

20 Norwegian Piano
Miniatures

HÅVARD GIMSE, PIANO

Twenty piano miniatures by some of the most trendsetting composers in Norway around the year 2000 — it has been a joy to be able to be part of it! — This project was initiated by Viktor Mjøen of the music publisher Blåmann Musikkforlag. The idea was that limiting the length and complexity of the pieces would enable even young performers to play the music. But in this richly luxuriant bouquet it is not difficult to find both simplicity and complexity! — Enjoy the experience! *Håvard Gimse*

Miniatures

BJØRN KRUSE

When twenty composers were each asked to write a short piece in 2001, an opportunity arose to see the entire spectrum of expressive styles that marked the beginning of this millennium. The composers who were chosen represented different generations, ranging from Knut Nystedt (born in 1915) to Therese Ulvo (born in 1982), and were connected with widely differing compositional traditions. It is precisely this breadth that characterises the composition community today. The colourful, lively diversity that has arisen reflects inspiration from multiple genres, including those outside the Western world. The new music that arose at the beginning of the 21st century was perceived as either tonal or atonal. Within the experimental music community all of the four basic elements of music – melody, harmony, rhythm and timbre – were subject to investigation. Music was seen as pure sound that could be processed in the same way as any other medium, whether this involved colour, texture, movement or concrete material. Composers appeared in every conceivable creative community, not only from among musicians. The idea took root that all art forms share the same source, enriching each other and generating new insights into what it is to be an artist. Composers create works in which several forms of artistic expression join forces to become a whole. And the

same composers seek out active performers to join in a creative dialogue in their compositional process. The rapid speed of technological developments ensures that artistic activities are increasingly accessible, enabling creative artists to forge new ways of expressing themselves through their chosen medium.

The twenty composers in this compilation represent some of the emerging diversity that marked the end of the previous century. At the same time, something more is unfolding that indicates the growth of a musical expression featuring a listening awareness, regardless of the character of the music. The audience, the listeners, formerly referred to as “recipients”, are now more often referred to as “participants”. The concert situation itself is often regarded as a dialogue between two equal parties. The music is an invitation to the listener to participate more than it is a phenomenon of interest on its own, independent of the listener. Thus expressive categories such as emotions and temperament, spirituality and contemplation, have returned to the realm of musical idioms. This aspect of musical experience is now merging with the material sensuousness and structural ingenuity that characterised new music in the 20th century.

The following offers some brief observations on how each individual composer in this compilation expresses possible trends indicating how contemporary music will develop and

influence our time as it constantly reveals new compositional insights and experiential qualities. I have attempted to ally myself to the greatest possible degree with the engaged listener, the listener who participates with references from an entire unique life, in the encounters with what the composers are telling about themselves, as interpreted by performers who are also listening. Each work here is viewed as an isolated piece, detached from the rest of the composer’s output. I encourage you to read about each individual composer and listen to key works, apart from my comments. My voice should be regarded as primarily that of a fellow composer, not that of a musicologist, but as expressing profound respect for the intense, poetical experiences of the devoted music lover.

Several of the twenty composers in the compilation have been influenced by the contemplative unpredictability of improvisational music. Some of them are very experienced jazz musicians, perhaps especially the three listed first. They are examples of musicians who emerge as composers from a wide spectrum of performance genres, and who bring great artistic integrity and persuasive credibility with them into the compositional creative process.

In **JON BALKE**'s *Storto* (Italian for "crooked") a warm and lyrical free-tonal improvisational reflection arises through a contrapuntal dialogue. The "crookedness" results from the constantly shifting tonal centre and the organic movement, like ivy creeping sinuously up a stone wall. *La Ville*, by **JAN GUNNAR HOFF**, presents a swaying, classically romantic and melancholic piece with a repetitive, eventually fluctuating motif, which seems to have been shaped intuitively within a familiar soundscape.

CHRISTIAN WALLUMRØD's *Japansk Koral* is perceived as a meditation over a 3-tone chord progression with a recurring rhythm, whose tonality is coloured by the interval of a minor second. The experience evokes associations with Japanese Zen philosophy and its contemplative exploration of sound through delicate variations.

THERESE ULVO's *Thumbnail*, **LASSE THORESEN**'s *Hear Here!* and **MAGNE HEGDAL**'s *Präludium: Vogel als Pianist* all express an exploration of the materiality of sound, almost as a physical object, while at the same time creating a dramatic involvement through expressive figurations and contemplative moments.

Ulvo introduces her piece with a thoughtful dialogue between individual notes played on keyboards, alternating with chordal episodes and sounds played directly on the strings inside the piano. Here she presents a sample of the extended world of sound that a simple piano can offer.

