



Meetings and crossroads.

Hans-Ola Ericsson's inaugural lecture for the Royal Swedish Academy of Music

I was inducted into this celebratory group in 2000 and to have the opportunity to give my inaugural lecture now, 22 years later, feels exciting because then, I was in the middle of my career and my work at the music colleges in Piteå and Bremen, traveling as a concert organist, composer and active in musical research around Europe. Today, I have, by and large, ended my permanent academic engagements, if you exclude a few international visiting professorships, but continue my concerts and stubborn defence of the quality and demands of attention of the new art music. The contemporary expression has always been at the centre of my musicianship, seeing the good new music as a constant source of irritation that always stubbornly pokes for attention, where unheard sounds can give my listeners courage to look forward to tomorrow.

I have worked as a concert organist, pedagogue, composer and in recent years also as a visual artist - more on this towards the end of my lecture.

Some meetings that came to mark my life were, for example, when I heard a work by Torsten Nilsson, *Nativitas Domini*, at a Christmas concert in Gustav Vasa church. I was maybe 12 years old and was completely confused, dazed and fascinated by the expression in the music. Shortly after this experience, I quite simply sought out Torsten and asked him if I could study composition with him. He took me on and became a great role model. He was uncompromising, to the point of self-immolation, for what he believed in. To me, he was truly a hero! Through him, at that time, I was brought up to believe that the truly new and innovative music took place in the church and that it played a truly significant role. Being able to be part of a number of complete church years in the Oscar Church with Torsten as choir director and Alf Linder and sometimes Karl-Erik Welin as organists gave a unique insight into what really good church music could be. I got to experience lots of premieres, phenomenal organ music, choral singing and church operas in the Oscar Church. And I myself had my first tentative works performed in the church.

At the same time and in the same spirit, the wonderful Sven-Erik Bäck taught us to "only give God the best" - not the simplest, not entertainment, not what today is described as easily accessible evangelistic music, but quality that is geared towards listening and reflection.

A year later, I was able to participate as a boy soprano soloist, at the Western European premiere of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Utrenja - Christ's Burial and Resurrection*. The sound and the dizzying experience it was to be able to perform this music, together with singers such as Elisabeth Söderström, Kerstin Meyer, Kim Borg and Peter Lagger, all under the direction of Antal Dorati, have left a deep impression on me and I have carried these experiences with me in all my life.

Getting to sing in Stockholm's Boys Choir, where every boy was also strongly encouraged to also play an instrument where the activity was connected to the community music school. In addition, attending the school Adolf Fredrik's music classes, was a logical framework for a young aspiring musician.

This was followed by studies at the Academy of Music in Stockholm, at least a year to begin with. There, a long line of wonderful teachers gave their utmost devotion, such as Gotthard Arnér, Maj Fougstedt, Solwig Grippe, Bo Wallner and Eric Ericson to name only a few.

One of the big profiles during my time as a student was Harald Göransson, with whom I had a very divided relationship. At the grand piano, he could make an elaborate chorale in Bach style, which one had sat and tinkered with all night before the lesson, sound as if it consisted only of parallel fifths and octaves. But he was cunning. At a lesson in

liturgical singing and conducting, he said: "Dear children, today we will sing something new, we will sing psalms!" We sang a little reluctantly but nevertheless. The next lesson he started the lesson with the same words: "Dear children, today we will sing something new..." We grumbled but sang much better. When the third lesson began with the same words, we wondered, and someone—perhaps me—muttered, "Now the old man has really become senile." What we did not know, however, was that he had been given a hearing aid and therefore understood my mumbling very clearly and explained laconically: "You should not think that I have become senile, this is about loving indoctrination."

With Eric, I became a rehearsal (piano slave) for both the Radio Choir and the Chamber Choirs - all in all, it was a good and extremely educational way to finance the studies.

After the first year at the Academy in Stockholm, I went on to the School of music school in Freiburg, because it was composition that I really wanted to study. I alternated studies in Sweden and Germany for seven years. In Freiburg I experienced the best guidance I received during my studies, mainly from Klaus Huber and to some extent from Brian Ferneyhough. The composition class, which was truly international, was constantly visited by the leading composers of the time and as a young composer craving for knowledge, it was of course wonderful to meet Pierre Boulez, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, Wolfgang Rihm, Morton Feldman and Paul Dessau, one of Berthold Brecht's favourite composers.

Towards the end of my study years in Freiburg, Luigi Nono often worked with his live electronics at the Experimentalstudio des Südwestfunks and I got to know him well. This led to him inviting me to work together in Venice for five wonderful months in the spring of 1984. The only real task, aside from deep discussions about anything else than music, I got during my time with him was to visit, as often as I could, the St Mark's Basilica and there study the golden mosaic which consists of approximately 8000 m² of individually designed puzzle pieces, but, as he said: "only where the sun shines in". I thought the task was unnecessarily esoteric, but I carried it out eagerly, nevertheless. After a few months, I think I understood the task – to study the individual (in each small mosaic piece) in relation to the intangible, the collective – and of course learn from this! Furthermore, he helped me to gain access to visit the Palazzo Ducale where Hieronimus Bosch's diptych, "Paradise: Ascent of the blessed" was located. I had longed to see the painting, but it was located in a part of the palace that was closed to the public. A good friend of Nono's worked as a janitor and early one morning he kindly unlocked the small room and asked how long I wanted to "be with" the painting. I think I said, preferably two hours. He then locked me in and after two hours he unlocked and let me out as a changed person.

