

Per Nørgård

BY JENS BRINCKER

To day Per Nørgård is 56 years old, and Danes will eventually have to stop thinking of him as “the young talent” coming storming into the Parnassus. Many younger talents are now rushing in, some of them are Per Nørgård’s pupils, others have more sporadically sought his advice and help, but they all come with the feeling that Per Nørgård is among those who will bid them welcome. It will be difficult for the Danes to change their habits of thinking, for Per Nørgård has been the “young talent” for many years. Already as a schoolboy in Copenhagen he received private lessons in composition from Vagn Holmboe – the leading composer of what is now the old generation – and in the 1950s his unusual talents as a composer were demonstrated in a number of works, such as his first symphony, “Sinfonia Austera” (1954), the string quartet “Quartetto Brioso” (1958) or “Constellations for Strings” (1958). In these works Per Nørgård appeared as a decidedly Nordic composer. As regards methods of composition, his point of departure was the technique of metamorphosis which older Danish composers – Vagn Holmboe, Niels Viggo Bentzon among others – worked with in the 1950s, and he further developed this technique by studying the works of Sibelius, particularly his 4th and 5th symphony where the motif-technique is especially characteristic.

According to many, the concept of “metamorphosis” was characteristic of Danish music of this period. It was not a Danish invention, however. Hindemith uses the word in connection with his “Symphonic metamorphosis on themes by Carl Maria von Weber”. One can also see Bartok’s name emphasized by Danish composers, who undoubtedly felt the modernism of Bartok less suspect than that of Stravinskij, not to mention Schönberg, because it had its roots in folk music, and consequently was connected to the ideas of popular art which after the death of Carl Nielsen was a favourite subject of Danish music aesthetics. Nevertheless, metamorphosis was regarded as typically Danish. Niels Viggo Bentzon, one of the leading young composers around 1950, called his 3. symphony “Metamorphoses” and maintained that: “Metamorphosis is the form of our time”, and Vagn Holmboe – the teacher of Per Nørgård and leading professor of composition at the conservatory in

Copenhagen – in connection with his 7. symphony described his composition technique by using the concept of metamorphosis. According to Holmboe, metamorphosis was a more thorough change than was variation. The metamorphosis demonstrates unity in variety, whereas the variation shows the variety in unity, it was profoundly remarked, and as a figure of speech people referred to the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into the pupa and into the butterfly. Same individual in three totally different metamorphoses.

Unfortunately, hardly anyone has ever defined in music theoretic terms what the generation before Per Nørgård actually understood by metamorphosis, and Per Nørgård himself claims that he did not understand it until he began to study the symphonies of Sibelius. By that time Sibelius was an outsider in European music. The circles around Schönberg regarded him as an overdue romantic and most people only knew little of his music, such as “Valse triste” and “Finlandia”. But in his four last symphonies, number 4, 5, 6, and 7, Per Nørgård found a motivic technique, which made the concept of metamorphosis more tangible. He was especially absorbed in the fifth symphony, and he wrote an analysis of it which he sent to Sibelius. Sibelius was enthusiastic about Per Nørgård’s analysis and wrote him a letter of thanks, in which he claimed that only a few had hitherto understood his music that profoundly. This episode contributed to Per Nørgård’s feeling that he was obliged to continue the tradition which he found in Sibelius and Holmboe. However, the basis of Per Nørgård’s style was something different from and more than merely dependent on that of the older generation. Conscious ideas about a “Nordic spirit”, which kept itself at arm’s length from central European currents, and which could be refined into a universe of sound, played a decisive role in his aesthetic ideas, and it is characteristic of him that he formulated these Nordic ideas in a philosophical and aesthetic program. Already in his twenties, Per Nørgård felt a great need to view his work as a composer as part of a greater whole. The decisive element in Per Nørgård’s concept of the “Nordic spirit” was not an expression of a specific, Nordic cultural tradition but was a reflexion of his enthusiasm for Nordic nature. The experience of the Nordic light, the summer nights of Finland, boat trips in Denmark in canoe, and the entire scenery which has made especially Nordic painting from the turn of the century famous, became for Per Nørgård a counter balance to the typically cultural music which Mahler and the circle around Schönberg represented. These experiences underlie his works until “Constellations for Strings”. Their instrumentation could remind one of Richard Strauss’ “Metamorphoses for 23 Solo Strings” which undoubtedly has been the direct

inspiration. The construction of the theme with small motives that are presented by various instruments has a resemblance to the beginning of Mahler's 9th symphony, which Per Nørgård hardly knew when he composed the work. But in its development and expression, the work is far from Strauss and Mahler. There is clarity, shades of pastel and absence of conflict about the safe, tonal rooting on d, which seems almost deliberate.

