

FREDRIK SIXTEN is firmly rooted in a Swedish music tradition, but at the same time with a musical language all his own. Today his works have started to spread outside the boundaries of Sweden. His *Variations for Organ and Let There Be* for choir and percussion will receive their world premieres this spring in the USA.

Fredrik Sixten in focus

When Fredrik Sixten in 2004 wrote *A Swedish St. Mark Passion* for choir, soloists and chamber ensemble, he had been composing since the end of the 1990s. But the passion was a breakthrough when he took up the grim narrative, with the gospel and newly written texts by **Bengt Pohjanen**.

Ragnar Bohlin, principal conductor of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, premiered and recorded the work in 2004, which led to continued collaboration: the CD *Mysterium*, with sacred choral music (including *O Magnum Mysterium*, *Pie Jesu*, *Laudate Dominum*, *Sacrum Convivium* and other works.) "The St. Mark Passion rests on three pillars: strong roots in Bach, Swedish folk music and an impressionistic modernism with quite bold harmonies – parts which would seem not to blend so easily. But Fredrik Sixten manages to pull it off. It is well written and has its origin in a sound knowledge of sacred music. Even though it is traditional in a way, it also seems new and fresh. He composes unaffectedly and many times with elements of surprise", says Ragnar Bohlin.

In spite of the fact that it is both musically and emotionally strenuous to learn, the *St. Mark Passion*, with its original voice-leading and rhythms, large choruses, simple hymns and intricate recitatives, has been performed many times, which is not a matter of course for a contemporary composer in Sweden.

Requiem and A Swedish Christmas Oratorio

Three years later Fredrik Sixten wrote his *Requiem* for choir, soloists and orchestra, with a synthesis of texts from the Requiem Mass and newly written poetry – this time as well by Bengt Pohjanen (translated into English by **John Hearne**). It was personal grief that gave rise to the work and the tone language is different from that of the *St. Mark Passion*. "The Requiem is the best contribution to Swedish church music in a long time. It is personal, penetrating and beautiful music that makes a deep impression and is easy to take to heart", says Ragnar Bohlin, who also conducted the premiere of the Requiem.

The third large-scale work for choir and orchestra, *A Swedish Christmas Oratorio* for solo soprano, two choirs and orchestra, was given its premiere in December 2009 in Gothenburg and on the Swedish Radio, here too a combination of gospel text and newly written text, this time by the poet **Ylva Eggehorn**. Even though the Christmas Oratorio is a brighter story, Fredrik Sixten has sought the darker aspects. "I want to get away from that sweetness and harmlessness that easily comes with Christmas. Even though it is a naive narrative, the background is anything but bright, with the child who was born to be sacrificed and then hung on the cross", says Fredrik

Sixten. He speaks of the complete darkness, of putting the outcasts in the front row and not forgetting that Mary and Joseph were also homeless, poor and rejected people on the run. In both the Christmas Oratorio and the *St. Mark Passion* the recitatives are sung by a soprano. "Why shouldn't women get to sing the gospel? Moreover, it opens up more possibilities, the voice of the soprano has a greater range than that of the tenor", he says.

Fredrik Sixten has also composed for solo instruments, string quartet and, especially, for a cappella choir. He is a composer who knows how voice, instruments and sentiment work together. There is a directness, a kind of honest simplicity, that enables one to understand what he wants to tell us. Even when melodies and harmonies take unexpected turns it is always singable.

Sixten as church composer

Fredrik Sixten was born in 1962 in Skövde and it was in church that he first encountered music; his father and grandfather were priests. But besides singing in the choir and blowing the organ he also played in various pop bands; he was influenced by both historical and popular music. After finishing school he went straight to the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, and today Fredrik Sixten is the organist at the Cathedral in Härnösand.

With his feet firmly in the day-to-day musical practice, 'utility music' also has a place in his heart. He sees it as a challenge to write music with a function, simple music but still with a bite. Too much of the music in the Swedish Church is overly banal in his opinion.

"What drives me on is that my music should be alive", he says. "When I see that music is lacking, music that is needed, then I want to write it."

There are those who think he is too traditional. But he sees the discussion about modernism and tonality as a meaningless question. "What is experimental music today? We have explored the tonal system now. One way of writing music for our time is unexpected

