

*Pictures From a
Sinking City*
AND
*Tale of Lead
and Frozen Light*

2 PIECES FOR STRING ORCHESTRA

BY MAJA S. K. RATKJE



TRONDHEIM SOLOISTS

SVARTSKOG, 6 OCTOBER 2020

I'm not always satisfied with everything I create, but these pieces – I actually think they're really fine. And they're both played without a conductor.

Why no conductor?

Because then the interplay between the musicians becomes much more focused, and as a member of the audience you want to see the musicians communicating. But it's difficult, because I have some crazy sound ideas in my head that I'm trying to get across.

What can a sound idea like that be?

In *Pictures From a Sinking City* I began to work with long melodic lines that I demolish in different ways. That sounds incredibly destructive, but it's actually creative. If I compose a long musical sentence that stretches beyond the range of the instrument, what happens?

Do you let that happen?

Yes. Then I gather up the notes that fall outside, distribute them higher or lower so they end up in a register that can be played, and see if I can find an amusing pattern. That might become a new bass melody that is very slow, a counterpoint to the rest. Or what happens if I remove the upper notes of something that was too high for the bass, and put them into the highest register of the first violin? This is how I create different levels that give the music a three-dimensional effect.

The things that land on the outside, the rubbish – that's what I see the potential in. And the things that are made from the rubble on the road – that's what I want to use. I don't refine the music so it glows crystal-clear or nostalgic-romantic. I want all the muck, too. So when I'm going to write the music down, I've already worked out a lot of material that I can take as a starting point.

Does writing the score become a kind of by-product?

In a way. I compose with the musical building blocks, what I call "material" here. I dephrase. Then I'm no longer loyal to the structural

concepts. But I spend a lot of time putting it all together into a form that I think is interesting.

Is your working method based on a very concrete idea?

In this work, in any case, it's very clear. Lots of artists work like this, not least visual artists. But every work has its own process. It's difficult, very demanding, to re-invent the wheel every time, but that is really what it feels like.

Pictures From a Sinking City is a title that evokes associations with the myth of the submerged city, Atlantis, and to the destruction of civilisation. How should we interpret it?

In this piece it is the material that is subjected to this kind of destruction. I inflict a sort of compositional violence on it, where I constantly gather the remnants, as I explained earlier, that rise to the surface. As the title indicates, the work is not a portrayal of destruction from A to Z, but I show some images of that kind of process. At the same time, the title brings to mind climate change, something that I am very concerned about, as well as the fear of the destruction of civilisation, because I am very upset about the nature and culture that will be lost. While I was composing this piece, I was reading in the newspaper about the flooding in Venice. Things I'm involved with can land straight in the music, as an inspiration for the content of ideas or a method of composing. Although composing itself is a positive, creative process, there is a superstructure here that can be very dark.

To me, the piece seems more melancholic than actually dark.

I agree with you. I also think that the piece has actually ended up being both cheerful and playful! My music often features sharp contrasts. I don't want to be too dystopian. Even though I might have gloomy thoughts and little faith in the progress of mankind and saving the world, I don't

want to write music that dwells on doom.

Why not?

If you stop hoping, then you can't have a life, either. I have brought children into this world, and I have a good life. I want to protect our culture and our natural surroundings. I love this life and this planet, and am struggling to justify my art and the meaning of what I'm doing. So I also have to have a positive mindset. It's a kind of survival mechanism. At best, I can give hope to others.

In *Pictures* I work with the same material the entire time. I want the piece to be experienced as an integral whole, and I think it can be perceived like that, because the same things are actually happening again and again. It's a real example of variations, as opposed to Tale. That's much more contradictory, because it uses some material from Beethoven, and then there's the terrible event...

Tale of Lead and Frozen Light was originally written as a string quartet, Tale of Lead and Light, commissioned by the Engegård Quartet in 2011. How did you adapt the piece for a string orchestra?

With a larger ensemble I had more space to take some of my ideas further. With more musicians I had the opportunity to compose from where I had left off in the previous piece. So I added more voices, and it ended up five minutes longer.

Which ideas did you work with?

The string quartet was originally meant to be included on a record with works by Beethoven, featuring his *String Quartet Op. 59, No. 1* among other pieces. I took fragments from this quartet that I wanted to work with in my own music. And it was while I was working on this piece that the shocking events of 22 July took place. [Anders Behring Breivik, a far-right fanatic, killed 77 people in two terrorist attacks.]

