



Per Nørgård

Per Nørgård's music is as amazing for its consistency as for its creative range. The imagination, the scope, and the profundity of his total output is unique, and he is widely recognized internationally as a main figure in contemporary music. In Danish musical life his fingerprints can be seen almost anywhere, be it as inspirer, mediator, or cultural commentator. And through his teaching he has shaped and influenced a host of Scandinavian composers for half a century.

That he has managed to remain a towering figure without leaving everybody around him in his shadow is due to hallmarks of his personality: openness, untiring curiosity and a unique sensory awareness. The world according to Nørgård is not just a confusing host of random events; it is an enchanted place, full of things to discover when your mind and your senses are wide open—the continuous connections and relations in nature, the infinite secrets represented by any sound, no matter how modest. A composer must have an ear for the wonders of the audible world, he or she must be able to detect miracles where others hear only the buzz of everyday life. On a South Indian beach, listening to the surf from enormous waves, Nørgård suddenly became aware of a faint, extremely deep sound from the sea, unchanging by day or night. And he asked himself: is this maybe the very *fundamental tone* of the ocean?

He is aware that we listen not just with our ears but with the whole mind. Listening involves selection and memory, and we can “focus” our listening on certain details, although we don't really have a word for it. He is similarly aware that just as “blind spots” occur in visual perception, “deaf spots” may occur when we listen—maybe due to habits or because something is covered by a layer of cultural waste. The listening mind can be used like a burning lens, and a composer must be able to experiment with his ears, indeed with listening itself.

The triad of sound-ear-mind rings through everything in Nørgård's oeuvre. The continuous interaction of sounds, their wavelengths, times and stratifications surround us like eternal mysteries, but never mysteriously distant, always at hand to enter into, behind, in between. Just as an example, think of the so-called Tartini-tone, a separate tone that can often be heard when two close sound waves interface. It is a sound emerging only in our ears: it cannot be physically demonstrated, let alone be recorded by microphones. You can disregard it as an indifferent byproduct, but you can also consider it a representation of a marvelous inner sound-world, a mirage in broad daylight; another world palpably present amidst everyday life. Thus the big world is full of other worlds, big and small. The ever-possible expansion of your consciousness while fully conscious is what has always spurred Nørgård's imagination and what he has relentlessly attempted to share with his listener. More than anything, Nørgård's music is a travelogue recounting ongoing journeys through the labyrinths of our perception.

His family background is not one of artists, but he showed unusual creativity from early on, and at the age of eleven, together with his elder brother, he created a particular

kind of image film based on colored drawings, and accompanied by sound and singing they were performed at small gatherings of family members. Nørgård remembers that he and his brother agreed on the artistic motto "confuse as many as possible as much as possible". And if you understand the word "confuse" here in Hegelian terms—that for anything to move and create impact there has to be an element of contradiction, of *Widerspruch*—you may well say that Nørgård has remained true to this childhood motto. If the young Nørgård, immersed in what he called "the universe of the Nordic soul," can be difficult to recognize in the restlessly searching and experimenting Nørgård of the 1960s, the beauty-seeking metaphysicist of the '70s or, later, the bold explorer of all the riddles involved in musical motion, shape and rhythm, this motto might, in its most profound meaning, have been his secret lodestar: a persistent urge to move his listeners in every possible sense of the word and to always raise new questions whenever old ones seemed exhausted. "When I meet an artist who claims to be in a crisis, I always congratulate him", Nørgård once said. So his many travels, physical as well as mental, have indeed been one travel.

By fate's favor Per Nørgård was taught by the great Danish symphonist Vagn Holmboe from his seventeenth year. And Holmboe's method of composition, the "metamorphosis" (where a basic musical nucleus undergoes constant organic transformation) was made-to-measure for a young student in search of the utmost cohesion and unity. This is evident in Nørgård's ambitious first symphony, *Sinfonia austera*. And in *Constellations* for twelve solo strings, his breakthrough work from 1958, the metamorphosis principle unfolds on several levels, while the music still maintains tonal centers. The musical mindset which was to preoccupy him again and again in ever new designs is already present here in embryo: Not only organic transformation on all levels, but the discovery that time itself can be extended, contracted or literally come to a halt. And that in close-up it reveals a micro world of unending wealth. The concept of time as a river with countless tributaries and deltas was to become a silver thread through Nørgård's many transformations.

