

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Carver, Anthony. 1972. 'Musical Smørrebrød'. *Contact*, 5. pp. 27-29. ISSN 0308-5066.

MUSICAL SMØRREBRØD11th Congress of the International Musicological Society

Copenhagen: August 20-25, 1972.

In addition to the scientific and social programmes, the 11th Congress of the I.M.S. provided delegates with the opportunity of hearing a wide variety of modern Scandinavian music. Since much of the music was very exciting and completely unknown to me, and the standards of performance very high, I should like to review the concerts briefly, and to indicate some composers whose music deserves to be played more often in this country, without in any way pretending to be able to give even a bird's eye view of present day musical activities in Scandinavia.

On August 21st there was a concert of chamber works in the excellent Louisiana Museum of Modern Art at Humlebaek. None of the pieces was written before 1967, and all are dedicated to the performers who played them on this occasion. The Danish Wind Quintet is clearly a considerable force in the Danish musical scene. They played brilliantly three works: Per Nørgård's 'Whirl's World' (1970), Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's 'Terrace in 5 Stages' (1969) and Ib Nørholm's 'Preludes to a Wind Quintet' (1972). The Nørholm was the least successful. His rambling melodic style is combined in a totally misconceived and unconvincing manner with more advanced textures. The deliberate diatonicism of the slow movement simply became boring, whilst his Accordion Sonata of 1967, played by Mogens Ellegaard, remained tediously anchored to the accordion's triadic construction.

Nørholm apparently reverted to a more 'traditional' style about 1966, before which, along with many Scandinavian composers of his generation (he was born in 1931), he was occupied with serial techniques. Instead of retreating, as Nørholm has done, Per Nørgård seems to have developed his style relentlessly, and currently employs shifting melodic patterns derived from two or four note motifs which are combined into infinitely long tone rows with repeated rhythmic patterns. In 'Whirl's World' the fast staccato patterns are juxtaposed with and superimposed on sustained notes which sometimes explore the beats produced by simultaneously sounding notes differing slightly in pitch. While not all the transitions seemed correctly calculated, this was a very stimulating piece. The other Nørgård piece, played by Bent Lylloff, was 'Waves' for percussion (1968), a study in shifting accents within continuous rhythmic movement. After a ritualistic gong stroke the patterns moved from one group of instruments to the next - 4 tuned drums, 6 small tuned gongs, xylophone + side drum, and finally a pair of chromatic timpani. The effect: hypnotic and exciting. Nørgård's works are beginning to become known in this country; several have been broadcast, notably 'Voyage of the Golden Screen' for chamber orchestra.

Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's 'Five Stages' revealed extreme economy of thought, whilst each of the five movements had its own character. Diatonic clusters

were treated with a Stravinskian feeling for chord sounds in the first and with Nørgård-like motor rhythms in the second. The middle movement was an hilarious parody of imitation by computer of tonal music, the fourth a fugue (hardly as "completely simplified" as the programme note suggested) and the fifth static like the first, but melancholy with many drooping sighs.

Arguably the most successful piece of the evening was Arne Nordheim's 'Dinosaurius' for Accordion and Tape (1970). Its use of such textures as clusters and glissandi completely freed it (unlike the Nørholm) from the accordion's traditional idiom. As far as one could tell, the tape functioned as an extra dimension to the sound, not as a stimulus to improvisatory reactions from the soloist.

On August 23rd, a concert was given in Lund Cathedral, Sweden, by Regionsmusiken in Southern Sweden (conductor Helle Rosén) and the Swedish Radio Choir (conductor Eric Ericson), with Karl-Erik Welin (organ). The first-named played Nørgård's 'Ceremonial Music for Winds' (1968), a spatial piece in which four groups, each consisting of a single type of instrument, were located in various parts of the building. The groups always played in the same sequence, viz. trumpets, oboes, trombones and horns, and had their own distinctive material. The brilliant fanfares of the trumpets gave way to bell-like oboe chords where each instrument produced chords by means of special fingering and positioning of the reeds in the mouth. The simple diatonic trombone fanfares gave way to bewitching horn music played largely with natural harmonics. The sequence was repeated several times with small changes, but while these were not sufficient to convince one of a coherent formal structure, the sounds themselves were thoroughly enchanting.

Karl-Erik Welin played Jan W. Morthenson's 'Pour Madame Bovary', written in 1962 when the composer was only 22. After a seemingly interminable stretch of shifting breathy rumblings it reached an effective climax with the notes B flat - A - C - B flat proclaimed loudly over the rumblings.

The remainder of the concert, rather badly planned, consisted of choral music, and apart from Buxtehude's 'Missa Brevis' (rather indifferently performed) was all by composers born between 1915 and 1928. No praise is too high for the choir's execution of this difficult music. Many of the pieces employed clusters, glissandi, Sprechstimme, speech and whisper. The two which seemed most successful were Knut Nystedt's 'De profundis' (1964), the masterstroke of which was the appearance of one of the versions of psalm-tone 4 in the doxology in combination with diatonic clusters, and Lars Edlund's 'Gloria' (1969), which as well as being the least afraid to employ ordinary triads was also the most exciting in its use of speech. At the beginning, for instance, a solo tenor singing from the balcony, aroused responses half-sung, spoken and whispered by the choir.

August 24th saw us assembled in Danish Radio's impressive concert hall for a concert by the Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by its musical director Herbert Blomstedt. Familiar were Sibelius' boring 'Tapiola' and Nielsen's disturbing 5th Symphony, here given a shattering performance with particularly fine playing from woodwind and upper strings. The rest of the concert consisted of Fartein Valen's Violin Concerto of 1940, and Ingmar Lidholm's 'Poesis per Orchestra' of 1963.

The Valen, excellently played with Arve Tellefson as soloist, is an elegaic one-movement piece employing a small orchestra. Use of tone-rows produced close thematic cohesion but a certain wearisome quality owing to the lack of any contrast to the flowing melodic polyphony. As in Berg a chorale, 'Jesus, meine Zuversicht', enters towards the end, here on a solo trumpet in combination with previous material.

In complete contrast, the Lidholm 'Poesis' is scored for huge orchestra, and was without doubt the piece of the concert. The composer was quoted in the programme note thus:

"My idea was to formulate a kind of instrumental drama and I used accordingly what one can call a tutti orchestra in dramatic contrast to certain distinct individual instruments, in particular piano and solo contrabass.... The work was composed at a time when instrumental theatre was attracting considerable attention in Sweden, especially through Karl-Erik Welin's performances. The piano part in Poesis is written for Welin and his collaboration has, among other things, been determinative for the working out of the solo cadenza." In practice the piano (soloist here Welin himself) and double-bass parts are not large, though clearly important. The work is not temporally notated, the various entries being cued at the discretion of conductor or soloist, or so it appeared. There is comparatively little 'extra-musical' content - the occasional shout. The success of the performance was due to the complete conviction of the orchestra and the obvious enjoyment they drew from their own virtuosity, and to the flawless dramatic timing of the conductor, Herbert Blomstedt, whose Bernsteinian gestures (he is a pupil of Bernstein) for once proved an apt visual complement to the sound. The BBC Symphony Orchestra would do well to emulate the enthusiasm of the Danish musicians, and could do worse than to lose their inhibitions by playing this very piece.

ANTHONY F. CARVER.