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NORDIC MUSIC DAYS 2004: A RECKONING

Just in terms of quantity alone the recent music festival, Nordic Music Days 2004 arranged by the Danish Composers' Society, outdid itself: 126 compositions and an unspecified number of improvisations were performed over the course of eleven days in a variety of locales in three cities, Copenhagen, Malmö and Helsingborg. Every kind of composition/work was included, from short three-minute pieces to an extended song cycle that comprised a whole concert. In addition a monodrama (*Miki Alone*) by Peter Bruun (2004) was performed several times during the course of the festival in Copenhagen and also in Malmö. More than twice as many works were performed at this festival as at the last Nordic Music Days in Copenhagen ten years ago, in 1994, and the repertory represented a decided shift in types of works that were included; the base-line in 1994 was almost unrelentingly orchestral and chamber works, whereas the latest festival included a noticeable variety of genres. The program of the 1994 festival was tightly organized and--aside from the large orchestral concerts held in traditional spaces usually as a part of an on-going series--the program was directed toward quite a narrowly-defined audience.

Working with a new formula for programming, the 2004 committee launched a festival with five thematic ideas which seemed to be a--perhaps desperate?--mechanism to draw lines and create thought-provoking connections: "situations" is the word that Ursula Andkjær Olsen used in her essay ("Music and language meet in the voice") in the program booklet. The themes were perhaps a bit artificial (festival themes as a rule are forced), but they provided the opportunity to provide a place for some new groups and genres not previously a part of these festivals.

This festival represented a quasi-evaluation of the basic principle for the Nordic Music Days, even the concept of "Nordic" seemed set up for perusal. It was hardly the most outstanding element in the arrangements of 2004 and it is worth pointing out that this testing continues a development that first became quite apparent with the Norwegian organizers in 2002 MAGMA festival, which was held for the first time (in more than 100 years) *outside* the Nordic countries--in Berlin. Whereas ten years ago the emphasis was placed on Nordic composers with, for example, the six "pure" chamber music concerts, one for each of the five nationalities and an extra for the composers from the Faroe Islands. In MAGMA 2002 all the concerts were "mixed" but the composer's nationality was still noted (very discreetly) in the printed program: the Nordic troops marched in step together. In 2004, this element/aspect was so little emphasized/accented that it

was difficult sometimes to even discern the nationality of the composer in the mini-biographical sketches at the back of the program.

The organizers of these festivals went along with investigating the possibility of creating a venue for developing contact with the world outside the Nordic countries. In MAGMA 2002, one single composition by a non-Nordic composer was programmed: Berio's Trombone Concerto was performed by the Berlin Philharmonic--but with Christian Lindberg as soloist--in a concert where the rest of the works were by Nordic composers. Other non-Nordic ensembles were engaged but performed *only* works by Nordic composers ("it is interesting to hear our music as others play it"), but it wasn't really very daring: of the three ensembles, the Arditti Quartet had already proved itself sympathetic to Nordic music and the Scharoun Ensemble was conducted by Rolf Gupta, the Norwegian artistic director of the festival. In 2004, this was taken a step further and the invited non-Nordic ensembles--from Birmingham, Berlin and Paris--played *both* Nordic and non-Nordic works. In general, this is a promising development, creating opportunity that benefits everyone--especially when foreign musicians can become acquainted with the idiomatic characteristics of Nordic music (as the near-catastrophic performance of one of Per Nørgård's works by members of the North German Radio Orchestra in Hamburg in 2000 demonstrated).

Be that as it may, "The World and The North" was one of the prominent themes for the 2004 arrangements, understandably so because of the economic support to try to develop Nordic Music Days to an international, commercial commodity. A seminar was organized with the purpose of exploring the possibility of marketing Nordic music as an entity. What didn't come out of it was a mandate for promoting Nordic composers as a commodity, but what did come out of it was perhaps more valuable as French Canadian composer Walter Boudrau and the artistic director of the festival Soundstreams in Toronto Lawrence Cherney suggested that a collaboration might be developed between the Nordic composers and the northernmost composers on the American continent (that is, north of the Canadian-American border). No one once mentioned that there might be a risk of the festival's losing its original *raison d'etre*, namely the creation of an opportunity every second year for Nordic composers to hear each others' music. This can seem too simple (and too often be dragged out to foggy-talk about Nordic mysticism), but it is precisely this simple formula that has provided this festival's singular life-force for more than 100 years and can be compared with the Bayreuth Festival that also has only one goal. No one addressed the potential risk of losing the principal source of inspiration if the decentralizing focus continues.

