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Mihkel KEREM

**Symphony No. 3
For the Victims
of Communism**

**Lamento for solo viola
and strings
String Sextet**

**Estonian National
Symphony Orchestra
Tallinn Chamber Orchestra
Tallinn Ensemble
Mikk Murdvee, viola and conductor**

FIRST RECORDINGS

MIHKEL KEREM ON HIMSELF AND MUSIC

I was born in 1981 in Tallinn into a family of musicians. At the age of six I started studying the violin at the Tallinn Music High School with my mother and I soon began to win diplomas and competitions, in Lithuania and the Czech Republic as well as at home. Since childhood, I have performed as a soloist around the world and as leader of a number of orchestras, roles I continue to fill in London and elsewhere in the UK. I began composition studies at the age of twelve with the Estonian composer Mati Kuulberg¹ and continued at the Estonian Academy of Music with Jaan Rääts.² After that I studied with William Mival³ at the Royal College of Music while I completed my master's degree. I have written over a hundred compositions to date, including three symphonies, a concerto for two cellos and orchestra, nine string quartets and three sonatas for violin and piano.⁴ Among the musicians who have played my music are The Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, the Oulu Sinfonia in Finland, Camerata Nordica in Sweden and The Chilingirian String Quartet in the UK.

The three works on this CD – the Third Symphony and String Sextet written while I was still a student at the Royal College of Music and the *Lamento* a few years after I graduated – are very different in language and style but all three are based on the idea of representing human emotions in music.

¹ Kuulberg (1947–2001), a professional violinist for the first eight years of his career (1966–74), wrote five symphonies, four concertos (for violin, flute, trombone and double-bass), three ballets and a good deal of chamber and instrumental music, including a number of sonatas.

² Born in Tartu in 1932, Rääts is a prolific composer, in an essentially Neoclassical style, with – among much else – eight symphonies, nearly thirty concertos, seven piano trios, six string quartets, three piano quintets and ten piano sonatas to his credit.

³ Born in 1959 in North Wales, William Mival studied with Anthony Milner, Robert Saxton and York Höller and is now Head of Composition at the Royal College of Music. His compositions include works for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Belcea String Quartet, the virginalist and harpsichordist Sophie Yates, the Welsh Chamber Orchestra and the choirs of Salisbury Cathedral.

⁴ The Violin Sonatas Nos. 1–3 and the Sonata for Solo Violin are recorded by Mikk Murdvee (violin) and Sten Lassman (piano) on Toccata Classics TOCC 0140.

2010. Since 2002 Paavo Järvi has been Artistic Adviser of the orchestra. The Orchestra regularly records music for Estonian Radio and has co-operated with such companies as BIS, Antes Edition, Globe, Signum, Ondine, Finlandia Records, Consonant Works and Melodiya. A CD of orchestral works by Ester Mägi, released by Toccata Classics in 2006 (TOCC 0054), was made 'Editor's Choice' in *Gramophone*.

The ERSO has toured widely (Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, Germany, Italy, Kuwait, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden) and taken part in numerous music festivals at home and abroad (Europamusical in Munich, Musiksommer in Gstaad and others). In the 1970s and '80s the ERSO actively toured the Soviet Union (including the Far East, and cities in Siberia and Transcaucasia) and was a regular performer in the renowned concert halls of St Petersburg (then Leningrad) and Moscow.

At present the Orchestra comprises 100 musicians and averages 60 concerts per season, with three to four new programmes a month. In addition to Estonian musicians, the orchestra performs with many renowned conductors and soloists from around the world.

The **Tallinn Chamber Orchestra** was founded in 1993 by Tõnu Kaljuste, bringing together a group of musicians with most of whom he had already been working for some time. Other conductors with whom the TCO has worked include Richard Tognetti, Terje Tonnesen, Paul Mägi and Juha Kangas. From the first the TCO collaborated with the German label ECM, recording music by major Estonian composers, among them Heino Eller, Arvo Pärt and Erkki-Sven Tüür. Concert tours have taken the TCO, often in the company of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, also founded by Tõnu Kaljuste, to England, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the USA.

The **Tallinn Ensemble** – consisting of the violinists Mikk Murdvee and Marie-Helen Rannat, violists Helen Kedik and Laur Eensalu and cellists Indrek Leivategija and Villu Vihermäe – was founded expressly to perform the Mihkel Kerem String Sextet for this recording, but it is intended that the group should go on to enjoy a life of its own, and further recordings with Toccata Classics are under discussion. The musicians of this ensemble are young Estonians of the same generation, the majority of whom studied at the Tallinn Music High School and Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. At present they work in the Bamberger Symphoniker, Kremerata Baltica, Estonian National Opera and Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, and are also in demand as soloists and chamber musicians.

