

# Tuning in to the word from up there

Mon, Apr 27, 2009

Russian composer Alexander Knaifel uses texts subsumed into his extraordinary music. He talks to **MICHAEL DERVAN** about life in Soviet times and this week's concert of his music in Drogheda

THE MUSIC OF the 65-year-old Russian composer, Alexander Knaifel, is as extraordinary to describe as it is to listen to. Take his *Agnus Dei* of 1985. It is scored for "four instrumentalists a cappella", playing percussion, keyboards, saxophones and double bass, all with electronics. Not a word is sung or spoken, although the familiar text appears in the score for the performers, as do extracts from the diary of a young girl who died in the siege of Leningrad.

The words of the diary are simple, their impact devastating. They bluntly record the days and times of the deaths of family and neighbours. The often isolated notes in this slow-moving, two-hour piece are inhabitants – mostly fragile, though sometimes subsonically threatening when in synthesizer mode – of an almost unendurably bare landscape.

*Chapter Eight* (1993) is a setting of part of the Song of Songs, written with Knaifel's cello teacher, Mstislav Rostropovich, in mind (a nerve inflammation put paid to Knaifel's cello career while he was still a student). The work is the antithesis of a concerto and Knaifel describes it in an unusual way, as being "for church, choirs and a cello".

The choirs form a cross in the church, a children's choir before the altar, a mixed choir at the back of the church, male and female choirs to the right and the left, the cellist at the centre. The hour-long piece moves with implacable, slow gentleness, the cello placed in the limelight for "an act of humility, a manifestation of sacrificial, self-crucifying love".

I heard the piece in a Lucerne Festival performance a few weeks ago by Swiss cellist Patrick Demenga and Latvian choirs under Estonian conductor Andres Mustonen. Mustonen managed to make the choral voices float. The sounds sometimes seemed to emerge as imperceptibly as a cloud slowly forming in a clear sky. In the welcoming rococo interior of Lucerne's Jesuit church, the effect was of prolonged, quiet ravishment.

Knaifel the man is sometimes as animated in conversation as his music is calm. He sings, points, cuts swathes through the air with his gestures and uses his legs and feet too. He illustrates as he talks.

And he has a wicked sense of humour. "Rossini," he roars, at one point, when I press him for the name of a favourite contemporary western composer. He's not just having a joke. He regards all real music as contemporary, whenever it was written.

His new commission for Friday's portrait concert at the Drogheda Arts Festival is one of those works which he has laced with embedded, unsung texts. The source is the 19th-century Russian poet, Fyodor Tyutchev, and Knaifel came upon the poems for his EF and three visiting cards of the poet in a most unusual way.

"In the 1980s, about 25 years ago, I got them from a very good friend of mine, who knew that I liked the poetry of Tyutchev very much," he says. "He typed out for me six late poems by Tyutchev which are almost unknown. Tyutchev wrote these poems to a very young woman – she was a lady-in-waiting to the tsarina. But she wasn't young any more, when this friend of mine got to know her. But somehow the poems had just stayed in the family.

"Tyutchev used to be quite spontaneous. He wouldn't always write down his poems in a proper way.

He would write on whatever happened to be around. And these ones he wrote on his visiting cards. That's why in the title there is EF, the name of the young woman, and the three visiting cards."

THE NEW PIECE inspired by the poems is a work for violin, viola and cello. Although it's an instrumental piece, it is, in essence, for Knaifel, "a vocal piece". It's dedicated to the English cellist, Elizabeth (Lisa) Wilson. Like Knaifel, she studied with Rostropovich, whose biography she has written (as well as books on Shostakovich and Jacqueline du Pré).

"The poetry says 'EF', but the piece is dedicated to 'EW'," says Knaifel. "Lisa Wilson has played in trios her whole life; it's something she does a lot. I'm very happy that it will be connected to the two Irish musicians. I'm also quite excited and a little nervous, because it's a very complicated piece."

The poetry is written into the score, moving around the page as it associates itself with different instruments. The text is in Cyrillic script, so the violinist and viola player, Elizabeth Cooney and Joachim Roewer, will be heavily dependent on the dedicatee when it comes to rehearsals. Knaifel's confidence seems unbounded.

