

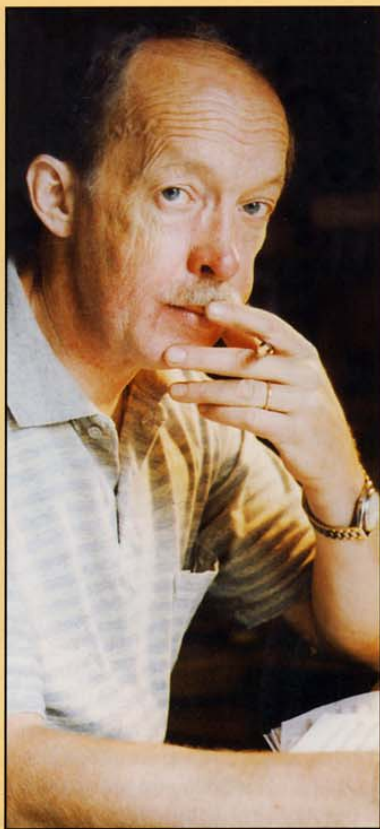
PEHR HENRIK NORDGREN

Transformation as a means of musical expression

"I used to plan a work in such a detailed way. But during the compositional stage so many surprises turned up that I began to ask myself, why should I be a slave to technique? Why should the notes be my little servants? Let them have a life of their own!", says the Finnish composer Pehr Henrik Nordgren, whose works are now gaining international recognition.

The music of Pehr Henrik Nordgren has, until fairly recently at least, remained largely undiscovered, international recognition coming somewhat late for the composer. For a long time Nordgren was regarded as someone who enjoyed conjuring up the lugubrious and depressing side of life. He was seen, moreover, as an introvert, an individual who had fled the musical life of the Finnish capital and withdrawn into the pastoral seclusion offered by the Ostrobothnian countryside. For many observers Nordgren was an outsider amongst Finnish composers. Since then his unique stylistic position has come in for considerable adulation. For Pehr Henrik Nordgren is stylistically neither a purist nor a pluralist, but possesses a truly personal voice of great strength and originality, and one which has enabled him to travel through all types of musical terrain.

Neither a conservative nor a modernist, Nordgren believes only in the discovery of the self. If Rautavaara is the



Pehr Henrik Nordgren

(Photo: Heikki Y. Rissanen)

'helmsman of the orchestral kaleidoscope' (Fono Forum), then Nordgren is a tone poet, admittedly one who does not show recourse to literary subject matter. Nordgren himself comments: "Music operates at a narrative level. But as a musician I am not interested in simply narrating a story, but in recounting how the narrative drama itself transpires, strange as this may seem! Dramaturgical principles which function both in language and in a story also affect the way a piece of music functions. It is only music, however. And music can only be expressed as music, and in the relationship of notes to another."

Controlled spontaneity

Nordgren's music is a type of architecture lacking objects. He understands form in terms of 'controlled spontaneity' remarking that "Over the last few years, and with every piece that I write I have been concerned less and less with form. I don't have to plan so much. Now

the form of work just seems to develop of its own accord. Formal development is a natural process, one which grows out of the musical material I am working with. I have become so aware of how one motive or another seems to want to develop in a certain direction, and how any particular one has its own set of needs. Then, step by step I simply build my structures and create what we refer to as form – which has nothing at all to do with improvisation, let it be said. I used to plan a work in such a detailed way. But during the compositional stage so many surprises turned up that I began to ask myself, why should I be a slave to technique? Why should the notes be my little servants? Let them have a life of their own!"

This begs the question: How much freedom does a composer have in the choice of his material? Nordgren admits: "Of course, I build a lot of structures with a rather recondite interval system. But I don't use it in a rigorous way, preferring to work with the basic musical material and vary it accordingly throughout the piece." It is not the foreground structure which interests Nordgren, but the interconnections in a background created by giving free reigns to his fantasy.

Pehr Henrik Nordgren was born on the 19th of January 1944 in Åland, the family moving to Helsinki three years later. He cherished the ambition of becoming a composer at a very early stage, his imagination fired by the sound of **Shostakovich**. He was presented with a violin at the age of fourteen in order to help him fashion his own works. Nordgren admits to writing: "Large sweeping melodies, developing into symphonic cycles almost a quarter of an hour in length, the whole thing played by an imaginary orchestra, just like 'Baba Yaga' in *Pictures at an Exhibition*. It was, however, my own personal Baba Yaga which I had called into existence on my violin."

