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Diversity in Danish 20th-Century Music

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Diversity. Does any word epitomize nineties-jargon more than this? Along with such words as "plurality" and "multi-culturalism" it is applied liberally to every issue and aspect of contemporary society, from education and lifestyle to cuisine and global politics. Music, of course, is no exception. The context, however, is most often the immediate chronology of method, process and statistics rather than background, history and causality of the existence -- or nonexistence -- of diversity. It is precisely in this context that one can approach Danish art-music in the 20th century.

I consider every 'ism' to be cultural imperialism.¹

This quote by the eminent Danish composer Per Nørgård condenses the attitude behind the enormous stylistic diversity found in contemporary Danish music into one crystalline statement. Not that this diversity reflects some unanimous rejection of all stylistic "isms" on the part of Danish composers, who have in fact aligned themselves with various identifiable musical trends and movements in this century. Nonetheless, Nørgård's equation of stylistic "isms" with cultural imperialism captures an essential attitude of many Danish composers. Just as skepticism of any movement that appears imperialistic has played a very real part in Danish politics, so has it affected developments in Danish musical life.

The idea of "national" styles, such as were widely recognized in the 18th century and had become an important aspect of musical ideology by the late 19th century, is now largely obsolete. The current situation is a vast wealth of styles, or rather, specific compositional techniques and approaches, from minimalism to neoromanticism to serialism to postmodernism, and the freedom to choose among them -- even combining them freely in one work -- as one desires. Clearly this immense range of diversity in 20th-century music is a global phenomenon unparalleled in musical history; however, it must be remembered that all things are relative.

When compared to its European counterparts, Denmark -- not unlike other countries peripheral to the mainstream of continental music represented especially by the Austro-Germanic tradition -- arrived at this state of freedom and plurality a bit late. Moreover, Denmark has historically represented the epitome of homogeneity and often antiquation. The relatively few native composers most often studied abroad, and upon returning home were content to compose in a derivative style.

The most well-known figure in Danish music is certainly Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707). This is somewhat ironic, considering that though Buxtehude's birth heritage was Danish he spent his adult life in Lübeck, Germany, and as a composer is associated with the Northern German school. Similarly, most other famous composers who worked in Denmark at various times were not Danish: John Dowland was, of course, English, and Franz Kuhlau and Heinrich Schütz were German.

It was not until the so-called "Danish Golden Age" of the 19th century -- coinciding with the rise of musical nationalism across Europe -- that Denmark began to have a thriving musical life of its own with native composers incorporating Danish folk tunes in their music. However, even the most successful of these composers such as Niels Gade and Jacob Gade (composer of the famous "Tango Jalousie") had limited international recognition, and musical trends and aesthetic tastes within Denmark followed the mainstream continental developments; especially those from Germany.

Indeed, during the previous two centuries the overwhelming predominant musical influence was Germany. Additionally, the music emulated by Danish composers was almost exclusively the conservative rather than the innovative: Brahms and Mendelssohn rather than Wagner, Strauss, or Mahler.² In other words, the relative homogeneity of European art-music in past eras when compared to the present was in fact progressive and diverse in comparison to the homogeneity that prevailed within Denmark.

Likewise, diversity in Denmark was slow to develop in this century compared with other continental countries. During the first two decades when the European musical scene was bursting at the seams with numerous new and revolutionary developments, Denmark was busily engaged in a new endeavor of its own: self definition.

The early years of the 20th century saw, for the first time, the emergence of a strong, central, Danish musical figure. This was the era of Carl Nielsen, who from 1900 until his death in 1931 came to be practically synonymous with Danish music, dominating all aspects of musical life. In the Nielsen era there developed a stylistic uniformity that bordered on exclusivity. Those who dissented from his views found themselves as outsiders with little hope for recognition by the musical establishment. There was little tolerance for "non-conformers" such as Rued Langgaard (1893-1952).

