

VAGN HOLMBOE

From Wikipedia

Edited David C F Wright DMus

Vagn Gylding Holmboe (Danish pronunciation: [vawn 'hɑlmbø:ʔ], born 20 December 1909 in Horsens, Jutland and died on 1 September 1996 in Ramløse, was a Danish composer and teacher who wrote largely in a neo-classical style (Rapoport 2001)

Dr Wright does not support this view but suggests there are other influences on much of his music from folk music, Bartok and Hindemith as examples. Some of the quartets do not have the refinement of neo classicism.

Vagn Holmboe was born into a merchant family of dedicated amateur musicians. Both parents played the piano. His father earned his living as a maker of colours and lacquers at Horsens, The Danish journalist Knud Holmboe was his elder brother.

From the age of 14, Vagn Holmboe took violin lessons. In 1926, at the age of 16, he began formal music training at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen on the recommendation of Carl Nielsen. He studied under Knud Jeppesen (theory) and Finn Høffding (composition).

After finishing his studies in 1929, he moved to Berlin where for a short period. Ernst Toch became his teacher (Rapoport 2001). During his time in the German capital, he met the Romanian-born pianist and visual artist Meta May Graf (1910-2003) from Sibiu/Hermannstadt. She had studied at the Musikhochschule Berlin since 1929, with Paul Hindemith as one of her teachers. The couple married in 1933 and left Berlin for Romania, where they visited obscure and remote villages and studied Transylvanian folk-song. Subsequently, they moved to Denmark, settling in the capital, Copenhagen, in 1934. While his wife Meta gave up her musical career to pursue her passions in the visual arts, photography in particular, Vagn gave music lessons privately and began composing during this period. Many of the early compositions have never been performed. Similar to the research he had already done in Romania, he pursued his studies of folk-song with much field-work throughout Denmark including the Faroes and Greenland. Many overtly folk-linked compositions, including the Inuit Songs, are a result of these activities.

From 1941 to 1949 he was a teacher at the Royal Institute for the Blind, and from 1950 to 1965 he taught at the Royal Conservatory in Copenhagen, being appointed a Professor there in 1955. Prior to that he had also worked as a music critic for the Danish daily Politiken from 1947 to 1955.

Vagn Holmboe's students included Per Nørgård, Ib Nørholm, Bent Lorentzen, Arne Nordheim, Egil Hovland and Alan Stout.

Vagn and his wife Meta had bought a piece of land at Lake Arresø in Ramløse/Zealand in 1940, where they set up a farm, "Arre Boreale" (Latin for Northern Arresø), in the 1950s and spent the rest of their lives together there.

Vagn Holmboe was a keen nature-lover, who lived in the countryside until his death in 1996 and over the years personally planted 3000 trees on his land.[6]

Holmboe composed about 370 works, including 13 symphonies, three chamber symphonies, four symphonies for strings, 20 string quartets, numerous concertos, one opera, and the late series of preludes for chamber orchestra, as well as much choral and other music, in addition to some early

works that never received opus numbers. His last work, the 21st string quartet, *Quartetto sereno*, was completed by his pupil Per Nørgård.

Musical metamorphosis of thematic or motivic fragments characterize most of his works between the years 1950 and 1970 (similar to Jean Sibelius). His earlier works show the influence of East European composers such as Béla Bartók; his work also shows the influence of Igor Stravinsky, Carl Nielsen and Dmitri Shostakovich.

Major works

Symphonies

sym. 1, 1935, for chamber orchestra, M. 85

sym. 2, 1938–9, M. 107

sym. 3, 1941, *Sinfonia rustica*, M. 126

sym. 4, 1941, *Sinfonia sacra* for chorus and orchestra, M. 132

sym. 5, 1944, M. 145

sym. 6, 1947, M. 155

sym. 7, 1950, M. 167

Chamber symphony no. 1, 1951, M. 171

sym. 8, 1952, *Sinfonia boreale*, M. 175

Sinfonia in memoriam, 1954-5, M. 185

Sinfonia I for strings, M. 194

Sinfonia II for strings, M. 196

Sinfonia III for strings, M. 200

Sinfonia IV for strings, M. 215 (*Kairos*)

sym. 9, 1967–9, M. 235

Chamber symphony no. 2, 1968, M. 240

Chamber symphony no. 3, 1969–70, M. 246

sym. 10, 1970–2, M. 250 (premiered by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra under Sixten Ehrling)

sym. 11, 1980–1, M. 304

sym. 12, 1988, M. 338

sym. 13, 1993–4, M. 362

Concertos

Several (about twenty), including especially

Concerto for trumpet and chamber orchestra, with the orchestra consisting of two horns and strings- written in 1948, M. 157. Eleventh of a series of 13 concertos with chamber orchestra originally called "chamber concertos"

Cello concerto, 1974–9, M. 273

Recorder concerto, 1974, M. 275

Flute concerto no. 1, 1975–6, M. 279

Tuba concerto, 1976, M. 280

Flute concerto no. 2, 1981–2, M. 307

String quartets

Twenty-one written (excluding numerous un-numbered student works)

From no. 1, 1948–9, M. 159 to no. 20, 1985, M. 322 (this the last of four works representing the times of the day) (also the completion of a twenty-first, Quartetto sereno)

Some other works

Notturmo for wind quintet, 1940, M. 118

Brass quintets - no. 1, 1961–2, M. 212; no. 2, 1978, M.293

Requiem for Nietzsche for tenor, baritone, chorus, and orchestra, 1963–4, M. 219

Symphonic metamorphoses for orchestra —

Epitaph, 1956, M. 189 (premiered by the BBC Symphony Orchestra)

Monolith, 1960, M. 207

Epilog, 1961–2, M. 213

Tempo variabile (Changeable weather,) 1971-2, M.254

Two sonatas for guitar, op. 141-2

Five intermezzi for guitar, op. 149

Commercial recordings of his symphonies by Owain Arwel Hughes are still available, as are recordings of his string quartets, chamber concertos, and some other works. His choral or brass music, or his wind Notturmo from 1940 may be performed more often than his works for full or chamber orchestra.

