Vardo Rumessen, Champion of Estonian Music

BY MARTIN ANDERSON

I couldn't get hold of Vardo Rumessen by the official deadline for this interview: He was busy, celebrating his 70th birthday on August 8 with a series of concerts in his native Estonia. When we spoke, he had not long returned from a Chopin recital in Pärnu and a performance of Eduard Tubin's Concertino, conducted by his old friend Neeme Järvi. I had been in occasional contact with Rumessen before his work burst into my life in spectacular fashion, through the BIS recording (BIS-CD-731/732) of the oratorio *Des Jona Sendung* (The Mission of Jonah), composed in 1908–09 by the Estonian composer Rudolf Tobias (1873–1918). My review, in *Fanfare* 19:3, began by stating that it "is one of the greatest choral-orchestral works ever composed, a score of towering strength and unflagging imagination. I know of no piece of music conceived on as constantly massive a scale—there are longer works and works that are more intense and works that aspire more explicitly toward the spiritual, but nothing that comes close to this gigantic score in its elemental sweep"—and I confess that I continued in the same manner. *Des Jona Sendung* is quite simply one of the great achievements of the human mind, and if my prose was purple, it is because the music insists on superlatives. But this mighty work was unknown until Rumessen produced an edition of the score. He sighs at the memory: "It was a great job, to restore that score. I started rewriting the whole score in 1974. I hoped that it might be performed in 1975, since there was a song festival in that year." Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have a tradition of song festivals; it was an important means of asserting national identity during the years of Soviet occupation. "But it didn't happen—it was impossible, on political grounds. It's an ecclesiastical work; that was the answer. I asked Jaan Rääts, who was the chairman of the Composers' Society, about it and he said, 'We also don't perform Tchaikovsky's ecclesiastical works, but we do perform his symphonies, so please bring us the symphonies by Tobias and then we will play them!'" Tobias kickstarted Estonian classical music: He wrote the first Estonian orchestral work (the overture *Julius Caesar*) in 1896, the first Estonian string quartet (in 1899), the first Estonian piano concerto (in 1897), and the first Estonian oratorio (you know about that one). But symphony there ain't, and Rääts should have known it. "Then I started work on another big oratorio, *Hiob* [Job], by Artur Kapp [1878–1952], and there was a big interruption to my work on *Des Jona Sendung*; only in December '84 I managed to get the *Sanctus* put in a program as an encore. Peeter Lilje, who was a very good conductor (unfortunately he died young), was brave enough to put it in the program, but the artist leader of the Philharmonic, the Armenian composer Boris Parsadanian, who was a member of the Party Central Committee, said, 'No, it is impossible'—but he agreed to it on condition that it not be announced to the public. Tobias's cantata *Johannes Damascenus* was on the program, and when the cantata was over, the soloists and choir and orchestra remained on the stage and they performed the *Sanctus*. Hardly anybody in the hall knew what it was. Afterwards people came to me and asked, 'What was *that*?'"

No wonder they were amazed. Here's what I wrote in that 1996 review: "Perhaps the most monolithically heaven-scaling moment of all—in a score bristling with passages that are viscerally exciting—is the *Sanctus*, 'Heilig, heilig, heilig ist der Herr Zabaoth,' the third movement of part II. The musical material here is so simple that it is almost banal—but Tobias makes it so blazingly epic, and then piles such wave of sound upon wave of sound, that I can virtually guarantee that the excitement will pin you to your seat, your eyeballs will bulge, and you will swear repeatedly to yourself in genuine amazement." Anyway, back to Rumessen's reminiscences: "Then I started work on the score again. I went some 10 times to Moscow to consult with Yuri Fortunatov, who had been a friend of Tubin and was the best professor of orchestration in the Moscow Conservatory. He helped me a lot with special questions about the orchestration. We agreed with Peeter Lilje that he would perform the first 'Picture' in '85." (The work, which is set in German, is divided into a series of *Bilder*, or pictures.) "Gorbachev came then, which made things easier. Every year Lilje did another

