

# Niklas Sivelöv, Pianist and Composer

BY MARTIN ANDERSON

A century ago one could find a plethora of musicians like Niklas Sivelöv, where one couldn't draw a line between composer and executant: Rachmaninoff is the example we remember today, but there were dozens, even hundreds, of composers who made their living on the concert platform and wrote new pieces to feed their own repertoire. These days the composer who is also a performing musician is a rarity, which makes the dual career of the Swede Niklas Sivelöv all the more remarkable—and with three symphonies under his belt and a fifth piano concerto underway, the parallel with Rachmaninoff is hard to ignore. Sivelöv's discography encompasses his own music (improvisation as well as formal compositions), works by Bach, Englund, Schumann, Skryabin, Stenhammar and others, two of Liszt's transcriptions of Beethoven symphonies, and much more. His scaling of one of the summits of the pianist's repertoire—the last six sonatas of Beethoven, on the label AMC Classical—was the prompt for a lengthy Skype conversation where we discussed the major strands of his musical life.

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*Let's start at the beginning. What were the beginnings of your life in music?*

I started playing the organ. I didn't read music until I was maybe fourteen, and even then very slowly. I was a student in the Academy in Stockholm when I presented a program of the pieces I could play. I was playing by ear, and improvising, playing very slowly as I was learning from the score. I had a kind of resistance to learning things, I wouldn't say properly, but I felt it was a very stiff way where the notes were in the way of the music somehow. I was very young, and I had these ideas about music just coming, as a kind of divine inspiration. And I kept that: I feel that I need a fresh drop of blood whatever I do. When I play, when I compose, I'm over-eager, and so I have to think about balance and restraining myself. Well, maybe not now, now that I have turned 50, but before it was always a problem. I have to remember when I compose that people have to play this, that this guy has to play it and not hate me too much; I have to make it understandable. So it's always a process of cleaning up after myself.

*When you sit down to compose, do you already know where the music is going, or do you just let it take you where it wants?*

More and more, I get the music as a whole piece, quite fast. I have the piece in my head—I can sense it, I can feel it, I can see it—and then I start to compose. Sometimes I go in a little bit of a different direction, but somehow the piece was already finished. It's really a struggle for me to finish it, because I felt it was already finished when I initiated it.

*Does that initial impulse come as a harmonic outline? What is it that you first perceive?*

The mood—and I can even see the notes, I can see my fingers playing certain notes. It comes to me like an idea, and then the editing process starts. It's like sculpture—as Rodin said, he has a piece of marble or stone, and the sculpture is already in there; all I have to do is remove the other bits. It's something like this. I'm quite rough in the beginning. Very fast, I have a feeling of everything, and I skip details. I have to remind myself to be patient and pay attention to the details. It takes a long time anyway for me to finish things, really finish the scores, to make it proper. It's also part of being a composer. It comes from improvisation. I did a lot of improvisatory CDs. If I'm in the mood, I can record a whole CD—and interestingly, really sparkling, not just repeating something that I have in my fingers, really inventing something; a whole CD in a couple of hours, and it's done. This is good; it's also bad. It's so fast sometimes, but you need to be able to digest things. I had to learn to take time—for example, in my Beethoven recording, and not only because some files were corrupt and we had to

re-record the “Hammerklavier.” It took time, but that’s good, because it gave me time to reflect on what to do and it was not hasty work.

*Let’s discuss the Beethoven recordings now, since you’ve brought them up. I was surprised to discover how much of an outdoor quality they had, rather than the Innigkeit that everyone else seems to go after. It’s not the interiorized approach that I was expecting—it has more energy than introspection.*

I understand what you mean. It might be late Beethoven, but he is still very much alive, and even if his health is very bad, he still has strength and willpower and crazy ideas. And sometimes they are far out, not even in the realms of beautiful or ugly, but something else, without filter. He’s building something that just collides, as in the late quartets. There’s a lot of energy—as, of course, there should be. I think I also have these philosophical moments, but I don’t see the late Sonatas as something where we are already in heaven and we should treat it as something “brainy.” You hear that kind of version a lot—people are afraid of touching this material. I have a little bit more of a hands-on approach: I studied these compositions very much as a composer, and I was surprised how much of this material is straightforward. Were you thinking of individual sonatas or of the approach as a whole?

