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DOSSIER
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IFCM News:
World Youth Choir to Make its Debut in
Inner Mongolia in July 2018

COMPOSER'S CORNER



Interview with Fredrik Sixten
Adam Zrust

INTERVIEW WITH FREDRIK SIXTEN

ADAM ZRUST

conductor and teacher

Adam Zrust: *What is your earliest musical memory?*

Fredrik Sixten: My earliest memories are probably when I was a child attending services where my father worked as a pastor and I heard the organ playing. I was astounded. But I was also afraid, since I recall being frightened by the power and big sounds it could deliver. I also especially remember a performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion when I was around six years old. It was breathtaking. The organ made me curious about sounds, colour, dynamics, and so on. My first encounters with musical scores were eye opening and enticed me to learn as much as I could, much like many of the old masters did by copying and imitating to learn the craftsmanship behind it. I think that was utterly important for me.

Did you play instruments beyond the keyboard?

FS: I was, in many aspects, a normal teenager, and formed my own rock band where I played the drums. The group was called "Birka" (the old name for Stockholm). At first, we played mostly covers, but at a later stage I started to write my own stuff and therefore learned to play the guitar. I also learned to play guitar in a classical manner and even studied it at the Royal College of Music. One of my first serious attempts was a guitar concerto and later on, a guitar sonata. The latter one is, in fact, published!

You mentioned a strong instrumental background in your upbringing and alluded to its impact on your voice. How would you characterise your treatment of

choral sound?

My fascination with the organ was the start for me, but I also began singing in choirs from early on and got knowledge and experience from that. For me, it's very important that I can hear myself singing the parts, feeling that I mostly shape the part as idiomatically as possible. My music is not always easy for the singers, but it's never impossible. I often get the feedback that it's always worthwhile, even if it's hard. I often use a lot of divisi as a way to make a tight and colorful sound, but I can, of course, deliberately choose not to use it. The text is essential. Even in homophonic choral pieces, I am obsessed with making each part as natural and with its own melody as much as possible.

Your artistic journey appears to be extremely rich. What milestones do you consider most valuable?

My first major piece was "A Swedish St. Mark Passion." Back in 2004, that was a unique piece in many ways – it was the first complete passion in Swedish – but even more dramatically, the first set of the passion where a female soloist (soprano) sang the role of the Evangelist was something that had not happened before through music history. The two performances of my Requiem with the Swedish Radio Choir in 2012 was also a highlight, as was my opera "The Truth Beyond" in Germany and Sweden in 2016. There are so many, in fact, the more I think of it the harder it gets.

Do you have a specific piece of which you are most proud? Or perhaps one that captures the

essence of who you are as a composer?

Oh, this is so hard. I love and adore my music, at least most of it. There could be no other way. Of course, there are some pieces that I have lost contact with – we have grown apart. My Requiem is very close to me; I wrote it in connection to losing one of my closest friends in the middle of his life. So, every time I listen to it brings me close to him. Life and music are often inseparable. I have other pieces I adore, as well – my organ works, the chaconne for string quartet, the concerto for two pianos and orchestra, the opera... the list goes on and on.

To those who may be unfamiliar with your music, how would you describe your compositional style?

My style is, in a way, that I'm not a composer who uses one significant way of expressing myself. Many of my critics say that I am shattered. In my case, I believe this could be a strength. I use different styles as an important ingredient in what I would like to express. "Alleluia," for mixed choir *a cappella*, has become my perhaps most performed piece, but it is not a typical piece for me. I used that style deliberately, as I felt it was ultimately for what I wanted to express, not because it is "my style."

I've noticed you employ unexpected harmonic shifts in your music. What other elements do you consider?

My curiosity makes me interested in opening unknown doors. To go from something familiar to an unexpected turn. That could mean that I make use of a well-known traditional concept which I suddenly

Commissioned by Karlstad Motettsällskap and cathedral organist Hans Nordenborg

Sicut cervus

for mixed chorus a cappella

Music: **Fredrik Sixten (2014)**
 Lyrics: Psalm 42 (41*)

Allegretto affettuoso ♩ = c. 68

* According to R. Weber (ed.), *Le Psautier Romain et les autres anciens psautiers latins, Rom 1953*
 ** pronounced as the vowel "u" in Latin

© Fredrik Sixten - 2014

leave to explore something else. I can use renaissance language and develop it towards jazz-influenced chords. I can make rhythmical changes unexpectedly and also mix different elements of folk music with baroque style. Above all, the melody is most important. I believe I am known for that and it is always something I am searching for.

