

## Variazioni Interrotti

Nine episodes and a coda on the composer  
Jørgen Bentzon and his music

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### **I. The turning point, 1927**

It was to be of crucial importance to the 30-year-old Danish composer Jørgen Bentzon that he was chosen along with Carl Nielsen to represent Denmark at the ISCM Music Days in Frankfurt am Main in 1927. German expectations of the Danish contribution were not high, but with the outstanding interpretation of Carl Nielsen's Fifth Symphony by Wilhelm Furtwängler, success was ensured, and the 62-year-old Nielsen had to take some nine or ten curtain calls to acknowledge the storm of applause.

At the last concert of the Music Days, on 4th July, the audience heard Bentzon's *Sonatina for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon, Opus 7* in a splendid performance by Gilbert Jespersen, Aage Oxenvad and Knud Lassen. The audience rewarded them with five curtain calls for the musicians and the composer and on this occasion the press coverage was as favourable as for Carl Nielsen; the sonatina was proclaimed the best chamber music work of the festival by the music critics present.<sup>1</sup> Bentzon, who had been a pupil of Carl Nielsen in 1915-18, on his part took every opportunity to spread "ruthless propaganda" for Nielsen's music among the many sceptics he met among his German contemporaries.

From Baden-Baden Bentzon and Høffding went on to Heidelberg and met the German composer Lothar von Knorr, who was to become one of their close friends and collaborators. Knorr was the principal of a *Volksmusikschule* in the working class neighbourhood Neu-Köln in Berlin, where Paul Hindemith was also a teacher for several years. From Heidelberg the journey continued, now with

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Lothar von Knorr, to Baden-Baden, where a convention for contemporary German chamber music was regularly held in these years.<sup>2</sup>

One day a small printed announcement could be found on the audience seats, saying that there was a meeting of the German *Volksmusikschulen* on the outskirts of town. Few of those attending the music festival showed any interest in the matter, but Høffding and Bentzon went, and it was a meeting that crucially changed their lives and composing activities. For the meeting Paul Hindemith had composed a cantata for amateurs, *Frau Musica*, based on a text by Martin Luther. The work was conceived so that the audience too was actively drawn into the performance; the conductor rehearsed them beforehand in a couple of canons which were to be sung during the performance when a certain sign was given. This alternation among choir and orchestra on the stage and the audience in the hall and especially the infectious, immediate joy in the music shown by the audience, contrasted starkly with the self-important tedium of the official music festival, and it made a profound impression on the two Danish composers. They met Fritz Jöde, who was the soul of the *Volksmusikschule* movement, and he explained the ideas and organization of the movement to them. For him it was important that the German *Volksmusikschulen*, besides classical choral music, also worked with contemporary music; so he had persuaded Hindemith to compose for him, and that was why the *Volksmusikschule* convention had been scheduled at the same time as the music festival in Baden-Baden.

Concerts of modern music were held specially for the students at the schools, and one of these featured Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite*, a work which the young audience naturally enough heard rather uncomprehendingly. So it caused rather a stir when Bentzon exclaimed - in German: "Damn it, it's tough on the young folk that they have to listen to that corpse music!". This spontaneous reaction testified not so much to his lack of respect for Berg's musik - and it was true he did not care much for it - as to his opinion of the organizers who presented such inaccessible music for the unprepared pupils.<sup>3</sup> The experience made Bentzon realize that if work was to be done with contemporary music in the music schools, it must at all events *not* be as complex as Alban Berg's - or as his own for that matter. In the years ahead this insight was to give him great difficulties as a composer in the work of writing *accessible* contemporary music.<sup>4</sup>

Høffding and Bentzon had become strongly interested in the *Volksmusikschule* idea, and on long hikes in the beautiful Schwarzwald mountains they planned to establish a *folkemusikskole* in Copenhagen. It was a tempting idea to transplant the *Volksmusikschule* to a country like Denmark, where national song and popular choral singing were seeing rapid development thanks to Carl Nielsen, Thomas

Laub and others. Yet there was much preparatory work to be done: they had to learn about ear training and the tonic sol-fa system where the pupils could sing without written music prompted by hand gestures; they had to procure choral music, especially contemporary music, and above all they had to gain practical experience of the work at the *Volksmusikschule*. It was Bentzon in particular who now faced a radical change in his life.<sup>5</sup> To understand its extent we must look at his upbringing and training and at his previous artistic development.

## 2. Childhood and youth, 1897-1920

Jørgen Liebenberg Bentzon was born in Copenhagen on 14th February 1897, the youngest of four children. His childhood home was a large town house at Ewaldsgade 7 looking out over the lake Peblingesøen.<sup>6</sup> In the house the rooms were decorated with oriental carpets and solid furniture; on the walls hung monu-

mental pictures of ships in storms, painted by Bentzon's maternal uncle, the poet Holger Drachmann, who was originally known as an excellent marine painter. And little Jørgen was probably an attentive listener when his famous uncle honoured the home with a visit.<sup>7</sup>

Bentzon had inherited his family's shrewd intelligence and was an early starter. When he went to the kindergarten at three, he soon learned to read and write and therefore started school at the age of five. But school was torture for him, as he was both younger than and different from his schoolmates. At seventeen he took his school leaving exam and with one exception had the best grade in all subjects. Determined to find himself a decent job that would also permit him to compose, Bentzon began studying law at the University of Copenhagen, and took an excellent degree in 1920, at the age of just 23.



*Jørgen Bentzon with his father, the chartered surveyor Povel Bentzon. The picture is dated 20.4.1899, and little Jørgen is clearly very preoccupied with "reading".*

But beside his schooling he had innumerable other interests. At seven he had begun to play the cello, and he taught himself the piano. According to his father Povel Bentzon he did not have “the virtuoso disposition”.<sup>8</sup> At 13 he became interested in chemistry and in the course of the year read the syllabus that is required to study engineering. But the interest did not last. The next year the family took its summer holiday in Holland, and after his encounter with Flemish painting he plunged into the history of art and became a frequent visitor to the many art collections in Copenhagen. At the same time he began to paint and the next summer had produced so many good pictures that he was able to sell them - presumably to family and friends.

The next year the family was visited by a Spanish-speaking relative. In a few weeks the now 15-year-old Jørgen learned Spanish and this led to such an interest in language in general that he spent the money he had earned from his pictures on grammars of a large number of languages. Over the next few years he learned most of the European languages, a number of Slavic ones and a few more exotic ones like Rhaeto-Romanic, Japanese and Sanskrit.<sup>9</sup> And - of course - he read and wrote fluent Greek and Latin, and throughout his life had the habit of ending the day with some bedtime reading in one of these classical languages. He solved the problem of keeping up so many languages by



*Bentzon as a 17-year-old school-leaver, photographed in his childhood home at Ewaldsgade 7. At this time he was loath to be depicted without a book in his hand.*



*Jørgen Bentzon with his fiancée Michala Weis and of course with a book in his hand! The picture is from around 1920.*

buying different foreign newspapers on his daily train journey home from work.<sup>10</sup>

Musical interests did not play a central role in Bentzon's growing years. It was only after he had left school that he plunged into the study of music: “My first positive step in my composing career was a lugubrious, highly romantic piano sonata in G minor that I wrote as a 17-year-old student with no decent technical skills out of the *Sturm und*

*Drang* of my heart. It is screamingly funny - but oh, it was deadly serious then!”<sup>11</sup> To make up for the technical shortcomings he began to take harmony lessons with his cousin Christy Bentzon. At the same time he composed a number of minor piano works and songs, especially to texts by Holger Drachmann. With these works he approached Carl Nielsen, who evidently considered him so talented that he took him on as a pupil in 1915-18. The teaching concentrated on counterpoint, and it is clear from the music notebooks preserved that Nielsen carefully corrected the work of his new pupil. In addition Bentzon learned part-writing by transcribing Nielsen’s symphonies for piano duet or for piano and harmonium - the instrument combination that had been available in his childhood home. The many fragments from these years testify to the young composer’s problems making the transition from his original musical standpoint, the Nordic Romantic tone of Gade and Hartmann, to a contemporary musical idiom.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. The progressive style, 1920

After taking his law degree in May 1920 Bentzon and his fiancée Michala Weis went abroad, officially to study law and music. If there were any results of the law studies, they are unknown; but all the more time was spent cultivating music. In Rome, with Madame de Tideböhl, a pupil of Anton Rubinstein, he improved his pianistic skills so much that in November 1920 he was admitted to the conservatory in Leipzig to study piano, theory and composition. His studies concluded with a successful concert of his compositions on 3rd June 1921, featuring two works written over the past year. *Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Opus 1* for solo piano and *Divertimento in one Movement for Violin, Viola and Violoncello, Opus 2*.

A few days later Bentzon returned to Copenhagen to begin his new job as a secretary in the Ministry of Justice. The legal work interested him a great deal, but it also took so much of his time that his work as a composer proceeded very slowly. A piano sonata and a septet remained fragments, while *String Quartet No. 1, Opus 3* was laboriously composed at the rate of about ten bars a day. The quartet was completed in April 1922 and performed at the society *Ny Musik* the next year. There it had a mixed reception, although a few reviewers showed some understanding of the new “European” style.<sup>13</sup>

After the string quartet he started with great energy on his first orchestral work, *Dramatic Overture, Opus 5*, and had just completed writing out the score in November 1922 when he was struck by a nervous ailment that required care and

treatment, and which left him unable to work for a whole year. The overture was performed at *Musikforeningen* on 20th November 1923, conducted by Carl Nielsen, but had a poor reception. It was criticized for its short, episodic structure, its often unfortunate orchestration and in particular because the overture, despite its name, was not “particularly dramatic”.<sup>14</sup>

Despite a ban on working with music during his illness, Bentzon was unable to resist. With great difficulty he wrote *String Quartet No. 2, Opus 6*, which on its presentation at *Ny Musik* on 3rd December 1924 was particularly kindly mentioned by several reviewers.<sup>15</sup> In addition he managed to write another work, *Three Sonnets*, for a ladies’ choir, *Ekko*, which was conducted by the composer Poul Schierbeck. For the text he had chosen nothing less than a collection of sonnets by Michelangelo, or Michelagnuolo Buonarotti, as he called him with historical accuracy. This was Bentzon’s first attempt to write for a choir, and the result is not particularly successful. The movements are conceived in instrumental terms and do not *sound* fully, especially as the lower parts are too deep. The frequent, clashing dissonances are not done justice vocally and they are also difficult to perform. For Sonnet No. 2 Bentzon later wrote a new, easier version, which was sent with No. 1 and 3 in a fair copy to a publisher in Bologna, where they were lost. “Not sorry about this” is the comment in the manuscript notes.<sup>16</sup> The missing sonnets have however later been returned to Denmark and are now in the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

#### 4. Character polyphony, 1924

The Weis family - Bentzon’s in-laws - were great lovers of chamber music, especially the string quartet. This is presumably why Bentzon wrote as many as five string quartets in 1922-28. Since his brother-in-law Adam Weis was an able cellist, Bentzon abandoned the cello and went over to double bass. Later he took up the bassoon with considerable success and these instruments were later used in many chamber music works.

In the summer of 1924 he wrote his first work for wind instruments, *Sonatina for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon, Opus 7*, the work that was presented three years later at the ISCM Music Days in Frankfurt am Main. During the work on the sonatina he gradually realized that the three woodwinds were so different in terms of playing technique and timbre that he would have to shape the parts accordingly. He may have been inspired by Nielsen’s *Wind Quintet* of 1922, where the variations of the finale in fact break with the part-writing traditions of centuries, and instead



Jørgen Bentzon with his teacher, Carl Nielsen, in the mid-1920s. The book has now been replaced by a score. Nielsen was amused by this artificial pose, and thought that with their scanty hair they would look like "two Roman augurs".

treat the five instruments as individual personalities. As early as the Second Symphony *The Four Temperaments*, Nielsen had related each of the four movements to one of the four classical temperaments, but in the wind quintet the individual instruments were contrasted with one another: the flute is sanguine, the oboe melancholy, the clarinet choleric and the bassoon phlegmatic. Unfortunately the classical four temperaments were not enough to cover the French horn, so it was described as "the simple child of nature". With Bentzon, this idea developed during the work on the sonatina

to a part-writing principle which he called *character polyphony*.<sup>17</sup>

In the next work, *String Quartet No. 3, Opus 8* from the autumn of 1924, he tried with no great success to combine his previous quartet style with the principles of character polyphony. In his manuscript notes he wrote of the work:

A painful birth. On its first private presentation (28.5.1925) the quartet aroused great interest in the inner circle, which encouraged me to dedicate the work to Carl Nielsen (on his 60th birthday!). The interest flagged, and the premiere in the 25-26 season (the first and last performance!)...was a great disappointment to me. I now understand better why the work failed. It seems more like a sketch than an integrated work of art. Elements of character polyphony clash with traditional quartet forms, fugato, ostinato and other mechanics that I have otherwise avoided. I have rarely felt so carried away as when I wrote that work, but what use is that? Would like to hear it again.

