



Example 1: Magnus Lindberg, *Clarinet Concerto*, solo clarinet line, bars 1-7
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Unseriously good: Magnus Lindberg's Clarinet Concerto

While working on his Clarinet Concerto at his summer retreat, Magnus Lindberg would take sketches and ideas and row across the bay to try them out with the clarinetist Kari Kriikku. The resulting concerto is the happy product of this happy collaboration.

I have always been suspicious of solo clarinet music, born of a mild antipathy toward Brahms and a strong aversion to Weber, whose music panders to the show-off in all clarinetists. (Think of an orchestra tuning up: it's always the clarinet you can hear, flying up and down their arpeggios.)

Lindberg's concerto plays to the gallery – as a concerto should – but is no mere show-piece. He embraces the clarinet's history: not just the 19th-century stuff but the innovations of the great jazz pioneers – and offers the odd multiphonic nod to the avant-garde. Looming over all clarinet concertos is the famous opening of *Rhapsody in Blue*. Again, Lindberg accepts the

challenge, appropriating the idea for a huge glissando as his own climax. But he also borrows the mood of *Rhapsody in Blue*: high-spirited, vivacious, busy and, above all, joyous. Unashamed, big, loud joyousness.

I say 'unashamed' – and why should a composer be ashamed of writing joyous music? And yet it seems that modern (modernist?) sensibility demands seriousness as its passport

from the spirit of Gershwin, there are also moments of Copland's spaciousness and Bernstein's edgy syncopation, making Lindberg's a very American concerto.

But this high-spiritedness (recalling also Adams' *Gnarly Buttons*) is not to do with Americanness. Neither is it to do with being 'tonal' (in whatever sense that word is understood). There is, after all, a divertimento character to much of Ligeti,



Example 2: Magnus Lindberg, *Clarinet Concerto*, bars 648-650 (reduction)
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to greatness. We have no problem seeing *The Marriage of Figaro*, the Brandenburg Concertos or Beethoven's Eighth Symphony as being profound and important despite being *divertimenti*. Yet, from Wagner on, music has had to be serious to be taken seriously.

This prejudice becomes even more pronounced with recent music, as if the difficulties and complexities of modern life can only be dealt with in music which is difficult and complex, even though this ignores that greater part of people's everyday lives made up of laughter, fun and un-seriousness.

So can modern music be joyful and great? Lindberg's concerto says yes.

It starts out with a humble diatonic tune for the clarinet alone (ex. 1, top of page), which subsequently emerges in several guises before a memorable show-stopping finale whose blues-inflected harmonisation is pure Gershwin (but with infinitely more distinguished orchestration). Apart

Carter, Donatoni, Rihm.

It is mainly to do with confidence: Lindberg is at the height of his powers, and this is a big piece, grandly conceived and resoundingly delivered. He is confident in his collaborator, so the virtuosity is never indulgent or self-indulgent. Lindberg has the confidence of an architect: crafted in its long spans and its individual moments, the 25 minutes fly by. He also has confidence in his audience: the concerto is enjoyable in a way modern music is not supposed to be. Lindberg has the confidence not to be bothered.

Lindberg's magnificent Clarinet Concerto is exciting and affirming, inspired and inspiring. It excites the musician in me. It is a great clarinet concerto precisely because of its joyousness. It embraces all that is wonderful about the clarinet, while breezily thumbing its nose at po-faced modernism, and at Weber.

Bernard Hughes

Magnus Lindberg's Clarinet Concerto is at the Proms on 3 August. See listings.

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