Silent Earth
Music: KARIN REHNQVIST
Poems: KERSTIN PERSKI
SWEDISH RADIO CHOIR | SWEDISH RADIO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
DIMA SLOBODENIOUK, conductor

Silent Earth
for mixed chorus and orchestra

01 Silent Earth
5:42

02 We, Who Once Were
8:58

03 The Burning Earth
11:21

Total time:
26 minutes

PHOTO: ARNE HYCKENBERG

About Silent Earth:

Music completed: Lillängen, Nacka, Sweden, 12 January 2020. Daily CO_2 reading: 413.16 ppm. (Safe level: 350 ppm.)

From Vivaldi's Four Seasons to Messiaen's Reveil des oiseaux, the natural world has for centuries been one of the most frequently evoked topics in music. Similarly, and for even longer, music has been an essential component of rituals of grief and commemoration. It is hardly surprising, then, that the onrushing climate crisis should have become a subject of concern for many of today's composers.

As burning fossil fuels raise atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide day by day, man's ongoing destruction of planet Earth offers a bitter combination of these two ancient themes.

Karin Rehnqvist's Silent Earth, for chorus and orchestra, has its roots in a conversation with the librettist Kerstin Perski one evening in March 2019. The two Swedish artists already knew each other well and had worked together several times before over many years. In 1997 they collaborated on the operatic thriller for children, The Beauty School, and in 2005 on the musical fairytale, When the Earth Sings. In 2015 they completed their first full opera together, Drifted (premiered at the Royal Opera, Stockholm, in 2022).

Set in the aftermath of a natural disaster, Drifted is, in many ways, a forerunner to Silent Earth. Its central character, Maria, has survived, but she has lost her whole family. Her memories of the trauma that took them survive only in fragments, and the opera dramatizes her descent towards grief, guilt and reconciliation before she finally reaches acceptance. In their conversation on that evening in 2019, Rehnqvist and Perski found themselves returning to similar themes, but this time on the scale of the whole planet. In the face of melting ice caps, forest fires and overflowing rivers, they imagined a distant view of Earth – beautiful and blue, suspended in space – from which they could find some sort of consolation.

Sitting at her piano shortly afterwards, Rehnqvist improvised a brief introduction to a new work. She sent the recording to Perski, who in return sent two terse yet powerful poems – 'Silent Earth' and 'We, Who Once Were' – that became the texts for the first two movements of Silent Earth. A third poem, 'The Burning Earth', written in 2008 (and used here in an English translation by Robin Blanton), was added as the basis for the concluding

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About Silent Earth:

movement. In lines that can barely speak beyond raw imagery, choked by the horrors of what they see, it describes an unnamed disaster of shrieking flames and seething rock.

In choosing to place 'The Burning Earth' at the end of her choral song cycle, Rehnqvist shapes a kind of anti-creation, in which the curtain rises on desolation before the music proceeds to even greater visions of annihilation. Perski's first poem, 'Silent Earth' describes a barren landscape of howling winds and glittering, fishless lakes.

The music recalls the many glorious sunrises of musical history – Haydn, Strauss, Copland, Ravel – but in the manner of a photographic negative. Like them, Silent Earth begins from a single point that gradually opens out to an expansive texture, under the momentum of successive melodic interventions.

But instead of warmth and blazing light, Rehnqvist gives us the dry percussive sounds of a wind gong (a Chinese gong with a distinctive flat shape, often used in meditation) and a bamboo guiro, alongside brass chords whose muted tones suggest a sun rising without life or heat. Wind and harp gesture towards birdsong, but with the lonely sense of species that are dying out and whose calls will increasingly go unanswered. When the choir enters – this bleak dawn chorus's point of arrival – the abjection is complete. Humanity, for that is who has arrived upon this scene, stands aghast.

Having born witness, but helpless in front of the unfolding horror, the voices give up the scene once more to the icy winds and lonely birdsongs. For the second movement, an introspective lament, they take up a more central position. Set mostly in humble unison, 'We, Who Once Were' tells of the ambiguous pleasures mankind once took of the earth, devouring its beauty while ignoring its pains – 'Like spoiled children / Blinded by your light'. The orchestral accompaniment is anguished and overpainted with dissonances and trills that prevent the music from becoming 'too romantic, too

About Silent Earth:

beautiful', in the words of the composer. The sense of terrible responsibility that she wishes to convey is unmistakable and reaches a peak at the movement's climax, a prayer-like invocation to the Earth (sung in multiple languages of the singers' choosing) to 'Save yourself from us! / Save us from ourselves!'

