

Honouring every note

Nobody knows when and where a musician is born. Then one day there he is with his accordion; alone on the big stage or in the concert hall surrounded by strings, in the smoky basement with enthusiastically improvising free jazz players, or with a Hardanger fiddler and a folk singer on a simple wooden stage erected for the occasion; Frode Haltli seats himself on his stool, perfectly self-assured, the accordion safely resting in his shoulder straps; a quietly satisfied smile spreads over his frank, disarming face, no antics, no gestures. Can one really demand so little attention? Just a few seconds pass. Then the music sounds out. Where is it coming from? From the first note, he sets us, the audience, free. He is already into the work, he has already taken us with him into the music. How does it happen?

'Duende' is an expression used in the flamenco tradition to define the state when the singer's personal sorrows and passions pervade the music and we, the audience, as if by a touch of grace, hear life itself in its grief, pain and rejoicing. A similar expression is used by traditional Norwegian fiddlers; 'å ha dâm i spelet', that is the moment when through the fiddle player the 'springar' or 'halling' dance tune starts to live its own life and turn into a kind of cathedral; every member of the audience knows when it happens and that they too are in the 'cathedral'. In these rare but unique moments the wings of the music touch us; we can never forget it, we shall always long for it. To hear Frode Haltli play Sofia Gubajdulina's 'De profundis', on this CD; Bent Sørensen's 'Looking on Darkness' or his own improvisation on the fiddler Gustav Kåterud's 'Lyrical Waltz', is to be taken into that room. Each time Haltli improvises on the waltz from his home village it is in a slightly new version. With a completely modern feeling for time, we don't know if we are listening to traditional music or modern, cornfields billowing in the wind or waves of big city conversation, we are taken into a meditative, almost sacred holy place, as complex as it is simple, the sounds thrill with collective life and moods, genre boundaries are broken down; with his playing Haltli raises this waltz to a sphere entirely its own, a new musical dimension is created.

Frode Haltli was born in 1975 in Levanger north of Trondheim. When he was six he moved with his family to the village of Våler in Solør, Eastern Norway. At the same time he was given his first accordion. The villages in Solør are situated in an inland region, the wide river Glomma flows through the beautiful, slightly rolling country of great forests, farms and cornfields, the sea lies to the south. Here, in the village in the forest with about a thousand inhabitants, a chipboard factory, two schools and a few shops, where the father worked at the factory, the mother at the secondary school, among farmers and foresters he grew up. In winter the trees brood heavily in the freezing pitch darkness, the village street is deserted, light shines from the windows, in springtime the snow melts, the grass turns dark green and the streams ripple through the summer meadows, the cornfields sway in the wind before autumn mists rise among the pine trees, leaves turn yellow and fall to the ground and again the evenings are long and dark, winter is back. From the forest you hear the sound of wood cutters, the