"Lisa speaks Russian as well as she does her mother tongue," he says. "She will make a literal translation for the musicians. She is the ideal person to be a bridge between the two cultures."

Knaifel's practice of using texts that were not to be sung goes back to the early 1980s. He first used it in a piece called *Nika* ("72 fragments for 17 performers on bass instruments"), with poetry by Heraclitus. And, over time, he found himself using the idea again and again, and embracing the idea of using Russian poetry.

It's his view that he's really doing nothing more than pursuing the words of the Bible – "In the beginning was the Word". He sees himself as bringing music back to its source, and he believes that while the words are not explicit for the listener in the performance, people will still pick up on the basics of the idea. He doesn't in any sense want to hide the words. They can be printed or read to the listeners. But, in performance, they are subsumed in the music itself, rather than separate from it.

Knaifel's current style is a far cry from the music he wrote as a young man, when his name was listed among the practitioners of the avant-garde in the Soviet Union. He was among a group of composers subjected to an official reprimand in 1979. His crime was the scandal which surrounded the Cologne premiere of an improvisatory piece called *A Prima Vista*. Along with Elena Firsova, Dmitri Smirnov, Viktor Suslin, Vyacheslav Artyomov, Sofia Gubaidulina and Edison Denisov, he was tarred with the accusation of creating "noisy mud instead of real musical innovation".

But, he says, he didn't really have a difficult time from the Soviet authorities. "I wasn't one of those composers who were socially or politically targeted. I just wasn't performed. But I worked on film music. And this was financially rewarding; I could live from writing it. And I could write music which would be recorded right away, and I could listen to it right away. Alfred Schnittke was also aware of this advantage. Sofia Gubaidulina, also, a little bit.

"I had a couple of difficult situations, but they weren't too bad, and it was also significant that I didn't live in Moscow, but in St Petersburg. It was easier there. In St Petersburg, the leader of the Composers' Union was Andrey Petrov. He was fond of me and believed in my music, and when he became aware of any difficulties he was very protective. In contrast to Sofia Gubaidulina, or Alfred Schnittke or Arvo Pärt, who went abroad, I didn't have many controversial situations.

"I would compare myself to Valentin Silvestrov. We stayed at home and got on with doing what we wanted to do."

Things in the Soviet Union were not quite as black and white as they are often represented.

“The point is not the country, the point is the people.” And, he says, “in a way, the atmosphere for creativity used to be better”.

Creating boundaries, he says, can actually promote creativity more than untrammelled freedom. He points to the remarkable human achievements which have been made under the extreme adversities of war.

“We know that unbelievable things are often born in a situation where you wouldn’t assume that anything would be possible,” he says.

ASKING HIM ABOUT the change that took place in his music prompts a long philosophical disquisition about musical language, and the source of what people often refer to as inspiration. Composers, he says, don’t actually choose their language or style.

“Every period has its own language. Listen to Palestrina, Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms, Stravinsky, Britten, Purcell. The languages are different. This is a great mystery. It’s God’s will, if you like. And this is the most interesting part. We understand everything which was before us. But all those languages are different, and that has to mean that the actual language isn’t the main point. We shouldn’t try to separate things too much on the basis of musical language or style.”

Then he takes a leap by saying: “The main thing is that a composer can’t really write his own music. The music comes from” – he points – “up there. What’s important for a composer is to listen to it and to get it down on paper. Then it’s clear for everybody what it is. All the classifications or separations come from the weaknesses of mankind.”

The Rest is Noise: the Music of Alexander Knaifel is presented by Drogheda Borough Council, in association with Louth Contemporary Music Society, for Drogheda Arts Festival at St Peter’s Church of Ireland, Drogheda, this Fri, May 1, at 8pm. Performers are Patricia Rozario (soprano), Elizabeth Cooney (violin), Joachim Roewer (viola), Elizabeth Wilson (cello), Oleg Malov (piano) and the Callino String Quartet. Booking: [www.ctb.ie](http://www.ctb.ie)

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