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Interviews

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REVIEWS

Review by: Alexander Johannesen

ARTIST: FRED JONNY BERG

SONG: VIOLIN SONATA NO.1 OP.50

GENRE: CLASSICAL / CONTEMPORARY

SIMILAR: ERIC SATIE, ANDERSEN

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It has been hard to review this piece of music. Not so much because of its complexity or unfamiliar style, but because I have to balance my bias against my emotions. You see, the composer and the performers are all Norwegian like I am, a rare sight in my world of reviewing free Internet music, and they're doing music outside of the general scope which, to me, is a valued genre.

Don't get me wrong; my bias doesn't alter what I write here but keep in mind that we're dealing with really, talented professionals here, not your average wannabe composer playing with his or her accidental friends;

Fred Jonny Berg is a young, well-known and highly productive composer here in Norway. He composes all sorts of music, mostly in contemporary style, whatever that means these days.

Then we have the violinist Håvard Rognli that I know too little about, but enough to have recognized his name from a few assorted good concerts. I can only judge him by his playing, and, without revealing too much, there is no reason why his name shouldn't be next to the pianist's.

So naturally we come to the pianist, Wolfgang Plagge. A lot can be said about this guy but "genius" is a word he has lived with since he started performing as a 5-year old, composing from the age of 12. This is one of those rare birds out there who was born to play this type of music, one who understands that music is more than just playing notes on a piece of paper. And, admittedly, I've been a fan of his since I saw him live a few years back. On a side-note: He's also known for swaying back and forth as he plays, some don't like that. I, on the other hand, love it! He's alive and emotional, which is exactly what I think a good musician should be. But I digress...

Now, take these three people's expressions, throw them into the bag of contemporary music, and see what you get. Hard to tell, at best, and bloody impossible to easily explain without going through some slight paces, so here we go;

I have spent a long time listening to this piece of music. A very long time. I've had a fair bit of shouting, threatening and abuse from the automatic reviewing system. "Review that thing now!! You're late!" I've heard every week for the last two months. How can I explain to such an impersonal and unemotional system that these things take time? And when the music is so ... so ... grasping? Let's review "grasping"; I can't really find another word that is more suitable. Let me try to explain.

That which truly grasps me are most often things that are dead simple in texture and truly amazing in its complexity. In other words, I crave nice curves

on the outside, and a rough powerful monster under the hood. I like shiny crystals with electric current going through it; the perfect mix of the beauty and the workings behind it. I have no better way of explaining it, than to refer to Bach's cello suites, where a note is playing and switching to the next, creating a rumbling in the case of the instrument, which just happens to be the ground note of the next section's first note; simple in texture, simple when you listen to it but dearily and amazingly complex when you try to understand its nature and inner workings.

But a reference to Bach when reviewing this music is somewhat misleading. This is nowhere near the baroque style, tonality nor feel. In fact, the first association I got when listening to this is Eric Satie, that crazy French modernist of early to mid 20th century. So, through that reference, let us explore what the music is.

This music was first played in December of 1999, at the famous Edvard Munch museum in Oslo. I can imagine being there, the swaying pianist, the dramatic violinist, and a somewhat serious composer sitting close, amongst the pictures of the impressionist Munch. There are links here, intentional or not; Munch, violin, Satie, piano, impressionism, modernism. Just like the setting in which it was played, so it is equally compelling, or, rather, grasping. Yes, there goes that word again;

The music grasps me because it is a structured piece that has an improvised feel. The music starts off in one direction that soon changes from rhythm-bound to free-track in one moment, before it restructures itself in a adagio part that sounds like random themes put together, only fooling me until I have a second listen; there is structure, one level up.

The music grasps me because it portrays syncopation in seemingly unrelated places. Where one would think that the piano and the violin would go their separate ways, they don't. It feels almost like the syncopation is a hidden way of telling their context, having the two instruments say the same thing but mean two different things. And it is not out of place, but rather done very nicely indeed.

The music grasps me because the theme is vivace, yet subtle in the total piece, repeated enough for a statement, but less as a repetition. One problem with a lot of music is how you get the shampoo-rinse-shampoo-rinse cycle going too many times, making the music seem repetitive and lifeless. Not so here, where the seemingly repetitions are merely transcriptions of the previous cycle. And note the piano intro and outro to this piece; truly amazing, and something I'd love to hear more of.

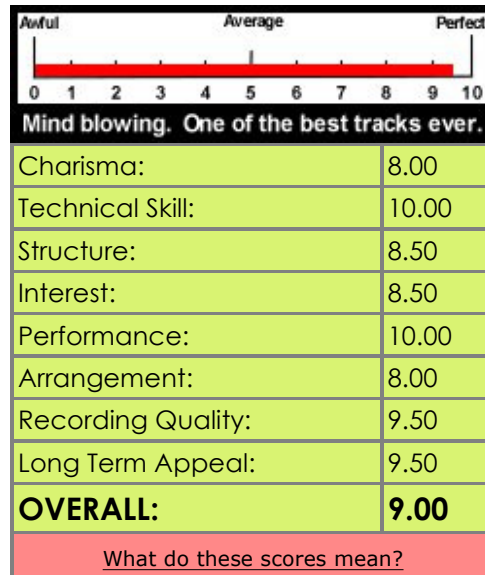
The music grasps me because it is darn well played! There is no denying the brilliance of the players here; lively, gentle, subtle, dramatic, all in their respective places, never out of tune, never out of touch with the music. If you don't like this type of music you should at least listen to it because of the performers; control, feel and understanding of the music in perfect symbiosis.

Having said all this, bare in mind that there is no revolution going on here. We've heard this music before, and it doesn't break any new ground. And hopefully it wasn't meant to do any such thing. As a stand-alone piece it is very nice in form and performance, but calling it new contemporary music is maybe stretching the genre to its limits, so let's settle for what it is; a nice contemporary piece I'll be playing through my system a lot in the future.

And Jonny; thanks for sharing your wonderful music with us. Rest assured your music will not go unnoticed, and that your homepage is duly noted in my favourite bookmarks.

Alexander Johannesen, *limited to my own shelter.*

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