Ironically, this period of institutionalized, oppressive homogeneity was perhaps a necessary condition that set the stage for the later acceptance of stylistic plurality. Not until it realized and firmly grasped its own identity was Denmark able--- or willing?-- to embrace any true diversity.

The years following Nielsen's death did see a gradual, very slow exploration of some imported developments, beginning with Sibelius. In the Finnish master was found a companion spirit to Nielsen: if not in actual technique or language, in a kindred "Nordic lyricism." His late-tonal style, along with that of Nielsen, represented the official norm for all composers to follow during and even after that time; a norm imposed to ensure that music produced by Danish composers would be authentically "Danish," or at least "Nordic," in character.

This is not to say that continental developments were entirely without influence. In typical fashion, however, those ideas stemming from below the border which were most influential were not the extreme or revolutionary, but rather the more refined and subdued; i.e. impressionism and neo-classicism rather than expressionism and serialism. Gunnar Berg (1909-89), the only composer to pursue Schoenberg's 12-tone system, suffered the same fate as Langgaard before him, struggling in poverty much of his career.

The most important composer of the post-Nielsen period was Vagn Holmboe, who combined an unusual interest in folk music of the Baltic region with a personal extension of Brahmsian "developing variation" into what he called "Metamorphosis technique." Like Nielsen, he preferred to explore the edges of tonality rather than pursue what he perceived as unnecessary revolutions of the Second Viennese School or Stravinsky. In 1933 Holmboe concisely expressed the then prevalent view among Danish composers:

Are there not three main threads from Romanticism down to the music of today? The first thread leads through Wagner-Strauss down to Schoenberg. The other from Chopin through Debussy down to Stravinsky. Finally, the third thread goes from Brahms to Carl Nielsen and Bartók. . . . The question of in which thread we find health, strength and positive content is surely not open to discussion.³

This identification with a specific tonal style with national identity was accepted even by the young Per Nørgård, who not yet rejected all schools of thought as imperialistic; at least when it came to the Nordic sound. In several of his early essays he wrote about the "universe of the Nordic mind," and warned against any return to central European music for inspiration as Denmark had for so many centuries, urging instead a focus on the strength and individuality he believed to be inherent in "the universe of the Nordic mind."

It is as if in order to find a stronger consciousness about ourselves and our own natural traits we become passive and 'eclectic-ized,' always considering what is being to the south. . . . Isn't it about time that we dare to put more confidence in the wide, Nordic basis? Is the musical situation south and east of us really so blooming and seductively fertile that we absolutely must consider it before ourselves?⁴

Thus it is clear that the Danes were indeed aware of European modernism, but rejected it in favor of the musical language that had come to be associated with Nordic identity by the works of Nielsen, Sibelius and Holmboe.

In part this attitude reflected the horror felt by the Danish people in the aftermath of the Nazi atrocities and the devastation of World War II, which had a profoundly negative effect on attitudes toward all aspects of German culture. Danish artists -- as the rest of the citizenry -- retreated somewhat and found safety in cool, rational objectivity. The eminent Danish musicologist Jørgen I. Jensen writes:

"As is known, in Germany we saw a culture or mentality where it seemed that an entire people had been gripped by irrational feeling. So it is no wonder that objectivity became the refuge. Obviously, the majority of Danish composers between 1930 and 1960 had to struggle to turn their music in a direction other than German. Of course, there was a strong influence from Hindemith, but that was as a neo-objective functionalist rather than a "German" composer. . . . Otherwise, one turned towards the East . . . [which had] a kind of connection to the Nordic use of modal movements . . . which goes all the way back to Carl Nielsen. . . . Other composers turned towards France."⁵