sky arches over the landscape, the snow squeaks under your shoes and a young lad in a knitted cap with a big accordion on his back is on his way home through the dark from his music lesson; when he comes into the house and has pulled off his winter clothes he takes out his instrument to get going again. The keys must be mastered; registers, bass and descant, his fingers, still small, must learn to co-ordinate; evening after evening he practises transcribed classical music by the great European composers, sitting in the boys' room there in the forest village. His first teacher is Erik Bergene. By eleven he is playing contemporary music by modern composers such as Torbjørn Lundquist and Per Nørgård. At thirteen and the youngest member of the traditional dance band, he plays for dances with a forester, a farmer, a carpenter, a salesman and a teacher from the village, and performs with his brother Marius, four years his junior, on the trumpet at local functions and on radio and television. But at home in the boys' room his goal is to overcome technical problems in order to master a new piece of art music. When he is seventeen he travels for stays in Copenhagen several times to take lessons with Mogens Ellegaard (1935-95), the great classical concert accordionist, the pioneer who persuaded contemporary composers in Scandinavia, including Arne Nordheim and Per Nørgård, to write original music for the instrument. With each technical barrier that is passed a new musical universe opens. But in contrast to the man in Kafka's story who goes out and saddles his horse and when asked: 'Where are you going?' replies: 'Away from here, just away from here', it is neither to get away from his home village nor its people and musical roots that Haltli wants, he constantly returns to them, both geographically and in his music, he does not intend to desert anything, he even knows where he is going; the vision is a musical magnitude out there that he cannot yet measure but which he knows is within his reach. At his first examination at the Norwegian State Academy of Music in Oslo (1994-98) he plays Magnus Lindberg's 'Metal Work' for accordion and percussion. He performs Sofia Gubajdulina's 'Silenzio' for accordion, violin and cello. Collaboration with classical musicians begins. The third year is the exchange year in Denmark. He transcribes Iannis Xenakis's 'Khoai', technically and musically an extremely demanding work, for accordion. From 1998 to 2000 Haltli takes a post-graduate degree in performance at The Royal Danish Conservatoire of Music in Copenhagen and receives guidance from Geir Draugsvoll and James Crabb. The numerous bursaries and prizes he receives have little effect on this modest but hard-working and dedicated musician. The vision is a different one: 'the musical dimension'. At twenty-five, in 2000, Haltli is elected as Norwegian young soloist of the year for 2001, and has his debut concert in Copenhagen and in Oslo with premieres by Bent Sørensen, Jon Øyvind Ness and Asbjørn Schaathun. Today Haltli tours as a solo artist and member of several ensembles both at home and abroad. With his genuine and generous musicality and with his concerts and involvement in a number of CD recordings, he is turning the accordion into an essential instrument in contemporary music.

The myth has it that when The Yellow Emperor of China, Wang Di, sent the learned Ling Lun to the western mountains to find a way of reproducing the song of the Phoenix Bird – the bird of rosy dawn and resurrection -, Ling Lun came back with the bamboo flutes that later would become the Chinese instrument sheng; a mouth organ with thin vibrating reeds attached to the mouthpieces of the flute and with a gourd as the sounding box. Explorers brought the Chinese sheng to Europe on their travels, the

frail reeds were replaced by freely vibrating metal plates, the flutes were built into a bellows which pressed air through them, opened and closed by valves controlled by buttons on the outer sides of the bellows. During the 19th and 20th centuries the instrument makers developed and improved this first accordion into the 'bandoneon', 'concertina', 'musette', 'accordion'; it was played in Russia and Europe, and the instrument sailed with the emigrants to America, Latin America and elsewhere around the world. A one-man symphony, 'a Steinway on your lap', Mark Twain called the accordion, this rich, apparatus-like and mysterious contrivance. With its large provision of uses and sounds - it can stand in for a whole orchestra and at the same time sound as sensitive as a cello - the instrument was first made use of by the ordinary working sections of the population; for folk dances on the meadow, the tango in Argentina, weddings and festivities in the Balkans and Russia, meditations in the Norwegian twilight. There is no doubt that it was the fact of the accordion being firmly rooted in popular taste that created the warm, profoundly emotional mode of expression attributed to the instrument. The accordion is 'reborn' almost like a phoenix bird when eminent modern composers during the last half of the 20th century write for the instrument, and it is to be heard in concert halls all over the world. When the relationship between high and low culture is the object of new fruitful discussion, it is precisely the unique history of the accordion with its deep roots in popular tradition and as a highly developed concert instrument, which gives it such great potential and at the same time makes it so versatile today.

Born in the mid-seventies and making his entry on the Norwegian music scene in the second half of the nineties, Frode Haltli is one of a generation of composers and musicians who have set their sights more freely in regard to the musical tradition than any other generation of music makers before them. Manfred Eicher with his far-sighted ECM productions undoubtedly laid some of the foundations for this progress. Every stone is turned and scrutinised by this new generation of players, whose constant concern is both experimentation and the desire to communicate to all, and for whom collaboration across tradition and genre is not the exception but the rule. Through working with vastly different musicians and composers Frode Haltli is one of the most prominent examples of his generation of this pioneering work and so is naturally to be found on a number of CDs as an ensemble musician. With the trio POING, with Rolf-Erik Nystrøm on saxophone and Håkon Thelin on double bass, Haltli has held dialogues with young contemporary composers who have already written more than twenty original compositions for this group. With the folk singer Unni Løvlid and fiddler Vegar Vårdal in RUSK, traditional music from Haltli's home ground Solør and Finnskogen are the subjects of investigation, on the CDs with The Source/Cicada String Quartet and No Spaghetti Edition it is as an experimental improvising musician that Haltli participates, while new expressions and feelings are tried out in the Trygve Seim Orchestra. The most recent collaboration is with the Vertavo String Quartet, Norway's leading group on the international stage, widely known for their interpretations of the classical repertoire. And last but not least must be mentioned Haltli's collaboration with his colleague and partner, the composer Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje, in such various works as tangos, improvisations and experimental contemporary music. It is still too early to point to the musical breakpoint in this generation in relation to the previous one, but there is no doubt that the unique extension of frontiers

