

“I have never doubted that I want to compose”

Vykintas Baltakas – a profile

by Sarah Laila Standke



Vykintas Baltakas

“I have never doubted that I want to compose. Music has always been a part of my life and I started to write ideas and sketches for compositions at a very

early stage,” recounts Vykintas Baltakas, who was born into a family of musicians from Vilnius, Lithuania, in 1972. After studying at the Academy of Music in Vilnius, he subsequently studied composition with Wolfgang Rihm and conducting with Andreas Weiss at Karlsruhe University of Music.

Soon after he arrived in Karlsruhe he met Peter Eötvös, who was running the Institute of New Music in Karlsruhe at the time and who for several years helped Baltakas to intensify both his conducting and composing skills.

In 2007 Baltakas – who now lives in Belgium – was awarded the Ernst von Siemens Music Foundation Composers’ Prize. In 2009 he founded the Lithuanian Ensemble Network; he has been director of the network ever since and has also used the organisation for the interpretation of his own works. The UE catalogue now contains more than 20 compositions by Vykintas Baltakas, including works which were written for the Ensemble Modern, Klangforum Wien, the Arditti Quartet and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Composing and conducting have been interlinked from the very beginning for Vykintas Baltakas. “They are mutually enriching and I feel that they are really two sides of the same thing: being a musician. I feel a need for this within me. It is not enough for me to just compose pieces; I also want to be a part of it, standing on the stage and influencing how something is played.” This is also reflected in his compositional process: “I cannot compose without thinking about how to interpret the music as well. And the reverse is also true: I cannot interpret without applying compositional thinking. The result of this is an interplay between the music and myself. I am not a composer who influences everything that he writes. I allow myself to be enriched by the music, giving certain stimuli and changing the material in a particular direction; then I listen to it and analyse what happens. It is like a game of ping-pong with the music. I try to feel the ‘taste of the sound’. What I find most interesting are things that are new to me, things that the music gives me.”

As many as four of Vykintas Baltakas’ compositions will be premiered in 2013; in January the revised version of his work for music theatre, *Cantio*, was also performed for the first time in German at the Ultraschall Festival in Berlin.

The world premiere of *Cantio* took place on 18 May 2004 at the Munich Biennale – this piece is the composer’s first and to date only work for music theatre. Baltakas himself describes it as an “artwork for theatre” that explores rhetoric on the one hand and the question as to why texts are sung at all in opera and music theatre on the other. The work is brought alive by language,

playing with words, and the connection between the spoken word and music, sound, and ultimately singing. None of these elements is given more emphasis over the others in Cantio; instead, everything focuses on the one existential question that forms the work's initial idea, and which is influenced by an understanding of ancient Greece: what would happen if the gods were to leave the city and go out into the world? "Of course, there is no answer to this primary question – what would happen if you were to lose your reason for existing, but it is important to raise the question. This is what happens in Cantio."

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At the New Chamber Music Days in Witten at the end of April, Baltakas' most recent composition received its world premiere: Saxordionphonics, a double concerto for accordion, saxophone and chamber orchestra, commissioned by the WDR (West German Broadcasting).

The accordion and saxophone are two instruments frequently found in Baltakas' compositions. What is the fascination of their sound? "It is probably that certain sharpness. The accordion is an instrument that used to be strongly underrated, but it offers an incredibly wide range of possibilities. It fits in with all of the other instruments and works wonderfully with any kind of ensemble. It can sound like a wind instrument, like an organ, or like a string instrument, yet it always remains an accordion. The articulation and style of playing are anchored somewhere in each of these groups. The sound of the accordion and saxophone is very similar and only really unfurls when heard together with the orchestra."

Vyintas Baltakas' next composition will be a work for the Scharoun Ensemble that will be performed for the first time on 28 August 2013 in Salzburg. He received a commission for the piece from the Salzburg Foundation, together with the UE composers Jay Schwartz and Johannes

Maria Staud. The composition is to originate from the examination of an artwork realised by the Salzburg Art Project – in Baltakas' case it is the light installation *Beyond Recall* by the Austrian artist Brigitte Kowanz, which can be seen on the State Bridge (Staatsbrücke) in Salzburg.

Baltakas describes how he plans to approach this new composition: "Before going to Salzburg to study the artwork, I am trying quite consciously to stop my ideas from developing so that I don't think too much in advance and then merely see the artwork as an alibi. I would like to form a relationship with the artwork. I experienced a similar process when I composed my piece for ensemble and electronics, *Lift to Dubai*, which was composed for "into" – the Ensemble Modern and Siemens Arts Program project.

A number of composers [including Luke Bedford and David Fennessy – ed.] lived in different major cities for a month – in my case it was Dubai – and were asked to write a piece based on this experience. I naturally started to think about Dubai and the Arab world, and I had all kinds of ideas. But after just one day in Dubai, I cast them all aside because my impression once there was completely different. I am very happy that I jettisoned it all because it had nothing to do with Dubai. The composition for Salzburg puts me in a similar position; I would like to be honest and really get to grips with the work of art. And there is not only the artwork, but also its surroundings, the context in which the work is situated. All this has a big effect and I don't know what will influence me the most. I have no idea where my attention will be drawn; I might even compose something about the surroundings of the artwork."