It was like being hit right between the eyes. What is the meaning of art? I'm sitting here writing

music. Have a deadline in a month. Everything came to a halt, and I ended up by taking some chords and “freezing” them so the music proceeded very slowly. It felt as though that was the only way to press forward, because I was in mourning. At the same time, I forced myself to enter into the light that I had already created out of the Beethoven material, places where they play with huge leaps, ethereally and lightly, which for me is the fog that is lifting. It lies like a lead-coloured sky on all the pictures of that day. Lead and light. So I used Beethoven to help me go on. I had never imagined that music could be like this. If 22 July had not happened, this piece would have been completely different.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth. What does this composer mean to you?

His music spans an enormous range, and Beethoven dedicates himself to what the music wants instead of to what the person commissioning it wants. He was the first composer who did that, and he set the standard for the rest of us. We can always go back to Beethoven and check up on ourselves. Are we where we want to be, or are we standing there clutching our cap in our hands? We can use Beethoven as an inspiration for the role of the artist today. We should use Beethoven as an inspiration. It’s easy to become too servile when you feel that art has become a mere grey shadow in the world. I myself know how important music is. The people who are affected by it also know how important it is. But if I never had the feeling that my music had an impact on somebody, it would be very difficult to produce anything at all. I don’t sit down and create music for my own sake. I make music for other people.

What is your contribution as a composer?

I want to contribute new ideas – otherwise I wouldn’t be doing this. I feel that I have something to give. It’s a pleasure even though it’s demanding. Sometimes I think that I would certainly have

had a better life and been more at peace with myself if I could just spend more time in nature, if I had been an environmental activist without being involved in art, and had a more grounded life and was less of a vagabond. Maybe then I would have felt more whole. But I must – and it could be defined as a sort of calling – I absolutely must express myself, and do it in the difficult way that I do through music. And if too long a time passes without my having worked with art, I get desperate. I have a creative urge that comes from a place I can’t identify. It’s the desire to share something, but it has to be something that is good, and that can offer some kind of hope. Something real. This is why I must accept all of the muck that comes with it – because it’s part of life. Both joy and sorrow have to be part of it.

The way you compose could seem to be a reflection of a perception of reality, couldn’t it?

Yes, that’s a description that I can recognise. Absolutely. But I don’t want to delve more deeply into that reflection. Then we’re beginning to use academic language, and I feel that this limits the way the music expresses itself. I just do what I do. That’s what I know how to do. Make music.

If one knew nothing about your other works and your career other than these two pieces, *Pictures From a Sinking City* and *Tale of Lead and Frozen Light*, one might believe that you typically composed written music rather than working with improvisation.

Do you think so? I suppose that’s true.

But you have composed a lot of different types of music, in styles that are more challenging and experimental, and many people are most familiar with you as an improvisational musician and a vocal artist. How are these things connected?

There’s a need to express myself, which assumes different forms. And there are various types of craftsmanship, so the results can be perceived as very different. But not to me.

When I generate material on an improvisation stage, and when I generate material in a composed work, in both cases I’m trying to play with the music and see what it tells me. I’m searching for a sense of recognition and belonging that speak to the life I live and the world around me. But the material must be activated in order to become art. And the feeling that I have when I activate things, regardless of what type of artwork it will become – that feeling is always the same.

So nature has become more and more important in my life. I have always known that I need that kind of grounding.

How do you get out into nature?

I live here.

So it’s this nature, in Svartskog?

It’s this nature and all kinds of nature. Every time we have an opportunity, we go for walks. This is something we share as a family. I think it’s wonderful. It’s something that has evolved over time.

How attractive is it to you to travel around the world, playing on large and small stages, in big cities and small towns, as you have done since the improvisation ensemble SPUNK was founded in 1995, and with a long list of collaborative projects with different artists and musicians?

Even before the advent of the coronavirus, I had greatly reduced my flying time. Because of the environment, and because I’m tired. I want to be left alone. I find travelling stressful, and I don’t think that’s getting any better. One would think that you’d get used to it, but I think it just gets worse. I’ve performed on many stages. It doesn’t bring me any further, in terms of my career. I can perform on a small stage in Oslo and get the same feeling of pleasure in playing for people that I do if I travel all the way to Los Angeles. And of course, I don’t have to be present when my music is performed if I’m not playing myself.

