

JOONAS KOKKONEN

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Joonas Kokkonen was born in Iisalmi, Finland on 13 November 1921, but spent the latter part of his life in Järvenpää at his home, which was known as “Villa Kokkonen” designed by Alvar Aalto and finished in 1969.

He served in the Finnish army during World War II with great distinction. He was educated at the University of Helsinki, and later at the Sibelius Academy, where he afterwards taught composition; his students there included Aulis Sallinen. In addition to his activities as a composer, he made a significant and powerful impact on Finnish cultural life, serving as a chairman and organizer, heading organizations such as Society of Finnish Composers, the Board of the Concert Centre, and others. His purpose was always to improve music education, as well as the status and appreciation of classical music as well as Finnish music.



In the 1960s and early 1970s he won numerous prizes for his work. He was appointed to the prestigious Finnish Academy upon the death of Uuno Klami. His composition activity slowed down greatly after the death of his wife and he increased his alcohol consumption and depression set in. He had long planned a Fifth Symphony but nothing was ever committed to paper and it died with him.

The date of his death has been variously reported as October 1, 1996 (New Grove Dictionary, and various internet sources); October 2, 1996 (many internet sources, including the Finnish Music Center); and October 20, 1996 (New Grove Dictionary of Opera). According to his biographer, Pekka Hako, he died on October 2, in the early hours of the day.

Even though he studied at the Sibelius Academy, he was mainly self taught in composition. Usually his compositions are divided into three style periods: a neo-classical early style from 1948 to 1958, a relatively short middle period in a twelve-tone style from 1959 to 1966, and a late “neo-Romantic” style of free tonality which also used aspects of his earlier style periods, which began in 1967 and lasted for the rest of his life.

Most of his early music is chamber music, and includes a Piano Trio and a Piano Quintet in which the style is contrapuntal and said to be influenced by Bartók, but it looks back to Renaissance and Baroque models as well. In the second style period, he wrote the first two of his four symphonies. Although he used twelve-tone technique, he avoided orthodoxy by occasionally using triads and octaves; he also liked to use the row melodically, giving the successive pitches in the same tone colour (many other composers of 12-tone music split the row between different voices). The Piano Quintet is a scintillating piece and one of the very finest chamber works to come out of Finland.

In the third style period, Kokkonen wrote the music that made him internationally famous: the last two symphonies, the *Durch Einen Spiegel* for twelve solo strings, the Requiem, and the opera *The Last Temptations* (1975) (*Viimeiset kiusaukset*), based on the life and death of the Finnish Revivalist preacher Paavo Ruotsalainen. The opera is punctuated with chorales which refer back to Johann Sebastian Bach,

and which are also reminiscent of the African-American spirituals used for a similar purpose in Michael Tippett's oratorio, *A Child of Our Time*. The opera was staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1983 and received over 500 performances worldwide. It is Finland's greatest opera.

His original breakthrough came with his *Music for string orchestra* of 1957

The *Symphony no 1* is in four movements and has been described as mildly serial. The first movement, *Moderato*, emerges from the depths with a luscious string melody, endless variety, and a sumptuous violin solo. It is brooding music with an excellent build up. The second movement, *Allegretto*, is playful and entertaining. Next comes an *Allegro* which is virile, powerful and dramatic and, finally, the *Adagio* which is thoughtful, expressive and has a glorious part for the solo violin

The *Symphony no 2* has another mysterious opening with a brief solo violin and fine interwoven instrumental music with another splendid and natural build up. The *allegro* is bustling and strong with memorable thematic material. This is followed by an *Andante* with heartfelt music of strange beauty and a brief *allegro vivace* finale.

Both these symphonies could be called austere but then Kokkonen took on the use of colour in his symphonies not that he could be called a colourist which is a stupid remark anyhow.

As for the *Symphony no 3*, it is a very impressive work of controlled power. It is not overwhelming as Walton's first symphony and therefore not exhausting but the logic, coherence and onward drive makes it a masterpiece and, as Robert Simpson said, "At least as great as Sibelius's greatest work". I had to listen to it time and time again. It seems to be more direct and concise. It was also said to be introverted. It won the Nordic Music Prize in January 1968.

The *Symphony no 4* took three months to write and was completed in October 1971. It is immediately accessible and is in three movements, The work is extrovert.

He only wrote one concerto, the *Cello Concerto* of 1969. It is in five movements with a virtuosic solo part and lighter orchestration so that the cello can be heard at all times.. There are times of sheer energy and fun. It is often very poignant and vastly superior to some of the most often played cello concertos with their pomposity and wallows.

Kokkonen is a truly great composer but is ignored or, perhaps, overshadowed by Sibelius. The public are consequently missing a highly individual voice and an exceptional talent.

List of compositions

Orchestral

- Music for String Orchestra (1957)
- Symphony No. 1 (1960)
- Symphony No. 2 (1960–61)
- Opus Sonorum (1964)
- Symphony No. 3 (1967)
- Symphonic Sketches (1968)
- Symphony No. 4 (1971)
- Inauguratio (1971)
- "...durch einem Spiegel" (1977)
- Il passaggio (1987)

Concertante

- Concerto for Cello & Orchestra (1969)

Chamber

Piano Trio (1948)
Piano Quintet (1951–53)
Duo for violin & piano (1955)
String Quartet No. 1 (1959)
Sinfonia da camera (1961–62)
String Quartet No. 2 (1966)
Wind Quintet (1973)
Sonata for Cello & Piano (1975–76)
String Quartet No. 3 (1976)
Improvisazione for violin & piano (1982)

Piano

Impromptu for piano (1938)
Pielavesi Suite for piano (1939)
Two Small Preludes for piano (1943)
Sonatina for piano (1953)
Religioso for piano (1956)
Bagatelles for piano (1969)

Organ

Lux aeterna for organ (1974)
Hääsoitto (Wedding music) for organ
Iuxta Crucem for organ
Surusoitto (Funeral Music) for organ

Vocal

Three Songs to Poems by Einari Vuorela (1947)
Illat Song Cycle (1955)
Three Children's Christmas Songs (1956–58)
Hades of the Birds, Song Cycle for Soprano & Orchestra (1959)
Two Monologues from "The Last Temptations" for bass & orchestra (1975)

Choral

Missa a capella (1963)
Laudatio Domini (1966)
Erekhteion, academic cantata (1970)
Ukko-Paavon Virsi for chorus (1978)
Requiem (1979–81)
"With his fingers Väinämöinen played" for male chorus (1985)

Opera

The Last Temptations (1972–1975)

(1176)