With this desperate plea, 'The Burning Earth' returns us to the dramatic mode of the first movement. Now, the scale of the calamity is made apparent. Through roiling fugal textures, using a theme based on astringent semitone alternations, Rehnqvist describes a landscape of earthquakes, fires and tsunamis. The destructive momentum appears all but unstoppable, adding layers of relentless counterpoint. Until suddenly it burns itself out.

As humanity is drowned in an ocean of flames, the music reaches a peaceful, if scorched, coda. The desiccated percussion textures of the work's opening return, against faint echoes of the semitonal fugal subject (but with none of the struggling, but surviving, sounds of birds and animals from the first movement). In a brief but unique moment of tenderness, a short series of descending scales for harp, alto flute and trumpets bid a farewell.

And then we are into the work's final section – marked 'the catastrophe' in the score. Playing senza vibrato, the strings and piano intone a single, dissonant cluster chord – a musical symbol of lifelessness and stasis – against randomized percussive attacks on thunder sheet, tam-tam and wind gong. The image is of a return to pre-creation chaos. The final sound heard is of a rubber superball mallet being dragged across the thunder sheet, in an eerie imitation of a human voice. Perhaps there is hope for a fresh start after all.

Sleevenote completed: Staplefield, West Sussex, UK, 26 June 2024. Daily CO_2 reading: 427.33 ppm. (Increase of 3.2%.)

– TIM RUTHERFORD-JOHNSON

Poems by Kerstin Perski:

1st movt

Lonely earth
Silent earth
Seasons passing
Winds howling
Lakes glittering
Emptied
Fishless

2nd movt

We are the ones who once were
Trod your paths
Buried our hearts
Deep in your soil

We are the ones who once sang
Loved you, cried out to you
Devoured your beauty
Praised your sunsets
Your dusks and your dawns

We are the ones who ignored your pains
Let you suffer from our greed
Like spoiled children
Blinded by your light.

Save yourself from us! *
Save us from ourselves!
Save us!

* *Could be translated into many tounges*

3rd movt

The burning earth. The tremoring earth.
The rock seething, bleeding, upheaving!
Hurling forth tongues, flicking, licking,
Winding, entwining with fiery fingers.
The shrieking flames. The groaning flames.
Rolling, plunging in thundering waves
Gulping, gobbling with burning jaws
Cleaving us… drowning us …tearing us…
… howling, roaring ocean of flames!

(Texts in 3rd movt translated from Swedish by Robin Blanton)

The composer's sketches

Save yourself from us! Save us from ourselves!

– The end of the second movement is a section of high emotion. A cry of despair.
– I'm looking for the right pitches and harmonies to let the singers' voices ring out. The notes have to lie in just the right range for each voice. Together with the strings, and with piano and harp accents, it can be very powerful. Very affecting. The trumpets and woodwinds, also in a high register, fill in between the phrases.

64

157

Perc. I

Perc. III

Chimes

Fl.

A. Fl.

B. Fl.

Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

163

Fl. I-II

Ob. I-II

Cl. I-II

Bsn.

Chimes

Fl.

A. Fl.

B. Fl.

Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

The Nordic Council Music Prize Helsinki November 2022

The Nordic Council awards five prizes each year – for literature, film, music, the environment, and children's and young people's literature. The winners receive the prize along with the Nordlys statuette, which is presented at an awards ceremony in connection with the annual Session of the Nordic Council.

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Just over thirty minutes of monumental and powerful music for choir and symphony orchestra. A call from the continents in the face of the climate catastrophe that seems inevitable. The work is called Silent Earth.

Karin Rehnqvist's music to Kerstin Perski's congenial lyrics becomes an overwhelming piece of music that will not leave anyone untouched.

In three touching movements – *Silent Earth*; *We, Who Once Were*; *The Burning Earth* – the authors describe their impressions and feelings of what is now happening to our planet. And they are not alone in that feeling. It is universal and shared by millions.

Here, the apocalypse of this climate is given an intrusive and strong musical costume.

From the composers acceptance speech

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Astronomers calculate that there are 2 trillion galaxies in the universe.

That is 2 with 12 zeros. That is a lot of galaxies.

In our galaxy, the Milky Way, we float in space upon the planet Earth. Our existence is fragile, we are here together, and we must take better care of our Earth.

PHOTO: ANDREAS PRAEFCKE + AGNES THOR

PHOTO: ARNE HYCKENBERG

Silent Earth
First performances

Silent Earth was composed for the Netherlands Radio Choir and Philharmonic Orchestra and the Swedish Radio Choir and Symphony Orchestra.

The first performance was planned for April 2020 in Amsterdam, but in March the pandemic struck, canceling concerts around the world. The performance was rescheduled for January 2022, but things got dramatic again.

