

## JOHN FRANSDEN'S SONGS *by Trine Boje Mortensen*

---

As a composer and a participant in the organizational bodies of the Danish musical world, as an organist, debater, recording producer and lecturer, John Frandsen's level of activity is sky-high. With his integrity, curiosity and enviable energy, John Frandsen is one of the firm pillars of the Danish musical scene, and has been so throughout his active musical life. But the image of the pillar is not satisfactory, for pillars stand still – and John Frandsen does not. For that, too much humour and curiosity are mixed in with the sober and robust.

John Frandsen (b. 1956) took a degree in musicology at Aarhus University, where he has also taught. Frandsen further has a diploma in sacred music from the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Aarhus and a diploma in composition from the same institution, with Hans Abrahamsen and Karl Aage Rasmussen as his teachers.

In addition he has studied conducting at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen. Over the years he has held a succession of posts in Danish musical life, including Chairman of the Danish Composers' Society 1999-2008, Chairman of the Music Committee of the Danish Arts Foundation 1993-95, and President of the Nordic Composers' Council 2004-7. Since 1995 he has worked as the organist at Stavsholt Church in Farum.

Frandsen's worklist covers music in many genres: seven operas – from a church opera to a full-length opera at the Royal Theatre, – symphonic works, concertos, chamber music, and not least songs. The latest opera success is *A Doll's House*, based on Henrik Ibsen's famous play.

In 2013 the DR ensembles, a number of vocal soloists and the Faroese singer Teitur premiered John Frandsen's *Requiem*, the biggest work in this genre ever attempted by a Danish composer. The work is among other things built up around the contrast between the texts of the Latin Requiem Mass and new poems by the Danish poet Simon Grotrian. This willingness both to wrestle with the grand themes (the liturgy of death, musical traditions, major forms) and to cultivate the intimate and simple (the poem and the voice) is in many ways characteristic of Frandsen, who in his operas too is able to give the close and the intimate a place in the great apparatus that is an opera. On this CD, however, one encounters great expressions of emotion in the intimate song format.

"What You See Is What You Get" – WYSIWYG – is an old term from the computer world, meaning that what you see on the screen is close to what you will see when you print it out. In a way WYSIWYG is also an apt term for John Frandsen's music. There is nothing hidden, no complex ambiguity in his works, although this does not mean that there are no layers, no expressive depth. There are plenty. There is also reflection and a delicate, sincere humanity. But there are no strange surprises, no profundities hidden in places where they are difficult to hear, there is no need for long booklets with clarifications of musical complexities. What you hear is what there is. And that is enough. For there is plenty of room in Frandsen's music for the listener to be present, to interpret, to listen again and gain new insights. This generosity with the space and the sense of being welcome means that to a great extent it can be said of the music that "What you hear is what you get". You hear a lot in this music and you get just as much to take with you into your life after listening.

John Frandsen is if anything a musical interpreter of texts, and it is in this role that he can be heard as a composer on this CD. A collection of extremely different texts is given musical treatment, and the common feature of this variegated collection of songs is Frandsen's sincere, open approach to all the types of textual expression.; from the truly intimate and the erotic to the philosophical and the absurdly silly. All the texts are given the scope for generous realization in their new, musical form.

### **Lystens liturgi / The Liturgy of Desire (1993)**

This collection of John Frandsen's songs begins with the most high-flown and at the same time most intimate work. *The Liturgy of Desire* is based on two texts, both about seduction and the erotic. The Bible's Song of Solomon and a poem by Pia Tafdrup are interwoven and given shared musical expression. The Latin text is for the most part more robustly and expressively unfolded in the music than the Danish one, which is more flowing and quiet. However, the two idioms swap roles, or texts sometimes, along the way. In *The Liturgy of Desire* there is an enduring feeling that there is no fixed point in purely rhythmic terms. This is fluid, unsettled music that produces an oddly dizzying effect, even in the places where the chords seem chiselled in granite. For it is as if those chiselled chords are not always where you might have expected them to be.