That is not to say that this festival's emphasis on renewal was superficial: the inclusion of "peripheral" regions in 2004 was an interesting attempt to broaden the base without actually losing focus on

Nordic composers. Then years ago, this attempt was very tentative and took to the form of just one single concert with the "cross-over" composer-performer, Marilyn Mazur, and a very superficial encounter with the New Jungle Orchestra at the last event, which was more of a reception than a concert. During the MAGMA 2002 there were several extraordinary events, including the possibility of underwater music, workshop for children, and electro-acoustic music with film. The 2004 festival lost no ground in following up with some new initiatives. The program committee had the remarkable idea of arranging six "unofficial" night concerts featuring different types of music, some elegantly humorous, others more serious and most with an emphasis on the "rhythmic" side of music--like jazz, experimental electro-acoustic performances and improvisational music, worker songs, cabaret. Even though there was nothing completely new or earth-shaking, it provided an opening to a wider, more comprehensive side of music. One could easily see many possibilities for further development with, for example, intuitive music, children's music (composition and performance).

But the most surprising among these new-comers to the festival arena was the music programmed under the "experimental" theme. Into this category fell concerts held in the rock venues (Vega in the Vesterbro area of Copenhagen and Jeriko in Malmö), most all of which were focused on electronic media. One especially, the concert of "laptop music", fell outside the usual festival frame. The featured composers (who had won a competition especially constituted for this occasion by the program committee) were not from the ranks of the traditional, academically-trained members of the Danish Composers Society, but rather from many different sides of the music world: internet sound-music, DJ's, dance, film or theater, video production, namely, Jakob Riis, Erik Levander & Rune Søchting Their portfolios are frankly at odds with the usual "normal" composers. They work with "hacking beats," "loops," and "down-speeded skip sounds," creating background sound for diverse media. The music, accompanied by visual elements which apparently were also computer-driven, was loud--and sometimes quite clever. These concerts were well-attended, but the audience at these events hardly comprised the members of the various composers' societies--not that anyone seemed to care.

Though these remarks have focused on the new aspects of the festival, it should not be forgotten that overall the programming was dedicated to the more traditional symphonic and chamber concerts, which took place in three different cities in buildings as far removed from each other as Borups Højskole in Copenhagen, the old Town Hall in Malmö and Utzon's masterpiece, Dunker's Cultural Center in Helsingfors. This writer is convinced that many concert-goers can still hear Lena Willemark's keening song in Karin Rehnqvist's (b.1957) *Teile die Nacht* (2002), relive Axel Borup-Jørgensen's (b. 1924) remarkable *Marin* (1963-79) (as it reawakened the spirit of the modernistic 60s), Rolf Hind's sympathetic performance of Jukka

Tiensuu's (b. 1948) *Mind* (2003-2004), Ronald Pöntinen's remarkable treatment of Veli-Matti Puumala's (b. 1965) Piano Concerto *Seeds of Time* (*world premiere*), the subtle assemblage of apparently incongruent texts in three languages (by Ugo Foscolo, Kafka and Keats) in Mikko Heiniö's (b.1948) song cycle *Sextet* (2000), and the elegiac moonlit atmosphere in Bent Sørensen's (b.1958) three-cornered drama for singer, pianist and violinist *Seven Longings* (1989-2001).

Finally, perhaps the work that best sums up this very festival was Peter Bruun and Urusla Andekjær Olsen's *sangspil, Miki Alone*. The Program committee's struggle to renew the old festival found resonance in Miki's dream of "hopping and counting" an ambition that she cannot achieve inside the circle (a circus ring) that encumbers her life. The point, however, is that Miki's impediments do not hamper the composer and author, but, to the contrary, nourish their inspiration. When Miki appeared made up as a queen, with a high coiffure and enormous skirt it wasn't hard to think about the festival as an old lady laced-up in a corset eager to conquer her narrow boundaries. Like the audience (observers) dragged into Maxi's world ("situation"), the audience in Nordic Music Days were also participants in a drama not fundamentally dependent on external sources for renewal. This traditional festival--a special mixture of a circus and a musical drama--had many voices that blended and mixed into an often-confusing many-voiced choir. At its best, one voice emerged from the noise, was heard and is remembered.