

## **Peeter Vähi's Supreme Silence - Music Beyond Style and Time**

**On the NYND New Music Festival** in November 1997 Supreme Silence, a new work by the composer Peeter Vähi was first performed. The press reviews ranged from laudatory to downright denouncing. The work was hailed as the highest achievement or condemned as a total failure. Some reviewers fathomed its religious depth, others thought that the pseudo-religious story was there to compensate the lack of musical accomplishment. The composer was praised for his originality of ideas and the novelty of his musical language as much criticized for shameless imitation. It is very seldom that one meets such contradictory opinions from the critics.

**What is Supreme Silence?** This is an approximately 50-minute long composition for solo voice, male choir and handbell ensemble, in places supplemented by Buddhist musical instruments and discrete electronics. The subtitles give us an idea of the overall tonality: Mandala Offering, Vajrasattva Mantra, Supreme Silence and Aspiration for the Pure Land. The second movement is based on the traditional Sanskrit mantra, the last on Tibetan lyrics by Lord Jigten Sumgon (1143-1217). Both texts have been specially chosen by His Holiness Kyaggon Chetsang Rinpoche, Head of the Buddhist Drikung Kagyu school. This is almost all that we know for certain about Supreme Silence. Everything else might be subject to debate, proof and contradiction.

**What is Supreme Silence?** This is a composition that could not easily be accommodated under any style or genre. It is not a typical instrumental or vocal work. It is not Buddhist sacred music, nor is it usual for concert music. Supreme Silence is reminiscent of stylised Oriental music. This is reflected by the male choir resembling the chanting of Buddhist monks and the use of ritual instruments (Tibetan cymbals, damaru, dung chen). But it is not the stylised Orient, because the work relies on European and American musical tradition. It is more like stylised early music. And it is not, because it is modern music or, we could even say it is "the music of tomorrow". It seems to derive from traditional melodies, but they are invented by the composer. Nor is it possible to classify the work using the terms of acoustic or electronic. It sounds like Philip Glass or Steve Reich, but no, it is neither. Over the past decades a number of stylistic terms have been coined: new age, cross culture, crossover. But they do not apply, either. And what about the third movement consisting of 5 minutes of absolute silence? Is it an imitation of John Cage? Not quite. One of the principal tenets of the teaching Buddha is the concept of shunyata or emptiness. The third movement is empty and the only musical equivalent for emptiness is Supreme Silence.

**And yet, what is Supreme Silence?** It is the Glasperlenspiel, so characteristic of the end of the Millennium, where the spiritual and the secular, the oriental and the occidental, the analogue and the digital systems, the past and the present seem to be interwoven. In a 1993 CD introduction to one of Vähi's compositions it says: "... in my eyes the 2000 years after the birth of Christ is like a philosophical-musical summary of the history of Europe." And now, five years after, it seems that the composer has moved even further on the path of abstraction. Every page of the score radiates with the composer's conviction that he is viewing "the end of the world's cultural history". What comes next? Or does anything come at all?

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