



Dance partner

As the premiere recording of Roxanna Panufnik's *Dance of Life: Tallinn Mass* is released, the composer talks to **Brian Morton** about bells, rhythm, and the delicacy of the Estonian language

Ask the average composer to offer some sense of the distinctive music of the Estonian language – one few of us would necessarily recognise in the street – and the likely answers are ‘Oh, you’d have to ask a Finno-Ugric expert about that’ or ‘Oh, crumbs... er, sorry.’ Ask Roxanna Panufnik, and she says brightly, ‘Yes, it’s like a trickling mountain stream, with icy cool and clear water.’ Wow.

Panufnik isn’t an average composer in any sense of the word. Your ‘average composer’ would balk at setting a Mass in Estonian, one of the world’s more resistant languages, with few of the ‘family’ resemblances that allow most of us to make guesses at words in the Romance and Germanic tongues. Panufnik has now written four Mass settings, including the much-loved *Westminster Mass* to mark Cardinal Basil Hume’s 75th birthday, and she nurses an ambition to compose others in a variety

of languages; but it was a mistakenly presumed family connection that led Panufnik to think that a commission from Tallinn to mark its term as European City of Culture would be relatively straightforward. ‘Well, of course, I’m half-Polish’ – her father was the great Andrzej Panufnik [see *C&O* September/October 2013], who settled in Britain in 1954 and was naturalised in 1961, spending the remaining 30 years of his life here – ‘and I looked at the map and thought, “Well, they’re close, there are bound to be similarities...”’

Dance of Life is a sweeping, vibrant oratorio of some 60 minutes that juxtaposes Panufnik’s *Tallinn Mass* (in Latin) and settings of 19 Estonian poems. Though the composer is at pains to point out that the recorded version of *Dance of Life* – released in the US in late 2013, and on release in the UK in February 2014 – is performed in Latin and English (rather than Estonian), it was the



Bernt Notke's *Danse Macabre* painting in St Nicholas Church, Tallinn, inspired the Estonian poems for *Dance of Life*

challenge of setting in an unknown tongue that inspired her. Panufnik admits to a 'weird rhythmic dyslexia – I actually have three left feet', but there is no sign of it in *Dance of Life*, a work which, to anyone who knows the country, seems to convey much of what makes Estonia so remarkable. 'Yes, for a country of such a modest size, the sheer variety of musical culture is incredible. There's such a difference, for example, between north and south, and such an openness – I guess history has a lot to do with that – to influences from outside.' There's an obvious Byzantine cast to the Mass's Agnus Dei, but the miracle of the work as a whole is that it so completely evokes a country and a city as a geographical and historical convergence, but without obvious 'ethnomusicological' padding. Though the folk element is relatively minor and recessed in relation to the work as a whole – and the distinctive plucked zither or *kannel* part has been adapted to be played on a concert harp – the music has an unmistakable provenance. A French critic identified Andrzej Panufnik's great gift as 'incantation', an ability to invest words and music with more than surface power, and it is a quality his daughter has inherited, however ambivalent she may once have been, in musical terms at least, about *that* family resemblance. Panufnik senior's *Universal Prayer*, a setting of Alexander Pope for vocal quartet, choir, harps and organ, is a useful reference point for this Mass, another work set in a very distinctive tradition but luminously accessible.

The Estonian text for *Dance of Life* is taken from a group of poems by Doris Kareva and Jürgen ▶



Roxanna Panufnik: 'not an average composer'



◀ Rooste, inspired by the 15th-century painting *Danse macabre* by Bernt Notke, a treasured piece of art in Tallinn's St Nicholas Church. Panufnik's understanding of the prosody was checked for her by Kai Ruutel, she explains: 'It's such a delicate language. You fear making mistakes like putting emphasis on prepositions, that kind of thing, so it was essential to get help from someone who spoke the language, and spoke it musically.' She worked with multiple versions of the text, literal, word-for-word and 'Englished', in order to get the cadences and moods just right.

