



ONDINE

LEPO SUMERA  
SYMPHONIES  
NOS. 1 & 6

ESTONIAN NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
OLARI ELTS



# LEPO SUMERA (1950–2000)

## **Symphony No. 1** (1981)

- |   |              |       |
|---|--------------|-------|
| 1 | 1st movement | 15:54 |
| 2 | 2nd movement | 14:26 |

## **Symphony No. 6** (2000)

- |   |                   |       |
|---|-------------------|-------|
| 3 | I Andante furioso | 13:10 |
| 4 | II Andante        | 9:21  |

ESTONIAN NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
OLARI ELTS, conductor

## Lepo Sumera (1950–2000): Symphonies Nos. 1 and 6

Lepo Sumera is one of Estonia's most outstanding symphonists, whose six symphonies vividly reflect the unique context of the generation of composers born after the Second World War. Unlike the generation of composers before them (which included Arvo Pärt and Veljo Tormis), they had no personal experience of the time before Soviet occupation. The formation of this new generation coincided with Khrushchev's 'Thaw' – a kind of 'golden age' of Soviet occupation, where the Communist Party's dictates over social life loosened somewhat compared to the preceding Stalinism. In music, this period – the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s – was marked by abandoning social realism as an officially sanctioned aesthetic, and adopting avant-garde styles and practices. However, the coming of age of this generation was marked by the events of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, the ruthless suppression of the democratic trends that began to manifest under the influence of the 'Thaw', and the beginning of Brezhnev's era of stagnation.

The stylistic and compositional choices of Sumera and his generation should be understood in the context of this social and political environment. The 'heroic' 1960s, when composers briefly believed they could openly oppose and polemicise with the Soviet authorities as artists, were over. Hopelessness had taken hold, and the belief that it was possible to reform Soviet socialism from within disappeared. Resistance to power did not stop, but instead took on new forms. Public defiance was replaced by a phenomenon known as late-Soviet escapism. This was a cultural response to the increasing repression and disillusionment – a way for artists to create worlds disconnected from the harsh Soviet reality. Within the world of music, this manifested itself in the explosive growth of personal styles, and in compositional strategies in which the composer's personality became symbolically invisible to the authorities.

The two most notable examples of this in late-Soviet Estonian music were Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* style, a compositional technique that he developed, and Veljo Tormis's exploration of runic song, a traditional form of Estonian folk music. These stylistic decisions represented a decisive departure from the existing aesthetic paradigm, not by opposing it – which would have been typical of the socially active 1960s – but by ignoring it. In both these examples, the phenomenon of the composer becoming symbolically invisible is evident. Pärt has said that in *tintinnabuli* his task is to find an algorithm that starts the music, and from there it is as if the music composes itself. Pärt's statement finds common ground with Tormis's idea that it is not he who uses the runic song, but instead the runic song that uses him. In both cases, the composer symbolically retreats from the music he has created and, through this, also from possible criticism

of the work by the authorities. In addition to the stylistic changes of direction mentioned above, the Early Music revival movement of the second half of the 20th century (which had a significant influence on Pärt's stylistic divergence) and the development of historically-informed performance styles can also be referred to as an 'escapist' form of expression. However, unlike as in the West, this was not so much an aesthetic as a political and ideological movement to be actively engaged with, and did not have official approval. Both old and new music were dissident, which was why, within the sphere of Soviet music, the avant-garde and the early music practitioner could be the same person.

In order to better understand Sumera's oeuvre one should also be conscious of the special position of the symphony as a genre within Soviet music. In Western Europe, where this style of music was free to develop, the Beethovenian symphonic tradition fell in popularity after Gustav Mahler, and was replaced by modernist experiments that either deconstructed or ignored it. In Soviet musical aesthetics, however, of which an important part was the expression of non-musical phenomena, the symphony was established as one of the highest of all genres, the creation of which was remunerated accordingly: royalties for symphonies were significantly higher than for other classical music works. There was also another side to this phenomenon. The ability of the symphony as a genre to express ideas and thoughts, which were not allowed to be discussed publicly during the Soviet era, via purely musical means, also made it appealing to the more dissident composers. As a result, the symphony maintained its central position until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Alfred Schnittke and Giya Kancheli continued Shostakovich's tradition of telling humanistic and therefore inevitably powerful stories through the medium of the symphony.

Sumera's *Symphonies Nos. 1 and 6* represent important milestones in the evolution of the composer's musical language. The *First Symphony* marks the composer's abandonment of atonality and, following Pärt's example, his turn towards a neo-modal language. The *Sixth Symphony*, however, is his swan song, the quintessence and summary of his creative journey, with the work's premiere taking place barely a month before the composer's sudden death. As a rule, the formal dramaturgy of a symphony is symmetrical. However, both of Sumera's symphonies are two-movement works, and if in the *First Symphony* the main conflict of the piece is presented in the second movement, then it can be found in the first movement of the *Sixth Symphony*. Both pieces are rich in intertextual allusions, which links them to the wider Western symphonic tradition.

