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A Contemporary Music Collision at the Oslo Chamber Music Festival

★★★★☆ 

By Aksel Tollåli, 21 August 2014

On Monday evening, the Oslo Chamber Music Festival presented the results of a Nordic "Call for Scores" with four compositions by four young composers. Under the heading "New Tones and Modern Classics", these pieces were, somewhat puzzlingly, bookended by chamber arrangements of tone poems by Richard Strauss. Even though the combination of new and older music can be an interesting and enlightening one, this programme lacked cohesion and proved confounding.

“musicians were seen scribbling furiously in the music...in favour of the wishes of some higher being”

Reviewed at JAKOB Church of Culture, Oslo on 18 August 2014

PROGRAMME

Beste, Sandrose

Martin Smørddal, Less-Sense

Skaarud, Phorisms, book II

Smarason, _a_at_na

Strauss R., Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche, Op.28

Strauss R., Don Juan, symphonic poem, Op.20

PERFORMERS

Oslo Sinfonietta

Kai Grinde Myrann, *Conductor*



Oslo Sinfonietta

© Anna-Julia Granberg

The first of the new pieces was *Sandrose* by Ansgar Beste. *Sandrose* is the German word for desert rose, and the piece was in many ways a depiction of the formation of this crystalline structure. The composer is very much concerned with the use of extended playing techniques, and the four players – a pianist, clarinetist, violist, and a percussionist – made great use of these techniques, be they dragging a comb over the viola strings or blowing through the clarinet without a mouthpiece.

Rather less concerned with pitch, *Sandrose* focused instead on the percussive qualities of each instrument, creating an extremely complex polyrhythmic texture. While this layering of sounds is an interesting idea, I found the execution lacking. There was little obvious development, with similar complex rhythmic figures continuing throughout without much variation or contrast, and as a result, I found it difficult to maintain my engagement in the piece.

Phorisms, Book II by Jonas Skaarud followed. *Phorisms* consists of 27 miniatures for string quartet, tiny pieces lasting only a few seconds each. In his introduction to the work, Skaarud talked about his fascination for the incomplete and interrupted and indeed, these little miniatures were not stand-alone pieces, yet together they almost managed to constitute a cohesive whole. The miniatures ranged from simple chords to chaotic contrapuntal lines for different combinations of instruments within the string quartet. While the sonorities were at times very beautiful, I would have liked Skaarud to have developed these ideas a little further, as the miniatures simply felt all too brief.

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Degenerate music at Villa Grande

Aksel Tollåli, 25th August

Friday's concert served as an interesting showcase of music that, undeservedly, isn't performed too often. Even though the performances were somewhat lacking, the quality of the music shone through.

★★★★☆

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Masterful Bruckner from Haitink and the LSO

Gavin Dixon, 24th October

Haitink's Bruckner is beginning to show signs of his age, but occasional problems of stamina and focus were of little consequence to this otherwise powerful and authoritative reading.

★★★★☆

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'The French Beethoven' unmasked by the OAE

Mark Pullinger, 22nd October

The name George Onslow may conjure up images of whippets, pints and rolling Yorkshire dales, but he was in fact born in Clermont-Ferrand in 1784 and was known as 'the French Beethoven'.

★★★★☆

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From Wagner to Lehar: Klaus Florian Vogt

Ako Imamura, 23rd October

German tenor Klaus Florian Vogt gave a delightful recital of Wagner, Mozart and operatta, aided by excellent playing by Staatskapelle Weimer.

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Mediterranean delights from the CBSO

Peter Marks, 23rd October

Fellow Frenchmen Alain Altinoglu and Renaud Capuçon make for fine partners in a rare outing for Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*.

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Myrann, Kai Grinde

Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche, Op.28



Oslo Sinfonietta

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Jan Martin Smørðal's *less-sense*, a piece taking its inspiration from the life of Saint Augustine, has a constant focus on self-denial and self-correction. The piece for piano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello and soprano, focused on an ever more frantic repetition of melodic fragments. Throughout, the musicians were seen scribbling furiously in the music, a form of self-correction, negating what they as performers and the composer wished to be played in favour of the wishes of some presumably higher being. The six musicians were very

much an ensemble, with no single musician taking on a definite solo role. The singer played a mostly textural role, with the text often being obscured either by other instruments or by its actual delivery; she would often gasp the words, or sing them very high and softly in long, drawn-out phrases. I found this piece very exciting, although I felt it perhaps relied a little too much on theatrics. The constant scribbling in the music by the musicians, and especially the occasional panting from the soprano, often reduced the impact of the work instead of adding anything to it.

The last of the new pieces, *_a_at_na* by Haldor Smarason, proved something of a frustration. The piece for four violins, viola, cello, clarinet, prepared piano and tape was really rather mystifying. To a large extent it consisted of long, low, drawn-out phrases with no apparent direction. Coupled with this were a series of projected images that seemed to have no connection to the music, making for a decidedly puzzling experience.

Bookending these four pieces were two chamber arrangements of Richard Strauss' tone poems, *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Don Juan*. While they lacked the wild sense of abandon that a full Straussian orchestra can give, they were both wonderfully played, especially *Till Eulenspiegel einmal anders!*, in an arrangement for only five instruments. *Don Juan* was perhaps not as successful, as the group of strings (one to a part) was just too small to match the strength of the winds and brass.

Monday's concert was an interesting experience, as it always is to hear new music, especially by young, up-and-coming composers like these. Still, there were a few misses, and the very odd inclusion of Strauss' tone poems made this concert very mystifying indeed.



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Don Juan, symphonic poem, Op.20

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Jane — So there was no orchestra or conductor?

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