under way today in new Norwegian music will prepare the ground in many directions for new musical landscapes and, time will show, perhaps open out to material yet unheard; among other things Haltli's own improvisation on the lyric waltz as mentioned above and Ratkje's bold dialogue with Japanese music on this CD may bear witness to the development.

So Frode Haltli chooses to make his debut as a soloist with contemporary Nordic music. The choice was simple for Haltli: 'This is my music. Topical, and here and now.' Alone with his instrument the soloist has no one to hide behind, no one to support him, every note, every modulation, can be heard in the work the soloist illuminates with his interpretation. As a musician, with his sovereign technique and fine-tuned sensibility Haltli comes fully into his own with these works. By taking the distinctive emotional strength and solidarity of the accordion and his own roots in popular tradition into classical music, Haltli bestows an incredible immediacy and clarity on these extremely complicated compositions; his way of listening intently to what he plays allows him to interpret the music with individuality and respect, by honouring each note.

In many ways the CD 'Looking on Darkness' comprises a journey through life with entrance, middle section and exit. Loss, searching, fragments of poetry, the energy of play and sorrow's meditative reflection form some of the elements. We generally connect late modernism with a cautious artistic testing, a search for a human anchorage remote from the more absolute statement and expression of earlier epochs; the totality, which the classical modernist, despite a shattered world, could still glimpse behind the ruins, has been lost; terror, lies, genocide and the horrors of war have put the European project of civilisation to the test; the artist does not only examine the foundations and potential of his own art, he asks questions about whether the very language of art has the ability to convey expression, at the same time placing a strain on new artistic communication. An age, a world has passed away.

And it is in the attempt to recreate a lost world, without any illusion of its feasibility, that we find the Danish composer Bent Sørensen's beautiful and melancholy music. Sørensen, one of the most frequently performed contemporary Scandinavian composers, has taken the title, 'Looking on Darkness', from Shakespeare's Sonnet No 27. The thematic and intellectually clearly constructed form in which the inherent emotion is centrally placed, and which characterises the sonnet, also forms the basis of Sørensen's composition, which is dedicated to Frode Haltli. After a long day's work the speaker of the sonnet from which the title of the work is taken lies looking out into the darkness; the memory of his beloved appears on his retina like a jewel in the night, but at the same time the sleepless one is restless at seeing the much missed beloved so clearly, and, just as in Shakespeare's sonnet, the past, memory, arises in Sørensen's music as it were out of nothing, out of the darkness, the silence; the concrete rattle of the accordion buttons and the sensitive dripping notes in the opening section vibrate on the borderline between the concrete and the hereafter. Loss and mourning for that which is lost and will never come again, flow into the fleeting and poetic tones and meld together; the

music oscillates, lingers, holds tightly to the absence, slackens its grip, tries again, does not say: hear me, but moves carefully onwards with itself like the fragmentary memories in Samuel Beckett's late prose, before the sorrowful voice of the piece, just as beautiful and unobtrusive, withdraws again and leaves us to the silence, to what used to be.

