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MUSIQUE CONCRÈTE – ‘THIS IS OBVIOUSLY
NOT MUSIC’: ARNE NORDHEIM’S ROUTE
FROM *AFTONLAND* TO *RESPONSE*

The first concert of electronic music in Norway took place in the Large Studio of the Norwegian broadcasting company, NRK, on 2 April 1955. On the programme were works by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry. The latter was present himself to direct the performance. One of the works was *Symphonie pour un homme seul*, which Henry and Schaeffer had composed together, including the recording, mixing and elaborating of sounds from the human body.

The concert came about through the collaboration between Radio Diffusion Française and NRK, on an initiative from the piano teacher Ingrid Fehn.

Ingrid Fehn, who was married to the well-known architect Sverre Fehn, had invited a number of musicians, visual artists and architects. Although she thought the concert would come up to expectations, and the artists considered it exciting, the musicians present were sceptical and very reserved, including Arne Nordheim.

Three months earlier, the newspaper in his hometown Larvik had asked Nordheim what he thought of the new music: *musique concrète*. Having explained how this music was created, he answered:

This is obviously not music – seeing that electronic instruments are used. In that case, one is rapidly distancing oneself from the music’s original essence. A concrete ‘composer’ has no guarantee of how his work will be heard from the technician’s hands. Because of that, the possibility of failure is clear: whether it is a new *sound art*, others must judge.¹

¹ *Larvik Morgenavis*, 20 January 1955.

Nordheim considered Stravinsky, Bartók and Hindemith to be the fundamental pillars of ‘the music of our time’: ‘That is great music – which will survive’, he said.²

In spite of Nordheim’s reservations, Ingrid Fehn urged him to go and see Schaeffer’s and Henry’s studio in Paris and to have an introductory course in *musique concrète*. Nordheim had just received a study grant and went to Paris to study music. Since then, all the biographical references to him have asserted that he studied electronic music in Paris in the spring of 1955. In an interview with Anders Beyer, he said that he had long tried to deny this, but it was quite in vain:

I was there and there was *musique concrète* and the great figures were there, Schaeffer and all the others. But there wasn’t any sort of course of study; it was more a question of going to concerts, making introductions and analysing works, explanations and how a work was composed. I learned an incredible amount from that, but it wasn’t anything like a systematic study. So I have to clarify that bit of history.³

At that time, he had absolutely no plans to create electronic music. Rather, the encounter with electro-acoustic music had made him sceptical. In an interview for *VG* (the newspaper *Verdens Gang*) in October 1956, he actually said that he had no feeling for ‘extreme directions in modern music’, such as pointillist and electronic music. ‘Sterile sound experiments without human warmth’ was how he characterised electronic music:

In the company of the electro-engineer composers and their ideas, one gains the impression that a concept like human warmth was foreign to their music. But it will be interesting to see if there doesn’t soon come a reaction to all the sterile experimenting with sound. I often think of H. C. Andersen’s deep, human story about the emperor’s new clothes. Perhaps soon the little child will come and say: ‘But he doesn’t have anything on...’⁴

² Ibid.

³ Anders Beyer, ‘Arne Nordheim: on Articulating the Existential Scream’, in Andres Beyer and Jean Christensen (eds), *The Voice of Music: Conversations with Composers of our Time* (Farnham, 2000), pp. 141–148, at 141.

⁴ “‘Golde lydeksperimenten uten varme’. Ung komponist til felts mot punkt- og elektronmusikk’ [‘Sterile sound experiments without warmth’. A young composer in a campaign against pointillist and electronic music], *VG*, 2 October 1956.

The first pieces Arne Nordheim composed were written for string quartet. The quartet technique also formed the starting point for the song cycle *Aftonland* [Evening land], to a text by the Swedish poet Pär Lagerkvist, but in that work Nordheim expanded the ensemble with vibraphone, celesta, harp and percussion, in order to create sound and colour effects and underline the textual content. *Aftonland* was completed in the late autumn of 1957.

That same year, Nordheim heard Gunnar Sønstevoid’s use of electronics in the Norwegian Theatre’s staging of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Then he was no longer as negative as before.⁵

He now tried to acquaint himself with the new currents and tendencies in international musical life. Inspired by the Swedish ‘Måndagsgruppen’ (Monday Group), a similar group of young composers was formed in Oslo in the spring of 1958. They met about once a month to go through new music with the help of scores and recordings.⁶ At one of the meetings, in 1959, Nordheim presented and analysed Stockhausen’s electronic work *Gesang der Jünglinge*.