In *The Liturgy of Desire* two texts and two idioms have grown seamlessly together into one work.

### **Songs of Innocence (1983/84) – Songs of Experience (1991)**

The two song cycles *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* were composed with an interval of seven years between them, both with the guitar as accompanying instrument.

William Blake wrote the two famous collections of poems, which he printed in his own illuminated volumes in the 1790s. Frandsen has set a number of poems from the two collections. In a programme note the composer writes of the two song cycles:

“From Blake’s own hand the two poem cycles are intended as comments on each other – several of the poems in *Songs of Experience* refer directly to and comment on the *Innocence* poems. Similarly, I have tried to create musical parallels between the two works – to find a musical language that expresses equally their common features and their contrasts.”

As an accompanying instrument the guitar provides a crisper, more timeless soundscape than the piano. The songs are not, like several of the others on the CD, a natural extension of the concert-hall tradition; they are very much chamber songs, in the sense of being suitable for singing to oneself in a room. There is a different kind of intimacy in these songs.

The first cycle, *Songs of Innocence*, is full of sparkling songs in high registers. The innocent tones of childhood sparkle and bounce like light across water, lustrous as new-budding beech leaves. But there are also contrasts in this collection of youthfully ebullient songs; in the song of *The Little Boy Lost* we feel all the world-shattering anxiety of an innocent child when the world for a moment (just a moment, one hopes) is not with but against him. And the last song here, a *Cradle Song* for the innocent child, evinces more of the mother’s calm and concern than of the child’s innocence, and in that sense seems like a link with the next collection, *Songs of Experience*. For the situation in *The Voice of the Ancient Bard* is also that an older person is singing for a younger one. But this time it is not comfort and soft words, but a lamentation over human folly and conceit. Although in *Songs of Experience* there are contrasts too, the fundamental tone is dark and frustrated. The sparkle in the music has been replaced by something more sensual and bitter. This can be heard in the guitar’s velvet accompaniment to *The Sick Rose* and in the Arabian aroma of the melody line in *Ah! Sunflower*.

### **Winternächte (1989)**

The four songs to texts by Hermann Hesse which together bear the heading *Winternächte* – Winter Nights – are in many ways the most musically radical of the songs on this CD. The songs gathered on this release were all composed within a decade, and although there is a chronological closeness among the works there are great expressive differences, for example between *Winternächte* from 1989 and *Seven Silly Songs* from 1987. The texts for *Winternächte* are chillingly oppressive yet beautiful. Hermann Hesse’s depiction of human solitude both in the company of other people and in nature is at once coolly registrative and painfully present. Only in the last song, *Böse Zeit* (Evil Time), is there a fellow creature who can extend a hand. Whether this is death offering kind release, or a travelling companion for the rest of the journey, is not obvious. John Frandsen has this open-ended poem accompanied by celestial music, played entirely on the strings inside the piano, so the journey seems accompanied by a faraway harp.

The three songs before *Böse Zeit* are expressive and balance between struggling against the oppressive filigree of the texts and abandoning themselves to it. The pouring rain in *October 1944* is evoked by an unyielding melody, while the encounter with an old acquaintance in *La belle qui veut* is at first rendered musically with a certain sentimentality, but is certainly not allowed to remain in this vein. The description of the old tree in *Knarren eines geknickten Astes* is melodically explosive and angular, with a sense of anger lurking beneath the surface.

### **The room where I once lived (1990)**

The texts of the four songs in *The room where I once lived* are by Henrik Nordbrandt and they are all full of sensory impressions: the tones of Mozart; a real, red rose, the feeling of cold; and touches. John Frandsen carries this play on the senses over into a recognizability in the music. But just as the poems tell more stories than those of the senses, the music too is both a mirror and a window out to the world’s many details.

