

Melody, refinement and an echo of Romanticism

– music by John Frandsen

Melody is what is normally emphasized in the work of John Frandsen – his special melodic vein, the feeling for the finely wrought vocal melody that permeates Frandsen's music. A melodic approach that the composer himself has sometimes characterized as "surrealistic". While it is true that this melodic quality is present in most of John Frandsen's output, it is naturally enough most clearly in evidence in the vocal works and the many operas. There have been no fewer than seven of these so far: six chamber operas – three of them forming a trilogy based on Svend Aage Madsen's novel *Tugt og utugt i mellemtiden* ("Vice and Virtue in the Middletime") – and a full-length opera for full chorus and orchestra, *Icon*, commissioned and premiered in the spring of 2003 by the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

In the Yellow Emperor's Time (2003), the most recently composed work in the CD, is a central aria from the opera *Icon*. In this aria we find on the one hand an example of John Frandsen's vocal art at its best, and on the other an example of the surrealism to which the composer refers. It is moving in all its apparent simplicity. One is actual tempted to sing along.

Yet that could be a risky business. The ostensibly so simple, repetitive melody constantly turns in new directions. Small displacements give the melodic development new colours and freshness; its realism, the recognizable melody, are changed imperceptibly in a surrealism consisting of unforeseen turns. It is discreetly done. There is no attempt to over-embroider. Everything is exquisitely delicate and refined, and the result is a thoroughly beautiful kind of music that will give pleasure to all regardless of the background one brings to listening. And thus *In the Yellow Emperor's Time* also shows another side of John Frandsen: the sophisticated and delicate. This is particularly true of the orchestral texture which accompanies the aria. With its simple effectiveness it is itself worth studying. With few but precise resources it evokes an oddly transparent mood of fairytale, ancient times and the Orient, which optimally supports and builds further on the fundamentally surreal character of the aria.

Delicacy and sophistication

These two concepts also permeate the remaining tracks of the CD. In fact the two concepts are at least as central to the full span of John Frandsen's oeuvre as the often-remarked singability. In the oldest work on the CD, *Amalie Suite* (1985), the refinements thrive within chamber music dimensions. The music of the suite comes from John Frandsen's first opera, *Amalie*, and the ensemble is the same as in the opera, decet and percussion.

Several types of music unfold here in a kaleidoscopic process with abrupt changes in the texture. The small melodic fragment played by the oboe does however run as a constant strand through the otherwise highly varied music of the first couple of minutes (up to about 2:37).

What then follows is a jewel in John Frandsen's oeuvre: a dense weave of brief motifs whose motions evoke echoes of fundamentally romantic music of the kind one can find in Schoenberg, Berg or even Mahler. Like passing ghosts the motifs move through the texture and leave the passage with an aura of something forever lost. The whole process concludes with the stroke of a bell, and the movement could in fact have ended there. But John Frandsen is not given to dwelling on melancholy. As a postlude we are invited up for a waltz; but the invitation fails to keep its promise: the waltz dissolves into its gestures, which finish off the suite as disparate elements pulling together.

An echo of something lost

With the concepts of echo and Romanticism we can extend and clarify the sound of John Frandsen's music. True, Frandsen's music is structured quite differently from Romantic music; but the elements from which the music is built often possess the aura of Romanticism – or rather of Late Romanticism. This is decidedly so with the two major works of the CD: the orchestral works Symphony no. 1, *The Dance of the Demons* (1986-1988), and the cello concerto from a good ten years later, *Hymn to the Ice Queen* (1998).

The Dance of the Demons, the older of the two works, is an assuredly composed, outward-looking, clear and effective symphony; a work that could easily bear a new encounter with the audience as part of the repertoire of the regional orchestras. It takes the form of three movements which are at once contrasting and interrelated; a fiery first movement, a lingering second movement and an – apparently – lighter third movement which along the way incorporates the sound of the first movement.

The first movement exhibits well nigh all the elements that appear and develop in the later movements. Thus one can see the second and third movements as expositions of incompletely elucidated elements from the first movement. But one can also hear the whole symphony as a constant transformation of a simple basis idea. One thing that particularly strikes the ear is the third movement's 'negative' relationship with the low instrumentation's rumbling opening of the first movement. In the third movement this is turned into a rousing skipping motion at the high pitch.