One day after a long conversation together, Luigi suddenly cut off the conversation because he had forgotten an appointment for a lunch meeting with some friends. He

invited me and the friends turned out to be Maurizio Pollini and Claudio Abbado. The only thing I remember from that meeting was that it was in no way about music.

Back home, I started teaching interpretation courses in new organ music at the Schools of Music in Sweden and this led to me being offered a permanent position at the relatively newly started School of Music in Piteå. This became a crossroad that led to 24 years of employment with deep commitment. In the county of Norrbotten, I was close to leading politicians and patrons and I was able to carry out two major research projects, the so-called "Övertorneå project" where we documented, restored and had two reconstructions (in Norrfjärden church and the German Church in Stockholm) built of one of the country's foremost cultural treasures, the organ in Övertorneå church, originally from 1608. The second project concerned an organ instrument primarily intended for the not yet composed music, for Studio Acusticum in Piteå. A long line of wonderful students and colleagues worked together to make the School of Music in Piteå a fantastic place to work at. It is a deep sadness to now have to state that time seems to have run out for this, once exuberant music venue. During the time I was employed in Piteå, I also worked at, among other things, the Hochschule der Künste in Bremen and the Sweelinck Conservatory in Amsterdam.

When I was newly appointed in Piteå, thanks to diligent recommendations from my friend and colleague Hans Fagius, I got in touch with Robert von Bahr and this led to a long series of phonograms where a recording of Olivier Messiaen's collected organ works became one of the biggest musical challenges in my life. I wrote to Messiaen, after being introduced by Carl-Axel Dominique, and had the amazing opportunity to collaborate directly with him during the last 5 years of his life. The meetings with him, where he generously shared his thoughts, of course gave a magical insight into his music. Ever since the BIS recordings and the collaboration with Messiaen, I have performed the music, given countless master classes around the world and written major articles about its interpretation.



Hans-Ola Ericsson together with Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod

In the years around 1990 I taught at the summer courses in Darmstadt and had the opportunity to collaborate with and perform works by Messiaen's direct opposite, John Cage, an artist I have always admired and been fascinated by. I am also one of the initiators of the performance of his Organ2/ASLSP in Halberstadt in Germany in a version that is supposed to last at least 639 years. Right now, the performance has lasted 21 years.



Hans-Ola Ericsson together with John Cage

Another important meeting in my life as an organist was to collaborate with, and record György Ligeti's organ works. His work "Volumina" from 1962, which I often and gladly perform, is still a challenge for every audience and can still face great resistance today. Not always wanting to please is otherwise a particularly good quality for a musician. I usually tell my students that you haven't performed pioneering music if you haven't emptied a concert hall of its audience.

Alongside this, I have premiered and re-performed a long series of works and constantly tried to represent the good Swedish music. And I have always loved and performed the music of Sebastian Bach.

In 2011, partly reluctantly, I was headhunted as an organ professor and another crossroads appeared, to McGill University in Montreal and got to experience there how a well-functioning, leading university can function when all good forces work together. I can easily describe the time in Montreal as happy! I had visited McGill on a few previous occasions, partly when Bengt Hambraeus was a composition teacher there, partly as a jury member for the CIOC (Canada International Organ Competition).

Actually, my wife Lena Weman and I had intended to stay there longer than the 10 years we lived in Canada. My employment was also not limited in time, but you could decide

for yourself when it felt appropriate to retire. But the problem with most North American universities is that the time for own development work is very limited - you easily become a serf. In addition, it felt essential to return to family and friends. Time for another crossroad...

When the debilitating pandemic hit in Montreal, everything in the community was shut down and in a week's time we would transition to providing all teaching "on line". Moreover, the previously attractive and charming city seemed to me ugly and abandoned. I have always composed and for a long time it has been my main occupation, but it is now time to return to the introduction and my paintings.

When I returned to painting, it had always accompanied my work in music. But I regarded this only as a pleasant pastime. My dear Lena urged me to take hold of this, for me, wonderful artistic expression. I guess she was fed up with my faltering and impatience during the lockdown we were forced into. Well, in Montreal I had a wonderful studio meant for my music making, a studio that was soon invaded by canvases and all kinds of paints. As I said, I had no idea that painting would be anything other than a therapeutic activity

When we then moved home to Sweden two years ago, I continued to dig inside myself for expressions that I liked, and I continued my painting in the studio we had built. I have shown my paintings through social media and have received a lot of very nice comments from friends that I respect and look up to.

Exhibiting paintings is of course something completely different from playing concerts and I realize that it's a bit cheeky, but from somewhere the thought came: but what the hell, you only live once and I like what I've created and I think that my paintings has a good expression and can give other people a rare beauty experience. I have had two major exhibitions and am currently planning a couple more.

Now we live in a small village, Sunnansjö, 50 kilometers northwest of Sundsvall and I am free to plan my own time. Time to practice, plan and play concerts, be an expert on organ building projects, think about whether I want to search for ways back to composing, maybe getting involved in Royal Academy of Music, hiking in the forest - and painting!

Thanks for the word!



"Skin Surface - red" by Hans-Ola Ericsson