In the composer’s own programme note we can read for example:

“They too [the songs] present something apparently familiar, sometimes actually something comforting. At any rate they relate to a world we can grasp and understand – and thus also distance ourselves from. But beneath the surface undefined forces are in play. Spirits, nightmare visions, decadence ... The ostensible familiarity and intimacy are undermined, obscured, denied.

The picture takes on the character of *déjà-vu*. And suddenly the poems become threateningly close to us.”

The music touches on the tonal idioms of both Schubert and Ib Nørholm; never as quotations or as literal *déjà-vu*, but as natural references for a twentieth-century Danish composer adding to a long-standing tradition of lieder and songs with piano accompaniment. John Frandsen’s melodies never become word-painting underlay for the texts, but sometimes one can hear how the melody or accompaniment takes its cue from a text phrase and gives it depth. This happens for example in the song *Road sign of the dead*, where a Schubertian piano accompaniment in a regular rhythm to the words “ ... in what direction you should listen ... ” suddenly spreads out, directionally perplexed and swarming to all sides, only to be gathered in again in a new mode of expression that carries the song onward. In all the songs the ostensibly simple opens the way for a wealth of expression.

### **Seven Silly Songs (1987)**

The seven “silly songs” to American and British nonsense texts are not so silly that they do not, like all the more serious texts for other works, offer the opportunity to hear honest human musical expressions of emotions like love, fervency and wildness. As in *Alice in Wonderland*, *Winnie-the-Pooh* and even old Danish ballads, the simplicity of the language and the stories leaves room for a wealth of imagination and surprises. Here we find the drunkard who mumbles his life-wisdom (‘The man who drinketh small beer/And goes to bed quite sober / Fades as the leaves do fade/That drop off in October’) and the young man who runs away from home; there are turtle-doves that miss one another terribly; there is a lullaby with dreams incorporated (‘Go to sleepy, little baby / When you wake / You shall have / All the pretty little horses’) and nonsense verses about jealousy, grotesque daydreams (‘But I’m a cockroach / And I’m a water-bug / I can crawl around and hide behind the sink’), and animals that run off home when it rains. All the bizarre images you need to set off the imagination are already in the texts. At no time does the music just become sound-painting of the colourful texts; at all times it takes the text seriously and in that way emphasizes the grotesque and touching. We smile and feel disquiet.

*Trine Boje Mortensen is the Promotion Manager at Edition Wilhelm Hansen and a music journalist specializing in contemporary music.*

### THE PERFORMERS

Young Norwegian soprano **Lise Davidsen** shot to prominence in summer 2015 when she was crowned winner of both the Operalia and the Queen Sonja competitions. She even was a triple winner at the 2015 Hans Gabor Belvedere Singing Competition in Amsterdam, and she is a recipient of many awards. Davidsen is a 2014 graduate of the Royal Danish Opera Academy in Copenhagen and has a degree from Grieg Academy of Music in Bergen. She made her Royal Danish Opera debut in the 2012/13 season as the Dog and the Owl in *The Cunning Little Vixen*. The 2015/16 season includes two notable house debuts, at Bavarian State Opera in *Die Walküre* and at Frankfurt Opera for its Ring Cycle. She will also make her debut in leading roles with Opern Zurich, Glyndebourne Festival Opera and Royal Opera House Covent Garden.

The Norwegian soprano **Liv Oddveig Midtmageli** is trained at Barratt Dues Musikk institutt in Oslo and at the Danish National Academy of Music, Odense, and has since trained with Anne Sofie von Otter, Håkan Hagegaard and Manfred Honeck. As an operatic soloist she has sung Rosina (*The Barber of Sevilla*), Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*) and Carmen. She also works with contemporary music in roles like Clara/Laura (*Tugt og Utugt* by John Frandsen), Vera (*Halløj Firmaet* by Peter Bruun), Sandra (*Egoland* by John Frandsen) og Ethel Rosenberg (*The Rosenbergs* by Joachim Holbek). Moreover, Liv Oddveig Midtmageli was featured in Odense Internationale Musikteater’s acclaimed stagings *Memory* and *Modellen*.