Private tapes exist of performances conducted by Holmboe; these were made by Nikolai Malko and/or by Fritz Mahler, but are rare, and difficult to obtain.

Books

Holmboe wrote several books, including *Danish Street Cries: a study of their musical structure and a complete edition of tunes with words collected before 1960*, translated by Anne Lockhart for Kragen, ISBN 87-980636-9-3, published 1988.

Another is *Experiencing Music*. An English translation of this by Professor Paul Rapoport, formerly of McMaster University, published by Toccata Press in 1991 has ISBN 0-907689-16-7 in its paperback release.

Paul Rapoport, an expert on the composer's music, has written for Edition Wilhelm Hansen, Copenhagen, a worklist and discography entitled *The Compositions of Vagn Holmboe*, ISBN 87-598-0813-6,

VAGN HOLMBOE, EXPERIENCING MUSIC, PAUL RAPOPORT

This book, *Experiencing Music* by Paul Rapoport deals with Vagn Holmboe's views on music and is a book for serious and genuine music lovers since it treats of a composer who was that himself. As Robert Simpson points out, Holmboe was a genius.

He had a healthy interest in life. He observed the growing of plants and trees, natural processes and such discipline is found in his music. Trees grow quietly without pomposity and hype, confident in their purpose and function. So it is with quality music. He speaks of music as art in the sense of skill and technique which evolves naturally; he speaks of it as culture and states that a country without a serious music culture is a dead country. He quotes from Niels Steenson and applies the quote to great music, "by far the most beautiful things are those we do not comprehend." There is in music literature some works that are so beautiful and skilful that words can never express them and we will never comprehend why they are so beautiful; it is incomprehensively so. Berlioz found this so when he distressed himself because of his failure to describe the beauty of the slow movement of Beethoven's Symphony No 4; the slow movement of Bruckner's Symphony No 8 is another case in point as Simpson once pointed out.

Holmboe reminds us that human development depends on thought and culture and the reward comes when we are involved with our minds. He continues, "Music is part of our culture and it demands effort." Superficial enjoyment results in passive stagnation. People who use music as a background are not attending to it; those who fuss about it being theoretical, mathematical, formal or historical are missing the point. Examining boards fuss over students' correct playing of musical ornaments and there is such a palaver about authenticity and how Bach would have played it. Does it matter? Music is an expression of the soul, not how many notes to play in a trill. As Holmboe says, music must have a direct experience; it must have its lifeless building blocks and they must be of quality and assembled with thought and care.

When Holmboe talks about the skill of composing he makes the valid point that composing is of the will. If it is merely feelings you may write some good tunes and many composers have done so and little else ... no structure, no form and no logic. The author states that composing is a "self-forgetting state where any objectives and desires, hopes and ambitions disappear. You are no longer conscious of yourself ..."

Many will take issue on this but read his exegesis. He is absolutely right in what he says, music intentionally written for fame and fortune will always be cheap in some way or another. If you consider the greatest music, little is dedicated to royalty or is self-indulgent. Consider the masterworks of Mozart, Beethoven and Bartók for example ... they were written to be music and music alone.

Holmboe deals with musical thinking. If you are a musician you have the capacity to be able to accurately think about music. However, if I have never driven a car, I cannot possibly think like a car-driver and you would hesitate about me driving your car.

Just as the real composer must and does compose merely for music's sake, so the performer must also follow the composer's intentions ... if he alters them he is setting himself above the composer. As Holmboe writes, "The composer does not want to be the victim of misinterpretation or outrageous distortion." And yet, there are performers and conductors who are guilty of musical slander and libel and are still fawned over. To my mind, such conductors are frauds but I had better not mention any names or proven cases here. A performer has not only to have the skill and technique but the understanding of the music. Interpretation is not how I think it should go but how the composer wants it to go.

An interesting chapter follows on listening to music ... note, not hearing it ... and how a bad performance can deter a listener from a piece for ever. I heard a famous youngish British conductor in Birmingham perform Sibelius' Symphony No 5. It was simply awful and this was clearly the conductor's fault. My companion vowed never to hear the piece again. "We can have a different effect each time we hear a piece," says Holmboe. But it is equally true that some works, however often you hear them, always command attention. The author rightly says that pop music is entertainment but real music meets emotional and intellectual needs. The real music lover is not out to be entertained but to be inspired.

We proceed to the problem of modern music and how many so-called music lovers are uninterested, disapproving and sometimes rancorous about it. Some display a vicious attitude. They want music to be something to hug your comfort blanket to and suck your thumb to. But music, of whatever age, has to be assessed as to its skill and not its security of 'pretty tunes'. The unfamiliar or unusual causes prejudicial distress and people long for the safety of the shores of predictability. "Culture will die if there are no new challenges," writes Holmboe.

As reviewer. I would like to add that I corresponded with Holmboe for some time and send him cassettes of all his symphonies as conducted by Bryden Thomson which thrilled him . As a thank you Holmboe sent me a score of his Symphony no 5 which is, without doubt, a very fine work.

(2083)

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