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Trondheim Chamber Music Festival, Norway

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Maja Ratkje leads the concert of revolutionary songs 'Wach Auf!' at Trondheim Chamber Music Festival. Photo: Ole-Einar Andersen

Trondheim's Chamber Music Festival turned 20 this year, and it feels like a healthy, well-balanced 20-year-old: young, confident, firmly rooted in its community.

The range of performance venues says something about the broad acceptance the festival has won over two decades in its coastal university town. Members of the Nash Ensemble, led by superb Trondheim-born violinist Marianne Thorsen, gave a vivid account of Mozart's first piano quintet in the elegant little wood-panelled ballroom of Ladejarlen House, home of the affluent owners of the Rema supermarket chain. A day earlier, composer-in-residence Maja Ratkje led a concert of revolutionary songs with local choirs at Folkets Hus, home of the local socialist worker's chapter, titled "Wach Auf!" ("Arise!"). The latter could have marched to the former, with their berets and red shirts and rousing calls by Weil and Eisler to overthrow the capitalist oppressor. But this is Norway, where social action tends to be more subtle.

The festival opened with one of Norwegian composer Ole Hamre's *Fargespill* projects, with refugee and immigrant children performing music from their various places of origin in ebullient combination, a celebration of diversity deliberately at odds with the rising tide of rightwing xenophobia in Norway.

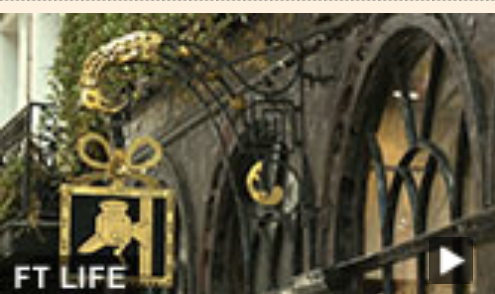
A more sober reflection on recent events came in the form of Ratkje's 2013 *Asylos*. Performed in the atmospheric 12th-century Vår Frue Church (Our Lady's Church), *Asylos* brought together the outstanding Norwegian Girl's Choir with Gregorian women's choir Schola Sancta Sunnivae and mezzo soprano Marianne Beate Kielland for a lavish and sweeping piece on themes of exodus and common humanity. Ratkje made theatrical use of the space, and the young singers dazzled with their energy, focus and flawless intonation. Concert takings went to a local refugee fund.

Ratkje is the third female composer-in-residence in a row at Trondheim (following Kaija Saariaho and Lera Auerbach), a fact to challenge Damian Thompson's offensive assertion in British magazine *The Spectator* recently that "there's a good reason why there are no great female composers", a patently absurd statement. After Saariaho's mysticism and Auerbach's precision, Ratkje brings a feral disregard for conventional form, combined with an extravagant imagination, linking it all to a fascination with the human voice and its communicative possibilities. Her works are dramatic, engaging and wildly diverse.

Another woman, librettist Marianne Meløy, penned *Kommentarfeltet* for the festival. Together with composer Trygve Brøske she has created a chamber opera about comments sections on the internet. Healthy muffin recipes and exotic bragging meet vitriolic racism, misunderstandings and bad spelling to hilarious effect. Even if this is not the first opera to send up Instagram and Facebook, it must be the best. More, please!

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