Your work reveals boundless exploration of different musical styles and elements. What is your creative process like?

In choral music, the lyrics are the foundation and where I get the most input. I always start there. I usually make sketches – a plan

for how I want the shape of the piece to be before actually writing a single note. The form is utterly important. In my oratorios, I work hard on how I build the piece and which texts to use. I work like a theologian. Then it usually comes fast and the music pours out of me. It's a gift, a blessing. As long as I do the preparations thoroughly it usually works that way. I have seldom had a writer's cramp.

Where do you find inspiration?

I would say from life itself – the contrasts, the conflicts, emotions, breakdowns. When I walk in the woods, or experience beautiful

scenery, I don't hear much music. Ugliness interests me because it's easier to appreciate the wonder in life if it is in relief to a darker background. The loss of my best friend, Patrik Runeke, created my Requiem; my daughter's longing for a long-lasting relationship created "Song of Songs" for choir and organ. Deadlines inspire me, they make me focused. Finding good lyrics inspire me, as well.

What would you consider to be your primary intent as a composer?
 It's my inner need to express myself. My curiosity and that I believe I can create new meetings among musicians, singers, and the public. It entices me that different people all over the world want to join me in my musical journey. That is so inspirational. I am deeply inspired through meeting and connecting with people.

Has there been a text you've come across recently that has been transformative for you somehow?
 Yes, there are certain poets that really catch my eye. One is the Swedish Nobel Prize winner, Tomas Tranströmer. But there are others, of course. Poems mean a lot to me and I am in constant search for new ideas. There are several things in the Bible; the Psalms, for instance, have truly been important for me both as a composer and a human.

Are there certain composers, past or present, who influence your work? Of your contemporaries, whose work do you admire?

There are so many. It is so obvious and natural to be inspired by others. That would not only include composers, but also artists, poets, actors, sculptures... anything, really. It's the creativity in whatever field you are working within that matters. The outcome is a world in its own.

What advice might you give young composers seeking to find their voice?

Find your inner voice. If you don't have one, search for it; if you have one, keep to it. Avoid repeating yourself. If you don't adore your music, there is something wrong. Be passionate.

What's next for you? Any big projects on the horizon?

Right now, I am working on new motets for mixed choir and a new version of my Requiem with organ to replace an orchestra. I also have a lot of new works on Edition Peters and other publishers of some of my new stuff coming out.

Your bio indicates that you were in various pop-bands during your youth. The inner sixteen-year-old in me is dying to know your favourite pop-band?

My overall hero is Prince. Others were Chicago (especially Terry Kath) and Jimi Hendrix.

What is it about Prince specifically?

He was a genius – as a composer, singer, and instrumentalist. It's a lesson in orchestration to listen to his recordings. His total lack of trying to give people and the record industry just what they wanted and expected. Instead, he focused to get to the next level in his creativity. He was like Mozart – ahead of his time. He was not afraid of the ugliness and harshness, but like Mozart, was also extremely talented in writing melodies. I am truly fortunate to have lived while he was still walking this earth and to hear him live!

Edited by Claire Storey, UK



A native of rural Nebraska, conductor and teacher **ADAM ZRUST** is active in the United States and abroad. His calendar includes concerts, guest performances in festivals and workshops, lectures, and active membership in several professional organizations. Holding degrees from Florida State University and the University of Nebraska-Kearney, Adam is based in Missouri, where he serves as Director of Choral Activities at the University of Central Missouri. Email: zrust@ucmo.edu

FREDRIK SIXTEN (b. 1962 in Sweden) is one of the foremost composers of church music in Sweden today. His choral compositions are performed by every type of choir, from children's to amateur to professional. He has written three large-scale works: *St. Mark Passion*, *Requiem*, and *Christmas Oratorio*. Sixten's organ compositions, as well as his choral music, are performed worldwide. Sixten works as a choral conductor and organist and has held prominent positions as a church musician, including organist of Hämösand Cathedral, Sweden. He is currently the organist of Nidaros Cathedral, Norway. *Alleluia* was written especially for the Edition Peters Scandinavian choral anthology, *I Himmelen*. Fredrik can be followed on social media and on the web at www.fredriksixten.se

