

**A VOICE FROM GROTTEN**  
**INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUES IN NORWEGIAN MUSIC**

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Arne Nordheim (b. 1931 in the coastal city of Larvik, Norway) belongs among the foremost creative artists living to-day. In his Artist Laureate home of Grotten, situated in the garden of the Royal Palace, the spirit of its former tenant, Henrik Wergeland, seems to inspire him to a search for ever new means of musical expression to convey the aspirations of the human spirit. Nordheim's music carries the imprint of an astounding musical imagination, creating a sonorous universe quite his own, testifying to an intense involvement in the burning issues of our time.

A devoted champion of artistic and personal liberty, of social justice human dignity and peace, Nordheim was a natural choice when Hellmuth Rilling of the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart started planning for music to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. He came up with the idea of a collective composition by composers from countries that had fought the devastating war, and set to the texts of the Latin Requiem. Joining hands in symbolizing a braking of the circles of violence and retribution, the most outstanding composers of our times set to work.

And so it was that the Requiem der Versöhnung (Requiem of Reconciliation) was scheduled for its premiere performance during the European Festival of Music in August 1995. Among the participating composers were Luciano Berio, Friedrich Cerha, Marek Kopelent, Krzysztof Penderecki, Alfred Schnittke and György Kurtág.

Nordheim had chosen setting music to the *Confutatis* section of the *Dies Irae*, because as he said in his letter of acceptance: "Since I started composing, I have always wanted to deal with the text and the visions of the Requiem...that the thirteen lines from the *Dies Irae* sequence would be most suitable for me and for my way of dealing with the extremes of an expression; on the one hand, the catastrophic, on the other a nearness to the poetic – and both not far apart." And so in the portrayal of the last Judgement terror and fear are dramatically contrasted with the hope of redemption. The work is scored for a multiply divided choir and orchestra with a high soprano introduced in the second half. The strong musical imagery strikes the listener from the beginning *Confutatis maledictis* where after an introduction through female voices and orchestra the Gregorian Chorale is introduced in the tenor and bass. This builds up to a dramatic crescendo in multi-layered eruptive encounters between voice parts and orchestra, with brass dominating. The fiery vision of Hell's torments *Flammis acribus addictis* is portrayed by strings and woodwinds after which the first part climaxes with the *Voca me cum benedictis* ending in a consolatory major chord invoking the hope for redemption.

*(Musical example)*

In this and many preceding works, Nordheim's music assumes an almost physical gestural quality. The shattering experiences of human suffering and loneliness are carried across through evocative musical images and stark landscapes of sound reverberating in a

multi-layered musical space. This comes especially to the fore in compositions based on major works of literature

In *Epitaffio* (1963) based on the poem "ed e subito sera" (and suddenly it is evening) by the Italian Nobel Prize Laureate Salvatore Quasimodo, (from the collection *Acque e Terre* (1930) such sound pictures are built around key words like "solo", "terra" and "sera" (alone, earth, evening). Nordheim conceived his work as "the wandering towards darkness by bright sounds, blocks of sound hanging beneath blocks of sound in slow undulations, and a quiet song that was to fill the whole room." The orchestral sonorities are extended by vocal sounds prepared on tape and covering the whole tonal range from luminous high to brooding dark.

*(Musical example)*

This exchange of idioms is further explored in *Eco* (1968) an extended work in the form of a Cantata for soprano solo, mixed choir, childrens' choir and orchestra. Following its premiere during the Nordic Music Days in Stockholm 1968, it was presented at the Hamburg ISCM Festival of 1969 at which I was happy to be present in the company of the composer. Ensuing a series of acclaimed performances in European capitals, the work won the coveted Music award of the Nordic Council in 1972,

As a vehement protest against war and oppression, Eco brings together two poems by Quasimodo. "I morti" (The dead) and "Alle fronde dei salici" (in the branches of the willows) from the collection *Giorno Dopo Giorno* (1947). It has been described as the best collection of poetry to come out of the Second World War, reflecting the horror at Italy's role in the war. Quasimodo was himself a member of an anti-fascist group and spent time in prison.