Mikk Murdvee has long been a champion of Mihkel Kerem's music, initiating and premiering many of his works, among them, as conductor, the Third Symphony, *Restless Night* for strings, *Small Concerto for Small Strings* and *Fanfare*; as violinist the Third Violin Sonata, Sonata for Solo Violin, *Aria for Mikk* for violin and piano and *Four Dances and Epilogue* for piano trio; and as violist the *Lamento* for viola and strings, the String Sextet and Viola Sonata in their Estonian and Finnish premieres. He has recorded the three violin sonatas with piano and the solo-violin sonata with Sten Lassmann on Toccata Classics (TOCC 0140).

Murdvee began his musical education at age six in the Music High School in Tallinn, studying violin with his mother, Niina Murdvee, and Harald Aasa. Thereafter he studied at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre before taking a master's degree at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, where he studied violin with Mari Tampere-Bezrodny and gained his violin diploma in 2005. He joined the conducting class in 2002, studying with Leif Segerstam, Jorma Panula and others, and took his conducting diploma with the Sibelius Academy Symphony Orchestra and Estonian National Opera in 2007.

In the same year he became conductor of the Helsinki University Symphony Orchestra, a position in which many prominent Finnish conductors (among them Leif Segerstam, Esa-Pekka Salonen and John Storgårds) began their careers. He has taken the orchestra on tour to Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Poland and Sweden. A CD of music for chorus and orchestra by the Finnish composer Ernst Mielck (1877–99) is in preparation from Toccata Classics.

He is a frequent visitor to a number of professional Finnish and Estonian orchestras and in London has conducted the South Bank Sinfonia and Royal College of Music Symphony Orchestra. Since January 2011 he has been assistant to Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Philharmonia Orchestra on several projects. He also continues his career as a violinist and violist, as soloist, chamber musician and orchestral leader.

The Estonian National Symphony Orchestra (ERSO) has its origins as a small radio orchestra in 1926. The repertoire of the ERSO, which has developed into the leading orchestra in Estonia, includes music from the Baroque period to premiere performances of modern works. In addition to symphonic pieces the orchestra often presents oratorios and other choral works. The ERSO has been the first performer of the works of such world-famous Estonian composers as Arvo Pärt, Lepo Sumera, Eduard Tubin and Erkki-Sven Tüür.

The Principal Conductors of the ERSO have been Olav Roots, Roman Matsov, Neeme Järvi, Peeter Lilje, Leo Krämer, Arvo Volmer and Nikolai Alekseev; Neeme Järvi returned as Principal Conductor in



Photo: Matt Jürjado

Symphony No. 3, *For the Victims of Communism*

When in early 2003 I was collecting thoughts for my Third Symphony, I happened to be reading Dmitry Shostakovich's *Testimony*.⁵ When talking about the subject with friends and acquaintances, I realised that these days many people have no idea what went on in the Soviet Union. Not only that: it is deeply worrying that so many who survived the regime seem to have forgotten what it was like to live there. The human mind naturally protects itself by putting difficult memories to one side, but the dangerous downside of selective amnesia is that it then becomes easy to idealise past times regardless of the true impact they had on people. This symphony is my way of trying to remind people of the dangers of autocracy and its ideologies and, for that reason, it is dedicated to the victims of Communism. I found it very difficult to start the work: I could not find the right musical language to put the 'story' across. In the end I realised that the only way to describe what I wanted to say was to use the musical style of Dmitri Shostakovich.

The first movement, *Adagio* [1], is a slow, painful procession, a description of the regime and its power of oppression. Through the movement the voice of the individual grows into a choir of suffering people. After the first climax the solo voices of winds and strings represent people telling their individual stories, with quiet supporting voices from the rest of the orchestra. There are also reminders that even within the four walls of your own home you were never safe to talk freely, knowing that any one of your friends and family could turn against you at any moment. As the individuals' stories grow louder, the regime reminds them of itself again as cellos and basses enter with the material from the beginning. Together, the voices of individuals with the unforgiving rhythm of the oppressors power each other into the second climax. This time the system wins and swallows the voices of the people, marking its victory with a banal D major cry through the entire orchestra. After the climax the entire string section keeps playing that rhythm, making it sound like an ideologically turned crowd shouting slogans. Over it the solo flute tells its story one more time – not in hope that someone will hear it, but in realisation that nobody cares.

