

# SHADOWS' DREAM

NORDIC MUSIC

*Trondheim Soloists*

## NORDIC MUSIC, TRONDHEIM SOUND

*By Andrew Mellor*

Even in our digital age, Nordic music of all genres has proved reluctant to shake off the influences that have shaped it for centuries: folk traditions, the aesthetic and technical leverage of the natural world, and the communicative resonance of acoustic stringed instruments. As one of Norway's best-known and well-travelled string ensembles, The Trondheim Soloists has consciously cultivated those influences in the development of a distinctive sound.

It is a sound that could only have come from this place. Trondheim, once Norway's capital, sits at the mouth of a river and at the wide edge of a fjord. Mountains loom in the distance rather than rearing up at the end of city streets. The town appears to be surrounded by a wilderness of wooded hills, where the musicians who founded The Trondheim Soloists would pit themselves against the mighty forces of nature as they tried to better understand what it meant to be a Norwegian musician.

More specifically, to be a Norwegian musician from the Trøndelag county – where views are wide and clear, where the light is lucid and crystalline, where sunrises and sunsets can last for hours. An open, plain-speaking sound with something of the folk fiddle's directness would infiltrate the orchestra of young string players founded in 1988 by Bjarne Fiskum. With both students and professionals in its ranks, its performances would combine sophistication and hunger, resulting in a sound that audiences, as well as major soloists, soon found infectious.

The orchestra's repertoire spreads to many geographies and chronologies, but its heartland

is northern. The five most populous Nordic countries are represented on this recording, states bound by shared philosophy, culture and collaboration and, these days, by blossoming music scenes that are exporting talent around the world. The development of music in Norway, Finland and Iceland – the Nordic countries that weren't imperial powers and achieved independence only in the twentieth-century – is the most obviously rooted in folk traditions. Those roots have only heightened that music's sense of innovation, relevance and technical fascination.

Once in a while, a composer comes along who seems to combine local DNA with something absolutely of the outside. **FARTEIN VALEN** was one such composer. He studied with the great Romantic Max Bruch in Berlin, but soon became Norway's staunchest acolyte of the school of atonal music propagated in Austria by Arnold Schoenberg's Second Viennese School. Ridiculed in Oslo, Valen retreated to Stavanger on Norway's west coast where he wrote a string of fascinating, urgent works that combined his love for music of the Lutheran tradition with Schoenberg's 12-note technique. Among his works is a Violin Concerto that, like Alban Berg's, even makes use of a Bach chorale.

While still a student in Oslo in the late 1910s, before he'd got into his serialist stride, Valen wrote his Opus 1: a piano work titled *Legende*. The stringent harmonic language that would characterize Valen's mature works is some way off, yet one can sense him groping for it in this piece. Much like Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, also recorded by The Trondheim Soloists recently, *Legende* seems unconformable in the skin of post-Wagnerian chromatic harmony, chomping at the bit to break free from its conventions. Perhaps

that's one reason Valen's piano work is so suited to the multiple instruments of a string ensemble, as arranged by Tore Martinsen.

The title suggests some sort of ancient saga. Sure enough, the music emerges with what feels like an archetype Nordic melody, but cast in the unusual gait of five beats to a bar. That soon splits into elusive transparency and its refracted into altitudinous registers. The more agitated central passage uses the same musical material, but finds a whole lot more turbulence in it.

**AULIS SALLINEN** became a professional composer almost by accident, writing his first mature work in protest at events in Germany in 1962 while travelling there on the administrative staff of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra. The composer would carry the same simple, plain-speaking convictions into everything he wrote, releasing himself from the orchestra's employment in 1970 to composer full time, the year after writing his String Quartet No 3.

Sallinen was commissioned to write the quartet for performance in Swedish schools. In fulfilling that commission he turned to a device that has long been central to his technique and has its roots in the communal improvisation of folk music: variation form. Sallinen delivered a simple one-movement piece that would 'vary certain basic material and bring it to life in numerous different circumstances, continually causing it to be reborn.'

Despite the quartet's title, that 'basic material' – the quartet's tune – started out as a wedding march. When it was rediscovered in the 1950s, its tempo was slowed and it became known in Finland as 'Peltoniemi Hintrik's Funeral March'.

Across five variations, with two intermezzos and a final coda, Sallinen filters the mournful tune through a kaleidoscope of colours and shapes. But he keeps his audience oriented by frequently reprising the tune in its original, recognizable form. True to his word: 'I wanted to compose a work of continuous variations in which the theme would never disappear...like a distant horizon.'

**BRITTA BYSTRÖM** was raised on the east coast of Sweden directly facing Finland. She started out playing the trumpet but was soon drawn for writing for the whole orchestra, which has become her natural medium. Her music has an alluring tendency to spin out entire works from a single entity, a strong Nordic characteristic that can prove as liberating as it can concentrating.

Byström's series of works with titles beginning 'A Walk to...' do something similar, using mobile, meandering rhythms to coax melodies and themes along. Sometimes those themes serve as an introduction to another composer's work – the composer named in the title. 'The idea is to take a musical stroll, during which you can catch a glimpse of the next work on the programme, similar to when from far away, one can discern the silhouette of an approaching town,' Byström writes.

*A Walk to Gade* was written in 2017 as an 'introduction' to the Novelette No 1 in F major Op 53 for string orchestra by the Danish composer Niels Gade (1817-1890). The music takes melodic shapes and figurations from Gade's work, fantasizing and daydreaming on them. Over the course of its semi-improvisation amble, the music appears to grow out of itself. It moves from light nonchalance to hints of worrisome darkness, slipping into the groove of folk music's dances, reels and sliding glissandos. Finally, the music wanders off into the distance as unobtrusively as it arrived.