Over the following years, Nordheim tried as well as he could to follow what was happening in the rest of Europe. In February 1960, he told the readers of *Morgenposten* about the burgeoning musical life in Poland. ‘They have even procured a studio for the performance of electronic music,’ he wrote, impressed.⁷

In September 1960, the first concert of purely electronic music was arranged at the Nordic Music Days in Stockholm, with nine new works by Nordic composers, amongst them Karl-Birger Blomdahl’s ‘Mimabanden’, from his sensational opera *Aniara*, and Ingvar Lidholm’s tape-recorded music to the ballet *Riter*. Arne Nordheim was present, because his *Aftonland* was performed in another concert.

In November the same year, Karl Heinz Stockhausen was invited to a lecture and concert where *Kontakte* for electronic sounds, percussion and piano was to be performed. That work was his first attempt at combining electronic sounds and performing musicians.

⁵ ‘Hele musikerfamilien skal bli elever igjen’ [The whole music family will become pupils again], *Morgenposten*, 16 August 1960.

⁶ *Dagbladet*, 26 March 1958.

⁷ *Morgenposten*, 1 February 1960.



After Stockhausen's visit, Nordheim obtained several recordings of electronic music in order to learn more, as can be seen from an article he wrote about Stockhausen in *Morgenposten's* music column. As an example of how a sound score for electronic music looked, in November 1960 he reproduced a page of Stockhausen's score of *Studie II* (1954), published by Universal Edition in Vienna. That was the first time a publishing house had issued a score of electronic music, and Nordheim described in detail what the graphic notation and diagrams meant.

For a long time, however, Nordheim still had an ambivalent relationship with Stockhausen's music. In October 1961, he maintained that in his serial music, Stockhausen was most concerned with technical organisation and less with the musical expression of the result.⁸

The Korean Nam June Paik belonged to the new music circle around Stockhausen in Cologne, and after his shocking concert in Oslo, Nordheim was certain that the milieu in Cologne was sick, clearly moribund, harbouring only speculations.⁹

In spite of the death sentence over the Cologne school, Nordheim saw the potential in electronic music and, as a first attempt, created electronic music to a radio play which was broadcast by NRK on 7 March 1961. The sounds of instruments and voices were recorded on tape, which was later cut and mixed together.¹⁰ The synthetic sound was produced by a sound generator that NRK had obtained from Copenhagen.¹¹

The first gramophone record of electronic music was issued in 1957, and in April 1961 Nordheim reviewed a gramophone record of electronic music by two Dutch composers, Henk Badings and Dick Raaymakers. In *Capriccio* for violin and two sound channels, Badings was able to use the new stereo effect in an imaginative way. At the same time, the recording showed how difficult it was to combine the sound from conventional instruments with an electro-acoustic way of thinking. The violin part was played in a dry room and did not blend with the electronic sounds. Besides, the violinist played as if it was a lush romantic and virtuoso

⁸ 'En virkelig komponist' [A real composer], *Morgenposten*, 17 October 1961.

⁹ 'Nam June Paik-konserten – spekulasjon i siste stadium' [The Nam June Paik concert – speculation in its last phase], *Morgenposten*, 3 October 1961.

¹⁰ *Programbladet*, 44 (1976).

¹¹ Lorentz Reitan, 'Grenseoverskridelser – i media' [Exceeding limits – in the media], *Ballade. Tidsskrift for ny musikk*, 1981/2–3, p. 63.

violin concerto. The result was two worlds that did not meld together into a unity. Nordheim considered that Badings had only transformed conventional formal elements.¹²

Nordheim tried to do it better. In the spring of 1962, he created music for orchestra and tape for the ballet *Katharsis*, which was performed at the Bergen International Festival. In an interview, he said that there had been a huge amount of investigation behind the distinctive quality of the electronic sounds, their recording and combining: ‘There are 9 minutes of electrophonics in the ballet music; it took around 250 hours to produce.’¹³

In the early phase of Nordheim’s use of electrophonics, the sound technician Viktor Sandal played a central role. He was interested in music, a propagandist for new productions and advocated Nordheim’s ideas with ardour and enthusiasm. Sandal would happily work day and night to achieve an exciting final result, and he was central to the development of all the electronic music Nordheim created up until 1966.

There were not many like him at the NRK, so one of the aims of Nordheim and the Composers’ Guild was to get the NRK to appoint technicians who were musically trained and who, in addition to improving the sound quality of musical recordings, could also give technical help with the development of electro-acoustic music. The goal was an electronic music studio for contemporary music.¹⁴

After the success with the music to *Katharsis*, the plan was that the music drama *Favola* would be performed at the Bergen Festival in May 1964 as a joint project with Norwegian television.¹⁵ For various reasons, that project had to be postponed, and it was first realised as a purely television opera the following year. In the meantime, in March 1964, Nordheim had *Epitaffio* for orchestra and tape performed in Stockholm. There are elements of electronic music in both those works.