In the music of Jean Sibelius, particularly in his 4th and 5th symphony, the young Nørgård had uncovered a similar creative thinking, and in 1956-57 he had studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. So from the outset he was foreign to the European avantgarde. In the early '60s, however, he gradually became a leading figure in a young generation that felt the need for international awareness. A group of Danish composers and scholars began to gather regularly, immersing themselves in serialism, new composition techniques and new concepts of form, style and unity. In the early '60s Nørgård experimented with his own concepts of serialism, not least in a series of works characteristically called "Fragments". *Fragment VI* for orchestra was an aggressive reaction to the isolation, complacency and selfsufficiency he now felt to be the Danish situation, and internationally it aroused keen interest. But Nørgård was not satisfied, and he withdrew the work. The musical content he had intended was not sufficiently audible, he had disregarded the test of the listening ears, and a watershed event in the history of Danish music became a parenthesis in his own.

But the recognition of a fragmentary world, open and ambiguous, could not be detained, the old ideas had lost their innocence, and Nørgård's works from the following period appear like queries, temporary findings and spareparts of a larger, partly hidden whole. Never again in his output is there such a discursive relationship between the outgoing and the intimate. Music, dance and theatre go together in a work such as the "happening-composition" *Babel* for voices, instruments, dancers, mimes and young performers, a huge fresco illustrating the Babylonian confusion of Western culture. Nørgård was among the first "serious" composers to discover a unique musical vitality in the new youth culture. Works such as the opera *The Labyrinth* (1963) and the ballet *Le jeune homme à marier* (after Ionesco, 1964) may seem to thrive on the grotesque, but the music oscillates nightmarishly between art and *Kitsch*.

In subsequent orchestral works such as *Iris* and *Luna*, however, Nørgård's immanent polyphony again starts singing in huge, vibrating fields of sound. The dream of a pure, intimate and profound beauty grows ever stronger, a music able to open the mind and let it flow, but also a music which in itself is so open and transparent that the ears can freely explore its depths.

Nørgård's marvelous discovery, the so-called *infinity series*, had been ruminating already for long, and in 1968, in *Voyage into the Golden Screen*, it becomes predominant. This principle is like a Chinese box: built into each other and into themselves you find the same shapes, over and over, large and small (a concept that clearly anticipates fractal geometry, which ten years later would greatly fascinate mathematicians). The structures unfold on different planes, but always relate to each other in an endless network—endlessly simple, but creating endlessly complicated results, just like in nature.

Delving in this universal world of layers, concordances, links, and connections, Nørgård developed a sense of continuity and fullness so dizzying that it must have seemed akin to what we call faith. In countless areas of life, from physics to mysticism, from astrology to biology, he discovered connections. and he came to see the hierarchical principle inherent in the infinity series as a natural law. It was a voyage into a simple formula, but it unfolded as endless variation, and with his rare mixture of cold and warm reason Nørgård applied the idea to all the elements of music: a hierarchical, non-periodic rhythm using the proportions of the golden mean and a stratified harmony based on the overtone series, i. e. on the structure of sound itself as each tone in the infinity series acquires a harmonic spectrum. The result was not only the rigorous application of these tools in the 2nd Symphony and the almost ecstatic celebration of them in the huge 3rd Symphony involving a large orchestra and two choirs. It was also the operas *Gilgamesh* and later *Siddharta*, both based on ancient Eastern mythology. Here the hierarchical principle becomes predominant. It creates rhythm and harmony and thus also constitute form in a way very similar to the way tonality and functional harmony constitute form in classical music.

No wonder if Nørgård may have felt at some point that his compositional technique had acquired an almost eternal, supernatural validity. But he once again insisted that to achieve authentic expression something must disturb, interfere, confuse. And his choice of the *Siddharta*-myth for an opera seems consequential. The prince, Siddharta, is not allowed to learn about sorrow, pain or aging and death, he grows up in an artificial paradise. But upon seeing somebody die, he is overwhelmed by the dark aspects of life kept hidden for him. He now questions reality versus delusion and leaves his fathers palace to become Buddha, the founder of a religion.

At that time however, in 1979, to depict an innocent, protected youngster transformed into a fully aware adult, the inherent beauty and harmony of Nørgård's great hierarchical strategies may have proved inadequate (he was later to significantly expand the crucial scene in the opera where Siddharta realizes that he is mortal). The principles of organic growth, overtones and the golden mean could create everlasting harmony and beauty but could not express the conflict, the *Widerspruch* necessary for attaining new insights and ultimately for a man to develop into a complete human being.

