

- Yes, that must be him. The scene is *De Ijsbreker*, a music cafe in the heart of Amsterdam. Halfway through the Gaudeamus festival. A crowd of people at the bar. I am confused, a foreigner standing patiently in a ticket queue. He draws attention to himself in this locale the same way as his music does, music that I shall come to know well during countless conversations in the small hours of the night over glasses of whisky - and yes, there was cigarette smoke - in his apartment right next to the Pompidou Centre in Paris. His apartment is right above mine, and while my apartment is still characterised by a certain student-like "charmlessness" and "why unpack my suitcase, I'm going home in two months anyway" appearance, his apartment seems to belong to someone who is, if not cosmopolitan, at least someone who knows how to make himself comfortable. He is polite, friendly, but one senses an iron fist in the silk glove. This is a person who is used to relying on his own resources. At least musically.



Klas Torstensson (Photo Theo Coolsma)

## AS VAGUE AS THIS GOAL MAY BE...

### Asbjørn Schaathun

Klas Torstensson, Swedish composer, resident of Holland for the last 19 years:

- It was a Norwegian, Per Johannes Hartmann who started it all. I studied composition with him when I was a student at Ingesund (Community College for Music in Arvika, Sweden) between 1969-71. The first thing he said to me was "I am willing to teach you, but only if we begin after

1945". So it was agreed, although later it turned out that we did go back to much earlier music than that. He had been a student of Luigi Nono and had spent a lot of time in Vienna and Italy, so he came from that serial school.

- Was it his personality or his technical and formal background that became most important to you?

- The latter was of course very important for an 18 year-old sitting at the piano, dreaming of being

a composer. It was important to structure the formal aspects of the whole. But above all, he was someone who could guide my budding talents. And he could give me the enthusiasm I needed to take my work seriously; get away from the romantic composer image acquired at the age of 18. But I don't believe that there are direct links between my current method of composition and that period. Other things have meant much more later.

- So you went to Holland in order to study at the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht...

- Actually, it is difficult to put a name to it, because later other things later came to mean more to me; first, the contact with computers, and second I entered, almost right from the start, the milieu surrounding the ASKO-ensemble. So meeting a new medium and coming into contact with musicians were more important.

- Are you still a foreigner in Holland?

- I don't believe that the Dutch consider me a foreigner. Cultural life in Holland is very open; it is a kind of conglomerate that results, among other things, from the country's geographic situation and from the old tradition of having many "non-Dutch" active here. I was, of course, also very young when I arrived, but after having grown into the musical scene here, working with various ensembles, I believe that I am considered today a Dutch composer despite my Swedish passport.

- So strictly speaking, it was via the ASKO-milieu that you found your way in?

- Yes, and through ASKO I learned to look at the role of the composer in a way that, above all, had a lot to do with the emphasis placed by this environment on the composer as one who provides nourishment to the musicians. To sum up: The cooperation between composers and musicians was good. We also had a composers' group in existence for 3-4 years called *de Werkplaats*. It was a very small, but heterogeneous group where we had discussions and weekly meetings with the musicians in the ensemble.

- My goodness.....

- And this was very fruitful, and has meant much more to my way of thinking and writing music than learning lists of composers' names.

## "LICKS AND BRAINS"

- If I mention the key words *monolithic music* versus *polyphonic* or *polymorphic music*... When I hear "Licks and Brains" I always find myself thinking that the piece exists at the point of intersection between a monolithic idea and a kind of polyphonic shape...

- There you hit the nail on the head. I see this as the two extremes between a "developing music" and an "identity music". With "identity music" - what you call "monolithic" - I think that the identity is actually very static. The piece has a

certain identity, and this is maintained throughout. This is the one extreme. The other extreme is that music must consist of change. Without change it

***"When I am composing a piece, I am constantly attempting to swing between the large form and the detail."***

is not music to me at all. And these two extremes...it swings between these two extremes. This is the movement which is the most interesting for the listener; his possibility to experience continuity or discontinuity is influenced to a large degree by this pendulum movement.

- This aspect is also reflected in your working methods. By this I mean that the finished score develops from bare beginnings over several "generations". I assume that this is part of the philosophy of the dialectic process between what you call "identity music" and "developing music"? You almost control the degree of "development" along the way, in that you write the same passage through several times?

