



Norwegian Imperatives

Fartein VALEN (1887-1952)

Four Pieces for Piano, Op.22

(*Nachtstück* [3:45]; *Valse noble* [2:04]; *Lied ohne Worte* [3:06]; *Gigue* [2:22])

Intermezzo, Op.36 [2:44]

Klaus EGGE (1906-1979)

Sonata No.2 (Patética), Op.27 [19:28]

Finn MORTENSEN (1922-1983)

Sonata, Op.7 [9:53]

Rolf WALLIN (b.1957)

Seven Imperatives (2001)

(*Seek* [0:51]; *Push* [5:01]; *Sink* [2:24]; *Spin* [3:55]; *Stab* [0:34]; *Lean* [7:58]; *Quit* [0:31])

Håkon Austbø (piano)

rec. March 2009, Sofienberg Kirke, Oslo

AURORA ACD5060 [64:36]

You know the beauty of the night sky, with glittering stars scattered? This beauty does not have a single pattern, unless by pure chance. The flowers of the field do not sit in nodes of a grid. Beauty can have a system, but it can do perfectly well without. The music on this disc is past tonality, dodecaphony or any other strict system. For the most part it is *very* atonal, so don't be misled by the Romantic titles of the movements. It is fascinating to follow the path from one composer to another, since each was actually taught by his predecessor. You see a school - but a school that was changed over a span of seventy years.

Nachtstück sets the mood for the album. This Night is dark and mysterious, with gusts of wind and formless visions. There are patterns, but they are natural, like footprints on the snow. Don't expect *one-two-threes* in *Valse noble*. There are no measures, no beat. It's more about gestures, and some of them are wide and gracious. *Lied ohne Worte* can be a reflection of Tchaikovsky's *Sentimental Waltz* in a puddle under rain, or in tiny shards of a broken mirror. Everything is vague and distorted, but the mood is lyrical, and the climax is utterly Romantic. It is a really beautiful piece. The last item, *Gigue*, is probably the easiest to grasp. It has the beat of a jig, the drive of a jig, the dark humor of a jig, with loud stomping and something approaching a sinister joy.

Fartein Valen's next piece, *Intermezzo*, sounds like a next (large) step after Scriabin's late piano music. It starts peacefully, becomes agitated, goes into high emotional gear, and ends suddenly.

Sonata Patética by Klaus Egge is very coherent as a sonata, on a Beethovenian scale. The first movement pictures a cruel world riven by violence and struggle. The slow beginning serves as a massive, brooding introduction to the entire sonata. The faster part of the movement is an Inferno set loose. There are short and powerful motifs, very clear and articulate. After the turmoil of the first movement comes the soothing *Canto etéreo*, with glimmering, mysterious splashes of sound. The last movement does not return to the harsh reality of the opening. It is a grotesque, energetic dance, like a Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dance* turned inside out. The coda is very impressive.

Finn Mortensen's *Sonata* is sombre and spectacular. It is not easy to grasp the first movement, and I must admit I am still working on this. It sways back and forth between the agitated and the calm, between Chaos and the gamelan. I may not understand it, but I like it. The second movement is magnificent. Its largest part is occupied by a formidable crescendo, an absolutely enthralling combination of the random and the inevitable. The latter is brought in by the structure: a genuine fugue. The crescendo ends in a shattering climax - I know it sounds like a cliché, but that's what it is. The ghosts of the first movement return and lead us into the mist. And in this mist, weird and wavering, the music dissolves and the sonata ends.

The *Seven Imperatives* by Rolf Wallin are interesting musical experiments. Written for a dance company, their sequence apparently accompanies some scenario. Without it, they look like a set of theatrical exercises, when the actors try to impersonate a chair, a tree, a sleeping cat. Just make sure to read the title of each piece before it starts, and then set loose your imagination and have fun. The composer definitely has a sense of humor - *Push* is a great example, picturing vivid outbursts of frustration. *Seek* and *Sink* are very natural, and *Stab* waves back to Bartók. Wallin even manages to capture such an immobile action as *Lean*, although this essay takes a full eight minutes. Overall, I don't feel this set reaches the level of musical emotion of the other three large works on this disc. But, then, does it have to? It is an interesting and enjoyable experience.

As for Håkon Austbø's performance, I would grade it 12 out of 10. He lives every note. I confess I am not the biggest fan of atonal music, but on this disc, thanks to his advocacy, I discovered great music, and some pages gave me the highest pleasure. Austbø makes the music three-dimensional, emotional – a breathing thing. It must be very hard without the household aids of tonality and harmony but Austbø does it splendidly. The pianist also provides the liner-notes, in English and Norwegian, and he says a lot on just two pages: something that many note-writers should learn. The recording quality is ideal. The entire project is a definite success.

Oleg Ledeniov

Håkon Austbø lives every note. ... see Full Review