

# Clarinet Concerto

Magnus Lindberg (b1958)



If Sibelius's Sixth Symphony was 'pure cold water', the 2002 Clarinet Concerto by his compatriot Magnus Lindberg is at the other end of the scale. Joyful, sensual and shamelessly extravagant, the Concerto manages the near impossible – to combine an unapologetically avant-garde sensibility with a tunefulness and a sparkling orchestration that make the piece immediately easy, even seductive, on the ear.

Lindberg is one of contemporary music's big hitters, with residencies at the New York Philharmonic and London Philharmonic and numerous recordings to his name, and his music has long been characterised by vigorous energy and a propulsive sense of rhythm. With his Clarinet Concerto, though, he seemed to add to those with a warm sense of melody that – together with the piece's astonishing orchestral colour – give the work immediate appeal. It's no wonder that the Concerto has enjoyed phenomenal success across the world, with more than 60 performances since its premiere in 2002.

## **A Concerto of friendship**

Central to the Concerto is the composer's long friendship with clarinetist Kari Kriikku,

tonight's soloist. The two men have known each other since their student days at Helsinki's Sibelius Academy of Music in the late 1970s, where they played together in contemporary music ensemble Toimii alongside Esa-Pekka Salonen and other now renowned instrumentalists.

Lindberg wrote a Clarinet Quintet for Kriikku in 1992, and the clarinetist later suggested a piece for clarinet and orchestra that would allow the orchestra to play loudly but the clarinet still to be heard clearly. Lindberg duly obliged.

The composer worked on the Concerto during a summer holiday in 2002, at a coastal retreat on an island in the Gulf of Finland. Kriikku happened to be staying nearby, and the two men reportedly exchanged ideas by phone and in person. As Lindberg began to produce pages of the score, he was able to deliver them to Kriikku by boat.

## **Contemporary techniques and glowing tonality**

The Concerto he wrote draws heavily on Kriikku's virtuosity in an enormously demanding solo part that leaps between

the extremes of the clarinet's range, requires astonishing rhythmic precision and places the soloist firmly in the spotlight almost throughout. Lindberg also makes extensive use of some unusual extended playing techniques. There are slides between notes (sometimes reminiscent of the opening of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*), tremolos that almost make it sound as if the clarinet is playing two notes at once, and roaring multiphonics whereby the player really does play several notes at the same time.

Lindberg doesn't shy away from the dissonance and complexity of a 21st-century sound world in his intricate rhythms and unpredictable harmonies, sometimes even analysing the acoustical properties of the sounds themselves to generate a rich, radiant sense of colour. But nor is he afraid to break into passages of glowing consonant tonality, especially towards the Concerto's conclusion.

### **The music**

The Clarinet Concerto is in a single movement, but breaks down into several shorter, contrasting sections. It begins with an unassuming melody for clarinet alone – hardly a melody, in fact, and more simply a collection of faltering phrases. But remember this tune: you'll hear it time and time again as it blossoms in ever grander ways throughout the Concerto.

The soloist is soon joined by icy string chords and a glitter of percussion, his tune expanding and becoming more agitated, always with a sense of forward propulsion. After a moment of rest on a broad chord of B flat, we're off again, the clarinetist soon joined by striding chords in the brass, rising ever higher – these become an increasingly prominent part of the orchestral texture as the piece progresses.

The orchestra seems to steal the clarinet's theme for a lush, Hollywood-style treatment of it, which provokes some angry multiphonics as the soloist reasserts himself, before a quieter section in which the clarinet bubbles away against a chamber ensemble of just a few strings and woodwind. Following more of those distinctive striding brass chords, the clarinet returns for an unsettled passage that gradually calms down to some enigmatic tremolos, almost subsiding to silence.

After the orchestra returns for a surging climax, the clarinet plays its opening melody in ringing simplicity against sustained strings, handing it on to a solo trombone, which leads to one of the Concerto's rare pauses for breath. But soon the rising brass chords return, followed by the clarinet's opening tune glinting with bells. The soloist has a brief, quiet conversation with its two colleagues in the orchestra, and later, a stratospherically high figure – produced by the clarinetist playing with his teeth on the reed – heralds a solo *cadenza*, which he improvises on the spot.

When the orchestra returns, it's for a long, slow build-up to the Concerto's grand conclusion. The clarinet plays its opening theme in a setting of glowing tonality before a final, massive chord of C major brings the Concerto to an ecstatic ending – even if the soloist stubbornly sticks to the 'wrong' note.

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