'Picture.' I would prepare a piano score and my friends in Sweden, with the help of the Swedish church, made copies from the piano score and sent them to Estonia, and I gave them to the choir. In this way every year one of the 'Pictures' was performed, up to 1989. In May 1989 the whole oratorio was performed for the first time. It was a sensation. It was thanks to *glasnost* that we were allowed to perform it." I was surprised to hear Rumessen talking about orchestration; after all, *Des Jona Sendung* was performed in Tobias's lifetime; wasn't the scoring complete? "Tobias was a genius who had very good ideas but he didn't always form them correctly," he said. "And some parts are missing; the last pages seem to be lost. In some places the score is draft. Some numbers have a double orchestration; he also made a correct orchestration. But the choir part is completely Tobias; there's no problem there. In 1992 Leo Kremer, a German organist and conductor, performed it in Tallinn. They brought Tobias's remains from Berlin to Estonia (Arvo Pärt helped that happen), and he was reburied near his parents in Kullamaa. There was a big ceremony in the Estonia Concert Hall, and Kremer conducted *Des Jona Sendung*. Then in 1995 Neeme Järvi took over and recorded it for BIS. We did concerts in Sweden, in Malmö, in Gothenburg, in Stockholm, in Finland in Helsinki, and in Estonia as well. After that Arvo Volmer conducted it in Paris; Neeme Järvi was supposed to conduct it, but he didn't have the time and so asked Volmer to stand in for him; it was Volmer's big break, and he did it very well. He also did it in Tallinn. And both oratorios, *Des Jona Sending* and *Hiob*, were done at the organ festival in Nuremberg. Altogether *Des Jona Sendung* has been performed 20 times since that first performance in 1989, including Australia. But not yet in America! At least it was recorded as a DVD for the U.S. company VAI in 2008, conducted by Neeme Järvi."

Rumessen had his share of brushes with the authorities in the decades before Estonia regained its independence in 1991. "In the 1970s," he said, "with my friend Tunne Kelam, who is now a member of the European Parliament, we had what you might call an underground group. We gathered nearly every month at the homes of different members. There was a writer, teachers, doctors, and so on—up to '84, when the KGB discovered it. They started to call us in, with the aim, of course, of putting us in prison. But in 1984 Gorbachev started making such changes in Moscow that the KGB lost its head—they didn't know what to do. All the trials failed completely, but I was forbidden to go abroad. After my first journey to Sweden, Tubin [who was living in exile in Sweden] managed to invite me to a Baltic conference in June 1981. There I gave a paper and two concerts in the big hall of the Swedish Royal Academy. And because of my success in Sweden I was forbidden by the KGB to go again! I asked the Ministry of Culture why I was forbidden to go again, and they said to me, 'You had a bigger success than was planned for you!' I wasn't allowed to go to the Mart Saar conference in Stockholm in '83"—the year after the centenary of the Estonian composer Mart Saar (1882–1963). "The Baltic Institute and Swedish Music Academy were interested in inviting me, to give a piano recital of Mart Saar's music and to give a paper on Saar, but I was forbidden. In fact, I was not allowed to give any recitals in Estonia up till '88. In '88 I was able to go to Washington, to the conference of the Association of Advanced Baltic Studies, and I gave a paper on *Des Jona Sendung*. But '88 was a year of big changes—the Singing Revolution, and so on."

Rumessen, now an honorary member of the Estonian Academy of Music, gave me a little background on his early career. "I studied in Pärnu. I was born in Tallinn (the Wikipedia page says I was born in Pärnu, but it's not true), but after the bombing of Tallinn by the Soviets in '44, my parents went to Pärnu. So I grew up in Pärnu and went to music school there. There was a very good piano teacher there who had studied with Nikolai Orlov in Russia before the war. Then in 1961 I moved to Tallinn and it was there, after three years, that I graduated from the music school. I hoped to be able to avoid being drafted into the Soviet army and enter the conservatory. And I did enter the conservatory in September '64, but in October I was taken up into the Soviet army and served in Siberia, near the Chinese border, 600 kilometers to the east of Lake Baikal—very far off! There was a military aeronautical school there for the MiG 21 and I graduated as a mechanic from that! Then I was sent to near Moscow and for three years I was unable to continue my studies with the piano. I came back in '67 and then was able to continue my studies under Bruno Lukk and Eugen Kelder, the best Estonian pianists. I graduated from the conservatory in '71."