'You'll know, as anyone does who spends any time in Tallinn, that there are bells at the corner of every street. It's just part of the sound of the place.' And it is very much part of the musical language of Estonia's most famous composer, Arvo Pärt, whose 'tintinnabulary' style is justly celebrated. Was that an example to follow, or to avoid? 'Neither, really. I only know three or four of his pieces, but let me tell you, he held my hand all through the premiere

[of *Dance of Life*]. He was completely adorable.' The bells are there, nonetheless. For a woman who claims rhythmic dyslexia, Panufnik has a subtle grasp of rhythm on the larger scale and in the rela-

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tionship between liturgy and vernacular drama a very sure grip of narrative: she rightly describes the overall impact of the piece as 'theatrical', but in a remarkably untheatrical way. What Bernard Jacobson once described, referring to the father, as the 'quintessential Panufnikian blend of ritual with lyricism, of profound conceptual laws with charming and unexpected turns of expression' is ▶

▲ Recording *Dance of Life* (clockwise, from top left): Mihhail Gerts conducts the performers; Estonian poets/librettists Jürgen Rooste and Doris Kareva; Panufnik with executive producer Heili Vaus-Tamm (l) and Jaak Johanson (narrator); the composer, Mihhail Gerts, Patricia Rozario and producer Philip Rowlands (r) listen to a take; a *kannel*, or Estonian zither.

PHOTOS BY SVEN TURTS

DANCE OF LIFE

PALLA MARCARELLI



▲ Folk elements are evident in herding shouts and hoots in the Gloria, and use of the *kannel* (zither) in the Agnus Dei.

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◀ in every part of *Dance of Life*. Its surface gleam is not the gleam of facility, but simply the light that momentarily hides a profound interior. The other obvious nod to Roxanna Panufnik's mixed ancestry is that the Continental and Catholic ambition evident in her structures is matched by a directness and simplicity of address that makes this work, in whichever of its available languages, speak to all.

At the turn of 2014, which marks Andrzej Panufnik's centenary, she looks forward to a year of bittersweet father-daughter programming and to a more conscious and deliberate examination of his

work. 'I don't read his scores, and in some ways I've avoided even hearing performances of his work because, of course, what I hear in them is him, and that's still – probably always will be – very difficult.' But the process has begun, and in the course of it she may well find that even when apparently detached from her father's example – and nasty charges of nepotism once persuaded her to use another name – she comes ever closer to completing his great creative project.

It feels worth venturing the thought that *Dance of Life* seems like a change of direction into a deeper maturity of style, a gathering together of much that had gone before, a genuine masterwork. How importantly does it stand in her worklist? As usual she doesn't disappoint. 'Massively, massively, massively. It's changed everything, in ways I can't entirely explain. But I know that I'm different because of it, and that's rather wonderful.' There is much else to look forward to in the coming otherwise backward-looking year. There is to be a US premiere of *Dance of Life*, a moment that will surely galvanise the small (c.25,000) but very talented Estonian-American community, and there are plans to perform it every year in its city of dedication. 'I've made such wonderful and lasting friends there,' she says, almost in surprise; but the work all conveys, as even a moment in her company confirms, a gift of human sympathy and connection that makes Roxanna Panufnik the most humane and approachable of contemporary composers. ■

www.roxannapanufnik.com

Roxanna Panufnik's Dance of Life: Tallinn Mass is published by Edition Peters; the Tallinn Mass parts are also available separately from the publisher: www.edition-peters.com

Brian Morton is a writer and broadcaster, formerly a presenter of jazz and classical music on BBC Radio 3, based in the west of Scotland.

Dance of Life: Tallinn Mass is released in the UK by Warner Classics [CD: 2564 64281-9] on 4 February 2014. Performers include Patricia Rozario, Jaak Johanson, Estonian TV Girls' Choir, Collegium Musicale Chamber Choir, Choir of Estonian Academy of Music & Theatre and Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Mihhail Gerts.