Atonal expressionism and 12-tone music were perceived as symptoms of the German irrationalism that led to Nazism, totalitarianism, and the barbarism of World War II. Skepticism of anything too "emotionally-Germanic" can be heard in both the music and writings of Danish composers. For example, though Bentzon was the first person in Denmark to lecture and write on Schoenberg, one can nevertheless detect an echo of the previously quoted Holmboe statement in his words: "[Schoenberg] is the child of Tristanian decadence; romanticism's sick twin brother, with Brahms the healthy twin."⁶

Yet was not Brahms German? Yes, but as Hindemith he represented the rational, non-threatening side of German culture, not the "sick," decadent, untrustworthy side found in Wagner, Strauss, Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. After all, despite the fact that Schoenberg was reviled by the Nazis, he nonetheless represented the turbulent, obsessive "emotional tyranny" which was perceived by the Danes as impending cultural imperialism.

Such attitudes persisted into the 1970's in Denmark, and resentment of Germany's continuing predominance in international musical life still smolders. Poul Ruders writes:

Music history gives the mid-European composer a birthright to Elysium as a christening gift, an advantage which is difficult to compete with if one has been so careless as to choose one's parents from Denmark, Uruguay, the United States, Ireland or some other similar outpost. . . . [I]t is considered common knowledge that "a good composer is a dead composer, and he better darn well be German!" . . . That the wise men from the East -- Bartók, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich -- stumbled through the door, slapped their travel visas on the table and proceeded to bring disorganization to the eternal kingdom has never really been forgiven them. The line from Bach to Stockhausen and Boulez (who in this context is a "good German") stands firm in a romantic, historically-obvious queue. It is here that perspective becomes blurred, heads turn the other direction, and fanaticism arises."⁷

It is paradoxical that the event that crucially changed the course of Danish music and set the stage for the current state of diversity was, in fact, a direct result of contact with the continental (and German!) avant-garde. In 1960, three of the most important composers of the youngest generation -- Per Nørgård, Ib Nørholm, and Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen -- piled into a Volkswagen and headed for the ISCM festival at Cologne, where they heard Ligeti's "Apparitions," Boulez's "Pli Selon Pli," and Stockhausen's "Kontakte." Neither they nor Danish musical life would ever be the same again. The waters of the European avant-garde with all its new ideas and possibilities were rising, and these three volunteered to open the floodgates wide.

In typical Danish fashion these various possibilities were not taken at face value or embraced dogmatically. Serial music now represented only one challenge among many, and as such was less threatening and more inviting for exploration. Rather than developing into a full-fledged "school," however, these experimentations were quickly followed by music collage, concretism, aleatoric music as "parallel developments."⁸

Though other composers prior to 1960 had been influenced to some degree by outside developments, it is from these three that the current state of extreme diversity stems. They immediately embarked upon three very distinct and individual paths, and were instrumental in the "conversion" of their peers, as well as composers of the older generation.

Nørgård, as mentioned earlier, was already the most important figure of the young generation. After the revelatory ISCM Festival he began a series of brief experimentations with serialism and graphic notation. Quickly realizing both the potential within and simultaneous claustrophobic systematics inherent to 12-tone music and the ultra-serialism of Boulez, he started exploring other aspects of serial technique. This led eventually to his theories of the "Infinity row" (which ultimately has little in common with mainstream serialism), which in turn led to his ideas of so-called "Hierarchical music" (a sort of complex heterophony). Since then he has developed several unique theories (such as "tone seas," astrological/mystical relationships, combinatorial tones), and has worked extensively with the poetry, writings, and paintings of the schizophrenic Swiss artist Adolf Wölfl.

After brief forays into serialism, Nørholm and Gudmundsen-Holmgreen began a movement called Ny Enkelhed (New Simplicity). The simplicity in each of their musics, however, was of an entirely different nature, so that despite the fact that they were aligned with the same movement their paths were unique.

Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's music became so simple that, in the composer's own words, the music is "poor in material, non-dramatic, without pathos, without expansion and culmination...boring for the listener . . . [and] immensely boring to play."⁹ While this is perhaps a tongue-in-cheek exaggeration, he has indeed pushed simplicity to its extremes. Nørholm's simplicity, on the other hand, was one of simple lines and textures. His music owes much more to the aesthetics of Holmboe, Sibelius, and Nielsen, yet boiled down to its lyric essence.