He was a politician for a while, too. "I was connected through my friends. I have to say I was-

n't really very interested in making a career in politics! My heart was dedicated to music, but it was such a complicated time that I couldn't say to my friends, OK, I'm going away now and please do all these important jobs yourselves. When we elected an Estonian Congress, I was a member of an Estonian Committee, which was like a parliament of Estonian citizens, and it was my job to prepare 'citizens' passports.' I went to Canada thanks to the Estonians in exile in Toronto; they printed these so-called 'citizens' passports.' It was still during the Soviet time, and all Estonians had the red passport of the Soviet Union, but we started this process, and thanks to this when we had our own parliament in '92, only Estonian citizens could be elected, not those who came illegally from Russia or from the other Soviet Republics. We had an enormous struggle and I lost a lot of time. Then I was elected to a constitutional assembly, which was preparing the new Estonian constitution; that took one year, and I was chairman of the second chapter of the state law—it was on citizens' rights. After that it was impossible not to take part in the elections of the new Estonian parliament, and I was a member of parliament for two terms. I managed to do something there for musicians, I have to say if I'm going to be honest. My biggest struggle was to get the funds to build the new Estonian Academy of Music. There were a lot of members of parliament, and also people in the government, who weren't very interested in building a new house for music. But we did it in 1999. And then I took three years to persuade the Ministry of Culture that we needed a music magazine, but finally we succeeded, and now *Muusika* appears every month. I also prepared a letter from the Estonian parliament for the United Nations' member states in January 1994, asking that they help us to get Russia to recognize that Estonia had been occupied in 1940. But it didn't happen, and until now Russia will not admit that Estonia was occupied—they are lying all the time to the Western world that it was the will of the Estonian citizens to join the Soviet Union, which is absurd."

Rumessen had talked about his work on the score of *Des Jona Sendung*, but his musicological activities had been extended to a wide range of the Estonian composers active roughly in the first half of the 20th century: "I have edited about 120 publications of music, but I'm active mostly as a pianist; though I am working as a musicologist, I didn't study musicology. When I started to work after graduating from the conservatory, Estonian music composed before the [Second World] War was condemned during Stalin's time and after that it was nearly unknown. Many composers and works were performed in the 1930s, but they got only one performance and nobody knew them in the '60s and '70s. And many works were not performed at all, like the Mart Saar preludes (there are 28 of them). I discovered the manuscripts and started to play them; then I published them. My diploma at the conservatory was the three volumes of the complete works by Mart Saar for piano, with commentaries and drafts. Then I started Tobias's Piano Concerto, which Tobias played himself only once, in 1907 in Tartu. Nobody knew about this concerto; they said it didn't exist any longer. Then there's the Piano Quintet of Edouard Oja [1905–50], which was performed only in 1935, when he got an award, and again in 1936, and then it was forgotten completely. After the War the Communists said that all this music was formalist and it was condemned completely. Heino Eller, Artur Kapp, Mart Saar—they were afraid to speak about their works and say what they had written in the 1920s and '30s because it was too modernistic, and you know what happened to Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony, to Prokofiev and other composers under Stalin. Estonian composers were in the same situation. Then in '71 I started to learn what this music is. In 1987 I discovered Eller's marvelous preludes (29 of them); a lot of them were completely unknown but in 1999 I recorded them for Pro Piano in New York. I was working then in the Music Museum because I found lots of Mart Saar's manuscripts in his own place, and his widow gave me a lot of manuscripts—solo songs, piano pieces, and so on. I wondered why nobody knew about this music. So then I started to work with the manuscripts in the Music Museum and there I found the music of a lot of other composers as well, thanks to Mart Saar. Then I met Tobias's daughter Sylvia, who was a harpist; she was alive in '73. She showed me the score of *Des Jona Sendung* for the first time in 1973. She was worried about what could be done for the work in the future; it needed work, and to be performed. And then she went to America, to her sister in New York. So in '74 I started to work on it and learn what the music was. It was a big job; it took me five or six years."