Per Nørgård became aware of the danger of provincialism inherent in narrowly cultivating the Nordic aspect when, at the end of the 1950s, strongly encouraged by the Swedish composer Karl-Birger Blomdahl, he set out to make contact with the international music scene and took part in music festivals and in the summer courses at Darmstadt. The European avantgarde, which had seemed irrelevant to him in 1956-57 when he was studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, now made the young Danish composer's notions about a Nordic universe explode, and at the beginning of the 1960s Per Nørgård became the pioneer among the generation of Danish composers who opened up Danish musical life to internationally inspired experiments. Composers like Stockhausen, Boulez and John Cage were played and analyzed in Denmark, the concept of the "work" was questioned, tonality was abolished and the technique of metamorphosis was replaced by serial techniques. Per Nørgård became a central driving force in this development, due to his classes in analysis at the Music Conservatory in Copenhagen and later in Århus.

The break with tonality was not only a revolution in Per Nørgård's composition technique and aesthetics. It was accompanied by an artistic crisis, which made Nørgård eager to throw himself open to experiences of any kind. Atonality and serialism were followed by collage and aleatorics, and in some works Per Nørgård introduces a chaos of conflicting ideas about composition technique and at times about aesthetic ideas as well. One of the most convincing examples of this is his music to Flemming Flint's ballet on Ionesco's play "Le jeune homme à marier" from 1964, in which the main character is forced by his parents to choose between an abundant selection of possible wives – one more frightening than the other. The "Wedding March" from Mendelssohn's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is a sort of signature tune that combines the individual scenes, and it is mingled with popular melodies from films and dance music. The quotation-like bits of melody in this score are not used without a certain order, but they are worked upon and varied until they almost imperceptibly change into a new identity. The waltz, "Le ronde de l'amour", becomes the Danish "Bridal Waltz", and both seem to grow organically out of the wedding march. This is the first sign showing that the metamorphosis

technique has not let go of Per Nørgård, even if tonal structure was abandoned. Secondly this way to exploit familiar melodic material proves that Per Nørgård is about to establish a new composition technique which can interfere with and determine a melodic development. This new composition technique turns up in a series of works between 1959 and '64, all of which are studies in serialism.

It is characteristic of Per Nørgård that his opus-sequence, which begins in 1951 with a quintet, op. 1, finished in 1960 with some songs, op. 27. The criticism of the self contained, independent composition stemming from Darmstadt and New York caused Per Nørgård to abandon the individual numbering of his "works". But it is also characteristic that his first compositions after 1960 are entitled "fragment" and are numbered I to VI. For Per Nørgård did not simply take over the serial technique, which was cultivated by followers of Webern in Central Europe of the 1950s. He developed his own row technique which is built upon interval processes and not upon repetitions of series of tones. Between 1960 and 1968 Per Nørgård studied the possibilities hidden in the interval processes, and elaborated them in an "infinite series" where certain constellations of intervals are presented in an ever-changing light. Per Nørgård's infinite series created motivic development which can be immediately perceived as melodic variation or repetition, and these melodic characteristics are reproduced on different rhythmic levels. The same motifs and themes occur in different tempi, but at the same time, so that the music presents the same motivic material, but in a hierarchical construction. In this way Per Nørgård's music resembles classical major-minor tonal music, where principles of form, rhythmic elements, or harmonic links are also hierarchical, and this enables him to reconquer the great forms of European music tradition on a new basis of compositional technique.

Starting with his orchestral work "Voyage into the Golden Screen" (1968-69) and symphony no. 2 (1970), Per Nørgård composed a number of important works, of which the opera "Gilgamesh" (1971-72, awarded the Nordic Music Prize in 1974), symphony no. 3 (1972-75), and the opera-ballet "Siddharta" (1974-84) are the high spots around which a number of smaller works are grounded like kinds of preliminary studies. The clarinet trio "Spell", for example, is such a preliminary study for the third symphony; originally it was a piano piece, "Turn", to which parts for clarinet and cello were added.