**Symphony No. 1** (1981) opens with a powerful broken triad motif played on brass instruments. This motif can be associated with the sound of bells, a sonic signature that was

frequently used in the music of many late-Soviet Estonian composers; even the name of Pärt's *tintinnabuli* refers to small bells. This bell imagery often acquired an existential meaning in works created during the late-Soviet period, and was, in many instances, related to expressing a state of expectation. Another thematic element is heard in the celesta, appearing after the opening motif has been presented and gradually unfolded in varied repetition, as is typical of Sumera's musical style. One of the most iconic motifs in Estonian music, the composer also used it in his *Piano Piece from the Year 1981*. Varied repetitions of this motif form a new theme, a completed musical process, which then serves as the basis for subsequent variations. The use of echo as a technique is very important in repeating the differing motif variants, a reference to the influence of electronic music: after each fragment is played, it reverberates around the orchestra several times before a new variant appears. A powerful dynamic swell leading to the apex of the first movement accompanies the execution of the variations. After the culmination, one can again hear both motifs in their original *pianissimo* form. This first movement represents an immersion into one's inner world – a meditation.

The transition to the second movement happens almost imperceptibly. At one point, the two main motifs of the first movement are replaced by extremely high and softly-played chromatic scales in the strings. These scales lay the groundwork for this movement's sonic 'gallery'; the numerous quotations and stylistic references that dominate the music. Firstly, the chromatic scales transform into a quote from a work by Corelli, and this is immediately followed by the introduction of new elements. Although there is a 'protest' – figures from the first movement that try to intervene – it is initially not very successful. In the climax of the movement, the 'gallery', now an 'evil' Shostakovich-esque *scherzo*-style musical romp, is dominated by circus music that combines aggressive fun with tragedy, evoked by a descending chromatic melody. This mad rush is finally stopped by rhythmic chords in the strings, a reference to the rhetorical closing formulas of a classical symphony. A coda follows, in which, as a reminder and no longer in conflict with each other, all the main motifs of the symphony appear *pianissimo*, dissipating into oblivion in the closing *Klang*, the suspended sonority conveying the formal telos of the work.

The closing chords of the second movement of Symphony No. 1, seem to be an almost exact quotation of the analogous chords in John Adams' *Shaker Loops*. It is quite certain that Sumera did not know Adams' mentioned work at the time of composing the 1st Symphony in 1981. However, the first commercial recording of Lepo Sumera's Symphony became available already in 1982, and we know that John Adams was familiar with Sumera's Symphony: he even wrote a thank you letter to Sumera after hearing the Symphony. The final version of *Shaker Loops* was completed in 1982.

As previously mentioned, unlike the *First Symphony*, in the **Sixth Symphony** (2000) the main dramaturgical conflict of the work is created at the beginning of first movement (*Andante furioso*). As is typical of Beethoven's symphonic writing, the opposite figures are based on the same thematic-structural basis, heard in a kind of chaconne – a harmonic ostinato. In this work, 'chaconne' should be understood as a more general method of organising the material rather than directly using the Baroque musical form. Chaconne, as regards this piece, is also associated with characteristic melodic material, descending chromatic arpeggiated thirds resembling the cross motif, which is widely used in Western art music. Successive variations also highlight the topical journey of the Classical four-movement symphony. A dialectical 'first movement' is followed by a meditative 'second' and, finally, a playful and mysterious 'third movement' or 'scherzo'.

Therefore, the second movement (*Andante. Quasi adagio*) represents a kind of finale, a solution to the preceding process. The chaconne as a structural basis is also applied here, but the feeling is that of a slow, meditative movement. As such, this movement represents what can be regarded as one of the archetypal finales of a symphony, a transcendental ending, and, as such, provides contrast with a more conventional fast-paced finale. Schubert's *Symphony No. 8 in B minor ('Unfinished')* can be considered the first historical example of this. However, it also manifests itself in a tragic form, for example, in Tchaikovsky's *Sixth* and – in the context of Sumera's work – most similarly in the finale of Mahler's *Ninth*. There are even more allusions to Mahler; for example, to his *Adagietto* of the *Fifth*. Reference to Mahler's *Adagietto* can already be found, fleetingly, in the first movement. However, this allusion gains even more significance in the second movement, with characteristic harp arpeggiations appearing in the background of the suspended harmonic pedals of the strings.