The piano, of course, remains the center of Rumessen's life, and to recordings of Tubin on BIS, Tobias on the Estonian label Forte, and Saar and Tubin on the now-defunct Finlandia, he has been adding recordings of Rachmaninoff, Chopin, Scriabin, and Bach on Estonian Record Productions, a Tallinn label run by the composer Peeter Vähi; altogether he has recorded 25 CDs. "I was playing Rachmaninoff and Scriabin in the conservatory already," he said. "I graduated with the Third Concerto by Rachmaninoff. In '72 there was the centenary of Scriabin's birth and on this occasion I recorded all 10 sonatas for Estonian Radio and performed them in the Music Museum. They went out in five broadcasts during '72. After that I forgot all about them, but sometime early in 2000 I discovered that the tapes survived in the archives. I asked a sound engineer if it was possible to restore them. It was thought in the beginning that only Sonata No. 6 could be restored, but they did good work and they saved the Seventh Sonata and then the Eighth; finally, all but the first two, which were damaged. Then I played the etudes in Stockholm, which I visited several times. I had good friends in the Swedish Royal Music Academy, the First Secretary, Gunnar Larsson and then afterwards Hans Åstrad; they helped me a lot with Tubin, since they were fond of Tubin and fans of his music. Thanks to them there was the idea of starting the Tubin Society and to edit Tubin's complete works. In Stockholm I played not only Tubin's music, but also Mart Saar, Heino Eller, and Scriabin and Rachmaninoff as well. In '88 I recorded for Swedish Radio Scriabin's Three Etudes, op. 65, his last etudes, as well as some of Rachmaninoff's *Études-Tableaux* and so on. Many years later I played all the Rachmaninoff *Études-Tableaux* in my concert programs, maybe at the end of the '70s. I was very fond of Scriabin, who was the first cosmic composer. I visited the Scriabin Museum in Moscow several times, studying his manuscripts, in the '70s already. And then this spring, in April, I was invited to the Scriabin Museum to a conference dedicated to his 140th anniversary. There were a lot of musicologists from all over the world, some 50 of them; I gave a paper on Scriabin's influence on Estonian composers, like Eller, Mart Saar, and Tubin as well. Tubin himself said to me that he was fond of Scriabin's music; he especially liked Horowitz's recordings. In the evening of the same day I had a special concert, and there I played Scriabin's *Poèmes*, as well as Mart Saar, Eller, and Tubin—works where you can find Scriabin's influence on Estonia. It was very new for the musicologists in Moscow: They knew that Scriabin had an influence on Szymanowski, for example, and other composers, but they didn't even know about [the Lithuanian composer] Čiurlionis, where he was a big influence. I had the idea of making an art edition, with cosmic pictures together with Scriabin's music; I have an old friend in Tartu—he was my classmate—who is an astronomer in Tartu Observatory, and he helped me find interesting pictures for Scriabin." The result is *The Call of the Stars*, a four-CD set released earlier this year.

Rumessen has even ventured into repertoire as central as the Bach "48." "Yes, I started to learn Bach's fugues when I was in the Soviet army," he said. "I had nothing to do, so I started to learn the *Well-Tempered Clavier* without any instrument. It helped me to survive that unbelievable situation—you can imagine what being in the Soviet army in Siberia was like."

And what can we expect next from him? "I hope to re-edit all 29 of Eller's preludes, which I had recorded for his centenary in '87, but only 15 of them were released by Melodiya. Before that only a few of the preludes had been played by another Estonian pianist; mostly, they were completely unknown. Most of them stayed in the archive. I gave the first performance of several of them, especially the first book of seven preludes. I hope that will be my next one. Then I have an idea for a recording of Baltic composers: Čiurlionis and Juozas Gruodis from Lithuania, from Latvia Jānis Zālitis and Alfrēds Kalniņš, and from Estonia Mart Saar and Heino Eller—two composers from each country at the beginning of the 20th century. I'm planning it at the moment, but it depends on the money, of course—it's always a problem finding support, as you know!"

Rumessen is still active as chairman of the International Eduard Tubin Society. After Tubin's death in 1982 he spent more than 20 years working on his music and in 2003 a *Thematic-Bibliographical Catalog of Works* was published, supported by the Swedish Royal Academy of Music (the international marketing is being looked after by Gehrmans Musikförlag in Stockholm), which has provided the basis for the edition of Tubin's Complete Works published by the International Eduard Tubin Society, which Vardo Rumessen supervises as editor-in-chief. His web-

site can be found at vardorumessen.ee, and that of the Tubin Society at tubinsociety.com.