May 46 JB.<sup>18</sup>

In June 1925 Bentzon began another string quartet, which he could not get quite right either. The first movement was rejected and the slow second movement was published separately as *String Quartet No. 4, Preludio patetico, Opus 11*. The next year Bentzon tried to realize his ideas of character polyphony in a wind quintet, *Intermezzi espressivi*. The title refers to the form of the piece: an introduction, six

intermezzi and a coda. In the various intermezzi the winds are presented in varying instrumental combinations. In his manuscript notes Bentzon gives a detailed account of the work:

During the work on my wind sonatina Op. 7 in the early summer of 1924 I encountered the problems of character polyphony - quite unconsciously - for the first time. Since they forced themselves upon me with increasing clarity and intensity, I felt an urge to go into much greater depth with these stylistic possibilities, preferably in a large-scale work like a wind quintet where the five starkly contrasting timbres permitted and motivated such a mode of expression. The draft - partly lost - goes back to the autumn of 1924. But it was not until the late summer of 26 that the ideas took form. I was in great doubt about the title. The final choice, *Intermezzi espressivi*, is not especially successful. The piece was at any rate finished in December 26. The premiere took place at "Ny Musik" on 4/1-28. The piece did not make much of an impression, not even on the inner circle, which almost found the style repellent. A few later repetitions (with some abridgements) led to no better results. I soon gave up trying to have the piece published and I do not regret it. The piece - despite its stiff, inflexible style and the rather vapid idiom - had extraordinary personal importance for me as a psychological preliminary study for the quartet Op. 15, the chamber concertos and the *Racconti*. Reading it through now, it seems to have been a crucial basis for my later sense of harmony. Have several times thought of reworking it, but have abandoned the idea, as I cannot recreate the mood. - A lot of words to waste on a failure.<sup>19</sup>



*The musicians Gilbert Jespersen (flute), Knud Lassen (bassoon) and Aage Oxenvad (clarinet) with Jørgen Bentzon on the garden steps in his childhood home. The picture was taken in summer 1927 during the rehearsals for the Sonatina Op. 7, which was to be performed at ISCM in Frankfurt am Main the same year.*

But the reviews were far from being as black as Bentzon remembers them. Brieghel-Müller, for example, wrote from the premiere: "Jørgen Bentzon's



“Intermezzi espressivi” was a splendid work, bursting with musicality from beginning to end. The composition, despite its episodic character, was shaped with a firm, sure hand, and the thematic content bore witness to a fertile imagination and power of combination...”<sup>20</sup>

Neither in the string quartet nor in the wind quintet had Bentzon quite succeeded in realizing his ideas of character polyphony. Only when he began to write for a *mixed ensemble* of strings and wind instruments did he make the musical texture and character polyphony merge. In *Variazioni interrotti*, *Op. 12* clarinet and bassoon are contrasted with violin, viola and cello. The title refers to the fact that the development after the ninth variation is interrupted by a calm middle section, then the variations are resumed with twelve new variations followed by a coda. The linguist Jørgen Bentzon later wrote in his manuscript notes: “The correct title “Var. interrotte” has deliberately been changed to the incorrect masculine form since “Rotte” [= “rat” in Danish] is an ugly word and the Italians won’t care - I like the piece myself. It is never played any more. May 46 J.B.”<sup>21</sup>

*Variazioni interrotti* was performed for the first time at a private gathering on 25th May 1926 and premiered as the main work at a - slightly delayed - composition evening on 16th March 1927 to mark Bentzon’s 30th birthday. The work was well received and many people consider it his very best work. Finn Høffding, for example, writes:

I would venture the claim that this work is not only one of the best written in Danish music, but in addition is among the best written at all in the burgeoning Modernism of Europe in the 20s and 30s. The many subtleties of the art of variation with its transformations, lengthenings, shortenings, developments etc. are a pleasure to follow in this work. One notes the great inventiveness in the combinations of the two winds and the three strings, and the way the wind instruments are individually profiled against the string trio....

In this work Jørgen Bentzon stands with a clear, distinctive profile among the leading composers of the day. He is unlike any other; rather than following the style of the age he helps to give it its shape.<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Between art music and people’s music, 1927-30

The meeting with Fritz Jöde in Baden-Baden in July 1927 had aroused Bentzon’s interest in amateur music. Over the next winter he played with the idea of an easy

instrumental piece, but progressive chamber music still preoccupied him so much that the amateur music had to wait. In the spring of 1927 a small but important work had appeared: *Drei expressive Skizzen von Jørgen Bentzon für Violine und Violoncello Op. 16*. In Sketch No. 2 we clearly observe the character polyphony mode of writing. Not only are the two string parts very different from each other when you look at the printed page, the playing technique is different too: the violin part should be played *scharf und leicht*, while the cello is contrastingly *schwer, pathetisch*.

The character polyphony mode was developed further in the *Sonata for Bassoon, Violin and Viola*, dedicated to the bassoonist Knud Lassen. It was written in the autumn of 1927 and has two different qualities of sound, since the strings, through all three movements, play homophonically *against* the bassoon. Only in the concluding ten bars of the work are the three instruments united in a shared rhythm in the unison ending. The bassoon sonata was premiered in Berlin in February 1929, but never published, as no publisher would take on such an unusual work with such an odd ensemble.<sup>23</sup>

His most recent chamber music works had given Bentzon experience in writing character polyphony string parts, and in the spring of 1928 he began on his fifth string quartet, this time composed throughout in character polyphony. The necessary sound contrasts within the naturally fairly homogeneous string ensemble are achieved by constantly adding playing directions to the string parts, e.g. at the beginning of the piece: 1st violin - *Corrente, non troppo espressivo*; 2nd violin - *Secco*; viola and cello - *Sempre dolce ed espressivo*. The quartet, published by Wilhelm Hansen in 1929 as *String quartet in one movement, Opus 15*, was very important for Bentzon's development as a composer, and is one of the major pieces among his radical works of the 1920s.<sup>24</sup>

The renewed meeting with the *Jugendbewegung* in the summer of 1928 prompted Bentzon to begin working with amateur music again. As soon as the string quartet was finished at the end of August, he had gone to work on an easy variation work for strings, piano and percussion based on the old ballad *Lave og Jon*. The work was heard for the first time at the annual summer meeting in Baden-Baden in 1929, conducted by Alfons Dressel and partly supervised by Hindemith. Despite the good intentions the work - especially the changes in tempo and rhythm - proved too difficult for the young musicians. The variations were dedicated to Fritz Jöde and published as Opus 17 by Kallmeyer in Wolfenbüttel in 1930. Over the next few years the work was played quite a lot in Denmark and Germany; in the latter case the pleasure was short-lived, as the work was banned by the Nazis in 1933.

Through the work with the major chamber music works - especially the string quartet Opus 15 - Bentzon felt he had developed enough stylistically that he could attempt to work with a larger ensemble by using the stylistic elements of character polyphony on a larger scale: from the solo instrument to the section. The result was *Symphonic Trio, Op. 18*. The title refers to the fact that the work was written for three solo instruments - violin, French horn and cello, each at the head of a group of tutti instruments: 12 violins, 3 French horns, 3 cellos with 2 basses, that is a symphonic trio ensemble. The work was written in the spring and late summer of 1929 and premiered at an art festival at Forum in Copenhagen with Emil Telmányi as violin soloist and conductor. The work was probably the most radically modern Bentzon had written so far, and it was received with great interest as well as great indignation. On a subsequent tour in Germany in the 1929-30 season it was performed several times, although almost all the Danish musicians found it "quite horrible". At the performances in Hamburg and Berlin the German press almost unanimously agreed with the poor Danish musicians: it *foamed* with rage. In the manuscript notes Bentzon writes:

As far as my own reactions are concerned, I only remember that I was extremely surprised to see that the piece was considered inaccessible, and that I have often found myself humming bits of it...In the course of time I have had many words of recognition from experts about this piece...In *Dansk biografisk Leksikon* (the dictionary of national biography) Hove gives it a central position not only in my own output but also in the wider context. Particularly odd considering no one dares play it, and no one can be bothered listening to it. And then I only remember, in the context in question, that *Hindemith* on a later occasion in the spring of 1930 (that is after the failure in Germany), after going through the work, comforted me by saying that the piece could only fail because the *l'art pour l'art* principle on which it was based was out of date. He presumably meant that it was *dreck*. (We musicians are always circumspect in our statements when we are provoked into saying something about our colleagues' productions). But God knows whether he would approve of this *basic* view if he was asked today.

May 1946 J.B.<sup>25</sup>

In the years 1920-30 Bentzon wrote almost nothing for choir. In 1923, as mentioned above, came the three sonnets for ladies' choir. Later, in September 1925 came *Three songs for male choir, Opus 9*, written for *Studentersangforeningen*, who

performed the songs on 9.12.1926, conducted by Kai Aage Bruun. At that time the student singers made up a large choir of good singers, so Bentzon could permit himself to write three full-sounding and magnificently ringing choral compositions. The first two songs were written to texts by Erik Moltesen. In the first, *Vesterhavet* (The North Sea) we hear not only a Nordic, Romantic tone, but also a certain “modality” and the abrupt shifts between major and minor that are so characteristic of Carl Nielsen. The second song, *Søvn* (Sleep), a fine adagio piece, is dominated by almost *Tristan*-like sounds where Bentzon exploits the close, low men’s voices to bring out the pulse, which seems to come slowly to a halt. The theme of sleep or death fascinated Bentzon and recurs in many of his choral songs. With the third song, *I Vandretiden* (The Roving Time) to a text by Harald Bergstedt, he strikes a far merrier tone. The first and second stanzas are sung chanting on a recitation tone that describes the busy husbands of the city and their gossiping wives, while “the roving journeyman” in the third, spacious-sounding stanza bids farewell and sets off out into the world. No doubt Bentzon himself felt in these years that he was a kind of “roving journeyman” who had turned his back on Copenhagen provincialism and gone with European Modernism.

When Bentzon was in Baden-Baden in the summer of 1928 Lothar von Knorr asked him to write some songs for his *Volksmusikschule* in Neu-Köln and gave him some German texts to set. And when Bentzon came back to Copenhagen in September he immediately started work on the commission and composed four songs, but was dissatisfied with the result: “The texts were poor and uninspired; the music likewise, and nothing came of it”.<sup>26</sup> One of the songs, *Die junge Schar*, was however later used in *Four Lieder*, Opus 20. Bentzon dropped the amateur songs and instead started working on the variations on *Lave og Jon*, then returned to art music.

In the spring of 1929 he wrote the *Chamber Concerto No. 1*, “*Symphonic Trio*”, and immediately continued with *Chamber Concerto No. 2*, “*Intermezzo espressivo*”, of which the first draft however had to be scrapped. He began a new version and had about half the work finished when he went to Spain in mid-March 1930 on an Ancher Scholarship. After returning home he continued working on the chamber concerto, which was almost finished when he went to Berlin at the beginning of September to observe the *Volksmusikschule* work of Lothar von Knorr in Neu-Köln. There he finally concluded the work in December 1930. The chamber concerto is based on the character polyphony ideas which did not quite work in the wind quintet *Intermezzi espressivi* of 1926, from which little but the title *Intermezzo espressivo* had been preserved. The chamber concerto is in one movement, and from first to last its musical structure is determined by the individual lives of the instru-

ments. Each of the four solo wind instruments - oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon - has its own characteristic theme and particular expressive idiom. Against this we have a homophonic string section with a “first subject” and a “second subject”, and finally the partly solo-like percussion parts.<sup>27</sup>

*Intermezzo espressivo* was played for the first time by Emil Telmanyi at *Dansk Koncertforening* on 23rd February 1931. The reception was surprisingly positive; in several quarters the work was however described as “musical surrealism”. With the Chamber Concerto No. 2 Bentzon’s progressive period of 1920-30 came to a close, and over the next few years he devoted all his energy to the *folkemusikskole* and popular music.

