

Messiah and the cultural canon

Episode 10: “Lyrical suite in wartime”

Messiah Hallberg

It feels like it took ages, but it's finally here. The Cultural canon. Ten of the works are musical pieces. You were involved in selecting them, weren't you?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, that's right.

Messiah Hallberg

Great, because I've got a few questions straight away. What are these pieces? Why were they chosen? What do they sound like? And who's behind them? Is that OK?

Mattias Lundberg

Very good.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

What was that we heard just now?

Mattias Lundberg

Here we heard '*Förklädd Gud*' (God in Disguise), a suite of lyrical pieces. The music was composed by Lars-Erik Larsson, with lyrics by Hjalmar Gullberg.

Messiah Hallberg

Lyrical suite. What does that mean?

Mattias Lundberg

On the one hand, there are settings of poetry, or poems set to music. But there is also a general tendency to describe what is beautiful and evocative in music. And the poet Hjalmar Gullberg was something of a leading figure of the Radio Theatre at *Radiothjänst*.

Messiah Hallberg

Which is now Swedish Radio.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, you could say that. Exactly. And Lars-Erik Larsson was actually employed as a composer to write new music for the radio all the time.

Messiah Hallberg

Alright.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

It's not heavy, but it certainly stands out when you compare it to a lot of the music that came after. It doesn't feel like it's... It's not exactly frivolous.

Mattias Lundberg

No, it is serious in a way. That build-up has certainly struck a chord. There's some evidence that this prelude even has It strikes a kind of... You can tell this is going to be serious. But at the same time, it's not sad; it's beautiful. So it also sets a tone, along with this reading, 'not for the powerful in the world'. It strikes a kind of pathos.

[Lars Ekborg]

Not for the powerful of this world, but for the weak. Not for warriors, but for farmers who have tilled their plots of land without complaint. A god plays the flute. It is a Greek fable.

Mattias Lundberg

A very popular format in the 1930s and 1940s was to alternate poetry readings with short musical interludes.

Messiah Hallberg

I felt that was unique here. I've heard so much, I think. It was lovely to start with a bit of a poem and then have a piece of music follow right after.

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly.

Messiah Hallberg

In connection with that.

Mattias Lundberg

First, there's a line read out by a reciter, and then the same text is sung, so that radio listeners at home knew what was coming.

Messiah Hallberg

The poem had, after all, been published long before that.

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly, it was written already in 1933. And then he added this line 'not for the powerful in the world, but for the weak'. That completely changes the whole context of this, given that it was during the period when Germany was expanding and subjugating other countries and territories.

Messiah Hallberg

This piece was published in 1940, right?.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly. Because the idea was also to educate the public. It was also a time of emergency preparedness, to instil hope and courage.

Messiah Hallberg

Was that actually said? Do you think it gave the Swedish people courage?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, I think so. Even back in 1938, when the idea first came up before the war had started, there was a great deal of concern. The radio was not allowed to engage in polemics, open polemics against the Germans. Because the Swedish government and the King were very much of the opinion that one shouldn't do that. Those who did, such as Karl Gerhard for example, were made to feel that we mustn't do anything here that might provoke Germany. But perhaps this is as far as one can go. It is difficult not to see this 'not for the powerful' as a reference [to Nazi Germany]. After all, the interwar period was very much characterised by the pure, the healthy, the powerful, the pure body, the strong body, freedom from disease. It goes very well with the whole idea of success that Nazi Germany stands for.

[Ulf Palme]

Apollo lives in a Thessalian stable. He wears no laurel wreath around his golden hair. He was sent down from the hall of the gods on Olympus, condemned to earn his living as a farmhand for a year.

Mattias Lundberg

At the very beginning of what you see, right at the start, in the opening bars of this suite, that's where it really is – we're transported back to ancient Greece. According to Gullberg himself, it's Apollo. The primal deity. But the further you go, the further we move away from this Greek antiquity, then it's the here and now, and what does that mean for us? And then your thoughts turn more to your namesake - Messiah.

Messiah Hallberg

Right.

Mattias Lundberg

That it is the Christ figure who offers himself up, without you knowing who it is, because... it's a kind of gospel message.

[Music]

Messiah Hallberg

Is it possible to see a bit of religious criticism?

Mattias Lundberg

You could say that, I suppose.

Messiah Hallberg

Or at least a broadening of the concept.

Mattias Lundberg

I know that back then there were priests and theologians who thought it was odd that the radio was broadcasting when people were talking about God in the plural. But this was a live broadcast.

Messiah Hallberg

They were playing live?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly.

Messiah Hallberg

But when a random person in the 1940s heard it on the radio, do you think everyone understood what was meant?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, they probably realised that the conversation was about whether or not gods exist.

Messiah Hallberg

Do you think they were a bit startled?

Messiah Hallberg

What a disrespectful view they have of the Christian God.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, I believe so. And it's very much of its time. Who is this god in disguise?

Messiah Hallberg

That's right, because that's how it's spelled. They spell 'god' with a lower-case 'g'.

