

Ruders And Nørgård: A Look Within The Danish Repertoire

Tattoo for One

Poul Ruders

B: 27 March 1949; Ringsted, Denmark

Composed: 1984

Instrumentation: clarinet

Duration: About 6 minutes

Poul Ruders (b. 1949) is a Grammy nominated Danish composer who is largely known for his operas and orchestral works. Ruders studied orchestration with Karl Aage Rasmussen and has created a large body of music consisting not only of operas and orchestral works but also many chamber, vocal, and solo works in a variety of styles. His operas have been staged in Copenhagen, New York City, London, Toronto, Munich, Boston, and San Francisco, and his orchestral music has been commissioned and performed by orchestras including the Berlin Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, and the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Tattoo for One is published with the following preface written by Bertel Krarup:

TATTOO FOR ONE (1984) is a virtuoso *tour de force* and as such can be looked upon as a kind of preparatory work to the later CLARINET CONCERTO (1985). TATTOO FOR ONE is characterized by Ruders' inexhaustible instrumental fantasy, together with the associations arising from the notation of a tattoo: an outdoor military parade at dusk. Rhythmic energy, and a finely edged treatment of motifs (including fragments of fanfare-like character) crowd in on the listener.

TATTOO FOR ONE was later in 1984 followed by a sister work, TATTOO FOR THREE, for clarinet, cello and piano.

Ruders created another sister work in 2017, Tattoo for Four. In his own words, "TATTOO FOR FOUR is in reality the same piece as TATTOO FOR THREE from 1984, but with a fourth voice - for violin - added."

The "tattoo" in the title can be generally understood as a rapid rhythmic tapping. Several tattoo motifs can be heard throughout the piece, marked by the percussive repetition of the same pitch tapping out a specific rhythmic fragment. The term comes from the early 17th-century Dutch phrase *doe den tap toe* ("turn off the tap"), a signal sounded by drummers during the Thirty Years' War in the Low Countries to instruct innkeepers near military garrisons to stop serving beer and for soldiers to return to the barracks. This tattoo is unrelated to the Tahitian origins of an ink tattoo.

The military reference in the title of this work points to the strict rhythmic rigidity the performer must uphold. Study and performance of this work requires a great deal of technical and mental stamina as a result of the inexhaustible and unrelenting nature of the music. Most of the piece is written without a time signature, so the difficulty lies in maintaining a consistent eighth note pulse while shifting between the triple and duple groupings, all while leaping across the range of the instrument.

The piece opens with a quiet tattoo approaching and eventually explodes into an exciting, pressing fanfare. The tattoo is occasionally interrupted by subito *pp* moments, but quickly marches on after each disruption. Soon after, the performer bursts into long, trumpet-like fermata notes embellished with semitones, eventually culminating into the clarinetist spinning around while playing bell up, creating a sort of Doppler effect. We are then given a brief reprieve from the unrelenting tattoo with a short *pp* “beep-beep computer game” section. After the return to the initial tattoo, Ruders gives the marking “extremely fast and wild.” The piece picks up in both register and speed as the performer spins again with her bell up before triumphantly ending on one of the highest notes on the clarinet.

Hut Ab!

Per Nørgård

B: 13 July 1932; Gentofte, Denmark

Composed: 1988

Instrumentation: 2 clarinets

Duration: About 1 minute

Per Nørgård (b. 1932) is widely regarded as the most prominent Danish composer after Carl Nielsen. He began his compositional studies at 17 with Vagn Holmboe and went on to study at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and with Nadia Boulanger. In the 1960s Per Nørgård developed the Infinity Series, a principle in which new intervals are created ad infinitum. He has composed works across all major genres: six operas, two ballets, eight symphonies, other pieces for orchestra, several concertos, choral and vocal works, numerous chamber works, several solo instrumental works, and film scores.

Nørgård writes:

Hut Ab! (Hat Off!), for two clarinets, was written as a one-minute piece to celebrate the Numus Festival for new music on its 10th anniversary. Dedicated to Karl Aage Rasmussen – the artistic director of Numus – the work’s tempo indication (*Allegro*) is augmented by *estático*, in deference to the dedicatee’s enthusiasm and love of music; you probably have to be out of your mind to initiate a modern-music festival...

The ‘ecstatic’ nature of Hut Ab! Gives the two clarinetists a hard time, since they are called on to play hoquetus – a fast echoing of each other's part. Though only of 60 seconds duration, the demands on the players, as the dominant line switches between them, are considerable.

As noted in the program note, the difficulty of this piece stems from the dominant line switching between players causing the feel of playing the downbeat or offbeat to switch. While the music is written with frequent time signature changes, signaling when the melodic material switches, the piece itself sounds as though a consistent quarter note beat is occurring throughout the whole entirety of the

first page. The music then breaks away from the persistent hocket into a more traditional compound rhythm, featuring dotted quarter notes accompanied by eighth note triplets. The ending is ushered in by a *fortissimo* glissando into the altissimo range in one clarinet while the other interjects with notes from the lowest range of the instrument, as per the marking: “the production of differential tones is intended and desired to be emphasized in the execution.”

Within the Fairy Ring and Out of it

Per Nørgård

B: 13 July 1932; Gentofte, Denmark

Composed: 1999

Instrumentation: clarinet

Duration: About 7 minutes

Nørgård composed “Within the Fairy Ring - and Out of it” in 1999 for clarinetist Anna Klett. Klett premiered the work on 25 June 1999 in Thorshavn in the Faroe Islands as part of the festival Summartónar.

