

# Halvor Haug's seismological symphonism – a 70th birthday tribute

Halvor Haug turned 70 on 20 February. With his five symphonies, symphonic images and other orchestral works, he has distinguished himself as one of Norway's great orchestral composers. He has his roots in the Nordic symphonic tradition but has created an idiom all of his own characterised by strong feelings, drama, intellect and mystery.

Indeed, it happens that composers whose works are attractive to professional musicians and aficionados alike and of the highest carat in every respect, go largely unnoticed and underrepresented worldwide. A notable case is that of Norwegian Halvor Haug, an outstanding artist with an abundance of tonal imagination, who captivate us in unmistakably independent ways with large-scale symphonic works of compelling coherence and consistently vivid narrative dramaturgy. His music has never conformed to the fashion of the day, and it defies categorizing classifications. His oeuvre is concentrated in relatively few works of the highest density and substance.

From the beginning Haug was – as his once mentor **Robert Simpson** testified – independent and idiosyncratic, yet always unmistakably 'Nordic' in the striking and darkly glowing atmosphere exploring the mysteries of deep sounds, the juxtaposition of erratic blocks of rugged, dramatic, threatening energies and a tender, deeply intimate lyricism that speaks of loneliness of the wanderer traveling in his inner world.

## A genuine symphonist

In his five symphonies Haug proves himself to be a genuine symphonic composer, i.e. a master sculptor of organic coherence, who takes the listener along suggestively. Instead of petty fixations on tonal microcosms, but with all the love of detail that reveals his enormous skill in the subtle as well as the obvious, Haug has chosen the exploration of the potential totality of the macrocosm, with a clearly articulated teleology as the center of his artistic endeavour. His music is al-

ways culminating in a climax that unmistakably crowns the emergence of tension. Everywhere it manifests itself in the vital kinship of the motifs and in the driving force of the rhythms that, for all their refinement, are always tangible. The continuity of the harmonic progression guides the listener in the constantly changing interplay of light and shadow, of colours and registers, like a script of irresistible suspense.

Haug's other orchestral works, including symphonic evocations and images such as *Insignia* or *Preludio dell' Ignoto* and string orchestral pieces such as *Song of the Pines*, are also characterized by such compression and coherence. His symphonies, like these, are predominantly organized in one single movement. But even the orchestral song cycle *Do not ever forget her* from 1997, so rewarding for the mezzo-soprano, is symphonically organized through, though the *Intermezzo* from it can also be played as an independent string piece.

And we should look at Haug's attractive chamber music: two string quartets, a *Piano Trio*, a *Duo* for violin and cello, the *Dialogue* for two harps, *Impression* for piano, *Three Inventions* for guitar are among them.

In 2002 Halvor Haug's until then continuous creative flow came to an abrupt halt due to a chronic nervous system disease. Of course we hope that he will find the strength to compose new works again.

## Uncompromising and timeless

While Haug's music always sounds unmistakably Haug, each work has its own unique character. The 2nd Symphony fascinates with



Photo: Kristina Frykfor

its unheard-of sound mixtures that draw exquisite facets from the integration of two women's choirs, the organ, and the solo soprano saxophone. The highly dramatic 3rd Symphony is divided into two sections, which mirror each other like the left and right hemispheres of the brain, and are mutually interdependent yet follow their own laws and end in pure evocation of nature with the song of the thrush nightingale. The 4th Symphony, dedicated to the innocent victims of worldwide terrorism, and the 5th Symphony, dedicated to the memory of his father, testify to an increasing concentration on the essential, on an inner world, which in its uncompromising nature makes connoisseurs think involuntarily of Sibelius' 4th Symphony.

What Haug has in common with Sibelius, moreover, is the overlapping collision of opposing harmonies, driven to the highest development, which seem to affect the listener with the elemental force of tectonic plate shifts: hence the vibrations, ranging from the finest oscillations to the most violent tremors, which seem to us so natural and at the same time emotionally dramatic. Haug as a shaping artist is, so to speak, a 'seismological symphonist' who sensitively perceives nature's energies. In this, Haug shows himself to be a truly innovative developer of Sibelius' timeless premonitions at the height of our time, and his sense of proportion and orchestral balance enable him to realize his visions to perfection. It is high time to discover Halvor Haug's music on a more comprehensive level.

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