If the violent energy discharge of the opening is worlds apart from even the Romanticism of a Schoenberg, the second movement may recall the adagietto of Mahler's Fifth. As far as I can hear, these two movements have nothing specific in common, only a special mood of wistfulness, a remote echo of the romantic. This lies like a substrate in the symphony and at several points breaks the surface, but rarely as clearly as in the second movement.

Hymn to the Ice Queen too evinces this mood. In his preface to the work John Frandsen describes how a journey with his father to Svalbard (Spitzbergen) was a stimulant to the concerto. The evocative conclusion of the preface hits off the fundamental character of the concerto so well that it should almost be read aloud as a prologue each time the work is played:

If one is out on a night in August when the Midnight Sun sheds an unreal, magical light over the Advent Fjord, one can almost hear all these forlorn destinies and shattered dreams. From the black depths of the Arctic Ocean, from the abandoned mine shafts, from the glaciers and caves, sounds the echo of a hymn. The spirits are singing their hymn to the cruel, beautiful Ice Queen of Svalbard.

If one thinks in abstract musical terms, it is again the echo of a (romantic) pathos that one encounters in this movement. But rarely is such an echo formed with such yearning beauty as John Frandsen forms it here: first a quiet, stepwise ascending motion in the viola, delicately rounded off by a harp harmonic. In the next phrase a clarinet note accompanies almost inaudibly. It is only noticed when, as an echo effect, it remains hanging on a note that the viola has just abandoned. A flute note emerges and persists until it again glides away into the melodic flow. Now a French horn also appears far away. The second violins enter with the viola's theme, but at the interval of a second higher. And slowly, slowly a fugue unfolds which permits the rest of the orchestra and finally the soloist to rise from the melody of the strings.

The music runs in a flowing, non-metric motion of almost imperceptibly shifting note values. The orchestration constantly coaxes new colourings forth. Constantly one can follow the flow of the

music, a flow whose inevitability suggests that an inexorable fate hangs over the work – the advent of the Ice Queen!?

In this cello concerto John Frandsen gathered the strands from the 25-odd years he had by then been active as a composer. Besides the romantic aura of the music we find perpetually borne, singable melody lines and delicately refined orchestral treatment controlled by an extraordinary sense of timbre.

Structure

Behind the lyricism and the immediately appealing music – indeed, as their precondition – there is thus a tight structure: precisely the element that gives the music its character of inevitability.

Structure is the last element in John Frandsen's music to be briefly touched on here. For all the direct beauty that is expressed on this CD is primarily expressed against the background of structures. Here the composer's craft and the art of instrumentation meet. Everything that happens does so according to a rationally formed musical logic. The sequences are built up in structures of precisely formulated gestalts. This is true for example of the fugato introduction to the cello concerto, the energy discharge in the opening of *The Dance of the Demons*, and more or less all of the *Amalie Suite*. In their motions the gestalts often have an inherent dynamic logic which relentlessly drives the music forward.

Background

John Frandsen has a wide background of musical education and training. He took an honours degree in music from Aarhus University in 1982, followed the next year by a diploma in sacred music from the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Aarhus, and then a diploma in composition from the same place (1985) after studying with Hans Abrahamsen and Karl Aage Rasmussen. Later (1991-1994) he supplemented these degrees by studying conducting at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen. Before finishing his studies John Frandsen was already teaching at the Department of Musicology at Aarhus University (1978-1983), at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Aarhus (1980-1996) and at the Carl Nielsen Academy of Music in Odense (1997-1999), where he taught composition.

Since then he has functioned as the chairman of the Danish Composers' Society, with all that this involves of board work. In addition John Frandsen works on an everyday basis as a performing musician: partly as the organist at the church Stavnsholtkirken in Farum, partly as the conductor of the chamber choir Convivium, which he founded in 1998 with his organist colleague Allan Rasmussen.

For many other composers all these activities would entail a drastic drop in composing productivity. For John Frandsen this has not happened. Alongside his many duties he has kept up an impressive output. Besides engaging in all these diverse activities, John Frandsen masters the art of letting them play together and form precisely the fruitful background against which his music can unfold.

- Svend Hvidtfelt Nielsen, 2004