Countertenor **Morten Grove Frandsen** graduates from the Royal Danish Opera Academy under professor Kirsten Buhl Møller in summer 2016. During his studies, Morten has received grants and scholarships from Den Böhmske fond, Anne Marie Mortensen’s mindelegat and the Léonie Sonning Foundation. In 2015, Morten was named opera talent of the year at the Copenhagen Opera Festival. He has sung the part of Super-Egon in John Frandsen’s opera *Egoland*, Ruggiero in Vivaldi’s *Orlando Furioso* (Riga Baroque Festival), Dr. Rank in John Frandsen’s opera *Et Dukkehjem*, and in summer 2015 premiered the modern opera *Leaves* by Karsten Fundal and Efterklang at the Copenhagen Opera Festival. Morten is also a busy lied and concert singer.

Norwegian baritone **Aleksander Nohr** - while still a student at the Opera Academy - made his debut at the Royal Danish Opera in Copenhagen as Dancairo in Bizet's *Carmen*. He was also engaged by the Norwegian opera to sing Baron Douphol in *La Traviata* and has sung in *Le Nozze di Figaro* with Arctic Opera Norway, *Dido and Aeneas* with Concerto Copenhagen, and in *Olav Engelbrektsson* with Opera Trøndelag, Norway. Aleksander has performed with several orchestras like Concerto Copenhagen, Odense Symphony Orchestra, Copenhagen Phil and the orchestra of the Wermland opera. He has worked with conductors such as Andrew Lawrence-King, Giordano Bellincampi, Lawrence Foster and Michael Boder. Aleksander also collaborates with accordionist Ida Løvli Hidle and on a regular basis experiments with a repertoire spanning from contemporary music to folksongs.

Guitarist **Jesper Sivebæk** completed his studies under Jørgen Bjørnslev (Danish National Academy of Music, Odense), Professor Per Olof Johnson (Malmö Academy of Music, Sweden) and Professor Alvaro Pierri (UQAM in Montreal, Canada). Since 2007 he has been associated professor and head of the classical guitar department at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen. Jesper Sivebæk is a prizewinner at international guitar competitions in Spain, France and Italy. He is co-founder of Scandinavian Guitar Duo and has been a soloist with Malmö Symphony Orchestra, Symphony Orchestra Kielce (Poland), Zapolski Quartet, Aarhus Sinfonietta, Randers Chamber Orchestra, Ensemble Funen and Danish National Symphony Orchestra. For Dacapo Jesper Sivebæk has recorded two CDs with guitar works by Poul Ruders and Vagn Holmboe.

The Finnish-Swedish pianist **Sofia Wilkman** took her Master of Music degree at the Sibelius Academy with distinction in spring 2012. She studied with piano professors Teppo Koivisto and Ilmo Ranta. In September 2014 she had her debut from the soloist class at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, majoring in accompaniment and chamber music under professors Niklas Sivelöv and Friedrich Gürtler. Sofia Wilkman is a sought-after lied pianist and chamber musician and has given concerts throughout the Nordic countries as well as Estonia, Latvia, France, Italy, Germany, Portugal and USA, and she collaborates with some of the finest Nordic singers. Since 2013, Sofia Wilkman has been a repetitor at the Royal Danish Opera Academy in Copenhagen as well as an accompanist at the Royal Danish Academy of Music.

Pianist **Orsi Fajger** was born in Kazincbarcika, Hungary, and has her training from the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest as chorus master, music teacher and accompanist. She has worked at the Academy as professor of singing and the woodwind department, and she quickly became a repetitor at the Hungarian State Opera. Since 2010 she has worked full time as a repetitor at the Royal Danish Opera. In addition, she gives masterclasses at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and in 2013 was the official pianist at Plácido Domingo's opera competition, the Operalia. Since 2008, she has also taken part in Adam Fischer's The Wagner Days festival in Budapest, where she has functioned as head of music since 2014.