## 6. Establishment of the *Folkemusikskole* in Copenhagen, 1931

For three years Høffding and Bentzon had gone to the annual meetings of the German *Volksmusikschulen* in Baden-Baden. To familiarize himself more with the practical aspects Bentzon took a study trip from September until Christmas 1930 to Berlin, where he observed the teaching and the organizational work of Lothar von Knorr in the school in Neu-Köln as well as Fritz Jöde’s *Volksmusikschule* and the *offene Singstunden* at Charlottenburg Palace. During his stay Bentzon wrote about ten small songs to German texts, several of which were rehearsed at the *Volksmusikschule* in Neu-Köln. However, most of the songs were not successful efforts; one of them, *Sonnenwende* (Solstice), was published in *Der Kreis*, the monthly magazine of the German *Volksmusikschulen* (15th May 1931), where “Dr. Bentzon” at the same time wrote a - slightly apologetic - article about *Dänemark und die musizierende Jugend*. The same year *Sonnenwende* was published in a grander version with a lead singer and choir in Jöde’s choral magazine *Die Singstunde* and in 1933 with a number of Bentzon’s other songs was included in the Swiss male choir songbook.

Among the songs from the stay in Berlin Bentzon chose four and collected them as *Vier Lieder für gemischten Chor - mit deutschem und dänischem Text, Opus 20*, which he tried after coming home to have published by the music publisher Wilhelm Hansen in Copenhagen. These - Bentzon’s first real songs for mixed choir - are not without musical qualities. Nos. 1 and 3, in accordance with the nature poetry of the texts, are in transparent, lightly expressive, moderately modern, homophonic settings. No 2, which as so often with Bentzon is about death, is a different matter. The relentlessly forward-driving “barske død” (cruel death) is sung by the men’s voices in a two-part ostinato which is repeated four times, while the girls’ voices, with rising intensity, add the contrasting “character

polyphony” voices. With the fifth repeat the ostinato is taken over by the girls’ voices, the contrasting voices by the men - and the setting is over. Bentzon tried in this setting to transfer his preferred musical form - the *set of variations* - to the choral medium. This is also true of the fourth song, *Die junge Schar* (written in the autumn of 1928 in Denmark), where the text is weighed down by the popular clichés of the period - *Wir kämpfen, wir siegen...etc.* The martial text is converted musically to a quadruple ostinato where the individual voices enter in turn and then repeat their respective ostinati; the “perpetual motion” is broken off by a contrasting coda, which however takes up the four ostinato figures again. As a work of art, this song is probably more interesting for its construction than for its musical qualities.

The *Vier Lieder* incidentally gave rise to an “Opus 20 trauma”. Since the songs could not be published directly in Denmark, Bentzon instead used the free opus number for a “Hindemithian” *Morgen- und Abendmusik* for amateur orchestra. In October 1931 it was sent to Kallmeyer Verlag in Wolfenbüttel, which however delayed the publication for a strikingly long period. In 1933 Bentzon’s works were banned in Germany, and then it did not matter. The wandering opus number eventually came to rest with a cantata for children’s choir, *Hvem vil med op at flyve?*, (Who would like to go flying?), published by Skandinavisk Musikforlag in 1935 as Opus 20.

During his stay in Berlin Bentzon composed a few small instrumental pieces for Fritz Jöde’s *Volksmusikschule*, and they were all, as he later remarked, “written according to the approved Jugendbewegung recipe for modern Music: *the small daily dose...*”. Of a later piece he says: “Instrumental hotchpotch in variation form....All in all, a telling illustration of the fact that it is impossible to produce usable amateur music without thorough practical immersion.”<sup>28</sup> However, a few minor pieces came out relatively quickly; some small piano pieces in fact won awards and were published by Wilhelm Hansen in the collection *Vor Tids Børnemusik* (Children’s Music of Our Time), and a few canons found their way into *60 Danske Kanoner* (*60 Danish Canons*) published by Wilhelm Hansen in 1930.

From March 1931 come *Five Songs for Male Choir, Op. 19*, and they illustrate as clearly as possible the compositional dilemma that now troubled Bentzon. The fullness of sound that had been so beautifully expressed in the male choir songs of 1925 is replaced here by some pieces that are beautiful in linear terms but a thankless task for the singers. This is true of *Gensyn med Danmark* (text by Johannes V. Jensen) and *Fiskeren* (text by Otto Gelsted), while the otherwise so simple *Tidlig Vaar* (Johannes V. Jensen) is flawed by polyrhythmic subtleties which would hardly be well served by the low voices, even if they were sung correctly. Two of the songs

do - each in its way - deserve special attention. These are the very simple *Tidens Fylde* (Otto Gelsted), where the parts develop from unison simplicity to full-sounding four-part writing. It is a text about *mortality* that prompted Bentzon to write one of his most beautiful, expressive pieces for male choir.

The situation is quite different with the fifth song, *Mørket* (Darkness), written in December 1929 to a text by Mogens Lorentzen. It is still dominated by the progressive style and the character polyphony ideas. The twelve stanzas of the text form the basis for a 133-bar through-composed *Chaconne for Male Choir* with a tenor, baritone and bass soloist. Yet again, it was a text about the themes of darkness, death and mortality that inspired Bentzon to create this very difficult, but beautiful and unique work. *Chaconne for Male Choir* was not written with any particular choir in mind, and has never been performed or published!<sup>29</sup>

In Danish music circles in 1931 there were many people who took an interest in the ideas of the *Volksmusikschule*. In Horsens Carl Maria Savery had already started on the work; at the same time as Høffding and Bentzon, Gunnar Heerup opened a school in Copenhagen, and a little later Poul Schierbeck started a school in Hellerup, just north of Copenhagen. In September 1931 Bentzon again went to Berlin, and on the boat he met the brothers Oluf and Knud Ring, who along with the violin teacher and choirmaster Richard Paulsen were also on their way to the *Volksmusikschulen* in Berlin. The three men, who all had many years of experience with music at the popular level, had just been discussing their scruples about the young feted composer and civil servant at the Ministry of Justice, Jørgen Bentzon, *descending* among the people to establish a “People’s Music School”. And now, on meeting the man himself, they expressed their doubts, and Bentzon told them about his own scruples and reflections and explained why he thought it would work. When the school was well under way, Bentzon invited the sceptical Richard Paulsen out to see and hear the results; Paulsen was greatly impressed, and Bentzon immediately took the opportunity to ask Paulsen to become a teacher at the school the next year. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship and close collaboration.<sup>30</sup>

It was of crucial importance to Høffding’s and Bentzon’s plans that they met the head of the “Copenhagen City Council Continuation Course in Languages and Commercial Subjects”, Thomas Højlund, who immediately understood that music would be a valuable supplement to the other subjects offered, and he ensured that the school was financially supported for the first few years, and administrated under the aegis of the continuation course.

At the evening school in the street Ny Carlsbergvej, the principal, Vejle, went round the classes in October 1931 urging the pupils to enrol in a choral project

that would begin at the school on 1st November. About 25 pupils did so without having any idea how much this would mean for their youth and later life. On the very first evening the two teachers, Høffding and Bentzon, won the confidence of their pupils with their natural, calm manner during the pre-announced auditions. The material for the first singing evenings was taken from *Gymnasiesangbogen*, a large anthology of Danish and foreign choral songs collected and published by Høffding in 1929. Later came the simple pieces in J.A.P. Schulz's *Lieder im Volkston*, which Høffding published with Danish texts in 1932. The teaching also included ear training, and in this field Bentzon in particular was adept at writing small canons based on a relevant rhythmic or intervallic problem.<sup>31</sup>

Following the example of Jöde, the pupils were to learn not just to reproduce music, but also to compose it. At one point in the spring of 1932 Bentzon took along a text taken from *Gadens Legende* (1920) by Emil Bønnelycke:

*Cyklerne, cyklerne, cyklernes kor.  
Hjulene runder den sjællandske jord -  
Fælgende flammer af nikkel and maling,  
råber af friskhed and ratebetaling.*

Bicycle, bicycle, bicycle sound,  
All over Zealand, wheels on the ground.  
Spokes a-spinning, frames a-quiver,  
All paid up on the never-never.

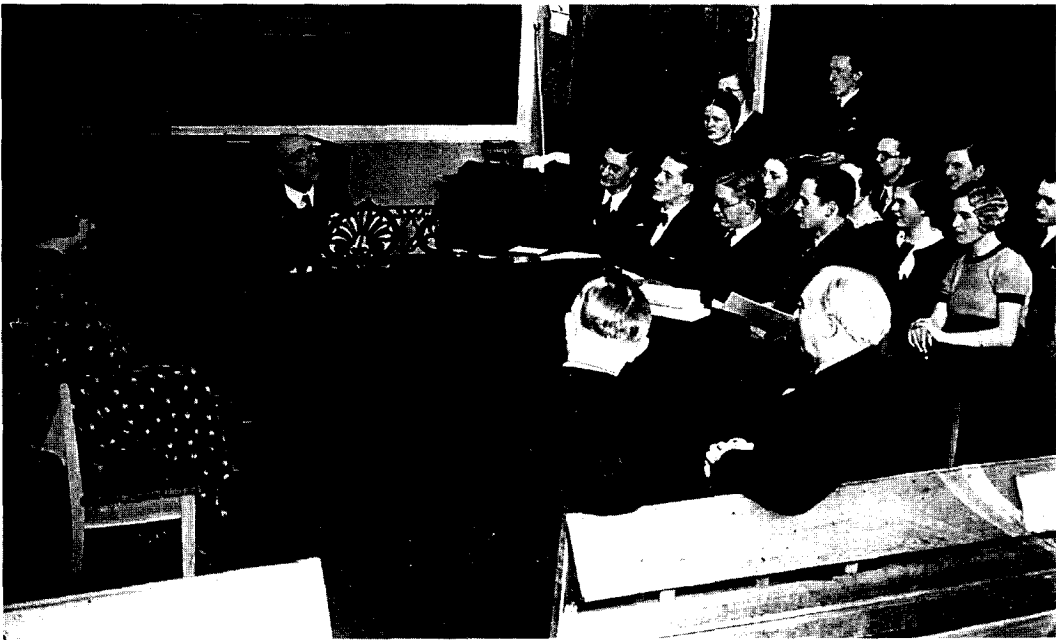
This down-to-earth text appealed to the young people from the workers' area of Vesterbro, and the result of their *collective composing* was a fine synthesis of text and music. After the class Bentzon went home and wrote a piano setting for it that would later prove to be "Bentzon's" most famous tune. Incidentally it should be added that Bentzon *hated* cycling!<sup>32</sup>

On 14th March 1932 Fritz Jöde held his first "*offene Singstunde*" in the now burnt-out great hall of the Odd-Fellow Palæ in Copenhagen. Jørgen Bentzon had rehearsed the evening's programme with the team in advance and had done a great deal to advertise the event. The pupils from the *folkemusikskole* were placed on the platform as lead singers, and the full house experienced - first with wonderment, later with rising enthusiasm - that a crowd of thousands could sing canons and two-part songs together as they had never been heard before. "Fritz Jöde got the whole hall involved. He divided people up for a three-part canon - balcony, front half of the floor, back half - and he instructed, broke off, corrected; he was



able, when conducting out towards the hall, to demand uniformity in the voices, and the hall followed the gentle movements of his hands, which indicated tempo and colouring.”<sup>33</sup> The concert was organized by the music teachers’ society *Musikpædagogisk Forening* and the singing teachers’ *Sanglærerforeningen*, and the events of the evening gave rise to a lively debate. There were protests about the “Fritz Jöde demonstrations”, which were called “kindergarten silliness” and “demoralizing Gypsy stuff”.<sup>34</sup>

The social relations were an important part of life at the *folkemusikskole*, and Bentzon did his part to promote them. When the first season was over he invited



*Jørgen Bentzon at the piano at the end-of-term ceremony after the first season at the Folkemusikskole in spring 1932. The gentlemen listening in the foreground are the Inspector of the Copenhagen Council Continuation Courses Thomas Højlund (left) and the Deputy Director of Education, MrSwane.*

the whole class to his parents’ country house at Hornbæk Strand in North Zealand. The young people were at first rather cowed by the situation - most of them had never been in “a fine house”; but Bentzon’s father, the Titular Councillor of State, was soon able to relieve the tension with a well-chosen anecdote, and his wife demonstrated a great talent for party games. It was an unforgettable day for the participants, and was later followed up by innumerable excursions, meetings and concert trips. It was Bentzon’s wife Michala who was responsible for these events, which were organized with great imagination and -

even by the standards of the day - very inexpensively.