As the new chairman of the New Music Society, in 1964 Nordheim began working with the Bergen Festival on a concert of contemporary music. His suggestions included Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Psalmus per*

¹² ‘Elektronisk musikk’ [Electronic music], *Morgenposten*, 4 April 1961.

¹³ ‘Den hellige Antonius fristes i Bergen!’ [Saint Antony is tempted in Bergen!] *VG*, 28 May 1962.

¹⁴ Kristian Lange, *Norsk Komponistforening. Gjennom 50 år* [The Norwegian Composers Association. Through fifty years] (Oslo, 1967), p. 65 ff.

¹⁵ Arne Nordheim’s letter to Gunnar Arne Jensen, 24 October 1963; Festival Archive A-4265, Da 88, Bergen City Archive.

nastro magnetico and Bruno Maderna's *Musica su due dimensioni*. This tells us what he regarded as good electronic music and what could have been important sources of inspiration for his own work.



Epitaffio was performed in the closing concert of the Warsaw Autumn in 1965. During the festival, Nordheim befriended the composer Włodzimierz (Wlodek) Kotoński, and, as part of a cultural exchange between Poland and Norway, Kotoński came to Oslo on a return visit in January 1966. Nordheim asked about the possibility of working in the electronic studio of Polish Radio. In a letter of 8 February, Kotoński wrote that the director of the studio, Józef Patkowski, suggested that Nordheim come to Warsaw in the summer of 1966 to discuss plans and to try out and become familiar with all the equipment that was available in the Studio Eksperymentalne Polskiego Radia before he started work.

In May 1966, Nordheim embarked on a grand tour through Europe. In his luggage, he had a whole box full of tapes containing recordings he had thought of using in new compositions. In Norway, there was still no suitable electronic equipment that could realise the musical ideas and groundbreaking projects he was working on.

After attending the Concertgebouw Orchestra's performance of his orchestral work *Canzona*, the plan was to pay a visit to several electronic studios in Europe, in order to find out how he could obtain the best and most effective help. 'I will collect empirical material from places as different as possible; I need, you see, to make thorough preparations for what I am busy with', said Nordheim, without giving away what exactly he was working on.¹⁶ Today, we know that, together with Arnold Haukeland, he was to create a sound sculpture for the blind, *Ode til lyset* [Ode to the light]. Because of the lack of technical opportunities in Norway, he had to go abroad to get help with solving the technical problems.

Before leaving Oslo, he also wrote to Jaap Spek, the sound engineer at Cologne Radio's studio for electronic music, hoping he could visit him to discuss 'certain electronic problems.'¹⁷ In May, he had gone to Warsaw to gain some idea of the opportunities for working and arranged with Patkowski to return in the autumn of 1967.

¹⁶ 'Polyfon studiereise med forhåndsarbeide' [A polyphonic study trip with preparation], *Morgenposten*, 15 April 1966.

¹⁷ Arne Nordheim's letter to Jaap Spek, 9 April 1966; private.

It is difficult to know whether, during his travels through Europe, he found time to work in any of the electronic studios he had planned to visit. However, he must have acquired many new ideas that he worked on further the following year. In a letter of 5 August 1967 to the festival director Åsmund Oftedal, he wrote that he was planning to go to Warsaw to realise his new works *Warszawa 67* and *Colorazione*. These, he hoped, could be performed at the Bergen Festival in 1968, together with *Response I* for two percussionists and tape.¹⁸

Response I for two percussionists and tape, premiered at the end of November 1966 at the Kunstneres hus (Artists’ House) in Oslo, was the first electronic work Nordheim wrote after his study trip through Europe in the summer of 1966. The original electronic part of *Response* represents the last phase in the sound compositions Nordheim managed to develop with simpler means in Norway, while the time after winter 1967 is marked by the collaboration Nordheim had with the technicians at the Studio Eksperymentalne Polskiego Radia. That was the beginning of his new development as composer. ‘This is obviously not music’ was Nordheim’s reaction to electronic music in 1955. Ten years later, he was regarded as the pioneer of electronic music in Norway.

¹⁸ Arne Nordheim’s letter to Åsmund Oftedal, Oslo, 5 August 1967. Festival Archive ESKE – 4265 Da: 120, Bergen City Archive.