I morti

Mi parve s'aprissero voci,  
che labbra cercassero acque,  
che mani s'alzassero a cieli.

Che cieli! Più bianchi dei morti  
che sempre mi destano piano;  
i piedi hanno scalzi; non vanno lontano.

Gazelle alle fonti bevevano,  
vento a frugare ginepri  
erami ad alzare le stelle?

The Dead

It was as if I heard a voice,  
as if lips were seeking for water,

as if hands were stretched towards the skies.

What skies! Paler than the dead  
who always waken me gently;  
barefooted, they do not wander far.

Are gazelles for drinking from springs;  
wind for stirring junipers  
and branches for lifting the stars?

Alle fronde dei salici

E come potevamo noi cantare  
con il piede straniero sopra il cuore,  
fra i morti abbandonati nelle piazze  
sull'erba dura di ghiaccio, al lamento  
d'agnello dei fabciulli, all'urlo nero  
della madre che andava incontro al figlio  
crocifisso sul palo del telegrafio?  
Alle fronde dei salici, per voto,  
anche le nostre cetre erano appese,  
oscillavano lievi al triste vento.

In the Boughs of the Willows

And we, how were we supposed to sing  
with a foreign foot on our heart,  
among the dead abandoned in the squares  
in the ice-caked grass,  
to the bleating of the children,  
the anguished cry of the mother  
as she approached her son  
crucified on a telegraph pole.  
in the boughs of the willows  
like an offering, hung our lyres,  
swaying gently in the mournful wind.

In his Nobel Lecture in Stockholm on December 13, 1959 Quasimodo clarifies his position and development as a poet living in the aftermath of two devastating wars:

”War, I have always said, forces men to change their standards, regardless of whether their country has won or lost. Poetics and philosophies disintegrate ’when the trees fall and the walls collapse’ At the point when continuity was interrupted by the first nuclear explosion, it would have been too easy to recover the formal sediment which linked us with an age of poetic decorum, of a preoccupation with poetic sounds. After the

turbulence of death, moral principles and even religious proofs are called into question. Men of letters who cling to the private successes of their petty aesthetics shut themselves off from poetry's restless presence. From the night, his solitude, the poet finds day and starts a diary that is lethal to the inert. The dark landscape yields a dialogue."

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"He may seem to destroy his forms, while instead he actually continues them. He passes from lyric to epic poetry in order to speak about the world and the torment in the world through man, rationally and emotionally".

Nordheim has this to say about his work:

"I had a need to monitor my experience of the distance and the connection between 'I morti' from 1930 and 'Alle fronde dei salici' from the end of the war. The restrained and crystalline images in 'I morti', with its white skies and silence are shattered by the violence and the impassioned cry as to how we can sing 'with a foreign foot on our heart', The paths between the quiet poetry and the crass, almost journalistic account wind through a landscape filled with echoes...the landscape and the events melt together into images one remembers without having actually experienced them".

*(Musical example)*

This close correspondence with the great works of world literature was to become a trademark of Nordheim's later production, linking it with the history of man, with the eternal questions of suffering and the quest for meaning. Through all his creative works there radiates an inner *cantus firmus* of human integrity, dignity and love, opposing oppression, humiliation and tyranny. In *Wirklicher Wald* (1983) for soprano solo, cello solo, mixed choir and orchestra the ancient Biblical text of the Book of Job is brought close to the experiences of our own age through confrontation with Rilke's poem. And in *Aurora* from the same year, the intertextual communication between Psalm 119, sung in Latin and Hebrew and fragments from Dante's *Divina Commedia* and *Paradiso* constitutes a vibrating, light-emitting center of hope and courage, ending on a eulogy of love: "L'amore che move il sole e l'altre stelle"