The second season began in September 1932, and everyone in the class attended. From *Gymnasiesangbogen* they sang, among other things, choruses from Händel's *Messiah*, *Samson* and *Judas Maccabaeus*, and songs by Gade, Laub and Carl Nielsen. As a new feature music appreciation was now introduced into the teaching. The vital and enthusiastic principal of the Royal Academy, Rudolph Simonsen, had agreed to introduce the young pupils to the great works of music. The spring of 1933 began with the rehearsal of Bentzon's *Strophe* (1933) and Høffding's two songs *Høstnat* (Autumn Night) and *Forårsdagen* (Spring Morning). It was a difficult task for the young people, who had not previously been faced with the modern idiom. *Strophe* in particular caused problems. For Jacob Paludan's poem *Sus Øresund, og lad dit orgel klinge...*, Bentzon had written a sophisticated, tuneful choral setting where classical imitation forms and character polyphony are integrated in a fine balance. With three of Bentzon's canons from the choir lessons, the three choral songs formed the programme for a concert trip to Stockholm in the summer of 1933.



*Social relations were an important part of life at the Folkemusikskole. Bentzon was a brilliant storyteller and is here entertaining one of the choir members. The attentive young lady is my aunt, Britta Topp.*

## 7. Vocal character polyphony, 1933

In 1933 Bentzon had been appointed Clerk of the Supreme Court. This meant not only a better-paid job, but also long, continuous holidays in January and June-August. At the Supreme Court he met his highly talented colleague Erik Hyllested, with whom he could not only hold fluent conversations in Latin or Greek, but also discuss music, as Hyllested was an able amateur composer. Of his relationship with Bentzon Hyllested writes:

Our mutual friend was an interesting personality. He was without reservation the most versatile talent I have come into close contact with in my now rather long life - I am 72! I am certainly no sufferer from an inferiority complex - rather quite the opposite type of complexes, and it has seldom fallen to my lot to meet a person who, I had to admit, was

more - even *far* more - intelligent than I (Einstein and Bohr I never knew!). And then he was not only superior in the intellectual field, but was also furnished with a uniquely solid, clear memory, huge energy, great artistic talent and - just so nothing should be left out - he was moreover able to enjoy all the simplest pleasures of life like a quite ordinary man without being in the least burdened by his extraordinary superiority; and this without making his surroundings aware of it in any unpleasant way...<sup>35</sup>

The position at the Supreme Court had given Bentzon more time to compose. In the spring of 1933 the above-mentioned choral piece *Strophe* had appeared and in September the same year two major choral works: *Vor Skæbne* (Our Destiny) and *En Bygning* (A Building). Bentzon had himself written the texts for both works, and in the first the words *Den Skæbne, som os fører sammen, er ikke blind* (The destiny that brings us together is not blind) are illustrated by a strict canon at the fifth between contralto and bass, linked and commented on by the outer voices. As a whole this peculiar choral composition has the appearance of a *Netherlandish* motet transplanted to the twentieth century. In a letter to his friend Richard Paulsen Bentzon wrote: "I cannot judge the musical value of the piece; but in terms of combination and polyphonic technique I do not think I can do better. And you must understand that it has not been laboriously calculated and combined; it was written in four working hours spread over two days - which with my slowness is almost record speed". But a few years later he was less optimistic: "I do not like that piece at all. It is poor, and I regret being persuaded to have it printed in *Folke- og Skolemusik*. It should never have been published."<sup>36</sup>

The next choral work, *En Bygning*, is a musical manifesto. Bentzon's text is in the slightly bombastic social realist style of the day and begins with a question:

*Vi bygger et Rum i Tonernes Land,  
en Bygning af Klang.  
Hvilke Klange?*

We are building a house in the land of music,  
a building of sound.  
Which sounds?

The introductory question takes the form of a short, robust fugato. In response the choir now continues with traditional sounds, that is with Romantic chords: *De*

*yndige søde smeltende bløde* (The gracefully sweet, the meltingly tender), but is roughly interrupted (by itself): *Nej, Nej, atter Nej!* (No, no, no again!). And now the question is *Hvilken Bygning?* (Which building?) and the choir attempts to answer with emotionally evocative triadic melody, but is again brutally rejected. Then, in the end, the right answer is given:

*Vor Bygning er rejst paa Hverdagens Grund  
af Klang, der har Kanter som Arbejdsøjne.  
Den Kraft, der har rejst dens Mure  
er Troen paa Magten i fælles Sind.*

Our building is built on the workaday ground  
of sound that has edges like toiling labour.  
The force that has raised its walls up  
is faith in the power of common mind.

In this last section Bentzon at last uses his own musical idiom with an open, vigorous melodic structure and a modally tinged harmony with elements of the characteristic *Nielsenesque* alternation between minor and major. The 88-bar choral work ends with a summation of the two main musical themes of the work.<sup>37</sup>

The proud building was however quickly demolished when it was to be performed by the young singers of the *folkemusikskole*. The vocal demands far exceeded the abilities of the singers, and Bentzon once more had to acknowledge the gap between his own musical intentions and the practical potential for realizing them. He did penance by writing a set of canons instead, each based on a rhythmic formula that was to be practiced in the classes. For the Christmas end-of-term celebration in December 1933, he made merry with two canons, *Before* and *After* (Christmas). The first is a composite of three well known Danish Christmas songs, while the second takes the form of a lament over the consequences of (too much) good cheer, accompanied by a harmonic sequence à la Rachmaninoff. The juxtaposition of text and harmony very clearly demonstrates Bentzon's view of Late Romantic harmony! Much of this working material was published with the choral work *Vor Skæbne* as Opus 22.<sup>38</sup>

Over the next few years Bentzon composed three important choral pieces for the *folkemusikskole*. *Skibe, Efteraarsnatten* and *Skovturen* (Cargoes, Autumn Night and Picnic), published by *Skandinavisk Musikforlag* as Opus 22,1-3. *Skibe* was written on 15th-17th July 1934 to John Masfield's poem *Cargoes* in a Danish version by Olaf Holst. For the first time Bentzon succeeded in shaping characteristic, personal

choral writing without overstepping the boundaries of what an amateur choir could manage. The text consists of glimpses of shipping from three ages: antiquity, the Renaissance and the present day. This is illustrated musically in the first stanza with the melody in the soprano; in the second stanza the parts are exchanged, so that the melody is in the lower part (double counterpoint), and finally the hectic machine age is described in the third stanza in a hard-driving close double canon. Of this piece, which was to become one of his most frequently sung, Bentzon wrote modestly to his good friend Paulsen: "I have made this song with our people in mind, to teach them to sing a polyphonic composition with a full sound."<sup>39</sup>

On 10th September came the next choral piece, the six-part *Efterårsnatten* (Autumn Night). Of the origins of this, Paulsen said:

Jørgen had long spoken of wanting to write a choral song to a "romantic" text. One day he phoned me from the Supreme Court, to say that he had found a suitable text, i.e. *Efterårsnatten* by Johan Ludvig Heiberg. It was a Friday. The next day, Saturday afternoon, he called me again to say that he now had the song finished in his head. The first stanza was to be sung by the light voices, the second by the dark, and the third by both light and dark voices, but with a one-bar displacement. I said: "I don't understand how you can have all that in your head at one time". "Oh yes," said Jørgen, "I can split my brain into two parts, sort of create a partition between them, and then I can work with the two halves individually. Now I'm off to Tisvilde, and I'll write it down this evening." At 11 pm my telephone rang. It was Jørgen, announcing that the song had now been written down and asking me to take the first morning train so we could hear it together. He had been allowed to knock up a family early - a family with a piano. Jørgen normally worked at the piano when he composed, but everything indicates that this song was created "without" a piano.<sup>40</sup>

Paulsen is hardly correct in saying that Bentzon normally composed at the piano; on the contrary it is documented in several cases (in fact even by Paulsen himself!) that works were often written down long after Bentzon could describe them down to the smallest detail. During the actual writing, on the other hand, the piano would of course have been very useful. Incidentally, he was for once extremely satisfied with the result. In the manuscript notes he says of *Efterårsnatten*: "Sophisticated polyphony! Two three-part choirs, to sing partly separately, partly together. *Vocal character polyphony!*"<sup>41</sup>

The major role of social relations in the *folkemusikskole* is expressed for example in a choral work like *Skovtur* (Picnic) for mixed choir and recorders, composed in April-May 1935 to a text by Olaf Holst. The choral work takes the form of a small cantata with stark contrasts among the seven movements. In the fifth, *Hilltop and Beach*, the six voices are divided up, as in *Efterårsnatten* into light and dark voices which first sing separately, then together, but with successive entries. But with this chorus there is at the same time a strong rhythmic and tempo contrast between the two groups: a new variant of vocal character polyphony. Unfortunately Bentzon later had to note: "The piece has not really caught on. The writing is throughout too complicated (finale best), and the insipid, unpoetical text (for which I must myself take some of the blame) does not make the piece more appealing."<sup>42</sup>

But Bentzon did not only write for the *folkemusikskole*. With Michala Weis he now had the children Adrian, Fridolin and Angelica ("Lica"), and this prompted him to write a number of compositions for children. In July 1934 came the much-discussed Opus 20: *Hvem vil med op og flyve?* (Who would like to go flying?) with a text by Olaf Holst. It is a small cantata for a children's choir, a five-part recorder consort and piano, and in the years to follow it was fairly frequently performed, but "unfortunately rarely with the right ensemble".<sup>43</sup> "For Adrian" in January 1935 he wrote a charming little canon cycle *Zoologisk Have* (Zoological Gardens) also with a text by Olaf Holst. They have been published with a number of children's songs by Wilhelm Hansen as Opus 22.

The *folkemusikskole* took up much of Bentzon's time. From January 1935 he had to carry on alone with the class at Vesterbro, while Høffding was to take charge of a new section in Christianshavn in the eastern part of Copenhagen. And indeed his activity in the years 1935-38 was impressive. In a broadcast by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation on 27th February 1935 the choir sang *Skibe* (Cargoes) and *Efterårsnatten* (Autumn Night); on 9th April a Bach-Händel concert was held at *Studentereforeningen*; on 18th-19th May 200 pupils gathered from all the *folkemusikskoler* in the country at *Den Internationale Højskole* in Helsingør and performed, among other works, Karl Clausen's school opera *Klokken* (The Bell) to a text by



Bentzon, photographed in September 1934 at Tisvilde with his good friend and colleague of many years Richard Paulsen.

Hans Christian Andersen, and at the concluding concert on 6th June much of Haydn's *The Creation* was performed. Then came a Whitsun trip to Bentzon's house in Tisvilde on 8th-10th June, and finally the end-of-term celebration on 30th June, whereupon the whole class, headed by Bentzon, went to one of the garden restaurants in Pileallé. This prompted a bizarre song for male choir, *Hømne til Naturen* ("A Hymn to Nature") with the poetic refrain *Øl er Øl* (Beer is Beer). Bentzon wrote: "After an end-of-term celebration at the *Folkemusikskole* I went with my pupils to a garden restaurant in Pileallé, where a male choir expressed its feelings amidst plentiful consumption of beer. Olaf Holst, who was with us, immediately wrote the text on a paper tablecloth; I composed it the next day (1/7/35)".<sup>41</sup> The song has enjoyed considerable popularity over the years among male choirs.

