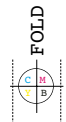


HEAD



Ludwig Holberg has been called the Molière of the north, and one of his plays forms the basis for Nielsen's opera, *Maskarade*. 1884 was the bicentenary of his birth and his native city, Bergen, celebrated the event by organising a Holberg Festival. Niels Gade composed a Suite called *Holbergiana* and Grieg wrote two pieces – a cantata for male voices designed to accompany the unveiling of the Holberg statue and an instrumental work.

When the cantata was given a second performance a few days after the unveiling, Grieg followed it by playing what has since become known as the *Holberg Suite*. It was originally entitled *Fra Holbergs tid* (From Holberg's time). A few months later Grieg scored it for string orchestra and it is in this form that it is most familiar. Although it transcribes perfectly into the medium, the piano original is very much a pastiche in the style of an eighteenth-century keyboard suite. As John Horton put it in his study of the composer, 'The style is basically that of Bach's keyboard suites with the addition of touches of piquancy suggestive of the French *clavecinistes*.'

The *Elegiac Melodies*, Op. 34, are also transcriptions for string orchestra. The originals in this case are two songs from the collection of

twelve settings, Op. 33, of Aasmund Olavsson Vinje (1818-1870), which was published in Copenhagen in 1881. The first, *Hjerterar* (The Wounded Heart), speaks of Spring and the pain it brings, while its companion, *Våren* (The Last Spring), is arguably Grieg's most beautiful melody: the poem describes the northern landscape newly released from the icy grip of winter – a phenomenon that the poet may be witnessing for the last time. In their present form these melodies rapidly took their place among Grieg's most popular pieces, a fact that did not inhibit Debussy from speaking of them as 'pink bonbons wrapped in snow'.

Valse triste comes from the incidental music Sibelius composed for *Kuolema* (Death), a play by his brother-in-law, Arvid Järnefelt. It soon took the world by storm, and was arranged for every conceivable combination and played in every tea-shop, much to the composer's chagrin, for alas, he had sold this best-seller for a derisory royalty.

In the play, the central character, Paavali, is seen at the bedside of his dying mother who, mistaking him for her dead husband, dances with him. It is difficult to imagine the effect this seductive and haunting piece must have had on its first appearance, as over-familiarity has almost

completely dulled our sensibilities. In its original form (1903) it was scored for strings alone, though the following year Sibelius scored it for small orchestra.

The Danish composer Carl Nielsen was born on the Island of Fünen in 1865 – only a few months before Sibelius. He came from a humble background, his father was a house decorator and village musician, and there were ten children in the family! The young Carl Nielsen joined the village band and later played the trumpet in the local regimental band. In 1884 he went to Copenhagen in the hope of studying at the Conservatoire. Niels Gade, its director, was so impressed by a quartet that he showed him that he accepted him on the condition that he passed an audition as a violinist. Indeed, most of his early years were spent as a violinist in the Royal Danish Orchestra so that his studies were not in vain.

There are some early chamber pieces, the G major String Quintet and a quartet in G minor later revised as Op. 13, that precede his official Op. 1, the *Little Suite* for strings. It did not meet with immediate acclaim (Gade found it 'too muddled'), but its freshness and lyricism have secured it a firm place in the repertoire. The

second of the three movements is a kind of waltz fantasy though it is entitled 'Intermezzo' and even anticipates some of the dances in the opera *Maskarade* (1906). Nielsen links the outer movements, the 'Praeludium' and 'Finale' by using the same thematic material.

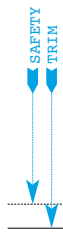
Both Nielsen and Sibelius were formative influences on the Swedish composer Dag Wirén who leapt into prominence overnight with the success of his *Serenade* for strings (1937). Robert Simpson is, I think, right to call him 'the most natural talent' on the Swedish musical scene even if his achievement is not the equal of, say, Hilding Rosenberg. He is not prolific: there are five symphonies and an equal number of quartets but it is the *Serenade* and, perhaps, the *Sinfonietta*, Op. 7 which have established his name outside Sweden.

The *Serenade*, unlike so much music of our own times, speaks entirely for itself and calls for no exegesis. One small point of special interest is that the march-like contrasting theme of the finale is said to have been prompted by a pre-war newsreel of Nazi soldiers goose-stepping which Wirén satirises to excellent effect.

Rakastava has a strangely complex history. Its material comes from a piece Sibelius wrote at



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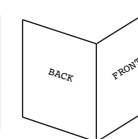


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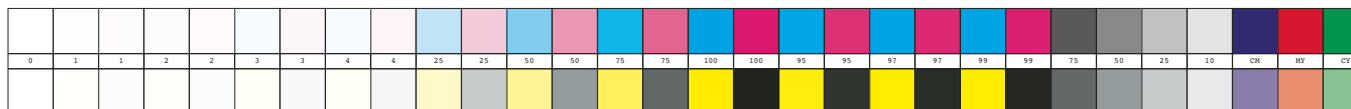
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