

**Mandel Festival at Severance presents *Hero's Song* —  
a conversation with composer Jüri Reinvere**

by Mike Telin



Jüri Reinvere is more than a celebrated Estonian composer. He has also published essays and poems, worked for Estonian and Finnish Radio, produced and written screenplays for documentary films, and translated and co-written books, as well as written the libretto for his earlier opera, *Purge*.

All of his artistic abilities have influenced his *Concerto for Violin, Harp, and Orchestra*, which will receive its world premiere on Friday, May 22 by violinist Leila Josefowicz, harpist Trina Struble and The Cleveland Orchestra led by Franz Welser-Möst.

The 7:00 pm performance at Severance Music Center is part of the Mandel Opera and Humanities Festival. The program also includes Adolphus Hailstork's *Epitaph for a Man Who Dreamed*, Grażyna Bacewicz's *Symphony No. 4*, and Antonín Dvořák's *Hero's Song*. Tickets are available [online](#).

I caught up with Jüri Reinvere by phone in Frankfurt, Germany.

*Mike Telin: It's a pleasure to meet you. I've enjoyed reading about you, listening to your music, and your fascinating career as a composer and a writer. Reading your program note, I understand that it was Franz who approached you about writing this double concerto. Am I correct?*

Jüri Reinvere: Yes, you are, but I've known Franz longer than he has known me. To start with, he's one of the very few Austrian, German, or even European conductors who is interested in the music of the Nordic countries. I have a huge respect for his performances and recordings of Sibelius. It's very rare here, because in Europe there truly is a border between the South and the North when it comes to music. For some reason, they don't want to have anything to do with each other. Franz is really an exception.

*MT: How did your collaboration with Franz begin?*

JR: I had written a lot of orchestra music and the musicians seemed to play this with authentic interest. Then, about eight years ago I got a request from the management of the famous Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig to list several of my pieces that Franz could conduct. The piece I suggested was *Norilsk, the Daffodils for recorded voice and large symphony orchestra*, and he played it in Leipzig, and a few months later in Cleveland. That was how our collaboration started.

After that we met in Salzburg when he was conducting there. We had dinner together and he asked me if I would be interested in writing a double concerto, and gave me a free choice of the solo instruments.

*MT: In your program note you say that both the harp and the violin are stringed instruments, but other than that, they don't have a lot in common. When you were writing the concerto, was "not having a lot in common" a challenge?*

JR: It was. In most double concertos there is always kind of a fight between the soloists. So when I started writing the concerto I said no, I am going to see the solo parts in this concerto not as opponents but as one and the same instrument.

Actually, they do have more in common than just pizzicato. Speaking in theological terms, in German we say that heaven is full of violins. The harp is also an instrument of heaven — you always see paintings of angels with harps. And there is a model in Louis Spohr's two concertos for violin, harp, and orchestra.

*MT: How much conversation did you have with Leila and Trina while you were writing the piece?*

JR: A lot. I had phone calls, video calls, email exchanges, and lively conversations with both of them. I really love to go into the practical details — I want to write so that the instruments feel natural when playing, even if my music has technical challenges.

Leila and Trina are both very curious and ambitious, so we decided that I should arrive in Cleveland early so we could have a few days to ourselves, seeing how things sound before the orchestra rehearsals start.

*MT: I know the piece is about 30 minutes in length: is it one or multiple movements?*

JR: It has a traditional concerto structure but it's in one movement with many sections, so it's not like one gigantic iceberg without breaks.

*MT: You've written it for a fairly large orchestra.*

JR: Last year I wrote a flute concerto which is 20 minutes long. And obviously I used a small orchestra behind an instrument like the flute.

But from the beginning Franz said to me, "Please be as creative as you want to be. Do anything you want to do." For once, I felt it was time to place a large orchestra behind the violin and harp. So while we have the intimacy of those two instruments and the intimacy of the orchestra all the time, we also have the volume of the full orchestra as well.

One of the things about modern concertos is that they tend to be technically challenging. I listened to a lot of violin concertos and at some point I started to think, "What can I do in this field?" At the same time, for some reason I was listening a lot to Mozart piano concertos and I heard how Mozart developed his splendor. And I decided that this concerto wasn't going toward the virtuosity of the instruments, it was going to be much more like a poem.

Classical contemporary music has been obsessed with technology and competition, and I really wanted to bring poetry and narration back into the music. Let's call it beauty. What's wrong with beauty?

I am also a poet myself. Two years ago I finished a grand project — four quartets, two hours long, with my own poems after T.S. Eliot. It's similar to *Norilsk*, which was played in Cleveland.

*MT: I was curious to know how the disciplines of writing and composition inform one another. I think you're answering that question.*

JR: I don't have the output that most of composers have who conduct or play piano. My output is being an essayist, writing poems, observing the world, and writing political columns. I have a regular column in the leading Estonian newspaper. I am also writing in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* which is one of the leading regional German newspapers. So I'm very active that way.

My mentors, maybe even my most important teachers, were pianist Kābi Laretei and Ingmar Bergman, the famous Swedish movie director. Kābi had a splendid career as a pianist in the USA in the '60s.

They always told me that freedom is one of the most important things for an artist. That doesn't mean doing whatever you want to do, but going where you think that as an artist you need to go. Take risks and be adventurous. This is sort of the path I've always followed.

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