CHOPIN Etudes: in f, op. posth.; **in e♭,** op. 10/6. **Nocturnes: in f,** op. 55/1; **in g,** op. 37/1. **Waltzes: in a,** op. 34/2; **in A♭,** op. 69/1; **in f,** op. 70/2; **in b,** op. 69/2. **Mazurkas: in a,** op. 17/4; **in a,** op. 68/2; **in g,** op. 24/1; **in c,** op. 30/1; **in f,** op. 63/2; **in f,** op. 68/4; **in g♯,** op. 33/1; **in b,** op. 33/4; **in e,** op. 41/2; **in c♯,** op. 63/3. **Preludes: in b,** op. 28/6; **in e,** op. 28/4 • Vardo Rumessen (pn) • ESTONIAN CLASSICS 4211 (72:05)

Vardo Rumessen is known primarily as an exponent of Estonian piano music. However, musicians with intriguing artistic profiles tend to have something to say about a broad range of music, and that certainly is true about Rumessen in Chopin. He has titled his collection *Melancholy*; it is a sort of study of the moodier and more reflective side of Chopin's personality. There are no display pieces here; still, Rumessen has constructed a beautifully arranged program. Conforming to the overall mood, Rumessen's tempos generally are leisurely. Rumessen, in his lengthy and slightly overblown program notes, mentions that Chopin himself rarely played as loud as *forte*, an effect Rumessen says is hard to achieve on the modern Steinway. Nevertheless, he shades his dynamics softly and very carefully on said instrument, and the effect is something Chopin might have appreciated. Rumessen's touch is appealingly light. He makes extensive but subtle use of rubato, and his playing always is highly expressive. Half of the selections on the disc are mazurkas, and these are rendered most exquisitely, with the greatest feeling for line and harmony. Rumessen gives us Chopin's works as that master might have played just for himself, or for a few select friends. This is artistry on a very high level.

The program begins with an etude op. posth. that is heard as if from far away. The Nocturne, op. 55/1, reminds me of a couple seated by a window in a café as twilight descends. In its spectral tonal coloring, the Waltz, op. 34/2, sounds like two skeletons dancing together. In the op. 17/4 Mazurka, one feels a state of apprehension where one almost is afraid to breathe. The Mazurka, op. 68/2, could portray a woman in folk costume doing a very slow, solitary dance; the woman may be known or unknown to the viewer—she seems mysterious. The Nocturne, op. 37/1, evokes the scene of a man alone at night writing a letter to his beloved, who is far away. Chopin's final mazurka, op. 68/4, is played with a wealth of quiet fantasy. The Waltz, op. 70/2, could depict the great stairway in a manor house. A sorrow too deep for words is contained in the op. 28/6 Prelude. The Waltz, op. 69/2, seems Chaplinesque in its nervous moodiness, while the op. 63/3 Mazurka ends the program with something like a vision of Buster Keaton's "great stone face."

The sound engineering is excellent, while the program booklet is beautifully illustrated. Vardo Rumessen has just turned 70, so I hope he will continue to make recordings of the standard repertory that document him at the peak of his powers. As a collection of Chopin's shorter works, this CD ranks with those of Jane Coop and Naum Starkman in my affections. Rumessen's insight into Chopin's artistic personality is strikingly individual and valuable. I can't imagine the Chopin lover who would not take this CD very much to heart. **Dave Saemann**

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Here is an album unusual in several ways. Titled *Żal,* or *Melancholy,* it presents 20 of Chopin's miniatures in minor keys—etudes, nocturnes, waltzes, mazurkas, and one prelude—as a portrait of the composer's poetic melancholy and as a stated tribute to Polish President Lech Kaczyński and all those who died in the air crash at Smolensk on April 10, 2010. Thus we have a rarity, an entire album of music by one composer presented as a form of permanent memorial service. All those who wish to grieve over this unfortunate loss of life may do so by playing this album at their own personally selected grief time. (I should point out that this is not meant as sarcasm, but merely a perception of the CD's stated intentions.)

The pianist, Vardo Rumessen, is described in the liner notes as a musicologist who is "widely known as an authority on Estonian music" with "a special affinity with the music of Chopin, having performed his complete etudes, all four ballades as well as numerous preludes, waltzes, nocturnes and mazurkas." The inside back cover of the glued-in booklet (I'm really not a fan of these, and I wish record companies would stop doing it, thank you so much) says that Rumessen is playing a