*The general approach—it’s vigorous rather than contemplative.*

In the “Hammerklavier” he’s really trying to do something monumental. There’s no doubt he had a lot of problems in his life during that time. There was the business with his nephew, Karl. And he had a lot of bad things happening, also with his health, but still he managed to compose this sonata—he must have had such willpower, never to give up, never to give in. I was in Baden where he composed part of the Ninth Symphony, outside Vienna, and I played on his hammerklavier (they opened it for me); and I saw a list of all the diseases he had when he died, in the autopsy—not just lead-poisoning; every organ was corrupt—and they said that he prolonged his life by eight, ten years because he was walking so much, he was walking four or five hours a day. It was not very common to go walking, but he loved nature. My point is that he must have had tremendous willpower, even if in these late sonatas (and they’re not his last works for piano; there are later works), even if in the last sonata he says farewell to the sonata *genre*, I think they still have very much the Beethoven strength. It’s just that he doesn’t care any more about the structure as we know it. It very poetical, not only philosophical, and it’s always about how he can bring out some of these dissonances. You see them in the score and you try them on the piano; you think: “This won’t sound good—it’s terrible to put these dissonances down in the bass—but it sounds great in the way he has ‘orchestrated’ it. You see it in the score and think: “This will sound ugly”—it’s full of these kind of things, and I am not avoiding those things; I kind of enhance them, even, instead of being elegant and holding back. This philosophical approach which says that these sonatas are more about death than life—I think that’s a misconception.

*Your mentioning of Beethoven’s long walks suggests an idea that I hadn’t thought of before. Do you think that these walks and these works are both reflections of a physical need to burn off energy?*

Yes. There was his love of nature, but there must also have been the fact that he just couldn’t stand being cooped up in small rooms; he wanted to go out and walk, and since he couldn’t communicate with people, maybe he felt he had to go outside and communicate with the world.

*I’m editing a collection of Andrzej Panufnik’s writings at the moment, and his widow, Camilla Panufnik, says that her husband would go out for long walks along the Thames in Twickenham, where they lived, and he would be completely oblivious of acquaintances walking past him because he was deep in composition inside his head. That would probably have been true of Beethoven on his walks as well.*

I have another idea, one that’s not so common these days: I think there’s a very strong improvisatory aspect. Because the music is so structured, you really cannot change much; it’s very hard to start

improvising in this music. It makes at least me have the courage to try to break free from this; the structure is so strong that it makes you improvise more. It's like Bach—you can also improvise because it's so strong. If it were a loose structure—sometimes in music that does have this strength—and you start improvising, it loses totally; it just melts. The challenge is not to give up, when you see a Beethoven score and think, ah, we must obey, we must be like a slave. I feel like a slave at times, when you think everything is so precise and we cannot change anything; everything has been thought of hundreds of times. The challenge is to infuse some kinds of improvisatory elements; it's very important. Maybe that's what you are sensing, and I've heard from other listeners as well that it has a freshness.

*There's an interesting point here. To take two examples: Svetlanov's recording of the Medtner Sonata reminiscenza (from 1953, think) is the freshest I know, because as a composer he didn't feel bound by the notes on the page. Likewise a performance of the "Moonlight" Sonata I once heard from Ronald Stevenson, which was full of what the purists might see as liberties but it was extraordinarily expressive and communicative—and he, too, was a composer. The fact that you are also a composer who knows what's involved in getting notes onto paper...*

...gives me an insight into the music from the inside. It gives me a kind of confidence that I know what I am doing. Of course, when I improvise something, it's not just wild—I do something here, I do something there; I know that here I can do something, because you see the whole composition; you don't just see the outside somehow.

I also think my approach is quite human. And I wouldn't say that I have similar problems, but I do have problems with my ears; and I have a lot of things that could affect the psyche in a similar way. I have tinnitus, for example, and I can imagine the terror for someone like him of losing his hearing. I can feel the struggle—with Beethoven you seldom feel that it is going easy; the composition process is always a bit of a struggle, there's some resistance. Of course, there are so many recordings, but I've played them so many times in concert that I felt that I wanted to do a recording, please, for myself, since I have an approach which might be a bit more in a different direction. And then it has been something of a mountain to climb, these six last ones.

*How long did the recordings take to make? The booklet isn't very specific.*

I did them in sections, spread out over two years, but I lost half a year because of these corrupt files, and we had to find time in the hall; and we did other projects in between. But it was usually in the summer months, since the hall wasn't free all the time and we had to plan it.

*Where do you actually live?*

Malmö.

*So it's quite quick to get to Copenhagen from there.*

Oh, yes, it's just over the bridge...

*...which, of course, everyone now knows from the television thriller The Bridge!*

Do you watch that?

*I used to—it's good practice for my Danish—but I don't watch television at all now.*

You know, I don't have a television anymore either. Two years without it, and I don't miss it. My wife says maybe we might think of getting one, but with the computer I don't need television. Anyway, this recording is kind of typical of my approach in general. Very often I hear that I am very spontaneous in communicating, and these last years I have also tried to be more perfect, to polish

everything a little bit more. Before, I didn't care so much, but I now see that it's part of the game; that you need to.

*You've written three symphonies now...*

Well, they're not really finished; and there's also a fourth one, a set of *Symphonic Variations*, which is also a piano concerto.