The Greek sophists studied and tested out their arguments by turning premises upside down to show how you could argue both for and against every premise. This is the starting point for the Swedish-born composer Per Magnus Lindborg, when in 'Bombastic SonoSophisms' he turns the notes upside down and in differing ways tests them out, but the conclusion of the work, which was commissioned by Haltli, holds far less bombast than the title would indicate. Playfully lively, almost physically present, Lindborg hurls the elements around, which then gather and spread out, the tripping descant and the quasi-powerful bass relate to each other in space searchingly, playfully and competitively. By degrees the voices in the work seek each other, find each other in an almost jazz-like rhythmic main movement, yet still wanting their own direction, even their own expression; the rhythm attempts to structure the space but refrains from overwhelming it, the elements fragment again and when we look back at the conclusion of the work, which ends in an ironic self-commentary, it seems as if we have been in a house where the internal staircase was in course of construction without being built and which we nevertheless find to be both functional and completely inhabitable.

Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje, one of Norway's leading young composers, with a number of compositions for various ensembles behind her, has been noted for quite some time as a bold, unprejudiced experimenter with an amazing ability to take fresh paths in astonishing dialogues. 'gagaku variations', the central work on this CD, was written for Haltli and the Vertavo String Quartet. Gagaku is a millennium old Japanese musical form. In 'gagaku variations', also inspired by the Japanese mood 'wabi sabi', the moment when beauty, suddenly and like a grace can show itself in an incomplete, hesitant state or quite simply in an unpleasant subject, Ratkje combines elements from western and Japanese music in an almost intuitive manner. The piece opens with a great majestic sound, then changes into strongly beating chords, with a power reminiscent of 'The Rite of Spring' and Xenakis. The clusters of tones, building up to an abrupt conclusion, sound out almost physically, and create the basis for the silence out of which the rest of the work rises. As in Japanese art, so in Ratkje's 'gagaku variations' it is against the background of emptiness that the music, like brief haiku poems with long pauses and European inserts in the long central movement of the work springs forth, indeed, becomes possible; a leaf that falls to the ground, a face profiled against the moon, a rotten tree trunk broken in two, bitterness and sweet longing, the beloved away travelling, sunrise over the sea with the little boat on its way out, the town waking up, but also violent outbursts and aggression form the clear, phonetic musical images. The form of the composition may in parts seem quite open, but when the gagaku melody, hitherto latent in the work, breaks out towards the end, it comes as something natural, as if released from suppression, followed by powerful energetic variations between the viola and the accordion, orchestrated as if the string quartet and the accordion shared a long tradition. When the dynamic work fades out with great force in a Japanese garden and a roar of

eternity, still with bold breaks, it seems as if Ratkje has brought the two traditions into conversation, but without blending; neither here are the different musical elements subordinated to each other, difference remains difference.

The Finnish composer Magnus Lindberg also takes his starting point in dialogue by making 'Jeux d'anches' into a meeting place for two traditions. The title itself, 'Jeux d'anches', refers to the metal tongues in the accordion which are set in movement that creates sound when air is blown through them, and it is in the examination of sound as well as the play on sounds and the actual organisation of the inside as well as the outside of sound that Lindberg, in 'Jeux d'anches', with his own background in severe structuralism goes to meet Grisey and French spectral music. Like agitated humming birds that stochastically and without direction fly high and low out of pure joy, far and wide in their search for nectar, the notes spread out playfully and eagerly in this informally excessive work. With brilliant energy and apparently by coincidence and without aim, Lindberg investigates the potential of the instrument, but the coincidence is only apparent, because when 'the nectar flowers' following the dramatic concentration have been found, the coincidences turn out to have been from the beginning the grounding and movement towards the conclusion, which assumes classical dimensions.

Can a modern atonal work be a lament without also grieving over its lost, romantic melody? The answer must be yes; 'Lament' by the Norwegian composer Asbjørn Schaatun, also written for and dedicated to Haltli, is this kind of work. Classically structured in its composition with clean, limited formal elements, Schaatun makes use of the polyphonic potentiality of the accordion to make the instrument as it were engaged in a dialogue with its own points of extremity. Is what we hear the survivors' conversation with the dead or are they quarrelling with each other? Or is it the soul's conversation with itself or its god that we listen to, before the voices are brought together and the work now moves onwards purposefully, but with a different resistance which is not from without, of the wind, the weather, but an inner, reflective, serious resistance challenging the work, before the composition and with that Frode Haltli's first solo CD fades out in a beautiful, elegiac falsetto, the brief farewell and ascent of the soul.

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