And what remains of Takemitsu in this new CD is that he was also very fond of old things, old Japanese things, American jazz, French *chansons*, and all that. So in this way I feel the same as Takemitsu, but I’m very happy to be visiting the Mediterranean countries and learn something from there.” Moreover, Venice crystallizes the paradox of a feeling of impermanence preserved for all time in the course of history, the sense of things dying in a living continuity. “I understand what you mean, and I agree with you. We can’t remember everything from the past, and we can’t know what will come in the future. And globalization means that so many cultures are being collected these days, in new and different ways, and we’re really happy to live in a world where we have so much information. The only problem comes if you can’t choose what you want; then it becomes very difficult. Rautavaara put it very nicely when he said you are a gardener and you have to prune away the things that don’t belong. That’s a matter of experience.” And does Nieminen see the past ten years of constant composition as something of a preparation for the challenge of the symphony? “In some way. Hokusai, the Japanese wood-painter, said: ‘When I am thirty, I can draw a line; when I am sixty, I will understand why I did it; and if God gives me the chance to live to ninety, it might live its own life. I’ve had that from the beginning. Andres Segovia, the great guitar-master, said: ‘All my life has been a long, very slow but rising line.’ So to keep your feet firmly on the ground but to try to learn something new is very rewarding.”

NIEMINEN *Il viaggio del cavaliere...(inesistente)*¹; *In Mirrors of Time; La Serenissima*² • Erkki Palola (1^{vn}; 2^{va}); ²Anni Kuusimäki (hp); Jukka Iisakkila,

cond; Pori Sinfonietta • PILFINK JJVCD-79 (70:53)

Nieminen's interview makes clear the multiplicity of influences that feed into his music; in the hearing of it, they blend together like the sometimes inconsequential thread of strands in a dream. The first movement of the violin concerto *Il viaggio del cavaliere... (inesistente)* is entitled 'Agilulfo e Gurdulu (Battaglia)', the two names being that of the knight and squire in Calvino's book *The Nonexistent Knight*, the violin taking the part of the knight, to comments from the harp, as the squire. Tiny calls-to-arms, little more than repeated rhythms, call the music to life; as the rhythms spread to the brass, they recall the ironic anti-militarism of much of Aulis Sallinen's music. In the slow movement birdsong in the woodwinds, snippets of fanfare from the brass, fragments of other ideas—all float by as on a carpet of imprecise, hazily harmonized memory. The chattering swifts of the third movement—skirtling woodwinds—lead to a lazy heraldic stand-off in the brass, and the music slips into the fourth movement, another dream-sequence, with the solo violin threading its lyrical way over the top of the texture. *In Mirrors of Time*, an orchestral triptych, seems to flow on from it almost seamlessly, the phrases drifting constantly downwards through the autumnal dreamscape like flecks of dust on the surface of the eye. In fact, *in situ* it acts as a central panel itself, binding the violin and viola concertos together as a macro-statement: The prevailing dream-like atmosphere, the pervading sadness, the generally subdued instrumental coloring (with occasional commentary from harp), are common to all three works, so that the CD as a whole unfolds gradually, calmly, as a river moving unhurried to the sea. The irruption of the chorale in the third movement of *La Serenissima* is exquisite and directly moving, Nieminen's allusions to Monteverdi underlining the sense of Venice as a place of dignified decay. All three works dwell in beauty, but the chorale passages in *La Serenissima* give it an emotional punch which raises it above its companions.

The performances strike me as committed and effective; and the recorded sound is clear and rounded.

NIEMINEN *Il viaggio del cavaliere ... (inesistente)*; ¹ *In Mirrors of Time*; *La Serenissima* ² Erkki Palola (¹ vn, ² va); ² Anni Kuusimäki (hp); Jukka Iisakkila, cond; Pori Sinfonietta • PILFINK JJVCD-79 (70:53)

In *Fanfare* 33:1 I gave a very favorable review to Kai Nieminen's flute and clarinet concertos on Naxos. Nieminen is a well-known guitarist, of course, but you don't really hear that influence in his music; in fact, his fluency goes way beyond anything one might associate with so comparatively parochial a tonal palate. In the previous review I etched out comparisons to Debussy (certainly) and Ibert (more specifically to that Naxos offering). And while Nieminen doesn't have the forward motion that we find in Debussy, whose melodies and harmonies tend to progress in tandem, Nieminen keeps the melody flowing while the harmonies spar with various aspects of the melodic highlights. Sometimes it drops out altogether and appears later; sometimes the harmony mimics the melody by offering snippets in a sort of call-and-response fashion, like a distant echo from a far away cave; and sometimes the harmony simply disentangles itself from any sort of block structure to become a ghost-like contrapuntal haunting of the melody. None of this

probably makes sense to anyone, but listen carefully to this music and you will see what I mean.

We are given two concertos and a tone poem here, as always, at least in my limited experience with this composer, engulfed in literary associations: the Violin Concerto inspired by Cervantes of *Don Quixote*; *In Mirrors of Time* a companion piece to the Flute Concerto (with texts by Emily Dickinson inscribed in the score); and the Viola Concerto, *La Serenissima*, named after the Republic of Venice with allusions to Mann's *Death in Venice*. Heady stuff, this, but in the end nothing matters but the way these pieces sound, and they sound just fine.

The Violin Concerto is probably unique among the works of Nieminen that I have heard so far; the solo passages are legion, somewhat virtuosic, though I don't think that is the main concern here. This piece has the evocation of Sibelius in its midst, which is eminently reasonable considering Nieminen's nationality. Enter *In Mirrors of Time* and you will encounter in the last movement one of the most gorgeous pieces I have ever heard, wistful, ruminative, and melancholy in a way that we all like. It reminds me of Tobias Picker's *Old and Lost Rivers* for some reason, but the comparison is not necessarily an apt one; it's just that the emotional feeling it conjures is in the same ballpark. Again Debussy rears his spectral self, along with a more melodic Takemitsu.

With the rich scoring of the Viola Concerto, and the genius idea of accentuating the harp, we have a modern concerto that takes advantage of the viola's considerable yet often unused resources to provide not only atmosphere and warmth, but sterling technique and a leadership role in the proceedings. Violas don't get that too often, but here everything is structured around its plaintive murmurings. Of all people, Vaughan Williams shows up to this particular wake, in glorious form as if he had decided to rewrite parts of the *Tallis Fantasia*. Yes, you read me right, and the appearance of it in the final movement will indeed startle you, but upon reflection you will understand that nothing else would have worked here. It's not a literal quote, but—well, you'll see.

All of these soloists are outstanding, the sound is excellent, and the Pori players have a real grip on this music. If something by Nieminen doesn't show up on my Want List this year, it will truly have been an outstanding year to edge this guy out. **Steven E. Ritter**