In these works the hierarchical principle becomes predominant. Just as Per Nørgård uses the infinite series in melody, he uses the proportions of the golden mean in developing rhythm, and the overtone series in harmony as his guiding principles. In each case Per Nørgård elaborates his technique of com-

position in such a way that his music is in line with those general principles, which for him have the character of natural laws. Per Nørgård for the first time works hierarchically with rhythm and harmony in the opera “Gilgamesh” from 1972. The work is built upon texts from Babylonian cuneiform writings which tell about the mythological character Gilgamesh, who is a king, hero and demigod, and Per Nørgård organizes his work in a kind of mythological time. The opera is divided into “six days and seven nights”, instead of scenes, and it involves the musicians, the public and the entire auditorium in the building of a mythological space, ruled by the gods. Into this space, the hero Gilgamesh is placed, he who is “two thirds god, and one third man”. He subdues the citizens in the town of Uruk and protects them against the spirits of Nature, but his protection degenerates into tyranny, from which the citizens pray to the gods to free them. Therefore, the gods create a contrast to Gilgamesh, Enkido, who in the opera represents the power of Nature, whereas Gilgamesh represents civilization. Musically, Per Nørgård expresses this contrast between Gilgamesh and Enkido by letting them emerge from separate musical hierarchies. Gilgamesh sings a pentatonic variety of the infinite series, while Enkido sings parts of the series of harmonics.

Enkido identifies himself with the wild animals in the forest and becomes their friend: This is shown rhythmically – the free improvisation, in which the animals (illustrated by musicians) express themselves, is by Enkido turned into a rhythmically coordinated music. In order to benefit from Enkido, the citizens in Uruk have to take him into the town. To achieve this, they use the hetaera Ishara, who is sent into the forest in order to seduce him. In a long, nocturnal scene between the two, Enkido loses his chastity and wins a new identity. He experiences a new kind of personality, symbolized by his learning to pronounce his own name, and he recognizes new sides of his personality. Musically Per Nørgård uses rhythm to illustrate the expansion of Enkido’s consciousness. Just like Enkido taught the animals of the forest to follow each other in a regular rhythm, he is now taught by Ishara to experience an irregular rhythm composed of proportions close to the golden mean. In this scene the erotic tension between Ishara and Enkido is expressed in a very subtle play between regular eighths in the marimba and irregular, “golden” rhythms in the vocal parts.

Enkido can now go into the town where he is proclaimed the rival of Gilgamesh. The two of them fight a ritual combat, and Gilgamesh acknowledges Enkido as his peer and makes friends with him. This time it is Gilgamesh who loses his chastity and realizes that he is not invincible. Instead, he gains a new

consciousness through the friendship with Enkido, and this is symbolized musically by his combining his own melody, the pentatonic infinite series, with that of Enkido, the series of harmonics, so that Gilgamesh eventually comes to sing the chromatic infinite series.

Seen from the angle of musical drama, what Per Nørgård expresses here is an interpretation of the Gilgamesh-myth, which is very interesting and significant in the light of 20th century psychology and anthropology – from Freud and Jung to Jean Gebser. It makes “Gilgamesh” appear as a relative to such musical dramas as Wagners “Ring” or “Parsifal” or Stockhausens “Licht”. But going into details with that would be going beyond the scope of this article. Seen from the angle of musical theory, “Gilgamesh” is also extremely essential, the infinite series having no built-in harmony. It is melodic per se, and can only generate harmony by sounding several tones simultaneously. In this, it resembles the twelve-tone series of Schönberg, which function as chords in a similar way. By combining the infinite series with the series of natural tones, each tone in the infinite series acquires a harmonic spectrum, so that it can generate not only the following tones of the series, but also the harmonies taken from the series of overtones or its inversion, in order to create a chordal accompaniment to the melody.

In the opera of “Gilgamesh” the hierarchical element in the composition technique of Per Nørgård is demonstrated almost as a programme. The various elements are linked with dramatic situations and characters, and are subjected to fate. But this programmatic use of the composition technique is only characteristic of “Gilgamesh”. In the next major work, the Third Symphony, and the minor works for chorus of chamber ensembles that are connected with it, the hierarchical principle is used in an absolute-musical way, that is, it is used to constitute form in the same way as the major-minor tonality and rhythm in a regular meter constitute form in the classical symphony. This is clearly reflected in the introduction of the Third Symphony, where the hierarchical principles appear one by one: First, the harmonic hierarchy taken from the series of overtones and its inversion. Next, the rhythmic hierarchy and the “golden” rhythms are shown. And, finally, in the main section of the movement the infinite series is introduced as six variations of a melody, starting from each of the lowest tones in the overtone-series of the tone G. One could briefly characterize this music by calling it “unfolded unison”. In principle, it is derived from one and only one melody, that is the infinite series, with the harmonic and rhythmic consequences that the series of overtones and the golden rhythm imply. If it is true that mastery is shown through the art of limitation,

then in his Third Symphony Per Nørgård has performed a masterly feat. The mastery, however, is not without ideological implications.

