

- In the beginning was the song -

It is thrilling to listen to different human voices convey emotions and meaning through texts and music. A folk singer with an untrained voice is probably the most individual interpreter of a musical genre. Our oldest hymns often originate in melodies that have migrated in both time and space, and we can often trace the historical path of our religious folk songs back to German chorales from the Reformation era. A good deal of this hymn material is common property of the European song tradition. These melodies have acquired their own distinctive characteristics through their encounters with various cultures and peoples.

The tradition of solo folk singing in Norway has cultivated beauty in the sense that the performer has “embroidered” the main melody lines in what could be termed a “harmonization” of the melody. If one were to compare the variations and preludes to the German chorales composed by the great master of Baroque church music, J. S. Bach, with the Norwegian approach to ornamentation and improvisation as applied to the same chorales, an interesting relationship would be seen. It could be said that a composer, or a musician, already has the song within himself before it emerges through the fingers and onto the paper. The song is the starting point, even if it is never performed audibly by a voice. Research has shown that an instrumentalist often moves his larynx as though singing while playing the melody on an instrument with his fingers.

It is a great pleasure to hear how the interplay between Sinikka Langeland and Andreas Liebig enhances our musical enjoyment of some of our loveliest Christmas hymns.

Written by **Sondre Bratland**

The old Christmas hymns

“From Heaven above I come,” sings the angel, proclaiming the joyous message of Christmas.

The old Christmas hymns sung by our forefathers at home and in church are marked by intense joy and depth of feeling. Each person who sang these songs interpreted them in his or her own way, and thus the hymns can be found in a variety of forms throughout Norway. One of the most well known Christmas hymns is “Et barn er født i Betlehem” (“A Child is Born in Bethlehem”), where the original version that migrated to the north from continental Europe in the 1400s can still be recognized. “Et lidet barn så lystelig” (“A Little Child so Pleasant”) was called “The Christmas Song”, and was, according to *Kingo's Hymnal*, to be sung “three times during the holy days of Christmas, before the Gospel for Christmas Day is read from the pulpit”. People who did not attend church services during Christmas performed the same ritual at home, and it is therefore quite understandable that this song is found in so many different versions. Other hymns have been documented in only a few different versions, and some do not appear in the Norwegian folk music tradition at all. I have improvised my own variations on these. Both Bach’s organ chorales and our folk tunes have their origin in the old melodies that are found in his collections *Orgelbüchlein*, *Leipziger Choräle* and *Canonische Veränderungen*. They form the core of this Christmas concert, which was recorded at the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway, in January and June 2002.

Have a happy Christmas!

Sinikka Langeland

... between St. Thomas's Church and the Stave Church...

Migration of hymns

The pieces presented at the *Stjerneklang* concert span the past millennium-and-a-half, and are based on the old hymns sung during Advent and Christmas that J. S. Bach used in *Orgelbüchlein*, *Leipziger Choräle*, and *Canonische Veränderungen*. This repertoire represents the point at which Norwegian folk art and European art music intersect.

The old Advent and Christmas hymns have migrated northwards to Norway from continental Europe. For instance, the Advent hymn "Veni redemptor gentium", which originated in Milan in the fourth century, can be found in today's Norwegian hymnal as "Folkefrelser til oss kom" ("The Saviour of the People Came to Us"). These hymns gradually became a vital part of folk culture during generations of use, and have made their way into the hearts of the people. The translations of Magnus Brostrup Landstad (1802-1880) for his collection in *Kirkesalmebog* (*Church Hymnal*) in 1869 have played an important role in this respect. Sinikka Langeland sings these hymns with their original texts, in which Landstad deliberately mixed "the language of farmers and the language of culture".

The scope of the hymn texts ranges from the cosmic dimension, as in "Saa langt som Himlens Hvelving naar, saa langt som Sol og Maane gaar" ("As far as the heavenly vault reaches, as far as the sun and the moon go"), to the concrete, earthbound images of "Men Okse der og Asen stod" ("But the ox and the ass were there") or "Af Saba kom de Konge tre, Guld, Røgels, Myrrha ofred de" ("The three kings came from Saba, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh"). Images like this appeal not only to children, but to the child in each of us.

