

The golden age of Danish music

Contemporary music in Denmark has for the last decades experienced a golden age. There is a very vigorous and productive environment among composers as well as performers, the stylistic diversity is great and the quality of contemporary Danish music obtains more and more recognition.

This is highly due to the fact that the two largest music conservatories of the country for a long period from the 1970s up until a few years ago staked strongly and daringly on contemporary music. There were large composers' classes at both conservatories, and they organized concert series and festivals where young composers and musicians had a platform for their co-operation. It has later on resulted in the establishment of a number of young ensembles who dedicate a large part of their activity to contemporary music, and who understand how to present the music with both competence and enthusiasm. The leading teachers of the conservatories have known how to make room for stylistic and aesthetic differences – there has been no tradition for exclusive and narrow-minded schools of composition in Denmark, at least not within the generation appearing on the stage today.

For a long period the state supported this positive development in different ways. The Danish Arts Foundation was founded already in 1964 – in fact Denmark has the oldest Art Foundation of the world. Through this foundation the state grants commission honoraries, scholarships, prizes etc. to creative artists within visual arts, literature, music, theatre, film, architecture and crafts. The funds are allocated according to the so-called “arm's length principle”, which is a Nordic expression for a kind of model where the politicians' influence on the art support is confined to only the frames themselves - the actual decisions about which artistic projects to support are put (at a distance of an arm's length) into the hands of expert committees compounded of and by the art environments themselves.

Besides the Arts Foundation the Danish Music Council was established. It was based on a comprehensive music law that determined similarly free frames for the state support to other parts of the music life: education, concerts, ensemble support, festivals, music information, communication, etc.

New structure

This structure, which has made remarkable results for Danish contemporary music, was crucially changed in 2003. The Danish parliament decided to join all these functions in a new big organisation called the *Danish Arts Agency*. This happened due to the wish of making a simpler and more transparent structure; but so far the project must be considered a failure. A large part of the work previously undertaken by employees and members of the councils in close contact with the musical environment, today has either disappeared or been dragged away from the professional environment into the political.

It is still too early to form a general view of the damages done. But a tendency to increased centralism and bureaucratization is already traceable as well as a similarly decreasing participation of all communicating and organizing parts of the Danish music life.

In the present situation there is still an unusually large and valuable potential in Danish contemporary music. New works are composed that arouse enthusiasm within the country and abroad. For instance, four new operas have been composed for the Danish national scene of recent years, and this season 10 Danish composers have had first performances all around the world of symphonic fairytales based on tales by our national poet H.C. Andersen. There are also (at least for some time, still...) close relationships between creators and performers in our national music life. But the conditions they work under fray the goodwill and the enthusiasm. This is the case both nationally and internationally: in Denmark the professional support is lacking and abroad it is today almost impossible to find professional and reliable information about Danish music. Hereby the following-up of the successes that was to help placing the new works as part of the common repertoire has been laid down.

Nordic co-operation

In the five Nordic countries there has been a long tradition for musical co-operation, among other things the holding of two important Nordic festivals: *Ung Nordisk Musik* (Young Nordic Music) that presents music by Scandinavian composers under the age of 30, usually performed by conservatory students, and *Nordic Music Days* which is a broader festival for Nordic contemporary music, and which is arranged biannually by the five composers' societies

This Nordic co-operation has been further intensified in recent years. This happens more and more in dialogue with important festivals and co-operators outside the North, and it happens realizing that the rest of the world sees the North as one coherent region. The music traditions of the Nordic countries all have decisive individual distinctive marks and characteristics, but there are also some common features and it therefore makes sense to work closely together. Our intention is to strengthen this co-operation in the years to come and to use it as a platform for establishing a stronger network with composers in the rest of Europe.

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