Concert halls had only recently re-opened after a new lockdown in the fall of 2021, and just days before the premiere, the regular conductor got Covid.

Gijs Leenaars, who had rehearsed the piece with the Netherlands Radio Choir, leapt onto an overnight train from Berlin and took over the baton. Thanks to the artistic and professional dedication of all involved, the performance went off without a hitch.

A Swedish premiere followed in August 2022, when this live recording was made.

Silent Earth was co-commissioned by the Eduard von Beinum Foundation for the NTR ZaterdagMatinee (NPO Radio 4's concert series at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam) and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra for the Baltic Sea Festival.

First performance: The Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, 29 January 2022.
Swedish premiere: Berwaldhallen, Stockholm, 26 August 2022.

About Karin Rehnqvist:

PHOTO: FILIP ERLIND

Karin Rehnqvist was born in 1957 in Stockholm and grew up in the town of Nybro in southeast Sweden. At the Royal College of Music in Stockholm she studied music education from 1976, and then composition from 1980 to 1984. Her teachers included Gunnar Bucht, Pär Lindgren and Brian Ferneyhough. From 1976 to 1991 she was artistic director and conductor of the Stans Kör chorus.

Between 2000 and 2004 she was composer-in-residence in a collaboration between the Scottish and Swedish Chamber Orchestras. In 2009 she co-founded KVAST, the Swedish Association of Women Composers, and from 2009 to 2021 she was professor of composition at the Royal College of Music, the first woman to be appointed to this position.

Rehnqvist's music sits at the intersection between folk and contemporary classical traditions. Particularly important to her musical style is the Swedish vocal practice of 'kulning', a type of shepherd's herding song that has become emblematic of her music. Kulning is a penetrating vocal call, sung mainly by women, to call livestock down from high mountain pastures. Sung using the resonant head voice, kulning calls can travel long distances in the open air. As well as this piercing quality, they have a melancholy air due to their use of flattened tones (similar to the 'blue notes' of African American music).

Rehnqvist first drew on the kulning style in Puksånger – Lockrop ('Tympanum song – Herding calls') for two sopranos and percussion (1989). She was inspired by the emergence of two singers – Lena Willemark and Susanne Rosenberg – who were comfortable in the worlds of both Swedish traditional music and contemporary notation, and she has since written many works with the voices of one or both of these women in mind. Puksånger – Lockrop allied the feminine expressivity inherent in herding calls with the concrete and corporeal.

Since then, Rehnqvist has used kulning both explicitly and implicitly to explore the fundamental states of existence: the primordial facts of life in Sun Song for female voice,

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PHOTO: FILIP ERLIND

two narrators and chamber orchestra (1994); the joy of innocence in Light of Light for children's chorus and orchestra (2003, rev. 2023); isolation and communication in the outdoor happening Was Someone Calling? for two singers, horn, trumpet and trombone, and street vendors (2006); women's resilience in the face of sexual violence in the monodrama Bloodhoof (2019); and the peace of death in To the Angel with the Fiery Hands for oboe and chorus (2000).

The poet and composer Bengt Emil Johnson has noted that Rehnqvist's allusions to kulning contain with them 'nursery rhyme and psalm, hymn and incantation, invocation and desecration, the lament of the professional weeper and the comfort of the lullaby'. Often Rehnqvist sets these themes within a natural framework – the rhythms of the sun (Sun Song), the sublimity of the Arctic ice cap (Arktis Arktis! for orchestra, 2000–01) or the concentrated seasons of the North (Songs Between Light and Darkness for soprano, two reciters, clarinet, alto saxophone and piano, 2021). In her recent music, this has been allied to a turn towards explicitly ecological themes, most notably in two major works composed in collaboration with the poet Kerstin Perski: Silent Earth for chorus and orchestra (2020) and the opera Drifted (2007–15).

Rehnqvist's music has been commissioned by many of the world's leading contemporary ensembles, including the London Sinfonietta (Embrace Me, 2005–08), the Kronos Quartet (All Those Strings!, 2013–14; The Riddle, 2017), Ensemble recherche (Bloodhoof) and Norrbotten Neo (Night Chant, 2020). She has won the Prix Italia (2014), the Järnåker Prize (2020) and the Nordic Council Music Prize (2022). But, expanding on her natural affinity for vocal and choral music, she is equally comfortable writing for young and amateur musicians, as in the children's opera Beauty School (1999) and many works for children's and girls' choruses.

In 2018 a book-length biography of Rehnqvist, written by Per F. Broman, was published by the Royal Swedish Academy of Music.