Nørgård realized that he had to fully accept and meet this challenge. And he found what he considered a valid artistic expression of irrationality, conflict and imbalance in the work of an insane artist, the Swiss schizophrenic Adolf Wölfli, who spent most of his life in a psychiatric hospital, painting, composing and writing poetry. Wölfli's art is obsessive and expressive, ranging from painstaking details to absurdity or sheer wildness. A recurring theme is the fall from happiness into catastrophe, and for Nørgård this emotional climate became the antithesis to the divine harmony. The opera *The Divine Tivoli* from 1982 has Wölfli himself

personified on stage, and Nørgård's 4th Symphony, called *Indian Rose Garden and Chinese Witch Sea*, is based "on an idea from Wölfli". For the rest of the decade Nørgård discarded the symphony in favor of a series of solo concertos, but he further explored the stratification of time and tempo, showing how melodies by means of accentuation, meter and beat may reveal ever new melodies within melodies. And he intensified his chase for the least tangible of all musical elements: time itself, by highlighting the experience of tempo—the most tangible representation of time in a piece of music—which of course points to itself most obviously when accelerating or slowing down; when it bends and turns time, so to speak.

The 5th symphony, one huge single movement written to mark the 125th anniversary of Sibelius and Carl Nielsen, heralded the '90s. And it announces yet another new beginning, something which is evident from its very start. Here no innocent beauty or organic growth remains, the listener is exposed to a disturbing sound world which changes with lightening speed from silence to whistling winds and sirens, then to brassy roars and whirling strings and back to sudden silence. Balance and turbulence, order and chaos seem to alternate incalculably - a critic wrote that it "has all the chaotic unpredictability of a weather system, and listening to it is like being in the middle of a thunderstorm."

With this work it became increasingly apparent that Per Nørgård had become one of the greatest and most genuine symphonists of our time, a time when contemporary composers in general use the term "symphony" with reluctance or not at all. Nørgård, however, just as Sibelius, the icon of his youth, apparently regards his symphonies as touchstones, as summary and synthesis. And behind crumbling historical relics he proves that "symphonic" remains a meaningful concept, that here greatness is not synonymous with self-aggrandizement but just denotes the greatest possible artistic effort. Every single one of Nørgård's symphonies is an independent individual.

Although conflicting moods clash or are superimposed in the 6th symphony, *At the End of the Day*, and although once again every trace of classical linear direction has disappeared, a sense of underlying order seems gradually to restore itself. The non-conforming, the fractious and sheer propulsive energy does indeed dominate in the first movement, but a shadowy second movement and a short, burlesque third movement appear almost to be dream visions of the first. Nørgård implied quietly that this was likely to be his last symphony, and near the end the music seems to burst and disappear. And yet something does remain, in the words of the composer "other worlds, new beginnings".

Maybe that is why his 7th was heard by some as a long farewell. Be that as it may, the work is a cleverly composed gradual loss of energy through three movements, and the third movement, curiously marked *Allegro*, is everything but a classical *finale*. But here, as in his other late symphonies Nørgård's music can suddenly attain a climate of expression which, for lack of a better word, might be called "surrealistic"; dream-like episodes in a strangely sharp light and sometimes a weird, almost wild humor, perhaps slightly reminiscent of Dalí or Max Ernst, although unlike anything else: something transfigured and devil-may-care, dark and life-affirming, rich and soft, unique and universal, at the same time.

His last symphony, first performed in 2012 when he had reached eighty years of age, is maybe the most subtle, most colorful, most constantly surprising of them all. When you hear the opening in which rising and falling lines unfold, you immediately recognize Nørgård from his previous symphonies. Here, like so often before in so many different ways, single melodic lines seem to spread and be echoed in a glittering, vibrating soundscape. Nørgård once told that even at the age of sixteen he envisioned a music which "consisted of only one single melodi for full orchestra (...) created by all instruments *together*." But there is a new lightness here, a knowing grace and at times a subtle, sometimes furtive smile behind the music, even in the mostly dark colored middle *Adagio*. And all three movements seem to end on a question mark. Also the immensely meticulous planning of structure and design so

typical of his work may be somewhat downplayed here. Of the last movement he said: "It's music where you have nothing to hold on to. You find it along the way."

There may indeed still be other worlds and new beginnings to float from Nørgård's fertile mind. But even today his output with its equal distribution on almost all musical genres mirrors not only a tireless curiosity but a strong sense of responsibility to music as a bearer of common culture. His hunt for hidden treasures in our sensory perception and his exploration of the collective unconsciousness makes his lifework a rare expression of community spirit in a music culture that so often settles for cultivating individual characteristics.

Karl Aage Rasmussen, November 2015