

Kai Nieminen has burgeoned from guitarist to composer and his oeuvre from guitar repertoire to orchestral music. Meanwhile, his artistic worldview has expanded from northern to pan-European, into a synthesis of north and south.

BY KIMMO KORHONEN

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A cold drop on a warm hand

Guitarist-composer Kai Nieminen (b. 1953) has his hands full at the moment.

“In August my new degree-ceremony music is being performed at the University of Jyväskylä. In October I’m going to Italy for a week, to stay at the Villa Lante owned by the Finnish Institute in Rome; I’ll be giving a concert there and another in Naples during the same trip. Then there’s the premiere of my first symphony on 13 November, in Jyväskylä. And after that it’ll be the turn of the monologue opera in English *It’s Like a Light* I’m writing for Elisabeth Wärnefeldt, a Swede.”

Behind the busy facade is nevertheless an artist searching for inner peace who has found his oasis of calm in composition. His music reflects this. Nieminen is a composer most clearly characterised by a lyrical, lingering mode of expression often veiled in melancholy hues and a prescient twilight. His music frequently has a strong poetic tone, a sense of reflection and contem-

plation, of existing in a mood.

Nieminen has travelled a long way from guitarist to guitar composer and on to bigger ensembles. His basically free tonal music carries hints of Impressionism, neo-Romanticism and momentarily even of Expressionism, and he is not averse to using more recent 20th-century resources should the need arise. He has on many occasions mentioned the Japanese composer Tōru Takemitsu as his closest musical and spiritual reference.

Apprenticed to masters

Kai Nieminen can well recall the moment he first held a guitar.

“It was in 1968, when I heard Cliff Richard sing *Congratulations* in the Eurovision Song Contest. My mother had a guitar. It had metal strings a couple of centimetres off the fingerboard, and it was on this that I



Saara Vuorjoki

Kai Nieminen at home, in the shamanistic 'north'.

began picking out Richard's song on one string."

At the time, Nieminen played the euphonium, but he gradually became more interested in the guitar. He was further inspired on hearing **Andrés Segovia** playing **Bach** on the radio. In those days he was living in the Tornio River Valley on the Finnish-Swedish border in northern Finland; he crossed over into Sweden to buy a guitar tutor and could pick up a programme on Swedish television about how to play the guitar.

In 1973, when he was 20, Nieminen entered the Department of Musicology at the University of Jyväskylä and became a guitar pupil of Czech teacher **Štěpán Rak** at the Jyväskylä Conservatory. He was lucky to meet Rak, because not many places in Finland at that time could offer first-class guitar tuition.

"Rak showed me step by step how to play the guitar. We were like master and apprentice, which is the best way to learn a craft."

His guitar studies continued at the Sibelius Academy and on a few courses that turned out to be important. "At the summer course held by **Giuliano Balestra** from the Santa Cecilia Academy in Rome I learnt how to apply Italian *bel canto* to the guitar. He urged his pupils to 'sing' on the guitar and stressed nuances of articulation. Also important were two masterclasses with **Julian Bream**. He talked about music, not playing the guitar."

Nieminen has since taught the guitar at the Jyväskylä Conservatory (now the JAMK University of Applied Sciences) and been a visiting teacher at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama in Cardiff, Wales. He has also served on the jury of the **Fernando Sor** guitar competition in Rome a dozen or so times since 1981.

One of the highlights of his career to date has, says Nieminen, been his performance of the **Villa-Lobos** Guitar Concerto at Karjaa in Finland in 1988, with **Leo**

Brouwer conducting. Outside Finland he has given recitals in Italy, England, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Russia and Austria, and he has released three guitar discs of both his own and others' compositions on the Pifink label.

From guitarist to guitar composer

From being just a guitarist, Nieminen soon branched out into composing for the instrument. "The Villa-Lobos Preludes transported me to the world of composition, and the Fernando Sor competition to a more classical world. Later, along came the guitar pieces by, for example, Tōru Takemitsu."

The earliest work in his catalogue is not, however, one for guitar; it is the *Suita Piccola (Aapasuo/The Bog)* for solo double bass, composed in 1976 but not finalised until 1978. Despite his by now extensive output, comprising a number of orchestral works and a dozen or so concertos in addition to pieces for solo instrument or chamber ensemble, Nieminen regards himself primarily as a self-taught composer. He did study a little with **Pekka Kostiaïnen**, who taught musicology at the University of Jyväskylä, and Štěpán Rak also gave him some advice on composing. He has since attended classes with such maestros as **George Crumb**, **Paavo Heinen**, **Jukka Tiensuu** and **Theo Loevendie**.