Conductor
Peter Csaba
rehearsing the
Autumnal Concerto

(Photo: Maarit Kytöharju)



The Kaze Ensemble performed in Nordgren's Autumnal Concerto at the 1996 Tampere Biennale
(Photo: Maarit Kytöharju)

Fascinated by Ligeti's world of sound

Even today Nordgren's music is characterised by incredibly powerful voice leading, entire passages often given over to monody (*Transe-Choral* for fifteen solo strings is a prime example) but usually driven forward by colourful, glistening lines, which intertwine in paraphonic and heterophonic meanderings. The tendency may arise – the case of **Georg Enescu** also springs to mind – from Nordgren's dealings with folk music, the simplicity of which is rich in such nuances.

Since the age of fourteen Nordgren composed without the need for guidance of

fered by orchestral scores. He studied musicology at the University of Helsinki and composition as a private student of **Joonas Kokkonen**, and first achieved recognition two years later with his first *Euphony op. 1* for orchestra. His second *Euphony* appeared in 1969, a work which secured his breakthrough.

Fascinated by the sound of world of **György Ligeti**, Nordgren comments: "In Ligeti's music everything is linear, albeit in terms of cluster sounds. For my part I was attempting to develop this idea independently and in a specific direction. I wanted to use these clusters to produce avowedly melodic music, a music which thus admitted an increasing importance of the vertical element. I never let go of these ideas, and continued to set my sights on working with these melodic, polyphonic clusters." For Nordgren the free tonality of the cluster technique is much more than an operating base.

Years in Japan

In 1970 Pehr Henrik Nordgren received a three-year stipend to study in Japan with **Yoshio Hasegawa**. Nordgren recalls that: "The most important thing I learned in Japan was how to live, and about having the right attitude to life. It was an amazing experience." Here after having completed the monumental *Agnus Dei* for vocal soloists, choir and orchestra, Nordgren

composed *Turning Point* for large orchestra, a piece demonstrating great clarity and economy of means.

Nordgren had at last turned his back on the gigantic canvases of many previous composition, relinquishing demands which had reached their zenith with the *Agnus Dei*. He now began a period of intensive investigation of the traditional music of Japan and wrote several works employing Japanese instrumental forces, including the *Autumnal Concerto* for traditional Japanese instruments and (Western) symphony orchestra – recently to be heard again in Tampere. The ritualistic objectivity that Nordgren has gained through his stay in Japan now began to act as an important antithetical force, one which was able to repel the more extreme manifestations of his personal expressivity. Works such as the *Ballads on Kwaidan* reflect well his encounters in Japanese surroundings.

Portraits of Country Fiddlers

Back in Finland Nordgren was offered the chance of becoming composer in residence at Kaustinen, the centre of Finnish folk music located in Ostrobothnia. He took up the position in 1973, moving to Kaustinen with his Japanese wife. In Ostrobothnia he met up with **Juha Kangas** again, a violinist and a conductor who had already encouraged him in the 1960s to incorporate Finnish folk music into his compositions. Kangas had recently founded a new ensemble which later was to become known as the **Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra**; Nordgren's response to write a piece for this group resulted in the *Portraits of Country Fiddlers*. This four movement suite is an incredibly successful homage to folk music in the spirit, but not in the style of **Béla Bartók**.

Inspired by this renewed cooperation with Kangas, Nordgren started to pour out an unbelievable number of works for string orchestra from 1976 onwards including a remarkable number of contrasting works that have been per-

formed on any number of occasions. These include *Symphony for Strings*, *Concerto for Strings*, *Transe-Choral* and *Cronaca*. Nordgren did not neglect his duties to the symphony orchestra, however, adding four symphonies and various concertos for solo instruments to his core output. There are many who regard Nordgren's *third symphony* as one of the greatest symphonies to emerge since Sibelius. It will receive its first German performance in November 1997, with Juha Kangas conducting the **Munich Philharmonic Orchestra**.

Nordgren's magical, uncanny sound world is immediately recognisable as his own. He is not one of those composers who, having discovered a style, attempt to establish themselves with it once and for all. Since the mid-1970s no dramatic fissures have appeared in his oeuvre. It is, however, his very ability to transmute and transform himself within defined boundaries of musical expression that continues to surprise and capture the imagination time and again.

Each new work is simultaneously Nordgren's Alpha and Omega; never an abstract experiment, all his compositions set out on a voyage of discovery. The man remains the same, only the route he takes changes – one marked by new turn-offs, the sense of the unexpected and an atmosphere of adventure through which he continues to blaze a trail. The goal may be clear, but the path to it is never straight. The same is true in life. Sensitivity and discipline continue to act out their never ending drama.

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