An Interview with Maria Lettberg

How and when did you discover Erkki Melartin's works for piano?

In the nineties, my studies of the piano brought me to Helsinki, among other places. There, at a concert in the Sibelius Academy, I heard an unusual work for piano that stuck in my head for days afterwards. It was *The Melancholy Garden* by Erkki Melartin. I was quite taken aback that I had never heard of this composer, even though his piano music sounded so fresh to me, so distinct (and so totally "Finnish"). Back then, I said to myself: If you are ever going to explore Finnish music in the future, then you absolutely must play some of Melartin's work.

In 2007, I finished recording Alexander Scriabin's complete repertoire for piano onto eight CDs – a magical journey which lasted for three years. I recorded the works in Berlin for Deutschland Radio and the label Capriccio, and I played most of them in five solo piano recitals as the "artistic" part of my doctorate at the Sibelius Academy. When I came back to Germany in 2008 with my doctoral thesis about the interpretation of Scriabin's music in my luggage, I had a suitcase full of compositions by Erkki Melartin as well.

How did this recording come about? Where does your interest in recording "piano rarities" come from?

Even while I was still recording Scriabin, I was often asked what would be coming next. Capriccio (or its successor Crystal) suggested that I record two CDs for the series *Piano Rarities*. So once more I had the freedom to select music that interested me.

The first idea that came to me was Melartin's piano repertoire. And that idea really inspired me, almost immediately, because I find it stimulating to rehearse something new and unknown (and this was most definitely unknown!). Few other recordings existed, sometimes none at all.

Lots of unknown or forgotten music lies gathering dust in the archives for no good reason – the most dramatic example being that it happened to Johann Sebastian Bach. But there are also composers who never became known or whose music gradually fell out of favour – and rightly so! – because their music was simply not unique or not of high enough quality.

Melartin was not a great innovator in the way Scriabin or Schönberg were, and his talent as a composer did not find recognition in the way the talents of Grieg, Sibelius or Tchaikovsky did. But his music can convince people, enchant them, move them, make them happy or sad. From my point of view as a pianist, it is good.

How do you decide whether it is worthwhile to occupy yourself further with a work?

I always have to try some of it out at the piano. Without the instrument, I can analyse the score; I understand the musical structure and the language when I do that, but I can only get a feel for the music at the piano, and that kind of gut instinct is important to me now – at this stage, I know that I have enough experience and enough knowledge to be able to trust my instincts.

Why have you limited yourself to works by a single composer once again?

I believe that a CD, just like a concert programme, must have a certain sense of unity about it; it should never be assembled using criteria like "what can I play best?" but should form a coherent whole! With the Melartin CD, I simply wanted to show the diverse range of this composer's work. At the moment, what I find most interesting is getting to know the creative work of one composer really intimately. I understand it better – and I believe that my audience also then

arrives at a better understanding of the music. But that's not to say that I will always stick to this approach. In the future, I would also like to record CDs with a more programmatic focus, not to speak of my concerts, which have been headed in that direction for some time now.

What does it mean to you to perform in front of an audience, rather than in the studio?

I find it much easier to perform at concerts. When I'm recording, I'm obsessively perfectionist. One can't make a CD without thinking of posterity, – or at least I can't – because nothing can be changed later. CDs lead a life of their own, in a sense – regardless of whether it is a long one or a short one. A concert exists only in the here and now (and then in memory); it is more about the human aspect, the question of whether a spark jumps across to the audience or not, whether I can use my abilities as a pianist to communicate something to my listeners.

What is it that makes Melartin's music special and interesting for you?

I think that Finnish culture (including the music) is somewhat isolated within Scandinavia. That may be partly because of the language, Finnish folk music and folklore, the Kalevala, but also because of history, which includes the period of Russian rule before the Finns managed to gain their freedom. Finland always went down different paths, and that is something which is very apparent in Finnish culture: from Finnish tango music to the music of Einojuhani Rautavaara, from the Moomins right up to Aki Kaurismäki's films.

In his own period, Melartin always stood in the shadow of the great Jan Sibelius, with whom he was friends and to whom the *Melancholy Garden* was dedicated. (Still, second fiddle is still a prominent role...) With all due regard for Sibelius´ symphonic works and his violin concerto, I personally don't find his works for piano as interesting and as creative as Melartin's. The real merit of Melartin's piano music lies in its expressive honesty and its spontaneity, and in its interesting folkloristic elements. Most of his piano pieces are programme music. Scandinavian folklore: folk songs, trolls, witches, will o' the wisps; mysterious images of nature. Woods, wind, rain. Imaginary musical journeys (to Greece, Italy, Japan) and mood pictures – love, loss, isolation, death.

So perhaps what Melartin offers is a chance to get closer to unlocking the “secret of the Finnish soul” or at least to understanding the idiosyncrasies and quirks of life in Finland and Finnish traditions.