The very high level of activity began however to make inroads on the number of pupils involved. In September 1934 Bentzon thus wrote to one of his pupils:

The good old circle that we began our work with is gradually crumbling away. I suppose it *must* be so, although I would have wished it otherwise. One would think that so many happy, important experiences could hold such a good circle together through a longer span of years. But there are forces which are beyond one's control, pulling at the individual and breaking up the whole. Yet I have not given up hope of getting our best people in under a new arrangement in the autumn (a central team at the Academy [the Royal Academy of Music] for advanced pupils with madrigal choir, ensemble playing, theory and other "advanced" subjects); but whether it is in my power to re-attach to the branch those "fruits" that have already little by little detached themselves, I do not know - I will do *whatever* I can to keep up *personal* contacts with my old pupils: and *that* should not be so difficult....<sup>42</sup>

That Bentzon really did follow his "pupils" closely is evident from the following charming wedding greeting:

...Marriage is after all rather like a kind of two-part counterpoint. In both cases it is a matter of preserving the individuality and proper motion of each voice *without* spoiling the harmony. And if it *should* come to dissonance, then remember not so much to prepare it, as to resolve it *as soon as possible*....<sup>40</sup>

The idea of a *continuation class* for the *folkemusikskole* was realized. In September 1935 a choice selection from the choirs from Vesterbro and Christianshavn was put together under the name *Centralholdet* (the Central Team). The classes were now held at the Royal Academy, and the teaching was broadened to include harmony and counterpoint in smaller classes. There was also instrumental teaching for interested pupils. A radio broadcast with the choir on 29th September and an open singing class at the headquarters of the newspaper *Politiken* were to attract new students. In the course of the autumn the “Central Team” rehearsed Høffding’s choral work *Das Eisenbahngleichnis* (premiere), aiming for a composition evening on 25th March 1936, his cantata *Ein Musicus wollt fröhlich sein*,<sup>17</sup> and a set of Danish ballads and songs, to be performed in Prague in connection with the International Musical Education Congress on 4th-9th April 1936. For the trip Bentzon had set the Danish and the Czech national anthems for mixed choir, the latter sung in Czech, which the linguistically gifted Bentzon had learned for the occasion. Of this R. Paulsen writes:

At the time when we were going to Prague, Jørgen familiarized himself with Czech in the course of a few months, and did so during his lunch break at the Supreme Court. “It takes me only ten minutes to eat my sandwiches, and that leaves twenty minutes for myself, and why shouldn’t I spend that time doing something sensible?” We who were there in Prague when Jørgen first gave an account in German of the *folkemusikskole* work in Denmark, and then repeated it in Czech, will not forget the emotion it aroused....So no small results came from his daily 20-minute studies.<sup>18</sup>



The work with the *folkemusikskole* involved many administrative jobs. Here Bentzon has been photographed at a music teachers’ exam in Oslo in spring 1946. In the picture we see (right) Finn Iløffding, (left) the Norwegian music teacher Øistein Rykkja.

The stay in Prague showed that the choir from Denmark was fully a match for the other ensembles.

Furthermore, the Danes were the only ones performing contemporary music, while the other groups on the whole kept to the older repertoire.



While building up the *folkemusikskole* in 1930-34 Bentzon had written neither chamber music nor orchestral music. But now he turned to these fields again, and this on the other hand meant that there were long intervals between the choral compositions. From 3rd December 1935 we have a couple of small songs for equal voices, intended for a school songbook. One of them, *Lirekassen* (The Hurdy-Gurdy), to a text by Tom Kristensen, was later set for both mixed choir and male choir, and has thus gained wide currency.

Much attention was also aroused by the work for male choir *6-17-5*, written on 22nd December 1935 to selected quotations from the Danish Law of Christian V. The piece had been commissioned by the singers of *Studentersangforeningen* and was performed in January 1936 at the anniversary of the foundation of the law school at the University. It was meant as a harmless joke, but caused a stir in the press and was illustrated by several caricatures - an honour not granted before or later to the composer.

From January 1937 comes a small, but artistically sophisticated piece for mixed choir, *Foraarsstemning* (Spring Mood) to a text by Humbert Wolfe translated by Olaf Holst. The three parts enter in turn in character polyphony contrasts and are repeated until all have had their say, then the piece ends with a lyrical homophonic coda.

In May 1936, as a summer joke for the *folkemusikskole*, Bentzon wrote three small pieces for mixed choir with piano: *Avisudklip* (Cuttings). The texts came from the weekly magazine *Søndags BT*, where the personal ads and the "agony column" took the brunt of the humour.<sup>39</sup>

But the important compositions had to wait until the summer holiday, when the Supreme Court was closed. From the summer of 1936 come Bentzon's best known songs for mixed choir, *3 Fables*, *Opus 26: Ørnen og Pilen* (12.6.), *Løvens Part* (20.6.) and *Døden og Brændehuggeren* (3.7.) (Three Fables: The Eagle and the Arrow, The Lion's Share, and Death and the Woodcutter). The fables are kept in a simple, declamatory style. The melodies are modal, mainly with a stepwise or pentatonic feel, and the rhythm is simple and stays close to the texts. The harmony is uncomplicated. The three pieces seem to have been composed very straightforwardly, but the basis for them is years of experience with the "people's music" style.

### **Ex. 1: Three Fables**

If we compare the beginning of the three pieces in the "Fables", we see that they are all based on the same melodic elements:

1. *Ørnen og pilen* (Europa)



2. *Løvens part.* (m.22)



3. *Døden og brændehuggeren* (org. F-minor)



1. a descending auxiliary note motion;
2. a second-third motif;
3. a fourth or "horn" fifth motif.

Looking at the further development, we see that every single phrase in the three pieces is structured as a variant of the same elements, sometimes with stepwise filling-out of the third. In other words, this is a kind of set of variations with a tight, precisely calculated compositional development, of which Bentzon was justifiably proud. Only in this work did he succeed in combining his compositional ideas with the simplicity of amateur music. In 1932 Bentzon had composed a male choir version of *The Eagle*, originally called *Europe*, which shows what Bentzon was thinking about: his fear of the huge rearmament and threatening expansion of Nazi Germany - a fear that is expressed here through La Fontaine's fables.

## 8. "Popular" art music, 1935

Around 1933 voices were raised in Denmark, claiming that progressive music, intended for a narrow coterie of particularly interested listeners, was a relic of the past. The age *demand*ed a more easily comprehensible mode of expression - "light music, easily accessible music, amusing music, music that is social in the sense that it can please the many".<sup>50</sup>

Bentzon loathed the watered-down musical ideals of populism, but he was convinced of "the healthy, absolutely proper requirement that *the artist* should recover his natural, firmly rooted position among the people whose environment, conditions of life and ideology he shares, and to whom he is artistically called upon to give expression".<sup>51</sup>

This attitude influenced Bentzon's efforts in the 1930s in three areas:

1. in his work with "music for the people".
2. in the chamber music genre.
3. in music "suitable for radio", which was to be "easily accessible without being musically lightweight".

1. In Bentzon's works with art music for the people we have seen how the choral pieces of 1933-36 became ever simpler in structure. There was a similar simplification in the instrumental amateur music. The variations for amateur orchestra on the ballad *Lave og Jon* (1928) had proved difficult to play for the young amateurs. This was not the case with his next work, *Morgen- og Aftenmusik for Amatørorkester, Op. 20a,b* (1931), but here on the other hand we encounter the "incredible tedium" that typified so much of the *Gebrauchsmusik* of the period. Bentzon tried to avoid this by adding professional solo parts to the simple amateur structure. At New Year 1932-33 came *Three Pieces for Solo Instruments and Orchestra: Concertino I - Trio - Concertino II*. Of its origin he wrote:

The background was the presentation in Baden-Baden in 1929 of a collection of amateur compositions (*Gebrauchsmusik*), the incredible tedium of which gave me the idea that one could liven up the technical inadequacies by introducing a "professional" solo instrument. The idea is hardly wrong, but it was not until the *Concertino Op. 23* that I managed it with some success! The pieces in this book fall rather uncomfortably between two stools....The style - especially in the trio - is decidedly character polyphony. Quite natural for *me* - but hardly popular.<sup>32</sup>

The next work in this genre, *Minstrel Concertino for solo violin and violin ensemble, Op. 23*,<sup>33</sup> was composed around New Year 1934-35 and dedicated to Richard Paulsen, who wrote as follows about its genesis:

In the winter of 1934 I practiced this piece (the variations on *Lave og Jon*) with the pupils at the YMCA training college, where we played it at a gathering for parents. We invited Jørgen to one of the last rehearsals to hear the result. When he and I left together after the rehearsal...we were in complete agreement that the task was too much for us. "But now I will do a piece for you that you can play!". An hour later Jørgen was on the

phone. “Now I have finished the piece. Since it’s difficult for you to get a bass, cello and viola, not to mention wind instruments, I will write it exclusively for violins. It will be for a solo violin and a four part violin section, and it will be called “Minstrel Concertino”. The first movement will be a kind of pastorale in 6/4 time and in the third movement we will plunge into the “minstrelsh”. To vary the sound picture I will have the middle movement performed by five solo strings”. I even think he told me the number of bars in the different movements. But about a year passed before he began writing it down, and during that time I reminded him several times about the piece. “You’ll end up forgetting it!”. “No”, said Jørgen, “it is well stored in its drawer up in my brainbox, and the day I get the time to write it down I’ll just take it out of the drawer”. One day, the piece was finished, and I was invited to Gentofte to see the manuscript and furnish it with bowing marks. The piece was exactly as indicated over the phone a year before.”<sup>54</sup>

The Minstrel Concertino was frequently performed both in Denmark and abroad, and this inspired Bentzon to write another two works in the same genre: *Sinfonia seria*, *Op. 33* for solo flute, strings and piano (1937) and *Sinfonia buffa*, *Op. 35* for solo trumpet, strings, piano and bass drum (1939). The titles gave him problems; in a letter to his friend Richard Hove he wrote: “I have written (partly mean to write) two orchestral pieces for amateur ensemble, one serious and one cheerful. I will not call them “overtures”, for they do not have to “open” anything whatsoever. I have called them “Sinfonia seria” and “Sinfonia buffa”, since I mean the word “sinfonia” in its older, more neutral sense. But what good will that do me? People will think it is a “symphony”, and if I write “one movement”, they will think it is a movement of a symphony and I am back at square one”.<sup>55</sup> The correct form “buffa” was changed in the printed version to the incorrect but more familiar concept “buffo”.

Despite the above rather grumpy remarks Bentzon himself was very satisfied with his works, “which are the first of a new epoch.” In this he was referring not only to a long series of important works that began to come in quick succession from these years on, but also to his personal circumstances. After the break-up of his marriage to Michala he had for some years led a roving life, living with family and friends, and only in 1939 moved with his new wife Karen to a charming, isolated home in the old cavalry wing of the former Hørsholm Palace north of Copenhagen. The home was beautifully furnished, for example with a dining room that had belonged to Holger Drachmann. In his letters to Hove, Bentzon



On moving to Hørsholm, north of Copenhagen, Bentzon had given up the work at the Folkemusikskole and thus had more time for his family and composing. This was evident from a new, more relaxed appearance (summer 1946).

repeatedly spoke of his pleasure in the new home and his new life. In the new marriage he had the children Viggo and Ulla, and the calm family life in the beautiful surroundings was undoubtedly a great source of inspiration to him in those years, when the situation in the Danish musical world and the political situation in Europe was not otherwise encouraging.

In 1933 the saxophone virtuoso Sigurd Rascher had been expelled from Germany. His instrument presumably did not have the proper “Aryan” tone. He came to Denmark and in 1933-38 worked as a teacher at the Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen. He thus gained a foothold in Danish musical life and soon became great friends with Bentzon, who in the summer of 1935 wrote his first “Racconto” with the extraordinarily demanding saxophone part for Rascher. In the winter of 1938/39 it was followed by *Introduction, Variations and Rondo for Sax Solo and String*

*Orchestra*, also written for and dedicated to Rascher, who premiered the concerto on Danish radio in March 1939, and later in innumerable places abroad.

In the years 1936-40 Bentzon composed only one work for choir, but on the other hand one of the most important: *En romersk Fortælling, Op. 32* (A Roman Tale), written in the spring of 1937. The ensemble is soprano and baritone solo, mixed choir and piano, and the work was meant for the *Studenterkoret* that Karl Clausen and Finn Høffding had established as a continuation of the *Gymnasiekoret* or high school choir. The text was an extremely frank tale taken from the Latin author Petronius’ *Satyricon*, about a mourning widow and a soldier on sentry duty who forget their “duties” and instead abandon themselves to each other. Their dalliance seems about to have disastrous consequences, but the problem is solved in a way that is as elegant as it is immoral.