**ANNA THORVALDSDOTTIR** is one of a handful of Icelandic composers who have proposed new direction for Nordic 'nature' music, one in which nature is as much a technical guide as it is an aesthetic inspiration. Natural forms and processes influence the metamorphotic states of Thorvaldssdottir's canvass-like scores, each of them an ecosystem of sounds in which all materials continuously grow in and out of each other, often resembling the fungus-like, dark volcanic rock that forms Iceland's unmistakable landscape.

*Illumine* was written in 2016 for string ensemble. It includes many of the hallmarks apparent in Thorvaldssdottir's bigger orchestral works: 'extended' instrumental techniques that see instruments played in unusual ways (in this case delivering evocative slaps, thwacks and thuds); a searching tendency to reach for microtones (the notes between the notes); drones or pedal notes pressured into bending out of shape; uneasy harmonic concessions that suggest a world teetering on the edge of change – or worse. A latent threat seems to exist underneath *Illumine*, which appears to be held suspended in the air, by turns glistening with luminosity and shot through with darkness. The feeling, familiar to many Nordic folk at high latitudes, is that nature is both friend and foe.

No living Norwegian composers after Edvard Grieg has searched-out and reinvented concert music's relationship with folk music to the extent that **LASSE THORESEN** has. Thoresen has been active as a composer since the 1980s, and in 2010 won the Nordic Council Music Prize for his vocal Sextet, Op 42, that called upon ancient Scandinavian traditions in reimagining vocal techniques.

*Skyggers Drøm (Shadows' Dream)* from 2019 was born indirectly from another Thoresen work written for The Trondheim Soloists, a concerto for two folk musicians and strings titled

*Sprang*. A chord from that piece lodged itself in the composer's head as he began to consider its successor. He imagined this 'exceptionally luminous chord...as a kind of backlight against the dramatic line' of the piece. Only later did Thoresen ask himself what this music he was hearing inside his head might mean. He concluded it bore some connection what the ancient Greek poet Pindar described as 'human life as the fleeing shadow against an eternal light.'

There are elements of the piece which appear traced against this luminous backdrop, but the essence of Pindar's phrase is captured more in its broader meaning than in any single narrative event or overt design feature. The music broadens outwards from a single note, growing in ensemble drama, rhythmic complexity and instrumental virtuosity before devolving into single voices, alighting upon a luminous chord before descending into deep harmonic throbbing. Everywhere is light and dark, gesture and shadow – even in the second movement that springs from thick, folksy chords into tear-away flight.

The Danish composer **PER NØRGÅRD** personifies the link between the old and new worlds of notated Nordic music. As a teenager in the 1950s, Nørgård corresponded with the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius as he sought to find a way of furthering the organic processes that composer had explored in his late works. Nørgård would discover his own means of systematic and plastic musical construction courtesy of an algorithmic compositional device known as the Infinity Series. It allowed him to write recognizably Nordic, functional music that concurrently opened itself up to a world of influences and expressions.

Nørgård series of three works for strings known as *Tributes* was written in the mid 1990s, each work a homage to a different twentieth-century composer: Jean Sibelius, Bela Bartók and Witold Lutosławski. The second, *Parting*, was written

in 1994 and consciously designed as a tribute to the latter composer, who died in Warsaw that year. Nørgård's starting point was a line from the thirteenth-century Turkish poet and mystic Yunus Emre referring to 'greetings to the ones we leave behind.' Nørgård's piece could be considered an elegy, in a melancholy Nordic mood, interrupted by what he describes as 'dance-like, whirling village music' whose Slavic character could be a salute to Lutosławski.

As often with Nørgård, the central characteristic of the music rests on a single technical trick. In this case, he achieves a depressed mood by focusing on the straining interval of the seventh, but also by letting the natural acoustic overtones produced by a low natural F 'interfere' with a clean, well-tempered F sounding above it – resulting in an 'emotionally strangled character'. It feels entirely natural – not so much the music of flowers and sunsets, as music apparently controlled by natural forces, from its initial birth from a single note to the spasms with which it withers away.

# SHADOWS' DREAM

1. FARTEIN VALEN (1887- 1952): *Legende, opus 1.* ----- 09:16
2. AULIS SALLINEN (1935): *String Quartet No. 3,*  
*“Some Aspects of Peltoniemi Hintrik’s Funeral March”* ----- 12:55
3. BRITTA BYSTRÖM (1977): *A Walk to GADE* ----- 05:24
4. ANNA THORVALDSDOTTIR (1977): *Illumine* ----- 07:08
  
- LASSE THORESEN (1949): *Skyggers Drøm (Shadows’ Dream), opus 55*
5. I ----- 11:37
6. II ----- 06:25
  
7. PER NØRCÅRD (1932):  
*Out of this World - Parting (Witold Lutosławski in memoriam)* ----- 07:08

Trondheim Soloists  
Geir Inge Lotsberg, *Artistic Director*

Trondheim Soloists

*Violins:*

Geir Inge Lotsberg  
Ola Lindseth  
Sigmund Tvette Vik  
Eira Bjørnstad Foss  
Ivan Penjin

Verona Rapp  
Anne Våg Aaknes  
Bergmund Waal Skaslien  
Mathilde Natlandsmyr

*Cellos:*

Cecilie Koch  
Marianne Baudouin Lie  
Marit Aspås

*Double Bass:*

Rolf Hoff Baltzersen  
Jostein Brødreskift (t.7)

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Edited by Geir Inge Lotsberg

Article by Andrew Mellor

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