In Thoresen's *Hear Here!* a steady, rhythmic chord emerges from clusters of notes and climbs in pitch and volume until it is nearly inaudible. Then it consolidates itself again, is fragmented, and dissolves in darkness. The entire keyboard is put to use. He induces the listener to be attentive and focus on the sonic qualities of the smallest audible segments of the sound.

Hegdal himself writes, about his piece *Präludium: Vogel als Pianist*, that it "is both objective and rich – it is about movement (which is the 'central theme' of the work), and also plays on movement in an emotional sense". He seeks an "ugly" sound in one place and a "round" sound in another, and feels that that the piece should be played somewhat more airily and freshly than the 19th-century tradition to which its style refers in a purely gestural way, although with a tasteful atonal colour.

As mentioned above about Hegdal's piece, he himself writes that it refers to a historical style. Composers have always quoted, written variations on, or in other ways related to a particular style, genre or specific historical composer. In this way an explicit reference is formed that the listening participant can place in perspective to the new music. This creates a space for experiencing the music that is being explored more and more frequently by contemporary composers, thus supporting the idealistic and social relevance of contemporary music. It also touches on a subject that is being discussed increasingly often: the relationship between aesthetic quality and ethical responsibility.

HELGE SUNDE's *Antageligvis Therese???* is a humorous deconstruction and fragmentation of Beethoven's *Für Elise*. Under the title, which means "Presumably Therese???", Sunde writes the following: "On 27 April 1810 Ludwig van Beethoven wrote a little piano piece that he scribbled a girl's name on. It might look like 'Für Elise', but his handwriting was as unclear as his hearing, and presumably it actually said 'Therese'. (...) Inspired by this small mistake, I have put bits of this work into a computer program that reshuffles the notes and places the notes of good old 'Ludo's' piano piece in a new order." Such a "remix" of familiar classical music will doubtless serve as a compositional technique that will, especially with the aid of computer technology,

generate exciting music within every possible genre, as it is already doing.

ASBJØRN SCHAATHUN's *Stravinsky goes Bach and Schaathun goes Frescobaldi* is connected with historical composers in a personal and playful manner, yet with profound respect. Here Schaathun, with warm humour, focuses on possible associations and imagined transitions in many directions, ranging from Frescobaldi, a pioneer of the keyboard, to Schaathun himself, via Stravinsky and Bach. An active listener will be able to appreciate Schaathun's clever cross-references and elegant constructions.

MAJA RATKJE's *Two small pieces for Arnold S.* are compact and inventive works, rich in variety, using short phrases with supple gestures. They evoke a continual sense of total freedom, based only on an intuitive and spontaneous creative reflex. The composer makes an obvious and generous reference to Schönberg's free, atonal universe and the tonal liberation he was in search of.

WOLFGANG PLAGGE's *Gregorian Fable* consists of a melodic theme, resembling a Gregorian cantus firmus. It has a reflective introduction, but gradually explodes in quick outbursts, before settling into a contemplative darkness at the end. Plagge takes advantage of a broad historical scope, making the experience seem even more expansive and open.

EIVIND BUENE's *Study no. 3* is perceived as a dialogue between an aggressive outburst and a subsequent meditative response; a tonal resonance, which is gradually absorbed, fragmented and neutralised in pensive reflection before it concludes in tranquillity. In this context Buene can be seen as a representative of a totally liberated form of expressiveness within an open, free-tonal landscape where anything is possible, but which is overtaken by an intention

or a concept. Often we sense the presence of concentrated exploration around one musical event or situation, for example a sequence of sounds, a melodic figuration, a distinctive harmonic progression, a rhythmic figure or a structural model. The impression is that what is purely sonic, in other words having to do with the sound in itself, is not as prominent here as in the works of Ulvo, Hegdal and Thoresen. The expression is also more dramatic, and the movement consists to a greater degree of shorter gestures.

The third part of **NILS HENRIK ASHEIM**'s *3 piano-miniatyrer* is, likewise, shaped as a strong impulse with a softer after-effect. The first part is a study of how open pillars of sound are infiltrated by a melodic motif and then ultimately appear in a darker version. The second part is an intense outburst of undulating arpeggios, crashing in a stormy sea.

Plokk, by **KNUT VAAGE**, is a good example of a compositional challenge that is typical of contemporary music. Here a short, compact motif is presented in constantly new, contrasting surroundings and varying sequels. This creates a recognisable core that constitutes "order" in an otherwise "chaotic" landscape. The challenge lies in the relationship between what is fixed and what is movable, the deliberate strategy and the (ostensibly) spontaneous, intuitive act.