After the premiere in August 1939 Vagn Holmboe gave a particularly laudatory account of the work and concluded that in the music Bentzon had found a new beauty and an idiom that was both generally comprehensible and artistically valuable.<sup>56</sup> But - art or otherwise - the review sparked off a bitter feud in the columns of *Dansk Musiktidsskrift*, since certain circles considered the text of the work blasphemous. Bentzon himself refused to respond to attacks of this kind, whereas Høffding, who had been responsible for the performance, warmly defended both text and music; for another six months there was a storm of indignant protests and personal attacks on the composer.

In 1928-36 Bentzon had composed more than twenty choral songs, all different in structure and character, and none in pure homophonic style. But in his later years, apart from the large choral work *Jorum* (1943), he wrote little for choir, and what he did write was simple, folk-like songs with homophonic settings. From 1940 comes *Lyse Land* (Land of Light) with a text by Alex Garff, a song which, with its simple national character, was sung much during the Occupation. Later came a number of simple, beautiful songs for male choir. But let us return to the starting-point: Bentzon's efforts to create a "people's" art music in the Denmark of the 1930s.

2. It would be hard to imagine anything that was less "people's music" than Bentzon's progressive chamber music works from the 1920. And indeed in the first years of the *folkemusikskole* the chamber music was completely shelved and it was only in 1935 that he arrived at a quite new, simpler genre: the *Racconto*. The Bentzon *Racconto* is a *narrative* in music - a short, one-movement piece for 3-5 instruments with different timbres. For each instrument there is just one characteristic theme, and as in a cultivated conversation the various instruments are allowed to speak in turn and are commented or countered by the others in a dialogue of character polyphony in the form of sets of variations on on the individual themes. Bentzon wrote a total of six *Racconti*, but spread over two periods, where the first three, which appeared in 1935-37, were kept in the "light" style, while the last three were written in 1944-49 in a more complex and "artistic" musical idiom.

The first *Racconto* (*Tale*), for *Flute, Saxophone (E ♭), Bassoon and Double Bass*, *Op. 25* was composed in July 1935 and dedicated to Sigurd Rascher. The *Racconto* has no number. It evidently only became clear after the publication of the work that this was a form that offered potential for a continued set. Learning from this mistake, Bentzon later added to both *Mikrofoni* and the piano sonata a "No. 1", although they were never followed by a "No. 2". The first *Racconto* was played a lot, both in Denmark and abroad; yet never - despite Bentzon's great efforts - on Danish radio (in Bentzon's lifetime).

From 15.7.1936 we have a first draft for *Racconto No. 2, Op. 30 for flute, violin, viola and cello* (published posthumously in 1959). The piece has much in common with the first *Racconto*, except that the character polyphony contrasts are emphasized in it by a marked use of polyrhythm - in the Corelli manner with 6/4 against 4/4 - and some polytonality; but beyond this the work is typified by great simplicity of expression.

*Racconto (Tale) No. 3, Op. 31 for Oboe, Clarinet (A) and Bassoon* was composed immediately afterwards in the spring of 1937. The character polyphony here is considerably more complex, and the harsh dissonance effects recall Bentzon's breakthrough work, the sonatina of 1924 for almost the same ensemble: flute, clarinet and bassoon.

Bentzon's *Racconti*, with their simple structures, were very suitable for radio broadcasting, but among the chamber music works one in particular, *Mikrofoli No. 1*, was composed directly for radio transmission. The work was composed in 1939 and dedicated to his wife Karen. It was written for flute, violin, cello, baritone and piano, and the Latin text has the tone of medieval goliardic poetry - but may have been written by Bentzon himself. There are three movements, and in the concluding *Hymn* the text translates as follows:

One thing is necessary.  
Brotherly love, good will, patience.  
Listen: one thing is necessary  
in this time of hate and discord.

The subject, "the victory of love over evil" recurs in *A Roman Tale* and later in the opera *Saturnalia*. Although *Mikrofoli* is couched in a moderate, subdued musical language, it is not "easy music", either for listeners then or in our own day.

Behind all Bentzon's chamber works throughout his life lay a number of études for solo instruments. In these he tried out his melodic expressive potential and his variation technique. The solo works were hardly of great importance as concert music, but in their respective fields they have become quite commonly used in the training at the Danish music academies, and they are frequently used as test pieces by the Danish symphony orchestras.

3. Finally, let us look at Bentzon's troubles with the "music suitable for radio", which was to be "easily accessible without being musically lightweight". In principle he was sceptical about the way radio made listeners passive, and not least about the *quality* of the music that was broadcast.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand he was not blind to the fact that his future listeners would more likely be found in front of

the speakers than in the concert hall. And if he was to capture their attention the music would have to be telling, appealing *and short!*

After the failure of the “Dramatic Overture” of 1922, he had stayed away from orchestral music for twelve years, but now ventured a new opus in this genre. “*Photomontage*”, *Overture for Orchestra*, *Op. 27* was written in February-May 1934 under the influence of the mood of dread that had spread through Europe since 1933. This collage-like piece has elements from American jazz and film music - *The Big Bad Wolf* - and in the horns one glimpses the Flemish canon *Lieber tod als Sklav'* - Fritz Jöde's favourite canon. The piece is set with impressive, rather coarse instrumentation dominated by brass and percussion.

In February 1936, as a counterpart to the “international” overture, he wrote a national work, *Variations for a small Orchestra*, *Op. 28*, whose introductory horn theme recalls Danish folk music. From the initial C minor the variations pass through the minor cycle of fifths back to the starting-point, where the theme is combined with N.V. Gade's *På Sjølund's fagre sletter*. Both works were well received when played by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, and were played frequently in subsequent years.

Bentzon came more and more to regard the radio as his most important concert hall. So it was necessary to write “easy music” which would not be squeezed into the very limited time set aside for serious works, but which could be featured in one of the many programmes of light entertainment music. At Tivoli Gardens, too, especially when the war closed off the Danish borders, there was a great need for light music with a national element. This prompted works like *Rapsodi over Cykleviserne* (Rhapsody on the Cycling Songs) (1936) and later *Three Orchestral Pieces* (1941).

The tendency to write with “lightness” in mind recurs in Bentzon's *Symphony No. 1 in D major* from 1941, composed over motifs from the works of Charles Dickens (*The Pickwick Papers*). For the five movements are formed so they can be performed separately, in a selection, or together. The symphony was played for the first time on Danish radio on 9th May 1941, and the criticism was predominantly negative. Vagn Holmboe, who was normally sympathetic to Bentzon, regretted in particular that in this symphony he had put together a series of movements that “fall rather uncomfortably between two stools”. Holmboe was very critical of a number of points and cast direct doubts on Bentzon's artistic integrity in this work.<sup>38</sup> In his answer Bentzon was unable to conceal that he too felt there was a gap between the music that satisfied his own artistic requirements - but which no one could be bothered listening to - and the music that audiences and the radio wanted, but which was written more out of duty than inclination.<sup>39</sup> The hard



criticism undoubtedly contributed to the fact that from the summer of 1941 Bentzon abandoned “easy music” and instead resumed the line from the progressive period of the 1920s.

## 9. Drive - Growth - Construction, 1941

By now it was clear to Bentzon that the “people’s music” idiom was not to evoke any greater response than the exclusive art music had given him before - perhaps rather the opposite. With *Chamber Concerto No. 3, Op. 39 for Clarinet solo and small Orchestra* Bentzon took up the thread from the art music of the twenties. The ensemble - bassoons, horns, percussion and strings - is more or less as in Nielsen’s clarinet concerto, by which he was undoubtedly inspired. The work was written in January-July 1941. The three movements are very transparently orchestrated and solo-like in all parts. The solo part was intended for Aage Oxenvad, who took on the task and who, although he was getting on in years, played the concerto with great success on Danish radio on 1st September 1942. Reviews were on the whole positive; only the Nazi paper *Fædrelandet* thought “that it sounded like a small, mentally deficient child who had drunkenly stolen a clarinet and was now fantasizing on it - Can one reasonably demand more?” Bentzon added sarcastically in a letter to Hove.<sup>60</sup>

Soon afterwards a new art music work followed: *Sinfonietta No. 1 for String Orchestra, Op. 41*. The three movements were written in August-October 1941 and kept in a cheerful musical language without use of character polyphony. But Bentzon also had great plans in the “popular” department. In a letter to Hove of 20.1.1942 he wrote:

You know I have sworn never to have anything to do with the Royal Theatre; I lack the stamina for the kind of war of nerves that goes on there. My skirmishes with the Radio are already more than enough for me. But oaths are there to be broken, and now I have gone off my rocker. I am toying with the idea of continuing the musical (but not the textual) line from “A Roman Tale” in an “Opera burlesque” with motifs from *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius....

I hardly dare expect any great stylistic musical renewal from this work, but probably a good deal of useful experience - for better or worse. And then there is the fact that any composer with self-respect must sooner or later break his neck at Kongens Nytorv....but I would

prefer to undergo this fate while I am still young enough to pick myself up and take my revenge....I will as far as possible refrain from getting literary assistance with the text. The poetic quality really hardly matters at all, and it is so amusing to create words and music at the same time. Well, that was that. I hope to hear from you soon - and that you do not think I have lost my senses.<sup>61</sup>

The opera *Saturnalia* took the form of a “number opera” with an overture and 26 numbers. The two acts were written from March 1942 until September 1943, the overture in May 1944. In this period Bentzon had no opportunity to take leave from his job at the Supreme Court. For two years he spent his evenings and nights drawing up the manuscript, fair copy and transcription of the parts and piano extracts: “Otherwise I am drowning in fair copies, which is profoundly boring and slow, when one is like the lady who declared: “I *cannot* make bad coffee” - I cannot write ugly notes. It makes it difficult that real music pens have vanished from the market. At present I am learning to cut quills; they are the ideal music pens; one should never write with anything else.”<sup>62</sup>



*During the war it was impossible to get real music pens in Denmark. So Bentzon taught himself the ancient art of writing with a quill and is seen here at the Supreme Court during a break in the proceedings, working on the opera Saturnalia (probably the spring of 1944).*

*Saturnalia* was premiered at the Royal Theatre at the worst possible time: 15th December 1944, just before Christmas and at a time when the Occupation was weighing heavily on Denmark. The reviews were mixed; the greatest praise was reserved for the many choral and ballet scenes, while the dramatic passages were considered weaker and the orchestral writing thin and unexciting. However, Bentzon was not dissatisfied, and wrote in a New Year letter to Hove:

*Saturnalia* works well on the stage. The Theatre is doing its best, and people are amused. The press was a lot of odd nonsense, a result of the uncertainty that on the whole dominates the genre. Typical that no two reviewers agreed on one thing, and typical that there will always be

mudslinging when I do not behave myself, i.e. stick to chamber music and the like, where I am a certified practitioner....Well, perhaps I should spend the years I have left continuing the series of chamber concertos, Racconti etc., but it bores me just to produce things that for myself are far too straightforward. I must have problems....A Symphony No. 2 is also rustling in the wings - has been for a year or two; but it will take more energy than I have at the moment.<sup>63</sup>

In 1943 *Dansk Mensural-Cantori*, founded and headed throughout the years by the organist Julius Foss, had its 25th anniversary. For the occasion the choir announced a competition, in which Bentzon won First Prize for the choral work *Jorum*, *Op. 40* to a text by the Swedish poet Axel Karlfeldt. The eight stanzas of the poem are about Death ("Jorum"), who wanders around with his rotting violin and carries off young and old, rich and poor. The text is strongly expressive and this is exploited musically in a set of variations on the introductory two-part theme. The work presents great vocal challenges and must be considered Bentzon's most difficult choral work.

In *Jorum* Bentzon had once more dealt with death, a subject he was shortly to face in real life. In the autumn of 1943 he lost his father: and shortly after the Liberation in 1945 his mother, with whom he had strong bonds throughout life, died too. Soon afterwards the old house in Hornbæk, where he had composed most of his works in the summer holidays, was sold (his childhood home in Ewaldsgade had been sold some years before).

Despite private grief, he succeeded in 1944-46 in producing a series of important chamber works. In May-June 1946 he had written himself dry and spent the time reviewing his manuscripts from 1920-36, furnishing them with detailed notes on origins and performances - notes which have been invaluable to this presentation.