Composers who later identified themselves with New Simplicity such as Ole Buck (b.1945) and Hans Abrahamsen (b.1952) write music equally disparate. This can be contrasted with the American minimalism movement, where even though Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and John Adams give their music personal touches, they can be heard as pursuing a common ideal, at least on the superficial level.

Composers of the generations following Nørgård, Nørholm, and Gudmundsen-Holmgreen have been raised in a time and environment where "pluralism...is a given."¹⁰ Composers such as Karl Aage Rasmussen, Poul Ruders, Bendt Lorentzen, Bo Holten and Bent Sørensen have pursued completely individual paths, and it would be difficult -- if not impossible -- to categorize them as members of any movement or school.

Though diversity is indeed a trademark of our century, for Denmark it has become a flag around which to rally. Denmark has broken free from the bonds of self-imposed stylistic unity as well as submission (and the corresponding paranoia of submission) to foreign musical trends. The very concept of "style" is being challenged, and new definitions are being proposed. In a time when national styles have essentially vanished, it is entirely appropriate that the individuality of Danish music among the music of the world be simply the individuality of individual Danish composers.

Let us return again to the words of Per Nørgård who, as he has done so many times through the past decades, seems to codify the entire issue into a single statement:

The break with the concept of the privileged isolation of the Nordic countries was accompanied by a gradual decline in the naively-rhetorical stylistic tendencies which thrive within any given tradition. Innocence was replaced by a musical puberty -- by the dream of growing up. Growing up has nothing to do with "finding one's style" (which would just be going from one closed state to another); to the contrary the new condition was accompanied by a newfound openness. The concept of style is often completely misunderstood, leading to the somewhat comical, almost fetishistic worship of "personal mannerisms" and ornamental, bizarre ticks. For me, style is quite simply the result of the interaction between unblemished sincerity and the uninhibited ability to communicate. That is why a young composer has no less "style" than an older composer. Stylistic questions therefore do not interest me whatsoever -- the day I worry about refining my style is the day I will have lost it."¹¹

¹ Per Nørgård, "Louisiana Revy" 2 (1986), 60.

² "[T]here is no way around the fact that one of the more telling dates in Danish musical life is the year of the first Danish performance of Gustav Mahler's Sixth Symphony -- [not until] 1970" Jørgen I. Jensen, "A Sense of Form and Clandestine Meetings with Expressionism," in "Nordiska Musikfester/Nordic Music Days: 100 Years," ed. Sten Hanson (Stockholm: Kungl. Musikaliska akademien, 1988), 12.

³ Jensen, "A Sense of Form . . .," 13-14.

⁴ Jørgen I. Jensen, "Per Nørgårds musik: Et verdensbillede i forandring" (Copenhagen: Amadeus, 1986), 32 (translation and subsequent quotes by Lansing McLoskey).

⁵ Jensen, "A Sense of Form . . .," 13.

⁶ Jensen. "A Sense of Form . . .," 14.

⁷ Poul Ruders, "Fremad mod nutiden: En enetale om musik," Dansk Musiktidsskrift 4 (1987/88), 157.

⁸ Jensen, "A Sense of Form . . .," 17.

⁹ Karl Aage Rasmussen, "Noteworthy Danes," 52.

¹⁰ Jørgen I. Jensen. "Tide og utide: Omkring Karl Aage Rasmussens tids-symfoni," Dansk Musiktidsskrift 5/6 (1984/85), 263.

¹¹ Per Nørgård, "Drømmen at blive voksen -- et monologisk fragment" in "Per Nørgård: artikler 1962-1982," ed. Ivan Hansen (Copenhagen: Ivan Hansen, 1982), 12.



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