Mattias Lundberg

Exactly. By focusing on the small things. Yes, exactly. And a god, and even more gods. Not entirely uncontroversial for the Christian community of the time, particularly the city church of nominal Christians. But despite this, or perhaps precisely because of this, it struck a broader chord, as society was already quite secularised back then. But gradually it became this, grew into a standard work, and Lars has cleverly written it in such a way that it can be performed by amateur choirs. The idea was probably from the outset that this should be a work performed out in the country. And that is certainly what it became.

Messiah Hallberg

So the intention was for this work to live on.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly.

[Music]

Mattias Lundberg

And this very classic recording from 1956. It is the first major production to feature Lars Ekborg as the narrator.

[Lars Ekborg]

There are still gods walking this earth. One of them might be sitting at your table. Do not think that a god can ever die. He passes you by, but your gaze is dull.

Mattias Lundberg

In the 1940s, for example, there was much more of this sort of theatricality and big gestures. Like the old Shakespeare plays.

Messiah Hallberg

You have such a wide range of vocal styles that you really take people by surprise.

Mattias Lundberg

But it is a form of singing. But if you listen to Ekborg there, if you listen to that, it's quite dull.

Messiah Hallberg

Yes, indeed.

Mattias Lundberg

And I think that's perhaps Radiotjänst's unique contribution to this – that now it's poetry readings. Then it's a bit more as if you're focusing on the work, the poem, rather than the actor reading it. There are, of course, several others; if you want to listen to some of them, there's Max von Sydow, and in our time, usually Stina Ekblad, Mark Levengood and the like, who have been reciters.

[Max von Sydow]

Does he remember the prisoner by the meadow and the bay, a world that is past, a forgotten music?

[Stina Ekblad]

Does he remember the lyre and the maiden choir, a life of holy ecstasy that never dies. What kind of realm is he from?

Messiah Hallberg

This form of poetic music, poetic music.

Messiah Hallberg

They go together really well. Yes. And it adds a certain intensity to the text.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly. And then you also get At first you just get Gullberg's text and you think, what does that mean for me? But a composer is never innocent; what they choose to do is also a choice. You learn that Lars-Erik Larsson means this, because he can choose to include this low, barely audible drum roll, which I then

interpret as a kind of unease that you can barely hear, but feel. And he can choose to include, to remind us occasionally, when it's mentioned that there's a god lurking around here. Then this oboe comes in.

Messiah Hallberg

It would be nice to have something like that in real life, because he's said something to his partner and then you have to explain a piece of music.

Mattias Lundberg

That's right, exactly.

Messiah Hallberg

I'm breaking up with you.

Mattias Lundberg

I'm ending this in the form of a lyrical suite. I don't know, no.

Messiah Hallberg

Maybe I should take a course. Why is it included in the canon? What was the thinking behind that?

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, but it's my fault, because I was on the committee. I didn't actually include it from the start because ten seems rather few, but gradually you realise it's impossible to avoid. The circumstances surrounding its creation are so unique that it made such an impact that it has endured and is still performed so frequently in this country. It is perhaps the most frequently performed work of 20th-century art music. And that it paints a picture of the history of Sweden that doesn't suggest we were actually talented; that was absolutely right. Because there's a bit of a shameful undertone to this text about tiptoeing around Germany so as not to be...

Messiah Hallberg

I know my father, who was an actor at the time, told me that many theatre directors had a picture of Hitler under their desks. In case the Germans came, they could say, 'I'm in.'

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, exactly.

Mattias Lundberg

But the reality was that, as we can see even today, we have world leaders who are convinced that many of those who play along do so not out of ideological conviction, but simply because they can't afford to stand on the sidelines.

Messiah Hallberg

If you enjoyed this, is there anything you can listen to today to remind you of it?

Mattias Lundberg

Musically, I think a quite striking example is a song by Laleh called '*Snö*'. And it has this.

Mattias Lundberg

I find that interesting. I don't know if Laleh got it from there, whether it's a deliberate reference, whether it's unconscious or just a coincidence. And it's done with London Philharmonic or something. So it's not too far-fetched to think that she might have heard it at some point. It's a favourite work of our King, Carl Gustaf, and Victoria have both spoken about '*Förklädd Gud*'.

Messiah Hallberg

Can I be so bold to ask? Can we really be sure they're sitting there listening to this? It feels as though the king – do you think he's sitting at home?

Mattias Lundberg

He probably listens to lots of other things as well. But I think they, too, felt that it's a piece that relates to the specific Swedish context.

Messiah Hallberg

It feels a bit far-fetched, I mean. If you were to ask, 'What are you listening to at the moment?', would it be '*Förklädd Gud*'? I don't know.

Mattias Lundberg

No, but I also know that the overture to '*Förklädd Gud*' has been played at the king's suggestion on occasions like the tsunami [in 2004].

Messiah Hallberg

Maybe he's got what it takes.

Mattias Lundberg

Yes, I really do think so.

Messiah Hallberg

Well, in that case, I apologize. It was just my preconception of him.