*But you have four piano concertos as well.*

Yes, I do.

*As you get older, are you more concerned about what you might leave behind you, or are you not that concerned with what posterity might think?*

I'm always concerned that what I'm leaving behind is clear enough. I'm trying in my work all the time to finish my scores.

*So you're becoming more attentive to detail after all?*

I realize that what I leave behind in the written score is what you have for others to read. And I have a very good collaboration with Paul [the conductor Paul Mann] now, who is helping me with layout and that kind of thing. It's not my strongest point, to make it look good, but it's very important, since it's going to make it easier for a conductor, the orchestra, everyone—I realize that. It's just hard to be a composer, publisher, everything; you have to be everything nowadays. Beethoven didn't have to produce perfect scores. He could just write it by hand and then pass it over to the guys who wrote the parts, and they could tear their hair out trying to decipher all those notes—he wasn't very clear. But those days are over; now you need to be perfect.

*Do you see yourself being in a particular composing tradition?*

I feel connected to those piano composers, those who also played. And there are also new guys like this, of course, in modern times. It's a natural thing when you are playing your own stuff. I've returned, for example, to my First Piano Concerto. It's not very modern or avant-garde; I think it's just well written. It's fun to play, and I went back to it many times to play it as a soloist, and I'm happy to do that. And I cannot say about all the new concertos that I play that I want to return to them. It's something also about the joy of playing—it makes sense, and it's fun to play. This is the tradition, if any. I don't what tradition it's from, in fact; it's just every tradition we have. I think what I have, as a personal mark, is a rhythmical drive—often, there's a very strong rhythmical energy and a kind of stamina in my pieces.

*Do you see the music as particularly Swedish?*

No, I don't think so. I have some influences in the First Symphony from Sibelius, because I'm from the North [Sivelöv was born in Skellefteå], and there's a big family there called Sursilt—the “sour herring” family—and Sibelius was in the same family. So I have some influences from Sibelius, and I have a lot of influences from jazz music, because I used to play improvisatory jazz, even popular music, when I was younger, when I started in music. Even some folk-music, not so much perhaps, but I like it. It also has a very typical energy, Swedish folk-music.

*Well, because Swedish folk-music is modal, it can hover between major and minor, which gives it tremendous emotional power.*

People say of Swedish folk-music that you cry in the major and you laugh in the minor! It's music that very often is in between.

*Do you see anything of that in your own music?*

Not much. It's a good question. I don't think my music is particularly Swedish, but we do have to remember that Sweden has been influenced very much by other countries. First, it was French, German, and English culture; after that, there was a French influence. I'm not sure what is typically Swedish, but it is a very good question. As a pianist, I don't feel particularly Swedish—I never really think about this. I'm kind of international, because the language of music is international.

*Yes, but these things usually mark us more than we might be aware of them, just as where you grow up will leave its mark on your speech.*

Yes, you could be right. I'm also very surprised with how the business is working nowadays, more and more towards simplification: Ah, I'm Swedish, so I can play the Stenhammar Concerto. Of course, if I go to the States, I do have Russian ancestors and I'm already a kind of a star, because my name is "Sivelloff", and not Sivelöv from Sweden. These things matter, to an extent, but I don't let it affect my own way. You have to find your particular way as a human being. You should know about these things, you should not be oblivious, you should be aware of the world, but you should follow your own path.

*So where is this path taking you now?*

It's taking me a little bit uphill: I have to struggle a bit more, because I understand that I have been taking things a little bit too lightly. I'm working very hard nowadays. I've always been working hard, but now I need to be working very, very hard. And disciplined—not waiting around for inspiration, but just sit down and compose and be practical. Ingmar Bergman said that making a film for him was like making a chair—you have to build it well, you have to know your craftsmanship. It has to be functional: People have to be able to sit on it, and it has to be stable and not break. This was his approach. Of course, he also had all the demons and the other things of his inner life. For me my inner life is turbulent: I need to have a very strict regime, a very strict lifestyle, and think I am building a chair. Then I would be able to do something. Otherwise, I would be up there in the blue skies and think I am doing something. I did that for many, many years.

*What do you think was it that triggered this new sense of responsibility?*

I just became more conscious of what you leave behind. Also, when I see scores, sometimes I think that some composers write too much. There's also a thing where you try to be too clear and so you write too much information. I'm thinking of the masters, people like Beethoven, who was a master of notation. There's not too little and not too much, just what's needed. Shostakovich is also another example; he's also a genius with it. Some composers, they want to show too much that every note must be something. Well, it's their way to make it clear, but for me it's not the right way: I want to find a way which is always comprehensive and makes things easier for the interpreter. I was always playing the piano part in my concertos myself, and in chamber music, and I didn't have to make it perfect: I knew what to do there, and I didn't think that someone else would see this and react to it. And now other people play my music, and that's another story: I'm not there. I realized very strongly that it must be clear.