What I am heading towards, what I need in order to keep going, is spending time with my family and

enjoying nature and making art: strange, weird, multifaceted, wonderful, peculiar art. Those are the three things that make me happy.

What does the future hold for you?

There are a lot of works I have ideas for, which are not clarified yet, partly because of the coronavirus.

Composed works or improvisational works?

Some composed works and also stage music. Improvisation concerts are never planned far in advance. They're the kind of thing that just crop up, and happen now and then. I don't even practise for them. All my time is spent on administration and composing.

If you're playing fewer gigs because of the coronavirus, and because you don't want to fly, what impact will it have on you?

It will be fine. I think that the coronavirus has been the best excuse ever to say no. People have been annoyed at me. Doesn't want to fly – what kind of diva is she? No, I don't want to. And now I don't have to say it.

Could it be that the coronavirus has rescued you, in a way, so you could devote yourself more completely to composing?

Yes, luckily.

How can you draw on the experience you have from improvisational performances when you write music?

That makes it sound as though they are two different things. But it's my life – experimenting and improvising. And it's also part of the picture that I write written music.

Why do you want to take on the enormous job of writing all these notes down?

Because I know how to do it, and because it gives me something. I'm capable of doing it, and I have something to say.

Even though this art music is a demanding form of communication?

Of course it is. Also because art music gets so little attention. And because it's regarded as so unimportant, I think it will make its mark on

the world of music on the basis of who is involved in it, and is committed to it and passionate about it. Because when it becomes so seemingly inconsequential, then there is something dishonourable about the way art – the music scene – is treated, which in time could lead to a situation where people lose interest in it. It's very exasperating when institutions don't care about what you're concerned with or that you even exist. It's easier to work with smaller institutions, because you have more control. Small ensembles, small formats, small stages. Performing on big stages should not necessarily be your objective. But when Geir Inge Lotsberg was appointed artistic director of the fantastic Trondheim Soloists, he saw the potential in *Tale of Lead and Frozen Light*. And he also commissioned a new work, *Pictures From a Sinking City*. And now they have, in fact, recorded both of these – on their own initiative. I'm just informed about it. I am really delighted. It's a gift. It's something that will keep me going for a long time.

Bodil Maroni Jensen

BIOGRAPHY AND INFORMATION ABOUT THE WORKS

Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje was born in Trondheim in 1973, and earned a degree in composition from the Norwegian Academy of Music in 2000. She had her breakthrough as a composer in 1997. Her works have been performed by a long list of key Norwegian and foreign ensembles and soloists. As an improvisational musician and vocal artist she has participated in countless collaborative projects both in Norway and abroad.

The improvisational ensemble SPUNK was established in 1995, and celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2020 with the same constellation of musicians.

Ratkje has received a wide range of awards, including the Arne Nordheim Composer's Prize in 2001, the Edvard Prize in 2004 and 2014, the Rolf Gammle Award for participation in over 100 record releases in 2013 and the Liv Ullman Award in 2020. Her choir work *Sirkling* was named "Work of the Year" at the Music Publishers' Awards, also in 2020. In 2013, she was nominated for the Nordic Council's Music Prize for her vocal work. She has been a member of Die Akademie der Künste in Berlin since 2017. Her scores are published by Edition Wilhelm Hansen in Copenhagen.

Pictures From a Sinking City was commissioned by the Trondheim Soloists, and had its world premiere in Trondheim on 30 January, 2020. *Tale of Lead and Frozen Light* exists in two versions: one for a string quartet, *Tale of Lead and Light*, written for the Engegård Quartet, and one for a string ensemble, commissioned by the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, which had its world premiere at the Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival on 16 September, 2014.

MAJA S. K. RATKJE (1973)

1. *Pictures From a Sinking City* 18:21
2. *Tale of Lead and Frozen Light* 17:51

Trondheim Soloists

Geir Inge Lotsberg, *Artistic Director*

Trondheim Soloists

Violins:

Geir Inge Lotsberg
Sigrid E. Stang
Hilde Gimse
Sunniva C. Fossum
Elisabeth R. Uddu
Elga Akhaladze (Solo vln.2 t.1)
Anna A. Vestad
Ola Lindseth
Nella Penjin

Violas:

Verona Rapp
Anne Våg Aaknes
Bergmund Waal Skaslien

Cellos:

Marianne Baudouin Lie
Eivind Rossbach Heier
Marit Aspås

Double Bass:

Rolf Hoff Baltzersen

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