But the symphony still ran in his head; and in the summer of 1946 he began writing down *Symphony No. 2 i Bb major*. To have time for the work Bentzon took leave for the whole autumn from the Supreme Court, and the composition of the three movements, *Drive - Growth - Construction*, was concluded on 3rd April 1947. During the work Bentzon wrote to Hove on Christmas Day 1946:

...I believe in the necessity of a certain *Drive* in people, a will to overcome difficulties, even if the result of the fine efforts is as meagre as can be. And I believe that there is a constant *Growth* surrounding us (sometimes also within us, not least in our emotional life) whether the world goes

one way or the other. And finally I believe in the value of productive awareness: *Construction*, the only thing that gives mankind a special place in living nature. - Does that sound insipid - or vague? It is at any rate the kind of thoughts that have been occupying me in the work on my Second Symphony, which I have been brooding over for five years....

With his Second Symphony Bentzon created a synthesis of his life's work: from the Romantic chord sequences of the first movement through the expressive, chromatically coloured melody of the second movement to the double set of variations of the finale, culminating in a *Conclusione* which sums up stylistic features from the whole work and rings out on a unison Bb!! The structure of the finale with its set of variations, middle section, new set of variations and coda (*Conclusione*) recalls, not only in form but also in the motivic material, the excellent chamber work of the progressive period in the 1920s, *Variazioni interrotti*. The symphony was premiered on Danish radio on 22.1.1948, and had a surprisingly positive reception. Hove too was enthusiastic, and Bentzon replied with the following wonderful lines:

Your positive assessment of my Second Symphony pleased me greatly. But otherwise I feel - for once - about that piece that it does not make so much of an impression on me whether people like it, for I think myself that it is *so* magnificent. With all (or almost all) my other works I have an alert sense of self-criticism. When I hear them, my basic mood is always chagrin over what could have been better or could have been placed or expressed better. But if they told me that everything of mine was to be wiped from the face of the earth, but that I could choose one piece that would be allowed to live, I would probably - with slight hesitation between that piece and *A Roman Tale* - choose the symphony. The *Tale* - despite its positive message - is rather on the bitter side. The symphony on the other hand may be rather optimistic; but in it I was able to give of myself more boldly and more directly than in any earlier piece: from raw, robust, "down-to-earth" boldness (cf. Holmboe's criticism) to a sophisticated sublimation that might perhaps cause the alert ear some difficulties. Several people have been shocked by the trumpet theme of the first movement (it had a slightly banal effect because the woodwind section was quite drowned out). But I don't care. Maybe I have an ordinariness complex. Actually I love banal music, as long as it isn't stupid or pretentiously inflated. Without conceding that

I might be guilty of anything like that, I would emphatically claim that one is allowed to say “bum” even in a symphony, if only one knows what one is saying. But if one says - well “B..” - but thinks one is saying “scent of violets” or “Semiramis” or the like - then something’s wrong. Wagner and Verdi are both sometimes very ordinary, but Wagner’s banalities are pretentious, and for that reason among others he is a poorer composer than Verdi. Even old Beethoven can now and then be very run-of-the-mill, but would one have him otherwise? It may make him less divine, but on the other hand a damn sight more human, and no one can convince me that he had no idea what he was doing....If I was a musical academic (God forbid!) I would write a doctoral thesis on “the aesthetics of banality”. It’s considerably more relevant than subtle analyses of hexachordal progressions in Carl Nielsen’s later compositions.

Danish Music mustn’t become an institute where everyone potters about in his own little special laboratory; there’s Riisager experimenting with high jinks. There’s Niels Viggo with elephants and blue smoke etc. etc. I have no doubt that all the little theoreticians would be delighted to see us like that; it would save them the trouble of “placing” us, which does seem to be something extremely important....<sup>64</sup>

## 10. Coda, 1948-51

The work - on *Saturnalia* and then on the Second Symphony - had been a great effort for Bentzon. In 1947-49 he suffered from increasing fatigue which made it increasingly hard for him to compose. At the same time - rightly or wrongly - he felt persecuted by other people, forgotten and abandoned by the musical world and the public. When the newspapers spoke of “the composer Bentzon”, it pained him that they now meant Niels Viggo Bentzon, not himself. Bentzon had invited his good friend and colleague at the Supreme Court Erik Hyllested to a concert of contemporary music, and the latter writes:

The same evening a minor symphonic work by him was to be performed at a concert where some modern music was presented. B. was of course greatly interested in this and got us tickets. On the way to the concert, which was at the Royal Academy, he said that he would prefer not to take a curtain call, and dearly hoped they would not ask him to; it was so embarrassing for him to stand there bowing. His wish was granted.

When his piece was over, there was only weak applause, which soon died out, and then they went on with the next item....<sup>65</sup>

Bentzon's letters to Hove, too, were gradually filled with bitter lamentations over his adverse fate, and the everyday work at the Supreme Court became more and more difficult for him to manage. On 23rd April 1948 there was an annual meeting of Bentzon's "baby" *De Danske Folkemusikskoler*. He had himself been one of the prime movers behind the establishment of the association and for several years had been chairman, then later a member of the board. His failing health prevented him from attending the annual meeting, but he had announced that he was standing for re-election. However he was not re-elected, since according to the published minutes "no one wished to nominate him". This was a hard blow, and he wrote to his friend Richard Paulsen: "I have been thrown off the board of *De Danske Folkemusikskoler*. It is quite my own fault, for I have not had time to make an effort - but they *might* have said something to me beforehand. I *have* after all not *quite* been an unimportant person in that work".

But the worst thing for Bentzon was that his musical inspiration had gone, and he could hardly compose. A new "Minstrel Concertino" was begun in the spring of 1948, but not finished. Bentzon did however finish his last major chamber work *Racconto No. 6, Op. 49* for string quartet, which was dedicated to Vagn Holmboe. In the manuscript he has added "Qualis artifex pereo".<sup>66</sup> The string quartet was finished on 12th March 1949, and the same evening he wrote to Hove:

Today I have completed my *Racconto No. 6* for string quartet. It is to be dedicated to none other than Holmboe, whom I consider - probably not wholly without reason - my real successor in Danish music. I have thought about - but don't know if I will do it (people can be so stupid) - giving it the motto "Qualis artifex pereo" - the late Emperor Nero's famous last words. I hope you understand the perspective - both in self-assessment and self-irony - and that you also understand that an artist can perish in many ways, for example when nobody cares to play what he creates. I have been an eternity writing this little piece, over eighteen months. Well, for the first year it only lay around my brain box, I didn't dare put a note to paper. The thing is that with the form I have adopted here I have made a terrible rod for my own back. If a "Racconto" is to be what I want it to be, it must have an immensely firm inner integrity and have a quite "rounded" effect, - as "rounded" - shall we say - as a tale by Hans Christian Andersen. You must feel that it has said it all, and that

absolutely no more should or can be said. If it just has the effect of a “first movement”, it has failed irredeemably. But achieving this requires an incredibly concentrated way of writing. There is no room for the long releases of tension, for “preparation” and all that; the contrasts must be felt quite as much simultaneously as successively, the mood must be maintained uninterrupted from the first to the last note - indeed, there should preferably be tension in every single bar. But to manage that, one’s soul must inevitably be in a constant state of tension - almost at breaking-point, while at the same time the hand must be so absolutely sure that it does not tremble the least bit, and that is a situation that does not happen every day when, like me, one is disturbed and spiritually cluttered up by all sorts of irrelevant things. I can’t resist enclosing a small sample; you can tell me if the fruit tastes sweet enough....

Bentzon then talks about himself and his relationship with his surroundings:

Inside the innermost circle (or sphere, if you like), where the real things happen, where a saint and a baboon live, a Hellene and a hellraiser - and much more, side by side - there I am completely alone, have not a single human being I can talk to. Best perhaps to Niels Viggo - yet not really, although he understands me better than most....The result is that my relationship with my surroundings and life on the whole becomes strangely abstract, symbolic and unreal. And this cannot fail to “sink in”. So it is characteristic that in some periods I drink far too much - partly from sheer fatigue, partly “symbolically” so I can somehow feel the veil that separates me from reality....If it’s any comfort to you, this letter was written in a state of stone cold sobriety.

After this “confession”, you’d think I suffered from a profoundly split personality. Perhaps I do too, but the odd thing is that I do not feel that to be so myself. For me, “Death and the Woodcutter” and - shall we say - the string quartet op. 15 are both equally valid expressions of myself. They have simply grown - purely geographically - from opposite ends of my little mental garden. “Death and the Woodcutter” looks out on the road, while the string quartet lies back behind the bushes and trees, where you sit if you don’t want to be stared at.

Just imagine, I think Carl Nielsen - despite the enormous differences in richness of talent, background, temperament etc. etc. felt exactly as I do. I knew him for 16 years; I was very close to him, I loved and admired

him. But I never succeeded in finding out what was actually going inside that man, not even when I thought we were closest...

The following letter to Richard Hove came six months later and was written from the mental hospital in Nykøbing, Zealand, on 24.9.49.

...I am now fortunately free of the anxiety attacks that plagued me greatly in the beginning, but I sleep badly, and it is bad when I have to lie in bed from half past seven in the evening until 12 noon. There is plenty of time to think about this and that. I have among other things lain reviewing my whole musical output, and there is something I can't work out. It may be because I am crazy, but I think my music sounds fundamentally different from almost all other music, and surely not just in my own ears? Is that a basic flaw? The fact is that people in general do not like what I do. I have always been honest, I know that. But I suppose people do not like honesty - they want dreams and lies and Tchaikovsky's B minor concerto. But then there's the odd thing that the great art, the art that stands unbudgingly firm - Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms etc. - that's bloody honest. There's something wrong here. The explanation may be that what I do is a lot of rubbish; then it's understandable that people don't like it - although there's so much rubbish that people like - Well - *schwamm darüber!*

My second symphony is to be played on Radio München in February, and my new quartet (Racconto 6) is to be played at the Breuning Bachers' 30th anniversary - I don't know when. Was it a premonition when I gave it the motto "Qualis artifex pereo"? As I lie here I have the feeling that I will never write a tolerable piece again. The tones that run through my head here at the institution are a lot of confused tommy-rot that is no good for anything. Now I am to have my shot, and then there will be a few bad hours when the whole ward will be roaring, screaming, singing, howling, crowing, bawling and whistling in an ever-rising crescendo until it is calmed down with suitable quantities of sugar water. It's hard when you haven't yet got so far that you can go into a coma and roar and crow with the rest of them. Hopefully that will come soon...

S.N.S. 22/10 1949.

...My Racconto No. 6 - as you have perhaps seen - had a decent reception. If I can mobilize a little energy I will see about making a



decent fair copy of the score so we can get it published fairly quickly. My second symphony is to be played on Radio München in February. If it arouses any interest I have devious plans of getting the Opera down there to take on *Saturnalia* in its new reworked form. I have a good man who can help me to make a decent German text. But all that depends on the insulin helping properly. I feel better already after about 14-15 jolts. Now I can only hope that my condition stabilizes, for the last 2-3 years have been bad; I can see that clearly now...



Jørgen Bentzon, 1951.

In December 1949 Bentzon was discharged, and spent Christmas in Florence. But he was very indignant about the miserable care he had been given at the mental hospital, and as soon as he was back in Denmark, he wrote an article in the newspaper *Politiken* - "The mentally ill" - where, in calm and measured terms, he described the inhuman conditions that prevailed in the wards. The article aroused great attention and was supported by a number of leading psychiatrists, who said he was right in his courageous and justified accusations. To one of his fellow-sufferers from the ward, the composer Ole-Carsten Green, he wrote on 20.2.1950: "...I myself - despite a wonderful recreative trip to Italy - am dead tired and drag myself through the duties of the day like a dotard. If things go on that way I may as well say goodbye to all future artistic production at once; I don't have a *glimmering* of the energy required."

Nevertheless he managed during his convalescence in the spring of 1950 to finish a *Minstrel Concertino No. 2* for two solo violins and strings, which had been two years in the making. In his last letter to Richard Hove on 23.8.1950 Bentzon wrote his musical testament:

I have had a long and very lazy holiday and am more or less well. But I am still incredibly tired, if anything more than in the early summer. The least mental effort floors me. Heaven knows how I shall manage when I start again on Monday at the Supreme Court. I have returned so much from the dead that I have started work on a new little piece, some "Monologues" for solo violin, which I intend to ask Else Marie Bruun to

launch once they are finished. It is a manageable, surmountable task. My musical idiom seems to have become very stable, but it goes terribly slowly when one is so short of energy.