Sumera's symphonies reflect important stylistic developments that occurred throughout Eastern European art music during the last three decades of the 20th century. These shifts began with a disillusionment with the avant-garde, its abandonment, and the subsequent introduction of various postmodernist practices that link the rich history of European art music with the genres of pop, rock and electronic music, as well as exotic non-European influences. The last decade of these stylistic developments, the 1990s, was marked by a certain renaissance of practices born out of the avant-garde, which now, viewed from a distance, are already part of the history of Western art music.

The **Estonian National Symphony Orchestra** (known in Estonian as Eesti Riiklik Sümfooniaorkester or ERSO) is the longest continually operating professional orchestra of its kind in the country. The orchestra's history dates back to 1926 and, like that of many other world orchestras, is connected to the birth of national broadcasting. Since 2020, it has been led by its Chief Conductor and Artistic Director Olari Elts. The orchestra's previous principal conductors include Olav Roots (1939–44), Paul Karp (1944–50), Roman Matsov (1950–63), Neeme Järvi (1963–79), Peeter Lilje (1980–90), Leo Krämer (1991–93), Arvo Volmer (1993–2001), Nikolai Alexeev (2001–10) and Neeme Järvi (2010–20).

The orchestra performs with renowned conductors and soloists from around the world, including Estonian musicians of the highest calibre. Its recordings demonstrate a quality recognized by many prestigious music magazines, having won several prizes, including a Grammy Award. In addition to broadcast performances on Estonian Public Broadcasting, ERSO has also been aired on the Mezzo television channel. The orchestra's home venue is the Estonia

Concert Hall in Tallinn, but it has also undertaken more than fifty concert tours, most notably tours of Italy in 2003, the USA in 2009, 2013, and 2018, China in 2016 and the United Kingdom in 2023. In addition, ERSO has regularly given concerts in European and Scandinavian countries, appearing at many prestigious festivals including Köln, New York, Verona, Genoa, Munich, and Stockholm. With a repertoire ranging from the Baroque period to the present, the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra has also given premiere performances of symphonic works by several Estonian composers, including Arvo Pärt, Erkki-Sven Tüür, Eduard Tubin, Eino Tamberg, Jaan Rääts, Lepo Sumera, Tõnu Kõrvits and Helena Tulve. In January 2023, a successful joint project „Macbeth“ premiered in collaboration with Estonian Drama Theatre and Eesti Kontsert, which includes music by Lepo Sumera and Jay Schwartz.

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**Olari Elts'** passion for distinctive programming rich with invention has earned him much praise on the international music scene. He began his tenure as Music Director and Chief Conductor of the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra in 2020. He was also Artistic Advisor of the Kymi Sinfonietta from 2018–2022.

Elts has appeared as guest conductor with renowned orchestras, such as Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Danish National Symphony, Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Radio Filharmonisch Orkest, BBC Symphony Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Orchestre National de France, Orchestre National de Lyon, Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Orchestre symphonique de Québec, Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra, Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Soloists with whom he enjoys collaborating, include Gautier Capuçon, Renaud Capuçon, Brett Dean, Isabelle Faust, Alban Gerhardt, Martin Grubinger, Martin Helmchen, Stephen Hough, Lucas & Arthur Jussen, Kari Kriikku, Karita Mattila, Alexander Melnikov, Daniel Lozakovich, Baiba Skride, Simon Trpčeski, and Antoine Tamestit.

As a champion of contemporary Baltic composers, Elts has released recordings of Heino Eller's Symphonic Poems, as well as his violin concerto with Baiba Skride and the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra. Also widely celebrated by critics are his Ondine recordings of Erkki-Sven Tüür works with Tapiola Sinfonietta, including the viola concerto with Lawrence Power, Tüür's Symphony No. 5, and the accordion concerto 'Prophecy' with the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. His 2016 recording of Brahms' arrangements (Glanert, Berio) with the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra also received high praise. Elts' discography includes the Borgström and Shostakovich violin concertos with Eldbjørg Hemsing and the Wiener Symphoniker as well as recent releases with music by Kalevi Aho. His latest recording project is a new album with music by award-winning Norwegian composer Øyvind Torvund in collaboration with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. Elts has also made his mark in opera, having conducted several opera productions.

Olari Elts was Principal Guest Conductor of the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra from 2007–2020 and held the same position at Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra from 2011–2014. He was Artistic Advisor of the Orchestre National de Bretagne from 2006–2011, Principal Guest Conductor of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra from 2007–2010, and Chief Conductor of the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra from 2001–2006.

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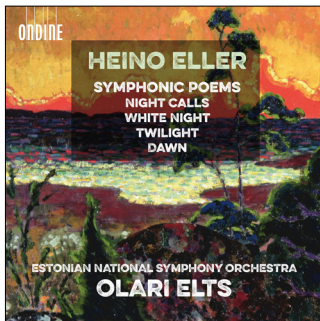
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