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### Trondheim Festival Reinvents Itself (Again)

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BERLIN--In the living-room of local architects Knudsen and Norderhus, floor-to-ceiling windows open out to the slate-grey skies and obsidian fjord of Trondheim. When the Pavel Haas Quartet plays Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*, the bleak grief of the music and the dull gleam of the vista entwine in an unbearably moving way.

Trondheim's Chamber Music Festival, now in its 21st year, is still run by the men who founded it two decades ago, violinist Sigmund Tvette Vik and director Vegar Snøfugl, and it never fails to reinvent itself.

House concerts were introduced to the program three years ago, and have already become so popular that when a vacant slot was put out to tender, 16 different households entered into fierce competition with one another to become the hosts. There is no money involved; on the contrary,

hosts have to provide refreshments. The prize went to one of Trondheim's oldest collective households, Bergsligata 13, currently occupied by 21 people (from children to pensioners) who agree to a daily evening meal together. In honor of the occasion, they baked cake and made coffee for all.

Back at Knudsen and Norderhus, the Czech quartet moves on to Webern's expressive *Fünf Sätze* Op. 5, and from there to Shostakovich's somber Second String Quartet. These are musicians who have something to say when they play; they have courage and rhetorical power, and their music-making is profoundly infused with meaning.

They are back the following evening at the palace of the Archbishop, a spacious new building that replaces the original, burnt down in the 1980s when struck by lightning—an act of God that would surely plunge any prelate into a morass of self-doubt. The quartet's playing is a force of nature in itself, and its account of Pavel Haas's Second String Quartet, *From the Monkey Mountains*, feels both elemental and definitive.

While the visiting quartet was undoubtedly a highlight of this year's Festival, which ran from September 26 to October 2, it was just one part of a spectacularly diverse array of musical offerings. "Listen with Care" was this year's motto, emblazoned on banners, t-shirts, and a capacious moving van that trucked small performances to unlikely locations. Its sides opened, making a portable stage-on-demand.



Bent Sørensen was this year's composer-in-residence, and the Festival context provided the chance to see both how heterogeneous his work is and how much his style has evolved over the years. At the Festival's

opening concert, for which Trondheim's breathtaking 12th-century Nidaros Cathedral was bathed in blue light, Sørensen's music was interleaved with instrumental settings of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, performed in various instrumental constellations by the Trondheim Soloists, the city's internationally touring chamber orchestra. The acappella Trondheim Vokalensemble brought purity and lilt to his *Havet str så blankt og Stille* (Sea star so bright and still) and *Og soles går ned* (The sun goes down), Duffay's *Ave Maris Stella* added to the general time-warp sensation. But Sørensen's 2010 *It is pain flowing slowly on a white wall*, written for the Trondheim Soloists, proved the concert's high point, with Sigmund Tvette Vik's fragile solo violin notes melting from one end of the Cathedral, where he stood alone, into Frode Haltli's mystical accordion, positioned in front of the orchestra, to the other.

Haltli's playing, his ability to blend the world of experimental contemporary music with that of Norwegian folk heritage, and his whimsical humor were a further Festival treat; his 2015 *Grenseskogen* (Crossing Borders) at Trondheim's romanesque Vår Frue Kirke (Church of Our Lady) is a meditative meeting of musical worlds, as off-the-wall improvisation eases into catchy folk tunes and drifts back into hauntingly evocative soundscapes.

Improvisatory freedom was a recurring theme. Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero and Norwegian violinist Henning Kraggerud were special guests, and while their rendition of Franck's A Minor Sonata in the city's Masonic lodge was strong, their joint improvisation provided the evening's most engaging moments.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of Trondheim's hip Dokkhuset, a converted waterfront space with a club-like feel, and a favorite venue for late-night concerts. The "100% Bent" concert with the Trondheim Sinfonietta was a good opportunity to spend time in cozy proximity with Sørensen's music, from his frenetic, conversational *Minnelieder* and *Zweites Minnewater* (Songs of Memory; Second Act of Nobility) (1988 and 1994) to his more introverted 2014 *Pantomime-Papillons*.

The Norwegian premiere of his 2015 *L'isola della Città* for piano trio and orchestra brought the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra into the Festival program and provided an insight into the wealth of musical life on offer in Norway's third-biggest city. With a population of just under 200,000, this

university town is hardly a teeming metropolis, but it is self-assured and laid back, and you feel that it is a place where there is still time for a life of the mind.

Beneath the spacious auditorium of the Olavshallen, where the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra plays, is the small theater of the Lille Sal. Parents with children flock there for “Fargespill,” a utopic presentation in which young performers from a wide range of different migrant backgrounds perform music from each other’s countries in a slick, well-conceived show that gives a heartening picture of just how well a diverse society can come together through music.

It is the unique combination of silvery half-light and fierce, dark soundscapes with cozy interiors and an unshakeable faith in the possibility of a better world that makes Trondheim’s Chamber Music Festival so compelling.

Pictured: Bent Sørensen



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