Yesterday I had one of the most considerable shocks in my life in the form of a statement of gramophone record sales in the January quarter. *A Roman Tale* and the *Fables* (despite a particularly fine review, e.g. in *Politiken*) had sold a total of 10 - ten. Oh well...People can't even be bothered with those things, and yet they belong to the easier end of my output. It is unlikely to encourage the gramophone companies to take more from yours truly...

The productive situation in Danish music is not particularly encouraging at present. Riisager carries on scooping from the same old barrel. Høffding and I are out of the picture. Tarp and Schultz have for all practical purposes turned their backs on serious music. One still hears something from Holmboe and Koppel - but it doesn't add anything to the impression one already has. Niels Viggo is in fact pretty well alone in stirring up the duckpond. Among those who are under thirty, I cannot see a talent of any real calibre. And as for a whole new approach - which surely should come from the youngest - one sees no trace of it, either here or elsewhere. I had a very detailed talk with Ernst Toch this summer. According to him things don't look any brighter in the USA - and the Russians are only allowed to play the barrel-organ....

You don't need to have any great gift of prophecy to know what will happen to my music one day when I am dust and ashes and can't pull the strings myself any more. If anyone is certain to join the Otto Malling and Gustav Helsted brigade - it is the undersigned. And this despite the fact that not a few, even sensible people, thought I had talent. But I suppose there were also some people who thought that about Malling and Helsted.<sup>67</sup>

Despite his fatigue Bentzon managed to write another series of brilliant articles, including "Om kancellistil" (On the Civil Service style) (29th Jan. 1951), and a few days later he wrote to Green: "Have you been following my cavortings in *Politiken*? I'm damned if I know how it can be, but all I have to do is fart in a newspaper and it triggers off a week of discussions with my name popping up here there and everywhere. In the "leader" they give me "what for" - then on the next page I am praised to the skies. And yet the truth is that I don't give a hoot for any of it - that my newspaper nonsense is *only* a surrogate for my urge to tame the intractable

tones and say something that will outlast the daily grind. But the damned tones keep resisting, so probably in a short while there will be a *new* article, even sillier than the first.”<sup>68</sup>

He did however succeed in finishing *Monologues for Solo Violin*, which was to be his last work. On 1st April 1951 the five movements were finished, and the fair copy delivered to Else Marie Bruun. Jørgen Bentzon’s resistance had broken down, and he died at home in Hørsholm on 9th July 1951. At his own wish the funeral was to take place in the strictest privacy. The last letter to his friend Ole-Carsten Green ends as follows:

Goodbye, my dear friend! Write again soon. I can’t resist adding a little poem I scribbled down yesterday. It follows here:

**To Holger Drachmann**

my famous poet-uncle

I remember you best in the glow of the fireplace,  
- I sat at your feet on my stool -  
your white hair, - but especially your voice,  
so soft, - but rather thin, old.

Is it, I wonder, just imagination when I think  
that you patted me gently on the cheek  
and smiled and whispered these words:  
“You pretty boy - beware of *women* .”

Yes, I was good-looking - but if *these* were your words  
is no longer easy to say.  
But what useless advice: “Be careful”! -  
what *is* one, after all, without a *girl*.

No, had you known what was beginning to develop  
in the boy who sat there so quietly,  
it would have had greater value if your advice had been:  
“Beware of *Eros*, my boy”.

The god Eros is lenient in the very early years, -  
but the years pass so quickly  
and when the skin wrinkles and our hair turns grey,  
then he roasts the soul to ashes.

Oh if we could meet, old man,  
and talk intimately of these things;  
about our erotic adventures,  
and - what we got out of it all.

Some *pleasure*, - to be sure , - but the *pain* was greater  
and, - what is most important for the spirit - :  
an eternal, unquenchable thirst for beauty  
that forced us to take up our pens.

*I used tones as you used words -*  
*glowing - smiling - caustic.*  
*I range, I suppose, to middle height, you were great, -*  
*but we both sang in praise of - the same.*

You, old poet, you roving journeyman,  
there you stand in plaster on the shelf  
and stare fixedly towards the window  
as if you still longed for the sun.

I nod to your petrified features, -  
You glare at me rather absent-mindedly in return -  
a copy of the *flesh*, - but the *soul* has gone,  
and the eyes are glazed - dead.

The crucial distinction between autumn and spring -  
is a play between remembering and forgetting.  
I see again your silver-white hair  
and hear your gentle rusty voice.

In the circle of composers after Carl Nielsen, Jørgen Bentzon was the only one to take his musical point of departure in Nielsen's last, experimental period. Bentzon introduced European Expressionism into the Denmark of the 1920s and created a musical language that was - and still is - unique. He was an avant-garde composer before the concept was invented and as such unrecognized by his contemporaries. Perhaps now, a century after his birth, we are capable of hearing that this music was as valid an expression of the 20th century as Gade's and Hartmann's of the 19th century.

## NOTES

1. Bentzon's colleague and good friend Finn Høffding had been sent to the ISCM Music Days as music reviewer for the newspaper *Nationaltidende*.
2. Under the patronage of Prince von Fürstenberg the *Donaueschinger Kammermusik - Aufführungen zu Förderung zeitgenössischer Tonkunst* was held in 1921-26. The efforts to associate the performance of contemporary music with the annual *Jugendmusikwoche* prompted Paul Hindemith and Fritz Jöde to move the music festival to a more popular setting. This was the origin of *Deutsche Kammermusik Baden-Baden* in 1927-29. From 1930 it continued in the capital as *Neue Musik Berlin*. After a break of a few years it then continued in Donaueschingen from 1950. See Thrun 1995, 368-423.
3. Høffding 1951,
4. Bentzon MSB 11. Bentzon's original manuscripts from 1921-51 are collected in bound manuscript volumes (MSB). To the works of 1921-36 Bentzon added manuscript notes on their origins, performance dates and publication. The manuscript notes were added in May-June 1946 and are printed in Morten Topp: *Jørgen Bentzons kammermusik*, unpublished dissertation Copenhagen University 1962.
5. Høffding 1967/ 2, 5-6.
6. The original building has now been demolished.
7. Bentzon was 11 when Drachmann died in 1908. I can give the following information about the Bentzon, Drachmann, Hartmann and Weis families and their musical relationships:  
**The Bentzon family:** Lars Larsen B. (1833-93) m. Christine Vilhelmine Bang, had the sons Povl, Viggo, Aage and Svend. Povl B. (1853-1943) m. Harriet Vilhelmine Drachmann (half-sister of Holger Drachmann), with whom he had the children Inger, Edele, Poul Georg and Jørgen Liebenberg. Jørgen L. B. (1897-1954) m. first Michala Weis, with whom he had the children Adrian, Fridolin and Angelica; then m. Karen Nielsen, with whom he had the children Viggo and Ulla. Viggo B. (1861-1937) m. first Martha Drachmann (sister of Harriet); then m. Karen Emma Hartmann (grandchild of the composer J.P.E. Hartmann). Their son is the composer Niels Viggo Bentzon. Aage B.'s daughter was the music teacher Christy Bentzon, and Svend B.'s son was the flautist Johan Bentzon.  
**The Weis family:** Carl Mettus W. (1809-72) had the sons August and Andreas Peter. August W.'s son was the composer Flemming Weis. Andreas Peter W. had the children Michala (m. Jørgen B.), Adam and Ernst. Ernst W.'s son was the pianist Peter Weis.
8. In a small typewritten article (20 p.) Povl Bentzon has provided biographical information on J.B.'s childhood and youth. Until 1962 the article was among B.'s posthumous papers in Hørsholm, but it now seems to have been lost. The bulk of the information is given in my dissertation from 1962 (cf. note 4).
9. Morten Topp, unpublished dissertation, p. 68 (cf. note 4)

10. In a typewritten article of 1957 (8 pp.) Bentzon's good friend Richard Paulsen has written about his collaboration with J.B. at the folkemusikskole. Unpubl.
11. This statement was made in 1927 in a conversation with Professor Erik Abrahamsen. See Abrahamsen DMT 1927
12. During a review of B.'s posthumous papers in 1977 a number of juvenilia from 1915-20 were found in a trunk in the attic. See Topp 1978, 10-13.
13. Bentzon, MSB 1.
14. Bentzon, MSB 2.
15. Bentzon, MSB 3.
16. Ibid.
17. Bentzon, MSB 8.
18. Bentzon, MSB 5.
19. Bentzon, MSB 8.
20. Review in DMT 1928, p. 144.
21. Bentzon, MSB 7.
22. Høffding 1967/1, 5.
23. Bentzon, MSB 9,a,b.
24. Bentzon, MSB 10.
25. Bentzon, MSB 12.
26. Bentzon, MSB 11.
27. Bentzon MSB 14, and a discussion of the work in DMT 1931, p. 43.
28. Ibid.
29. Bentzon, MSB 13.
30. Paulsen: Erindringer... 1957, p. 1 (cf. note 10).
31. Arne Topp in Bentzon 1957, 22-23.
32. Bentzon, MSB 15.
33. Ove Jensen in Bentzon 1957, 34.
34. Geisler 1932, 7-20.
35. E. Hyllested, letter to Ole-Carsten Green, 7th Jan. 1952.
36. Paulsen: Erindringer... 1957, 4 (cf. note 10).
37. Michael Fjeldsøe has kindly drawn my attention to the fact that Hanns Eisler, in his choral work *Vorspruch*, op. 13,1 of 1927, uses a similar approach. There are such great resemblances between the two works that we must presume that Bentzon had heard Eisler's work in Berlin. See Fjeldsøe: Hanns Eisler, unpublished dissertation, Copenhagen University 1993, p. 55.
38. Folke- og Skolemusik, Vol. 1,9, WH 1935.
39. Paulsen: Erindringer... 1957, 2 (cf. note 10).
40. Paulsen: Erindringer ... 1957, 4-5 (cf. note 10)
41. Bentzon, MSB 16.
42. Bentzon, MSB 18.
43. Bentzon, MSB 16.
44. Bentzon, MSB 18.
45. Bentzon, letter to A. Topp. 1935.
46. Bentzon in a letter to Margrethe and Arne Topp, Nov. 1936.
47. Høffding: *Das Eisenbahngleichnis* (Erich Kästner), op. 26 for choir, piano and three saxophones (ad libitum), (1934). Ein Musicus wollt fröhlich sein (text from the 16th century, translated by Finn Høffding). Cantata for string orchestra and three-part choir, op. 19 (1931).
48. Paulsen: Erindringer ... 1957, 7 (cf. note 10)
49. This idea too may have come from Hanns Eisler, who uses similar material in his *Zeitungsausschnitte für Gesang und Klavier*, op. 11. Eisler spent extended periods in Denmark in 1934 and 1936.
50. Bentzon 1933, 237.
51. Bentzon 1933, 241.
52. Bentzon, MSB 15.

- 53 The Danish title, Musikantisk Concertino..., is difficult to translate. A musikant (in Danish or German) is a musician, but originally with connotations of the city musicians (waits etc.) or minstrels of the middle ages and later - i.e. of a certain informality, of "music-making" rather than high musical art.
54. Paulsen: Erindringer ... 1957, 5 (cf. note 10)
55. Richard Hove was a miller by profession and a consul in Thisted in northern Jutland. But he was also an amateur conductor and an active music writer who was very interested in contemporary Danish and Nordic music. From the years 1931-50, 62 letters from B. to Hove have been preserved, and are now in the Royal Library.
56. Vagn Holmboe, review in DMT, Aug. 1939. p. 173.
57. Bentzon 1929, 111.
58. Holmboe, review in DMT, April 1941, p. 69.
59. Bentzon, *ibid.*
60. Bentzon to Hove, 30.4.1941.
61. Bentzon to Hove, 20.1.1942.
62. Bentzon to Hove, 14.9.1943.
63. 30.12.1944.
64. Bentzon to Hove, 26.1.1948.
65. Hyllested to Green, 20.1.1952.
66. "What an artist dies with me!" The quotation is ascribed to the Emperor Nero.
67. Otto Malling (1848-1915), composer and organist at the cathedral Vor Frue Kirke; from 1899 principal of the Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen. Gustav Helsted (1857-1924), composer, succeeded Malling as organist at the cathedral in 1915.
68. Bentzon to Green, 6.2.1951.