

KURT ATTERBERG

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Kurt Magnus Atterberg was a Swedish composer and also an engineer. He is best known for his symphonies, operas and ballets. He said that the Russians, Brahms and Reger as his musical influences, and his works combine their compositional styles with Swedish folk tunes.

Atterberg was born in Gothenburg on 12 December 1887. His father was Anders Johan Atterberg, an engineer and brother of the famous chemist Albert Atterberg. His mother, Elvira Uddman, was the daughter of a famous male opera singer.

In 1902, Atterberg began to learn the cello, having been inspired by a concert by the Brussels String Quartet, featuring a performance of Beethoven's String Quartet No.

8. Six years later, he became a performer in the Stockholm Concert Society, now known as the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as publishing his first completed work, the Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 1. His String Quartet No. 1 in D major, Op. 2, soon followed.



While already studying electrical engineering at the Royal Institute of Technology, Atterberg also enrolled at the Royal College of Music, Stockholm in 1910 with a score of his Rhapsody and an incomplete version of his Symphony No. 1. There he studied composition and orchestration under the composer Andreas Hallén. He earned his engineering diploma a year later, as well as being awarded a State Music Fellowship. He made his conducting debut at a concert in Gothenburg in 1912, premiering his first symphony and the Concert Overture in A minor, Op. 4.

Although continuing to compose and conduct, Atterberg enjoyed a fulfilling career in several different organisations. He accepted a post at the Swedish Patent and Registration Office in 1912, going on to become a head of department in 1936, and working there until his retirement in 1968. He co-founded the Society of Swedish Composers in 1918, alongside other prominent composers such as Ture Rangström, Wilhelm Stenhammar and Hugo Alfvén. Six years later, he was elected president of the society, maintaining the position until 1947. At the same time, he became president of the Svenska Tonsättares Internationella Musikbyrå, which he also helped to found, and his presidency lasted until 1943. Other jobs taken on by Atterberg included his work as a music critic for the Stockholms Tidningen from 1919 to 1957, and as secretary of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music from 1940 to 1953.

Atterberg died on 15 February 1974 in Stockholm, aged 86, and was buried there in the Northern Cemetery.

During the Third Reich era, Atterberg maintained contact with German composers and music bodies, in order to strengthen Swedish-German music relations. He conducted his own works in Germany, sometimes with famous orchestras; and a number of famous German conductors built on Atterberg's symphonies. Atterberg never hesitated to pass the German contacts he established over the years to his Swedish colleagues, or to work for Swedish works constructed in Germany. Atterberg introduced Albert Henneberg to Fritz Tutenberg at a music festival in Kiel in 1926, and wrote operas together for the Opera in Chemnitz. From 1935-1938, Atterberg was General Secretary of the International Composers Council, founded by Richard Strauss in 1934.

There are anti-Semitic passages in Atterberg's correspondence and use of language, particularly evident in disputes with the composer Moses Pergament, a music critic for Svenska Dagbladet. In a 1923 letter to Pergament, Atterberg wrote: "You could launch yourself as a composer I could not dream of ... So far, you are indeed the formal successor to a fundamentally pure Jewish composer—then why not in name too?" The dispute between the two composers stemmed from their diametrically different artistic tendencies and the fact that Atterberg was a leading personality in the Swedish music scene and a proponent of the romantic national identity; whereas Pergament, together with Gösta Nystroem and Hilding Rosenberg, was inclined to a more modernist wing.

After World War II, Atterberg wanted to free himself from suspicion of being a Nazi sympathizer. The Royal Academy of Music set up an inquiry of Atterberg at his own request. The investigation could neither confirm nor refute the accusations that he was a Nazi sympathizer

Atterberg composed nine symphonies. His Ninth Symphony (entitled Sinfonia Visionaria) was, like Beethoven's, scored for orchestra and chorus with vocal soloists. His output also includes six concertante works (including his Rhapsody, Op. 1, a Piano concerto and a Cello concerto), nine orchestral suites, three string quartets, five operas and two ballets. The Piano Concerto op 37 is very fine indeed at times and the big tune in the slow movement when given the full treatment is truly memorable.

The Symphonies form a vital part of his output. The Symphony no 1 in B minor Op 3 dates from 1910 and is in four movements lasting just over 40 minutes. The opening movement is rather leisurely but the slow movement has some gorgeous tender moments and is beautifully orchestrated There is a powerful scherzo and a slow introduction which is atmospheric leading into a grand finale.

The Symphony no 2 in Op 6 dates from 1913 and lasts for forty minutes. It takes a while to get going and has a pastoral feel about it and later what might be a nationalistic feel. The slow movement is acceptable and the scherzo has some excellent moments while the finale stops and starts. It is one of those works that is good in parts but not all parts.

Pictures of the West Coast is the subtitle of the Symphony no 3 in D Op 10 of 1916 which last about 37 minutes. It is his best work so far and very evocative.

The Symphony no 4 in G minor Op 14 of 1918 is called Piccolo, not after a woodwind instrument, but meaning little and, at 21 minutes, it succeeds in his conciseness but it is a splendid piece and has very much to commend it.

Tragic is the subtitle of Symphony no 5 in D minor Op 20 which does not come off and is not an unified whole and eventually seems to degenerate into a type of cheap waltz,

For the 100th anniversary of the death of Schubert in 1928, the Columbia Gramophone Company sponsored a worldwide symphony competition in which composers were to write a symphony completing, or inspired by, Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony. Atterberg entered his Symphony No. 6 in C major, Op. 31, and was awarded first prize, winning \$10,000. The symphony, which was later known as the "Dollar Symphony", was recorded by Sir Thomas Beecham. The symphony was performed by Arturo Toscanini in 1943, during an NBC Symphony Orchestra broadcast concert; a performance which Atterberg praised on hearing the recorded broadcast.

This Symphony of 1928 of 28 minutes is a very poor work. It is lightweight, somewhat banal and slush. About 20 minutes in it is repetitious and has already become very wearisome. Its popularity is a complete mystery to many of us.

Romantic is the title of the Symphony no 7 Op 45 of 1942. It fares better than its predecessor but has a long winded slow movement and the finale does sound rather trite. I am concerned that symphonies have titles as often people try to relate the titles to the music and this does not always work and is a distraction.

The next symphony in number 8 which has much in common with numbers 3 and 4. It has some fine orchestration, bold thematic material although sometimes it is a little trite but it is often impressive. The Symphony no 9, Op 54 is scored for mezzo, baritone, chorus and orchestra and contains some lovely and atmosphere music although the work is uneven.

On February 22, 2005, CPO Records released a complete box set of recordings of Atterberg's symphonies, as well as the symphonic poem Älven - Från Fjällen till Havet (The River – From the Mountains to the Sea). The recordings were performed by four different German orchestras, including the Radio-Sinfonie-Orchester Frankfurt, all conducted by Finnish conductor Ari Rasilainen.

Atterberg married twice, first Ella Peterson, a pianist, in 1915; they divorced eight years later. His second marriage was to Margareta Dalsjö in 1925, which lasted until her death in 1962.

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