The second movement, *Vivacissimo* [2], is a daemonic burlesque. There is no individual thought left. Masses of people lead their lives as machines working in factories. Smaller groups emerge from time to time to shout out political slogans. Like the first movement, this one also has two climaxes. The first of them, which builds up relatively quickly, portrays a disaster that happens because of ideology rather than human, practical reality. But the human machines work on as though nothing has happened; indeed, they are not allowed to believe that anything did. Slowly, though, the layers of this human mass gain strength and grow into the second climax. This time it is like a jubilee – but surrounded by chaos. This climax does

⁵ *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitry Shostakovich, as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov*, first published by Hamish Hamilton, London/Harper & Row, New York, 1979.

not calm down but carries on as a dance of drunken maniacs, out of control. More pressure is put on the individuals and that leads to the collapse of the system.

It was at this point that I realised that I could not keep writing this work in the musical style that I had adopted so far. Sadly, Dmitry Shostakovich never saw the end of the Soviet Union and therefore his music could never develop to reflect its demise. For me, the moment of the collapse of the regime felt rather as if a bottle had been overturned and its contents spilled over the floor. So the third movement, *Grave* [3], is the aftermath. It suggests the barren wasteland of human emotions that people were left to deal with. The music starts very quietly and grows slowly, culminating in two deformed chorales that describe the mutated understanding of the world of those who were left. The rhythm that represented the system in the first movement echoes one last time in the percussion section at the end of the second chorale. I was careful not to express any hope in this work since people always remember happiness better than trauma and don't have to be reminded of it through art. The Symphony finishes with a painfully loud crescendo on a single tone, like a cry that wants to end the nightmare.

This symphony was premiered by the Oulu Sinfonia and Mikk Murdvee on 19 October 2006.

Lamento

My *Lamento* for viola and strings [4] was originally written for cello and strings as a commission from Camerata Nordica and its principal cello, Per Nyström, in 2008. It was premiered at the 'Barockt' festival on the Swedish island of Öland on 9 August 2009 and has been in the regular repertoire of the orchestra ever since. At Per's request the solo part in this piece was composed to represent a lone human voice in a world of disappointment. I used the violins and violas as an operatic choir: they support and comment on the lament of the lone human being. The bass line is one long drone throughout the piece, representing destiny or unwanted reality. It disappears only when the solo voice with the chorus of violins and violas intensifies in their disagreement with life. At the climax of the piece the solo voice is momentarily swallowed by the chorus, only to return with an angry statement of the opening phrase. Thereafter the chorus calms down in acceptance that the world won't change. The bass drone returns to haunt the dying lament of the lone voice. The very last phrase is the only one in a major key and echoes as a prayer for hope.

The version for viola and strings was arranged for Mikk Murdvee at his request in May 2009 and was also premiered by him with the Tallinn Chamber Orchestra in the White Hall of The House of Blackheads, Tallinn, on 14 January 2010.

String Sextet

I wrote my String Sextet [5] in summer 2004. Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* takes its narrative from a Richard Dehmel poem in which a man and a woman are 'walking through a bare, cold wood', illuminated by the moon; she confesses that she is carrying the child of another man, but he offers her his support and accepts the child as his own. Having recently performed *Verklärte Nacht*, I had the idea of writing a work about what might have happened the night before. My aim was to describe the fears and doubts of the woman as she lies awake on her bed, wondering about how to tell her man that she is carrying another man's child. I used a fair amount of Schoenberg's musical ideas, so as to provide continuity, but in a deconstructed manner, to avoid adhering too closely to the original. The idea was to develop my String Sextet 'into' Schoenberg's, not least so that they could be performed together without a break in sound.

Writers sometimes say that the characters in their novels start to lead their own lives. The same thing can happen in music, and thus my work began to develop in a different direction. Already before the middle of the piece it became clear that it was not only the prologue to another work but the entire sleepless night of any person whose mind does not let him rest, for whatever reason. The work goes through a turmoil of emotions, from calm, even passive, to agitated and angry. The person suffering this restless night finds peace only at dawn when the body grows calm after the exhaustion of being awake the entire night. The String Sextet finishes with a long stretch in D major, its sense of arrival making a deliberate contrast with the unsettled harmony earlier in the piece; it also brings back motifs that were earlier used as searching and unstable elements, as calm and reminiscing. Together they describe a slow but beautiful sunrise by the end of which our restless soul has closed his eyes and finally fallen asleep.

The Sextet was premiered by the Chilingirian String Quartet, with Arun Menon, viola, and Niamh Molloy, cello, at a concert in the Royal College of Music in London on 1 June 2005.