By trying to legitimate his hierarchies as natural laws – the series of overtones, the golden mean, and the infinite series are increasingly regarded as nature-grown or nature-like – his music tends to exclude anything that cannot be based on the hierarchies. Again, one stumbles on the comparison with Schönberg and the twelve-tone music. Schönberg, too, felt a need during the first years after his discovery of dodecaphony to surround his compositional technique with taboos. Taboos against octaves, against repetitions of tones, against triads, and major/minor-sounding seventh-chords. But Schönberg was aware of the fact that these bans were of a historical nature, a necessary limitation caused by the proximity of Late Romanticism. In the late 1970's Per Nørgård approaches a position where he might be suspected of attributing an almost superhistorical and eternal validity or truth to his compositional technique. And this position involves a danger of isolation. Seen retrospectively, one gets a feeling that Per Nørgård in the late seventies was on his way towards the same shut-in situation as at the end of the fifties. At that time it was Nordic nature that inspired him and prevented him from recognizing the importance of other peoples' experiments. Now it is a mythic nature with mythological traits that are closing in upon his music.

The interesting point about Per Nørgård as a man and as a composer is that in this situation he reacts with an almost dramatic openness. Around 1960 he rejected the thought of the "Nordic spirit" and deliberately went into a crisis, where he exposed himself to a chaos of influences. I do not consider it an accident that Per Nørgård in the seventies seeks a subject for a new opera which, with almost unfailing certainty, again forces him into a similar crisis. The subject is Siddharta, the young Buddha, who grows up as a prince in a palace where his father with all his might tries to protect him from the wickedness and negative sides of life. This happens in a very concrete way: All ill, disabled or ugly individuals are sent to prison or are hidden. Death and disaster are tabooed, the prince is not allowed to know that his mother has died and that he is raised by her sister. He must not learn about sorrow or pain, but must grow up in an artificial paradise.

This is depicted during the first two acts of the opera, with the use of the entire hierarchical compositional technique of Per Nørgård, which is extremely suitable for representing this super-harmonic world of youth, wealth, beauty and missing social responsibility. In the third act, where in the meantime the prince has married the most beautiful of the princesses, the catastrophe sets in.

Siddharta finds out that man can fall ill and die, he sees through the ideology in which his father has enclosed him, he gets knowledge of the negative sides of life, and decides to leave the palace, marches out and experiences the world for better or for worse. Siddharta starts the transition which makes him the founder of a religion, Buddhism. This, Per Nørgård was not able to compose in 1979.

In terms of drama, the critical moment turns up at the point in the third act where prince Siddharta, together with his wife and some friends, attends the performance of a singer and a dancer. The two women depict – each in her own medium – on Oriental love story with many complications and surprises, in which the main character swings between boundless love and deep suffering. Siddharta, who only knows happiness and believes any sort of pain a play and unreal, admires the realism with which the two artists depict suffering, and he gets tied up in speculations about the identity of the artists. When are they real and when are they playing a part? Where is the distinction between play and reality drawn? Is, after all, what he calls reality a play too?

The answer comes unexpectedly. The dancer drops down, overwhelmed by an illness that she has been hiding. While she doubles up in pain, she is filled with despair by the thought that now she will be sent to prison like all the other unhappy individuals who are locked up in order not to break Siddharta's illusion. And in a flash Siddharta understands that his life has been unreal. Other people have suffered for his sake, so that he could escape pain. By the help of his foster-mother he finds out that the palace not only holds all the happiness he knows, but also the unhappiness which he has been spared. And he leaves palace, wealth and family and starts out for the world in order to learn about suffering.

Here the text follows the legend of Siddharta's change into Buddha. For six years he lived in extreme poverty and, through asceticism, searched for insight in reality in order to realize the true nature of suffering. Not until he had obtained this knowledge did he become Buddha and able to preach the teachings which, according to Buddhism, is still the proper road to release from pain and rebirth for man, regardless of caste, rank, or wealth. But if the text with its quasi-historical plot is to be expressed in musical drama, the composer must provide his main character with a qualitatively different expression in order to distinguish the young, innocent Siddharta from the future Buddha. In the late seventies, Per Nørgård could not wring this qualitatively different expression from his hierarchical compositional technique. The hierarchical music depicts the illusion, the ideology and unreality that Siddharta was brought up to

believe in. It cannot depict the truth that sees through ideology as well, and Nørgård did not possess an alternative composition technique. Therefore, he logically refrained from composing Siddharta's understanding. We see and hear about the cruelties that Siddharta realizes. But Siddharta is silent and leaves the stage – he walks away in protest, not only from the palace but from the genre of opera as Per Nørgård sees it.

