

Geirr Tveitt

Geirr Tveitt was born in Bergen in 1908, but spent most of his childhood in Drammen south of Oslo. He was baptized Nils Tveit, but changed his name a number of times during the interwar period, and it was only after World War II that he started operating with the spelling by which he is known today. Tveitt's parents were from Hardanger in Western Norway, where Tveitt spent his childhood summers, and where he finally established himself on the farm of his ancestors in 1941, after five years of music studies abroad, followed by a number of years in Oslo. In the mid 1950's Tveitt started commuting between Hardanger and Oslo, and moved permanently to Oslo in 1967, where he lived until his death in 1981.

Tveitt was among the best educated composers of his generation in Norway, and his diverse background is reflected in his music. With very little formal musical training he was admitted to the renowned Leipzig Conservatory in 1928, studying composition with Hermann Grabner and Leopold Weninger and piano with Otto Weinreich until 1932. Tveitt's progress both as a composer and pianist was extraordinary, and he made quite a stir with works like *12 zweistimmige Vorstudien in lydisch, dorisch und phrygisch*, which was published by Breitkopf & Härtel in 1930, and *Piano Concerto no. 1*, which was premiered by the Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra in 1931. Between 1932 and 1933 Tveitt also lived in Paris and Vienna, and claimed to have consulted a number of influential composers and teachers in these cities. Tveitt returned to Norway in 1933, but toured Continental Europe and Northern Africa as pianist and conductor a number of times in the decades to come. Several of these tours were great artistic successes for Tveitt, who was met with especially much interest and respect in Paris, due to the highly original blend of Norwegian and French flavoring in his music.

Tveitt was a prolific and versatile composer, who created both solo piano pieces, songs, and large scale compositions such as ballets, operas, piano concertos, and symphonic works; an œuvre which—despite its somewhat uneven quality—positions him among the most distinguished Norwegian composers of the 20th century. Tveitt's opus 1, the above-mentioned *12 zweistimmige Vorstudien in lydisch, dorisch und phrygisch*, is a chromatically ordered cycle of modal inventions. However, Tveitt was soon to repudiate the strict polyphony of this work, and the more freely contrapuntal style of his later works is audible in another highlight from the 1930's: the monumental Norse ballet

Baldurs Draumar («Baldur's Dreams», 1935/38), which is typical of the so-called “Norse impressionism” style prevalent in Norway during the 1930's. During and immediately after World War II Tveitt went through a period of stylistic experimentation and maturation, composing in a more modernistic and internationally oriented style (as in works like *Piano Sonata no. 29* and *Piano Concerto no. 4*, both premiered in 1947). In the decades to follow he returned to a more folkloristic, formally and tonally clarified idiom, although his music retained stylistic features from French impressionism and Eastern European barbarism (as in his famous *Folk Tunes from Hardanger*). During the last years of his life Tveitt composed many ballads which have become very popular in Norway. Unfortunately, a large number of unpublished works, among them several different versions of *Baldur's Dreams*, were destroyed by a devastating fire at Tveitt's home in 1970—but fortunately, many works have since been found elsewhere or reconstructed.

Let us now listen to the opening of Tveitt's *Piano Concerto no. 1*, which was premiered when Tveitt was only 23 years old, testifying to his great talent as a composer. On this recent NAXOS recording the Tveitt expert Håvard Gimse is piano soloist, being accompanied by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Bjarte Engeset's direction.

MUS.EX.: OPENING OF PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 (CA. 1.30)

Already in this early work we can hear one of the most characteristic features of Tveitt's music, namely his attempt to integrate the tonalities of Norwegian folk music into his own compositional idiom (cf. the Dorian-flavored opening of the concerto). Tveitt also wrote a thesis, *Tonalitätstheorie des parallelen Leittonsystems*, in which he makes the rather dubious claim that the modes employed in Norwegian folk music are in fact an old Norse invention.

Although the influence from folk music is most often indirect in Tveitt's music, some of his works, such as the important piano and orchestral suites to which I will collectively refer as *Folk Tunes from Hardanger*, draw directly upon Norwegian folk tunes. The opening piece of the first orchestral suite, titled “Velkomne med æra” (“O Be Ye Most Heartily Welcome”), is among the most famous and beloved pieces from this collection, and is a good example of the colorful blend of Norwegian and French sonorities in Tveitt's music. Let us listen to the opening of this piece, which was premiered in 1950—here in a recent BIS recording with Stavanger Symphony Orchestra under Ole Kristian Ruud's direction:

MUS. EX.: VELKOMNE MED ÆRA (CA. 2.00)