– TIM RUTHERFORD-JOHNSON

MORE ABOUT THE COMPOSER: karin-rehnqvist.se

About Kerstin Perski:

Kerstin Perski, playwright and writer, has been described as one of Sweden's foremost librettists. Through her librettos and poems in Swedish and English for more than fifteen new music dramatic works for adults and children, she has contributed to the development of the field of opera with themes that combine a sense of contemporary urgency with the timeless and mythical.

For example, in the full length operas *Cry Wolf* (1997), *Son of Heaven* (2015) and *Mythomania* (2023).

Her collaborators include composers from Sweden, Denmark, Japan and Iceland. A recurring feature in all her writing, which includes plays, novels, short stories and poetry, is a focus on the musicality of the text, where poetic concentration is deeply related to phrasing and rhythm.

With a Ph. D in Artistic Research (2020) focusing on finding more collaborative and non-linear methods of transformation from drama to text and music in the creation of opera, Perski also contributes to the opera-making of tomorrow.

Since autumn 2024, Perski is a professor in Creative Writing at Linnaeus university in Växjö, Sweden.

PHOTO: ANETTE NANTELL

MORE ABOUT THE LIBRETTIST: kerstinperski.se

About the conductor Dima Slobodeniouk:

Praised for his exhilarating approach and energetic leadership by musicians and audiences alike, Dima Slobodeniouk has become one of the most sought-after conductors of his generation.

He works with the world's foremost orchestras, including Boston Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony, Berliner Philharmoniker and many others. Dima Slobodeniouk studied at Helsinki's Sibelius Academy, where he graduated in 2001, and also took up his conducting studies.

In the 2023/24 season, Dima Slobodeniouk was invited to make his debuts with the National Symphony Orchestra Washington and Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich. In the opera pit, he will make his debut at the Bayerische Staatsoper.

A passionate believer in widening opportunity, he started a conducting initiative whilst at the Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia, giving aspiring conductors podium time with a professional orchestra and the opportunity to work with him on selected repertoire. Together with the Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia he built an extensive and highly acclaimed media library of live concert recordings in recent years.

Known for his musical expertise, Slobodeniouk is also a praised recording artist.

PHOTO: MARCO BORGGREVE

For nearly 100 years, the Swedish Radio Choir has paved the way to the future of Swedish choral singing, inspiring choirs worldwide. The 32 professional choristers form a unique, dynamic instrument hailed by music-lovers and critics all over the world, as well as by the conductors and composers who explore and challenge the choir's potential. The Swedish Radio Choir performs at Berwaldhallen, concert hall of the Swedish Radio, as well as on tours all over the country and the world. Also, they are heard regularly by millions of listeners on Swedish Radio P2, Berwaldhallen Play, and globally through the EBU.

The award-winning Latvian conductor Kaspars Putniņš was appointed Chief Conductor of the Swedish Radio Choir in 2020.

Two of its former Chief Conductors, Tõnu Kaljuste and Peter Dijkstra, were named the choir's first Conductors Laureate in 2019. Since January 2019, its choirmaster is French orchestral and choral conductor Marc Korovitch, with responsibility for the choir's vocal development.

The Swedish Radio Choir is known for its broad repertoire, ranging from European choral classics to groundbreaking new vocal music. The choir has been an important part of the Swedish Radio's cultural output since the beginning: it was founded in 1925, the same year as Sweden's inaugural radio broadcasts.

PHOTO: MARCUS KURN

PHOTO: ANDREW STAPLES

About The Swedish Radio Choir and The Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra:

More than 100 exceptional musicians make up the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, a multiple-award-winning ensemble renowned for its high artistic standard and stylistic breadth, as well as collaborations with the world's finest composers, conductors, and soloists.

Daniel Harding has been Music Director of the SRSO since 2007, and since 2019 also its Artistic Director. His tenure will last throughout the 2024/2025 season. The SRSO performs at Berwaldhallen, concert hall of the Swedish Radio, and is a cornerstone of Swedish public service broadcasting. Its concerts are heard weekly on the classical radio P2 and regularly on national public television SVT.

The orchestra regularly tours all over Europe and the world. SRSO has an extensive and acclaimed recording catalogue. The first radio orchestra was founded in 1925, coinciding with Sweden's first national radio broadcasts. The SRSO assumed its current form in the 1960s and has since had several prominent chief conductors. Two of them, Herbert Blomstedt and Esa-Pekka Salonen, have since been named Conductors Laureate, and continue to perform regularly with the orchestra.

About the album:

01 | Silent Earth – *5:42*
02 | We, Who Once Were – *8:58*
03 | The Burning Earth – *11:21*

Total time: 26 minutes

Live recorded at Swedish Radio Berwaldhallen, 26 August 2022
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Translations: Robin Blanton

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