- The reason why I do this - besides being a purely methodological decision - also has to do with the fact that when composing a piece, I am constantly attempting to swing between the large form and the detail. And I do this because what interests me the most, is that the piece can in a

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way, be predictable; not in what the listener listens to or thinks of, but in the way he listens. I want to be able to manipulate this in one way or another. I try to promote a flexible, active attitude on the part of the listener. This sounds pretentious. But actually it's not pretentious - it's ambitious. One way to do this is to work with extremes. But what is more important to me, is to be able to mediate between the different listening levels the whole time. And so it's not just making a bare outline, and then filling out details, making detailed decisions... the different levels influence each other. The only way to get a grip on the continuity, the only way a listener can comprehend a piece is, of course, to have a concept of the piece as a whole.

- But this depends on conscious work with clear musical identities. One condition for being able to work with different listening levels must be that there exist at least one clearly defined level. Doesn't this also imply a criticism of music that doesn't have clearly defined, differentiated and

ordered levels of listening?

- Well... critique is, of course, not the way to choose such a strategy. On a more general level: If a composer talks or writes about the way a piece was written, you can have difficulty in differentiating between construction principles and perception principles. How often have we not read programme notes describing construction principles which has nothing to do with the audible result - or at least, very little. In any case, when composers verbause their ideas about a piece, they often speak pure pretentious nonsense in the first place, and in the second place, they do not have the ability to separate between the two levels. Nor are they able to describe the relationship or relationships between these construction principles and why they actually exist: What is it one attempts to accomplish with the utilisation of certain construction principles? For some composers it is more about just being able to find a way of composing. For me composition is also, of course, very important, but what is most important is knowing why I compose. It is first upon this knowledge that one can choose construction principles, "scaffolding" and "building materials", appropriate to the result one wants to achieve. As vague as this goal may be.

- About writing in a type of spiral: A spiral is, of course, a whole, regardless of how long or short it is - I'm also drawing parallels to Berio's "Chemins"-series where he seems to continually add on more layers of music. Still, I experience the way you do it in

"Licks and Brains" as the merging of two pieces - and this was probably what impressed me the most. Berio's technique is, in a way, very much simpler, in that it is a kind of acoustic extension of an already written solo voice. Here you have actually composed another piece around the first. I am quite simply curious about how you incorporated the saxophone quartet into the piece. To be precise: Where did the concept come from in the first place? Was it a practical consideration, was it a commission or... how did you do it?

- First, I think it is important to say that I wrote the pieces at the same time. It is not as if I wrote a piece and then thought "one can certainly make more out of this", and I occasionally suspect Berio of this; it has to do with the means of production. Instead, I felt that it posed an intriguing problem to me as a composer - to see if one could interpret material in a new way by placing it in a new context. And it has something to do with what I mentioned about the inherent logic of the voices... that it is just as important as the whole. I wanted to

attempt two pieces. The bass saxophone piece is really set a little apart. It is best considered as an exercise required for at all to reach the music. But regarding the quartet and the last piece... the goal is to make the quartet a complete piece, but at the same time make it function in the larger context. I must admit that the quartet is very important for the orchestral work – you can not really remove the quartet. At certain places in the score it is actually the quartet that is expanded and re-orchestrated for a larger ensemble. This is the one extreme. The other extreme is that the quartet is being played, only with new layers added to it. It is the same pendulum motion between the two extremes that we talked about earlier.

– But I'm thinking, for example, of the quartet coming at a later point in the work, etc. Did this

idea come first or last, if I can use the expression...

– This was a very early decision that came from the fact that the most ideal form of presentation is to perform the three pieces in sequence, one after another. When you then come to the last piece, I want in one way or another to define the new timbral body and the acoustical world, which is mainly determined by the ensemble. To define this first – and this is actually something that

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occupies me a lot – to have a kind of definition of the acoustic and musical space in which the music unfolds itself. The almost "ouverture-like" introduction of the piece has this function.

– When you speak about defining the acoustical

environment, if we pull it down to a concrete level, then it is the instrumentation.....

– Yes, but this of course also has something to do with... the direction, which is also very important to me – therefore all my scores include notes on how the stage arrangement shall be and from where the sound shall strike the listener, if one can say it in that way. I work with this a lot, – at least in these pieces – both depth and extreme left/right effects, stereophonics... So, it not only has to do with instrumentation, but also with pure perception.

And perception is obviously of crucial importance to the composer. The hard hitting sound-sculptures of *Licks and Brains* pierce themselves into the brain and uncover a personality with a strong reluctance to melt into its surroundings. Just like the rapid moving saxophone quartet in the piece refuses to bend down and give away to the acoustical environment.

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