This solution, of course, is unsatisfactory, and dissatisfaction grew to a crisis, which sent Per Nørgård chasing for new ways of composing that could bring an adequate artistic expression of Siddharta's understanding within reach. Nørgård found inspiration for this expression in two places. From Balinese gamelan-music with its dominant rhythmic character. And from the experience of the works of an insane artist, namely the Swiss schizophrenic multi-artist Adolf Wölfli, who spent most of his life shut up in an institution where he painted, wrote poetry, and composed works of art that were half mad and half bore the stroke of genius. Wölfli's fragments of texts, pictures, and music gave Per Nørgård a decisive impulse around 1980. They all describe the fall from a state of happiness into catastrophe. He sees himself falling from Heaven, where he is coddled by the angels and God, down to a hard and merciless earth. He is the victim of traffic-accidents, where railway bridges fall down, and he is swept away into an abyss etc. By working with rhythm Per Nørgård learned to compose this fall, he constructed passages that almost physically express dizziness and nausea, and he provides these new rhythms with melodic substance by combining thematically contrasting material. The consistent unison which I earlier pointed out as a central characteristic of the hierarchical music of Nørgård is now replaced by polyphony in the works composed around 1980, inspired by Wölfli. Most important among them are the opera "The divine Tivoli" and symphony no. 4.

The result of this development is that Per Nørgård in 1984 goes back to "Siddharta" and revises the scene containing Siddharta's understanding. The flash of understanding that for a fraction of a second enlightens Siddharta is put under the microscope and magnified into an aria of 8 minutes, where Siddharta realizes that he is mortal, and bitterly reproaches his father for having hidden this fact from him. Per Nørgård could not get the text for this area from the librettist of the opera, Ole Sarvig, who had died inbetween. So he found it in the papers of Adolf Wölfli, where he pieced together sentences and fragments of poems into a monologue, which thus acts as a kind of credit to Wölfli for his impact on "Siddharta" and, in a wider perspective, for his importance upon the development of Per Nørgård as a composer.

If we consider the development in Per Nørgård's compositional technique in the early 1980s more abstractly, one is tempted to use the term dialectical. The problem with Nørgård's technique in the 1970s was that it was on the point of abandoning dialectics as a way of thinking. The idea in dialectical development is that contrasts meet and are abolished and turn into a new synthesis, to quote Hegel. From this point of view, Siddharta's change into Buddha is a dialectical process: Childhood is spent in wealth, happiness, and innocence. Manhood in poverty and pain caused by a sense of guilt. These contrasts are removed by his understanding the essence of suffering, which changes Siddharta into a founder of a religion and creates a spiritual prince out of the worldly one. But Per Nørgård's music was not dialectical. It generated everything from principles that were given beforehand: the infinite series as a principle of organic growth, the series of harmonics as a harmonic principle, and the golden mean as a proportion. These principles can only repeat themselves and create new variants or metamorphoses from a substance that is already present. It cannot create any real contrast, and thereby it prevents Per Nørgård from reaching a new synthesis. In the words of Adorno, one might claim that the paradox is the decadence of dialectics. This is illustrated by the first version of "Siddharta" where the main character paradoxically – regarded as a hero of opera – becomes silent in the moment when, for the first time, he has something original to say.

What happens in the revised version of "Siddharta" is, that Wölflin is let into Per Nørgård's universe as the dialectical contrast to Siddharta. The outsider who lives in an institution because his insanity cannot fit into the culture of his surroundings, becomes the contrast to the happy Siddharta and makes him understand himself as badly fitting into the surroundings which previously he accepted. Therefore, it becomes meaningful in a music-dramatical sense, and esthetically fulfilling, that Siddharta leaves the palace only when he has gained a way of expression which definitely stands in contrast to the hierarchical music characterizing Siddharta's world of happiness. Not until the moment when Per Nørgård's "catastrophe-rhythms" and the polyphonic tension between contrasting melodies act as an anti-thesis to the hierarchically unfolded thesis, do we experience the conflict of Siddharta as significant and full of perspective. Not until then do we perceive the possibility of a new synthesis some time in the future. "When I meet a young composer who tells me that he is in the middle of a crisis, I always congratulate him", Per Nørgård once said. The remark might also be aimed at Per Nørgård himself, as a congratulation to a composer who, 56 years old and with 200 works behind him, is still young enough to expose himself to a crisis which gives a chance to new developments.