It is hardly surprising, in the light of Nieminen's guitarist background, that he was first noticed as a composer of guitar music that is notably rewarding to play. The major works by him for the instrument have included *Night Sonata(s)* (1976–2006), *Acquarelli della notte* (1981), *Homenaje a Andrés Segovia* (1993), *Riflessioni sul nome Amedeo Modigliani* (2011) and the guitar sonata *A Walk to the Mysterious Woods* (2012).

As an instrument, the guitar makes certain specific demands, and composers are not, claims Nieminen, always fully aware of these.

"You can tell from a guitar work whether or not the composer is a guitarist. With a non-guitarist composer, some things may be possible but tricky. For example, Takemitsu had a Ramírez guitar on which he tried things out. He had a feeling for resonance."

The precise marking of details is, according to Nieminen, important, as demonstrated by the scores of his works for guitar. The word "resonance" often recurs in his speech, and in his guitar works he pays lots of attention to harmonics, timbre and tone colour.

"In the second movement of *Riflessioni*, for example, the melody in the top voice resonates with the open strings. There are also micro-intervals. The work was inspired by **Amedeo Modigliani**, an artist with a drug problem, and the micro-intervals create a drugged impression."

Then the new *A Walk to the Mysterious Woods*, a guitar sonata for **Patrik Kleemola**, makes use of scordatura, i.e. alternative tuning.

"The bottom string is tuned a semitone down to E flat. This gives a superimposed E flat major and E minor with G as the third note acting as the link. It permits new potential, because there are no two identical harmonic series. The E flat adds something new; this is not the most common scordatura for the guitar.

"For me, the guitar, as an instrument, has a written-in potential for flexible orchestration," says Nieminen and quotes **Eugenio d'Ors**: "The guitar is a little orchestra, not from our planet but from a smaller and more beautiful one."

Narrative logic

Nieminen's first orchestral work, *Vicoli in ombra*, dates from 1995. It gave his career a considerable boost and marked the beginning of a new era in his output in that orchestral works and concertos have since become his main genres. Since the flute concerto *Palomar* he wrote for **Patrick Gallois** in 2001, concertos, in particular, have followed in quick succession.

"If you're a musician yourself, you have some idea what being a soloist means. For me, the soloist in a concerto is like the protagonist; concertos are almost like musical whodunnits, investigating the protagonist's relationship with the community."

The works of Nieminen often have a narrative logic, in the nature of fantasy journeys in imaginary or dream-like worlds and moods. Most of them have been born as the result of some extramusical stimulus. They are not, however, programme music, since they heed their own musical laws. The titles, on the other hand, reflect the initial stimulus and provide some sort of pointer and tone to the listening experience.

Nieminen looks far and wide for inspiration, not only to music but also to literature, art, the urban landscape and nature experiences. **Italo Calvino**, **Miguel de Cervantes**, **Georges Perec**, **Timo K. Mukka**, **Helene Schjerfbeck**, **Paul Klee**, **Joan Miró**, **Amedeo Modigliani**, **Salvador Dalí** and **Antoni Gaudí** are among the artists who have either provided an initial stimulus or had works dedicated to them.

Northern shamanism and southern bel canto

The Mediterranean region, and Italian culture in particular, have meant much to Nieminen ever since he first visited Italy as a member of the jury of the Fernando Sor competition in 1981. Since then, he has travelled to Italy some 20 times or more, and has been deeply impressed not only by Italian music but by the country's culture and way of life as well.

The greatest single Italian source of inspiration has been the writings of Italo Calvino, who hovers in the background of many of his works. Examples are the orchestral *Le città invisibili* (1998) and the flute concerto *Palomar*, the violin concerto "Il viaggio del cavaliere... (inesistente)" (2005), the guitar concerto "If on a Winter's



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Italian culture means much to Nieminen. His viola concerto *La Serenissima* captures the feel of Venice.

Night a Traveller (2009), premiered by **John Mills**, and the double concerto *Marcovaldo* (2012) for cello and accordion. Associated with Italian cities are *Vicoli in ombra*, inspired by Rome, and the viola concerto *La Serenissima* (2006), capturing the feel of Venice.

But just as important to Nieminen's art as the Mediterranean 'south' is the shamanistic 'north' – the winter darkness, the Northern Lights and the slower concept of time. And if Finland stands in the north of the map of Europe, then the Tornio River Valley where he grew up is northern even in Finland, and it is precisely against this northern element that the south has come to mean so much to him.

“I feel the synthesis of north and south in my music is akin to Takemitsu's synthesis of east and west. The encounter of south and north could be likened to a cold drop of water falling on a hand: the warm hand is the south, and the drop that startles with its coldness is the north.”

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