Folk song traditions

Just as the stave church has enriched European architectural styles, folk music could be regarded as Norway's most significant contribution to music history. Norway's topography and its linguistic and geographical position in the periphery of Europe, far from the cultural trends of the major European centres, made it difficult to communicate with the surrounding world. Thus an exceptionally rich and vibrant folk song tradition, with its distinctive ornamentation and naturally tempered scales, was developed and preserved. Religious folk songs also occupy a unique position in Norway because of the relatively late stage at which the organ established its normative hegemony within Norwegian church music. As recently as at the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s, heterophonic congregational singing could still be heard in many rural churches, where people sometimes sang individual variations simultaneously in different tempi and rhythms.

In central Europe, on the other hand, folk music has disappeared to a great extent. One of the few remaining enclaves of folk song is the straightforward common singing that takes place in a congregation during a church service, consisting primarily of Lutheran chorales (*Kirchenlieder* or *Choräle*) and the psalms of the Reformed Church. It was this rich source of hymns that Bach used as a basis for his choral compositions.

Bach's "Klangrede" ("sound language")

Based on the "Klangrede" ("sound language") of the Baroque period, where composers sought to express their messages in accordance with precepts determined by the theory of affects (*Affektenlehre*) through the aid of musically rhetorical figures in conformity with the principles of

classical rhetoric, Bach's organ chorales can be regarded as his interpretation of the hymn and its theological and poetic content. Albert Schweitzer called Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*, written in the composer's youth, a dictionary of his sound language. Later, as Cantor of St. Thomas's Church, Bach edited and collected a number of major chorale preludes into *17 Choräle von verschiedener Art*, also known as *Leipziger Choräle*. With their format and profound spiritual content, these chorales display the tonal language of the *Orgelbüchlein* in a consummate compositional technique. It is no wonder, therefore, that some musicologists claim to perceive, in the calmly progressing bass line in the introductory organ chorale BWV 659, an echo of Isaiah 9:2: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined." Albert Schweitzer repeatedly referred to Bach as a painter in music.

With the *Canonische Veränderungen* that Bach submitted when he became a member of Lorenz Christoph Mizler's *Societät der musikalischen Wissenschaften* in 1747, he achieved as intense a structural complexity and spiritual concentration in the chorale form as he had in *Kunst der Fuge* and *Musikalisches Opfer*. In this *Glass Bead Game* Bach, as the last great representative of the medieval *Ordo* concept, distills the essence of his contrapuntal combinatory art. The point of departure here is, paradoxically, the most popular Lutheran Christmas hymn, which Luther himself called "Ein Kinderlied auff die Weihnacht" ("A Children's Christmas Song"). Bach set its 15 metaphorically descriptive verses to music in five (a symbol of the Incarnation) distinctive variations that are intriguing in their unique merging of the most advanced mathematical compositional techniques with emotionally (*affektmäßig*) clearly delineated, intensely saturated sound poetry. One of the wonders of the piece is the magnificent *Stretta*, in which all four lines of the last verse of the hymn are heard simultaneously. Is this an echo of the music of the spheres from an eschatological viewpoint? Is it Baroque composition as applied music science – pointing mimetically towards the harmony of the cosmos? Within this framework the scope of the Christmas chorales extends from the mystery of Advent to the all-eclipsing hope of eternal life.

The Wagner organ

The splendid organ in the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, built by Joachim Wagner (1690-1749) of Brandenburg, is Norway's principal Baroque organ. After the impeccable restoration work carried out by Jürgen Ahrend from Leer-Loga, Germany, in 1993-1995, Bach's organ works, in particular, are brought to life with remarkable vigour and tonal scope in the rich acoustics of the Cathedral due to the power and vitality of the instrument with its original prospect pipes built by Wagner. This is the first time that these Christmas chorales have been recorded on this masterpiece of the German Baroque art of organ building.

(See also: *Barokkorgelet i Nidarosdomen - Ringve Museums Skrifter VI* - editor: Petter Andreas Kjeldsberg, Trondhjem 1995)

A musical journey to the Star of Bethlehem

During her work on the repertoire that represents the point where the Norwegian folk music tradition and the music of Bach intersect, Sinikka Langeland was inspired to improvise her own versions of Norwegian folk melodies to the "accompaniment" of Bach. Thus the entire programme integrates elements that are usually experienced as separate. The presentation in *Stjerneklang* of both familiar and unfamiliar material invites the listener to accompany the musicians on a musical journey to the Star of Bethlehem, where the distance between St. Thomas's Church and the Norwegian stave church is shorter than one may think...