

Per Nørgård: An Appreciation

By Karl Aage Rasmussen

The imagination, the scope, and the profundity of Per Nørgård's musical output are unique in contemporary Danish music. Moreover his fingerprints can be seen almost anywhere in Danish musical life, be it as inspirer, mediator, or cultural commentator, and his teaching has shaped and influenced countless Scandinavian composers for half a century.

That he manages to be a towering figure without leaving everybody around him in his shadow is due to hallmarks of his personality: curiosity, openness, and sensory awareness. The world according to Nørgård is not just a confusing host of random events; it is an enchanted place, full of things to discover when your mind and your senses are wide open — the endless connections and relations in nature, the infinite universe represented by any sound, no matter how modest. A composer must have an ear for the wonders of the audible world, and must be able to sense miracles where others hear only the buzz of everyday life. On a South Indian beach, listening to the surf from the enormous waves, Per Nørgård suddenly became aware of an extremely deep sound from the seas, a kind of “shadow tone,” unchanging by day or night. And he asked himself: might this be the basic sound, the very *fundamental* of the ocean?

He is aware that we listen with the whole mind. Listening involves selection and memory, and we can choose to “focus” our listening on specific elements, although we don't really have a word for it. He is similarly aware that just as “blind spots” occur in visual perception, “deaf spots” may emerge when we listen — deafness to anything in the world of sounds that is so easily neglected due to habits, or that easily disappears under a layer of cultural waste. The listening mind can be used like a burning lens, and a composer must be able to experiment with listening itself.

The triad of sound–ear–thought rings through everything in Nørgård's output. The continuous interaction of sounds, their wavelengths, times, and stratifications surround us all like eternal mysteries — but never mysteriously distant, always at hand to enter into, behind, in between. Just as an example, think of the so-called Tartini-tone, a separate note that can often be heard when two close sound waves interface. It is a sound emerging only in our ears: it cannot be physically demonstrated, let alone be recorded by microphones. You can disregard it as an indifferent byproduct, but you can also consider it a representation of a marvelous inner sound-world, a mirage in broad daylight, another world palpably present amidst everyday life. And thus the big world is full of other worlds, big and small. The ever-possible expansion of your consciousness while fully conscious is what has always spurred Nørgård's imagination and what he has untiringly attempted to convey to his listener. More than anything, Nørgård's music is a travelogue recounting ongoing journeys through the labyrinths of our perception.

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He is in several ways the traveler in Danish music, and his travels, mental as well as physical, have led him far and wide — so far, in fact, that they may seem aimless. The steadfast young Nørgård, who lauded what he called “the universe of the Nordic soul,” can be difficult to recognize in the restlessly experimenting Nørgård of the 1960s. And he may seem very far from the beauty-seeking metaphysicist of the '70s or, later, the relentless explorer of riddles in the worlds of self-similarity and of time itself. Close up, however, you cannot fail to realize that there has been one lodestar only and that very few have so persistently revolved around the same recurring fascinations. His many travels have been one travel.

Nørgård’s marvelous discovery, the so-called Infinity Series, has been around since the early 1960s. This principle is like a Chinese box: built into each other and into themselves you find the same shapes, over and over, large and small (a concept that clearly anticipates fractal geometry, which ten years later would greatly fascinate mathematicians). The structures unfold on different planes, but always relate to each other in an endless network — endlessly simple, but creating endlessly complicated results, just like in nature.

Immersing himself in this universal world of layers, concordances, links, and connections, Nørgård developed a sense of continuity and fullness so dizzying that it must have seemed akin to what we call faith. In countless areas of life, from physics to mysticism, from astrology to biology, he discovered connections. It was a voyage into a simple formula, but it unfolded as endless variation, and with his rare mixture of cold and warm reason Nørgård applied the idea to all the elements of music: a non-periodic rhythm that uses the proportions of the golden mean and a stratified harmony that is based on the structure of sound itself.

Gradually, however, the old images of harmony, growth, and maturation disintegrated and new images kept arising. In later works these became more intimate, more vulnerable, a delicate balance confronting seemingly uncontrollable forces. Since the last decade of the 20th century, quite new sides of these oppositions — the non-conforming, the fractious — have appeared while Nørgård has intensified his chase for the least tangible of all musical elements: time itself. Tempo, the tangible representation of time in a piece of music, most obviously points to itself when accelerating or slowing down, when it bends and turns time, as it were. And Nørgård’s music developed a climate of expression — acknowledging that words can never really describe music — that might be called “surrealistic,” a strangely sharp dream light and often a weird, almost wild humor, perhaps slightly reminiscent of Dalí or Ernst, although unlike anything else, that is transfigured and devil-may-care, dark and life-affirming, unique and universal at the same time.

Official explanatory models do not accept in-between ideas; knowledge that cannot be conceptualized, visualized, or demarcated. Yet, Nørgård wants to articulate this crucial *non-knowledge*; music always seemed to him particularly suitable as a medium for this kind of expression, and his music exploits this insight with unique visionary imagination.