KETIL HVOSLEF's *Et øyeblikk* is, by the same token, a juxtaposition of two short, subtle melodic fragments that participate in an exploratory, playfully imitative interaction, where the pauses seem to continue to resound as though the tones are hesitating. After a moment's impetuous but slightly effervescent flight, it returns abruptly to a hesitant imitation before silence settles at the end.

JON ØIVIND NESS's *Slengfe* is obsessively steady, rhythmical and playful, with startling alternations in emphasis and chord combinations. The music plays with defying expectations and producing surprising reversals. Here the connection to rhythmical minimalism and popular music is obvious, but that only serves as a point of departure for the composer's ingenious creativity.

OLAV ANTON THOMMESSEN's *Scherzino* is perceived as a playful flight of notes at breakneck speed, which begins as abruptly as it ends. Or as the sculpting of a texture, a sparkling surface, as when thousands of starlings draw a dancing cloud against the evening sky.

DAGFINN KOCH's *Urban Portraits* consists of three short, free-tonal pieces (*Kjetil, Malin* and *Dietrich*) that are built on the sounds of open fourths that seem to explore their own echoes. The second piece comprises contemplative open sounds that rise slowly, like vast balloons, up to the heavens. The final piece presents a playful, recurring bass line under interjected moments featuring the unmistakable colour tone of perfect fourth intervals.

KNUT NYSTEDT's *Capriccio* is experienced as an informal dance, cheerful and happy in its lively musicality, but also humorous and somewhat impudent, as the title suggests. This piece makes a direct reference to a type of playful, unrestrained tonal work that was often composed in an earlier epoch, which has maintained its popularity among classical concert audiences. Contemporary composers will certainly appropriate this playfulness and dress it in new costumes for, perhaps, the same audiences!

ANTONIO BIBALO's *Intermezzo* incorporates much of the character of Nystedt's "Capriccio" but, indeed, in a new tonal costume. This is a rhythmically playful piece, with sudden interruptions and teasing, repetitive rhythmical

cells. This is set in contrast to a pensive segment, after which the piece immediately begins its playful activity again.

EGIL HOVLAND's *Pastorella* opens majestically, but continues into a theme that is melodically intensely simple, and tonally sweet and sensitive, before the pillars of sound from the opening then close the piece. This is a study of heartfelt longing for confirmation of the iconic beauty of what is familiar. But it could also have been a tender, lovely pop ballad, or background music for a captivating scene in a romantic film. Hovland's piano piece is unique in the context of this compilation, but is connected with a genre that will always remain a major part of social musical life in the future.

Miniatures

1. Olav Anton Thommessen (1946): *Scherzino* 1:46
2. Wolfgang Plagge (1960): *Gregorian Fable* 1:56
3. Antonio Bibalo (1922-2008): *Intermezzo* 1:14
4. Jan Gunnar Hoff (1958): *La Ville* 2:48
5. Egil Hovland (1924-2013): *Pastorella* 2:40
6. Knut Nystedt (1915-2014): *Capriccio* 1:19
7. Ketil Hvoslef (1939): *Et øyeblikk* 2:15
8. Jon Balke (1955): *Storto* 3:56
9. Maja S. K. Ratkje (1973): *Two small pieces for Arnold S.* 1:32
10. Nils Henrik Asheim (1960): *3 Piano-miniatyrer* 3:56
11. Dagfinn Koch (1964): *Urban Portraits* 1:53
12. Lasse Thoresen (1949): *Hear Here* 4:04
13. Knut Vaage (1961): *Plokk* 0:56
14. Helge Sunde (1965): *Antageligvis Therese???* 2:16
15. Christian Wallumrød (1971): *Japansk Koral* 2:30
16. Asbjørn Schaathun (1961):
Stravinsky goes Bach and Schaathun goes Frescobaldi ... 3:02
17. Magne Hegdal (1944): *Präludium: Vogel als Pianist* 1:36
18. Jon Øivind Ness (1968): *Slengfe* 1:29
19. Eivind Buene (1973): *Study no. 3* 3:48
20. Therese Birkelund Ulvo (1982): *Thumbnail* 5:02
21. Olav Anton Thommessen: *Scherzino (Revised version)* 1:08

Håvard Gimse, Piano

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Recorded and edited by
Geir Inge Lotsberg

Piano technician:
Thron Irby

Supported by:
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Liner notes: Bjørn Kruse

Translation:
Shari Gerber Nilsen

Photography and design:
Erik(sen)

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