Tveitt was a central figure of the nationalistic movement in Norwegian cultural life in the 1930's, but interestingly, as we can hear, his music is at the same time strongly oriented towards the Continental styles of the late 19th and early 20th century. Although he went through several stylistic periods as a composer, certain features remained characteristic of his music throughout his life: a dialectic between simple, folkloristic, and often highly melodious themes, and more melismatic and orientalist themes; shifting modes, tetrachords, and synthetic scales; colorful, ambiguous, and often bitonal harmonies; parallel fourths, fifths, octaves, and triadic chords; brisk rhythms; an extensive use of ostinato figures; additive forms; many-layered textures where the main melodic material can be accompanied both by sound-sheets and by poly- or heterophonic countermelodies; a highly subtle orchestral palette; and «changing background techniques»—a way of creating variation not by means of thematic development, but by throwing the themes into relief against continuously changing background figures and harmonies. Tveitt's music often tends to fluctuate between two very different expressions: a tender and lyrical expression characterized by the use of exquisitely rich harmonic and instrumental colors, testifying to Tveitt's debt to French impressionism; and an impetuous and energetic expression, characterized by ultra-deep bass notes, many accentuations, and a frequent use of octave doublings and transfers, features that seem clearly inspired both by Eastern European barbarism and by the piano music of Beethoven, which was studied arduously by Tveitt in his youth.

Let us now hear an example which can better illustrate the typical dialectic between lyricism and impetuosity in Tveitt's music, in this case an excerpt from the first movement of *Piano Concerto no. 4*, "Aurora Borealis" from 1947, here interpreted by Håvard Gimse and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Bjarte Engeset's direction:

MUS.EX.: NORDLJOS, 1. SATS (8.50-11.20)

Like *Baldur's Dreams*, this concerto, too, has risen from the ashes of the fire in Tveitt's home, thanks to the meticulous reconstruction work of a number of persons. The fire was of course a grave personal tragedy for Tveitt, and is unfortunately not the only tragedy that is affiliated with his life and music. The other tragedy, which became fully unravelled during the process of restoration of *Baldur's Dreams*, is linked to Tveitt's political sympathies. Like many of his Norwegian contemporaries, Tveitt was known to

have been an avid nationalist, and even to have expressed anti-Semitic opinions on several occasions during the interwar period. However, the full extent of Tveitt's political engagement had been concealed up until the Norwegian historian Terje Emberland began to do research on Norwegian adherents to the religious ideologist Wilhelm Hauer's "Deutsche Glaubensbewegung" ("German Faith Movement"). In his recent book *Religion og rase* ("Religion and Race") Emberland has documented that Tveitt was actively engaged in Hauer's national socialist religious movement, which sought to replace the foreign, Semitic religion of Christianity with the truly Aryan Teutonic mythology—back to Odin and Thor, in other words. And to the musicological society's great dismay, Emberland discovered that *Baldur's Dreams* had been premiered in Germany in close collaboration with Wilhelm Hauer in 1935; the work being used to promote "Deutsche Glaubensbewegung". Thus, unlike most of Tveitt's more politically neutral works, *Baldur's Dreams* can be regarded as an explicitly political work. But so as not to be unfair towards Tveitt, I wish also to mention that he in fact distanced himself clearly from the Norwegian Nazi regime from 1941 on, bravely defending both Russian, French, and "Jewish" music (i.e. music written by Jewish composers), and resigning from his position as State Music Consultant in 1942 in protest against the Nazi regime. As is the case also with Tveitt's many-faceted music, Tveitt's political sympathies seem to have been highly ambiguous, and to have changed with time. Thus, there is in my view no reason at all to regard his folkloristic post-war works as politically dubious.

But what about *Baldur's Dreams*? Does the work's history of abuse imply that we should regard it as "untouchable", as a product of evil that is not worthy of our attention? Meeting this difficult dilemma towards the end of my doctoral project based on Tveitt's music, I pondered upon these questions for a long time, and I concluded that the uncomfortable history affiliated with *Baldur's Dreams* could in fact be used positively, as an opening towards a discussion of the relation between music and ideology during the interwar period in Norway.

It would in my view be wrong to overlook Tveitt's religious/political views during the interwar years, or to bagatellize them in an attempt to make his ideas less dangerous, and thereby less of a threat to the integrity of his music—for an artwork is linked to its creator and to the historical context from which it grew forth, factors which contribute to the work's continuously ongoing history of effect. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that once created, artworks also deserve to be regarded as autonomous individuals who live a life of their own. Interestingly, this duality can be seen in the critiques following the 1935 and 1938 premieres of *Baldur's Dreams*, where some of the critics focused mainly upon ideological aspects of the work, whereas others chose to

focus upon aesthetic and stylistic aspects. Luckily, music will always have a potential for meaning that is much greater than any single interpretation can convey. Thus, it is my sincere hope that we today can listen to *Baldur's Dreams* both as a musically intriguing work, and as a point of departure for a very necessary reflection upon the dangers of fervent nationalism. Thank you for your attention!