*Does it amount to a search for simplicity, or is that itself an over-simplification?*

Yes, simplicity! I'm searching for the most simple way. In fact, I wanted to say this about the Beethoven sonatas. Because of the reputation they have, that they are philosophical, that they are impossible to play, I tried to find the most organic and simple way and let the music speak itself. This is what I am trying with my own compositions, to find simplicity so that it can speak the message in the best and clearest way. That takes maturity. Composers tend to write less and less notes when they

get older, because they don't need as many notes. Even Mozart found this: He had many notes in the beginning, but later there were fewer and fewer.

*Is there not a tension between the performer and the composer?*

Yes, it's a very tricky one, it's a big tension. I would say it's perhaps not the best thing that the composer is playing his own works. It can be very interesting—for example, when Rachmaninoff performed his own concertos—but it's not obvious that it could be the best way to play it. I have a very strong memory of doing the Fourth Concerto. I always try to deliver in good time, and with the Fourth Concerto I was a little bit early with the parts and everything, at least a month early (not like with the Second Concerto, which was chaotic: I was learning it the week before. I was younger and had more energy, but still I was too late with that one). But still I didn't have enough time to switch from being composer to being interpreter, and the conductor, Kristjan Järvi, he knew me, and he said: "Niklas, you have to switch now—you're playing too much like a composer"! Because I knew the music so well, I don't play out, I underplay it a little bit. And it's a new piece, and the orchestra doesn't know it, so you can't do that. It's OK with the Fourth Piano Concerto of Beethoven—you can underplay that a little, or some other famous concerto. But with a new concerto you need to play out and show the ideas very clearly, and I didn't do that. I changed for the concert. So I agree with you. The tension is very great between the two roles, and you need time in between.

*How much time does it take you to make that transition?*

I'm not sure. With the Fourth Concerto, for example, I studied it like a new concerto, not like my own piece that I can play. I need to study it. Then you have to be objective—you have to see the score like you never saw it before, and that's difficult. You have to detach yourself from this child, still love this child, but be at a distance and see what is best for this child now. You need to distance yourself; it takes time.

*Do you need to do something completely different, like go out and shoot some geese or go climbing...?*

I walk in the woods, I go to see some old churches—there are some beautiful old churches and graveyards near here, very peaceful. Just drive around in my car—I love to do that. The English countryside is fantastic. I was many times recording in Potton Hall, and this countryside is just so full of stories. We have it also here in Skåne; it's flat, and there are a lot of little villages, and you can just drive around and find some new spot.

*What does the future hold now? What are your main projects over the next three, four, five years?*

Well, there are the symphonies. I have a new piano concerto, No. 5, commissioned for next year in the Concert House [the Konserthuset in Stockholm]; it's a brass-band concerto. So the first one [op. 11, 1998] is for full orchestra, the second [op. 13, 2001] is for strings, the third [op. 27, 2017] is for full orchestra, the fourth [op. 40, 2018] is kind of chamber orchestra, the fifth brass band, and No. 6 will be these *Symphonic Variations*, like a symphony. I feel it's very important that I have to pass No. 5: It's like a holy number for piano concertos—Saint-Saëns, Prokofiev, Beethoven.... I had to start a sixth one; it was very important. It's kind of between a symphony and a piano concerto. Then I have other scores to finish: A tuba concerto, string quartets (I have No. 4—I did No. 3 in the summer).

And then recording projects. I will try to keep going what I am doing, in two directions. One is this mainstream. The next thing from AMC Classical will be Haydn sonatas and variations, and then Bach there. But the other direction is this modern music/improvisatory. I have a CD with Chinese instruments, which is kind of crazy. So I like to have these two paths, mainly because it's what I do. If I play a recital, very often I have Bach and Beethoven before the intermission, then I have something completely different: My own preludes, Skryabin, Bartók. My own preludes have been very successful—it's very lively music, and people like it, so it's a good way to finish a recital. So it's important for me, these two directions.

As for the compositions, as you might have understood, I am starting to be a little more serious with my composition. It has always been on a side thing for me, and I could maybe feel I have something to say, some talent for it, but it was something fun I could do. And then I realized that I could do it better, and I have to focus. Of course, I am also teaching in Copenhagen, and that takes time. I have a family with two kids. I have to keep at it now, at least for ten years! It's a question of where to put the effort, and there are many areas I want to cover. I have this with my students now: Many students are starting to win competitions. That's something that comes much later: You work hard building a class, and... nothing. And then some people start to win competitions and prizes, and it's fine. It's all good. This ocean of music is endless, and you never get good enough for you to really master it; there's always something you need to learn. And when you reach a plateau, you want to get higher up and you will see more. It's like life. People should have this feeling about life. It's not just money and materialistic things; it's this kind of climb, you are climbing.