A fairy ring is a naturally occurring phenomenon where certain types of mushrooms grow in circular formations. Many cultures across Europe traditionally believed fairy rings to be a place where fairies, elves, witches, and other magical beings reside. Some thought that they may be dangerous or even life-threatening to enter, while others believed that this magical presence could be a sign of good fortune. According to English and Celtic tales, anyone who entered the fairy ring would be forced to dance with the creatures until exhaustion drove them to madness or even death. In German folklore, fairy rings were known as Hexenringe or “Witches Rings” and were believed to be places where witches danced on Walpurgis Night, a celebration taking place six months before Halloween that welcomes the beginning of spring. Nørgård’s marking at the beginning of the piece, *al circolo di streghe* (“to the circle of witches”), leads us to believe that in composing this piece, he was referencing the fairy ring of German folklore.

It is generally understood that escaping a fairy ring requires outside intervention, and those who are rescued are rarely safe after. Fairy tales describe people who have managed to be rescued from a fairy ring as having no recollection of the experience, disappearing, or even crumbling to dust. This tinges the piece “Within the Fairy Ring - and Out of it” with a certain sinister if not macabre sensibility.

The difficulty of the piece lies not only in the everchanging meters and complex rhythms, but also in the nuanced and counterintuitive dynamics throughout. The opening rhythm creates a sensation of a dance that eventually devolves into haphazard phrases that disrupt the initial regularity in the music. This

rhythmically defined opening comes to an abrupt end, and we find ourselves in a tranquil, meditative state. The music meanders and picks up momentum, gradually accelerating, only to suddenly subside into a new trance, marked by semitones and multiphonics. The peculiar dance from the opening returns and eventually grows more extreme in range, pitch, and frequency of dynamic change. The final section, marked *estasi* (“ecstatic”) is much more vertical and steady than the music that has come before. The wild leaps on the instrument accelerate to an abrupt if not unsatisfying end, leaving the listener to wonder if escaping the fairy ring is even possible at all.

Spell

Per Nørgård

B: 13 July 1932; Gentofte, Denmark

Composed: 1973

Instrumentation: clarinet, cello, piano

Duration: About 15 minutes

Per Nørgård composed “Spell” for the American Montagnana Trio in 1973. The title refers to both “spelling” with notes and the idea of enchantment.

Nørgård’s program note from 1981 is as follows:

“Spell”, my second clarinet trio, was composed in 1973. There is a lapse of about twenty years between the two works and much which was subconscious in me when I composed op. 15, had in the meantime found expression and had moreover been formulated in rational note and rhythm constellations of an abstract kind (“the infinite series” from ar. 1960, the rhythmic layers of “the golden section” from 1972, etc.). As indicated by the title the work aims at “casting a spell” by “spelling”, which – expressed in notes – means that small motifs of few notes gradually change in the course of numerous reappearances. When three instruments in this way separately “spell” their way through one motif after another, it is evident that numerous kinds of harmonies and melodies will develop. In that way one state after another appears, according to the single stages of the “spelling”: secretive, lyrical, exhilarated, violent, melancholy, festive, etc. – like cloud formations forming pictures and breaking up again: the forms are innumerable and partly dependent on the listener’s creative imagination. Nevertheless the course of the work can be described in broad outline – like a landscape from an aeroplane: the murmuring double tempo of the introduction, a virtuoso pianolike part which gradually “breaks up” and reveals a hectic conflict, released in a “grand” climax; this lasts, however, only for a short while and then discloses a sensitive inside until an almost chaotic ‘furioso’ brings the movement – and the work – to a close. At last, however, there is yet another ending where the drip of notes from the beginning reappears, but on a new basis of sound and emotion: the circle proves to be a spiral.

Nørgård provides a list of observations for the performers in the beginning of the score, including an explanation of the non-traditional system of notation, clarification of brackets indicating independent tempi for each individual performer, and indication that the number of modified repetitions is left to the performer's discretion.

Unlike other traditionally composed music, "Spell" is not written in measures in the traditional sense. The piece is composed of cells denoted by brackets and longer unbarred sections. These brackets come in and out of sync between the other instruments, lining up only at key points in the piece which are specified by a vertical dotted line. The cells for the clarinet and cello often line up and change together. Nørgård also uses notehead size to indicate changes in dynamic—larger noteheads meaning louder notes and vice versa. He also uses arrows to notate acceleration and deceleration of motifs throughout the piece.

While other pieces usually have the ensemble change tempo together, "Spell" features moments each musician slowing down at different rates and times. At one point in the piece the three instruments rallentando independently - starting at different times and slowing down at different rates to create intentional asynchrony. The piece also begins with piano at a tempo independent of the clarinet and cello.

The most interesting technique, however, may be the fact that the number of repetitions of each bracketed cell is left up to the musicians, thus requiring a combination of planning and also spontaneity. This piece demands great familiarity with every trio member's parts and solid communication between players. As a result, Nørgård writes, "[t]he work is thus very much a chamber music 'game' for the players and demands a high degree of co-ordination between them." Although unconventional, "Spell" provides an extremely fresh and unique opportunity for both the performers and listeners.

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