

**COLLECTION**  
**BBVA FOUNDATION - NEOS**

**Anders Eliasson**

**Desert Point · Ostácoli · Sinfonia per archi**

Arcos Chamber Orchestra  
John-Edward Kelly, conductor

**CD CONTENT:**

**“It Takes No Prisoners”**

**Anders Eliasson and the Art of Infinite Presence**

“Music was the only way I could survive in this world.” Even as a young boy, Anders Eliasson used to arrange his toy soldiers into an orchestra, sit in front of them and sing, imitating the sounds of the instruments. The earliest music he can remember is “my own singing”. At the age of nine he was given a trumpet, received some lessons from experienced jazzmen, and soon became the leader of his own combo (two clarinets, trombone, drums, guitar and trumpet). By the time he was fourteen, he was taking lessons in harmony and counterpoint. “I didn’t have much luck back then. I suffered incredibly. When I was sixteen or seventeen I became very ill. I had to be sent to hospital – with a psychosis.”

Two years later Eliasson moved to Stockholm, where he found a mentor in Valdemar Söderholm: “He put me on the right track. I spent five years studying counterpoint with him. Bach, Bach, Bach – the most powerful energy you can possibly touch.” At the same time he also composed, but “it amounted to nothing: ‘music theater’, ‘kinetic music’, and I got to know the aesthetics of the classics and the modernists. There were a lot of idiotic attempts, but I had to get my hands on it and become familiar with it in order to know what I’m doing.” Then he entered the composition class of Ingvar Lidholm, a leading member of the ‘Monday Group’ that had an iron grip on Sweden’s modernist aesthetic: “I was shocked, because I suddenly lost all connection with the music within me. There was no way to avoid this training; I understood that, and was even quite interested in electro-acoustical music. But at the same time, I knew that it was not for me. I set out in search of my own ‘musical alphabet’.”

In the early 1970s, Eliasson discovered the foundations upon which to erect his own music. The remarkable thing is that his music cannot be categorized stylistically – indeed, this becomes less and less possible the more one delves into his music. “Questions of style are immaterial. Clinging to ideas like that means having to ask someone else what to do. And of course I experienced that often enough; whenever I have tried to impose my will on the music, it was always a disaster.”

What is Eliasson's 'musical alphabet'? "It's nothing special, absolutely simple, and the point of departure for everything: modes as simple as D-F-B-C-B-F-D, a sort of Lydian, and D-E-A-Bb-A-E-D, a typical Dorian used both horizontally and vertically. Both modes are very closely related, so it's easy to switch from one to the other. To me, though, they're neither Lydian nor Dorian; no other constellation offers so many possibilities. I don't know any that have so much leeway. It leads directly to infinity. The underlying basis is severe restraint. Once you enter into its realms and learn to exploit it, however, it turns out to be absolutely unlimited. The simpler the basis, the more multiform the potential lines of development. Conversely, the more complex a system is, the more limited it is at the same time. It's a paradox. This tonal system can be extremely far removed from its fundamental, yet it's always related to it."

The compositions Eliasson has produced since the early 1970s are largely instrumental: four symphonies (the second being unfinished) and other symphonic pieces; solo concertos for violin, clarinet, alto saxophone (for John-Edward Kelly), bass clarinet, trombone, violin, piano, bassoon, horn, and trumpet (with percussion ensemble); several works for string orchestra; compositions for chamber ensemble; a great deal of chamber music; such vocal works as the large-scale oratorio *Dante Anarca* (based upon Dante and his six masters); his most recent work, *Quo vadis?*; the symphonic mountain-journey *Canto del vagabondo*; a setting of Tranströmer's *Breathing Room – July*, and many others. All in all, his oeuvre forms one of the central pinnacles in the great symphonic tradition.

In music as substantial as Eliasson's, sound is only the outward guise of a deeply felt, highly complex, finely-wrought mental process. Its essence, rather than being the sound it is wrapped in, is unveiled in the mind of the listener through the bundling of a rich panoply of phenomena, forming a compellingly coherent experience. This is music that thrives not *on* sound, but rather *through* sound. It does not overwhelm the listener who grants it his full attention, but rather keeps him in a constant state of tension without repose. Immediately after completing his *Fourth Symphony*, Eliasson was asked to describe it. He replied: "It takes no prisoners. It grabs the listener by the throat and drags him along to the very end."

Eliasson has indeed discovered a new tonality – or rather a previously unknown principle of tonality that expands space into the infinite. This new tonality transcends the duality of the modes and the obvious grounding of the major-minor system in the tonic. It is music of pure energy. Conditioned by the 'triangulated harmony' (every third fifth is directly related), it seems constantly poised between all worlds, always in contact and in continuous interaction with mutually antithetic centers of gravity; never yielding to the magnetism of a particular center, but always orbiting between them with the self-assurance of a sleepwalker. This music is an uninterrupted act of liberation: "The most important thing is the emotional force-field – the propulsive truth, the being behind the semblance of things. Music, unlike sound, is not a matter of physical representation. That's why there are so many sounds without a soul today. Sound is a long way from being music. Sounds can be described, classified. Music can only be experienced. It is even impervious to liking or disliking. It stands above – or moves outside of – space and time. How could anyone put that into words? Timeless presence, infinite presence – always in paradoxes, for reality is incompatible with the

pragmatism of human thought. Not everyone understands this. It cannot be understood at all.”

Listening to the three works on this CD, it becomes obvious that Eliasson’s style has changed over the years. It is a long way from the vehemence and timbral extremes of *Desert Point* to *Ostácoli*, which has become a sort of classic for string orchestras, or the broadly reverberant introspection of *Sinfonia per archi*, circumscribing a huge, delicately gossamer arc of tension. Yet no one can foresee what will come next, for each piece is a self-sufficient entity that poses its own demands. What is the creative act of composing? “Naturally, a piece is more personal at the beginning than at the end. I try, after all, only to trace the emergence of the music – a quite objective process. One might say that I wander beneath the skin of the music. Where it is heading depends upon it, not me. It is not I who reaches the end, but the music itself; I try to keep my fingers out of it.”

The intensity of the musical process in Eliasson’s music is unique. This is perhaps because he doesn’t speak about himself, but lends resonance to powers that are greater than humankind: “Who do we think we are in the cosmos? Even ‘grains of sand’ is an extreme exaggeration. But perhaps one or another of us, given sufficient skill and open-mindedness, will prove receptive to energies and intelligences unimaginable in our little world, and to manifest them in the here-and-now.”