

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF THE MUSIC INFORMATION CENTRE NORWAY

Hilde Holbæk-Hanssen (Musikkinformasjonssenteret) *

Once Upon A Time

The birth of the Norwegian Music Information Centre [Musikkinformasjonssenteret] (hereafter MIC) back in 1979 resulted from the so-called Artist Initiative of 1974. This initiative saw Norway's artist organisations gathering for negotiations with the government over funding aimed at increasing use of Norwegian artists' works. The MIC was initiated by the Norsk Komponistforening [Society of Norwegian Composers], which was seeking to expand the distribution of scores: this was a service that previously the organisation had administered for its members. In addition to these tasks the Centre was to focus on information and documentation activities. Given the fact that government grant would make up most of the Centre's funding, Norsk kulturråd [the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs]—the allocating body—decided that the Centre's services had to be available to the wider public, not just to members of the Society of Norwegian Composers. On a practical level, this meant that the MIC was to distribute scores and supply information on composers from a wider field of genres, not just contemporary music. The Norwegian Musicians' Association also added a passage that committed the Norwegian MIC to run information activities focusing on Norwegian musicians.

With only three full-time and one part-time members of MIC staff, this was all wishful thinking. We had primarily to concentrate on what had been the Centre's starting point: music by contemporary composers. We had taken over the Society of Norwegian Composers' collection of scores and parts as well as a considerable amount of photographs, biographies and old books. Back in 1979, the notion of a personal computer was totally unknown. Computers were huge things occupying large buildings, and required operators with a Ph.D. in science to work successfully. To us, a computer was primarily a tool, which electro-acoustic composers had to travel to the continent to operate. That within ten years Silicon Valley and Bill Gates would dominate our work environment was something beyond our comprehension. We felt we were quite up-to-date and efficient with our card indexes, stencil machines, typewriters and photocopiers. We would publish news bulletins that were printed on the basis of our typewritten copies and we would collectively stuff the information into envelopes, postmark and stamp them. It was completely unthinkable that within our lifetime we would be able to communicate with the whole world via the Internet and e-mail. We had never heard of faxes either. Requests for information came in the form of letters that were replied to after a couple of days or weeks, depending on the content. Blueprint letters. Letters with white correction marker. Replies and answers that had been given thorough contemplation and consideration.

* Hilde Holbaek-Hanssen is a musicologist, and Head of Information and Deputy Director at the Music Information Centre Norway, where she has been employed since its foundation in 1979. She publishes articles on music-related issues. The present article has been translated into English by Tomas Lauvland-Pettersen.

Today...

Autumn 2002 saw a change of name, logo and by-laws for the Music Information Centre Norway [NMIC]. The change of name was a direct consequence of the Internet. As a member of IAMIC—the International Association of Music Information Centres—the Music Information Centre abbreviation MIC quickly became a must-have URL. It was impractical to have a name beginning with the letter N and an URL that started with letter M. Did we bow to technology? Maybe. But during the twenty-three years that had passed since the establishment of the centre, MIC had maintained a high technological level. Since the mid-1980s we had built up the most extensive Norwegian music directory. In the late 1980s our library's catalogue of scores, sound recordings and books was adapted for our computers. Almost all of our correspondence is now via e-mail. Virtually all of our activities have been adapted to computerised use. Beginning in 2000, NMIC has built up Norway's biggest and most influential music portal, at www.ballade.no. In addition to these services, the “new” NMIC offers an English website, an online library catalogue, an extensive events calendar and music download services. The only remaining major task is to digitise the entire collection of scores, a project that was initiated in Spring 2003.

The most central new development, however, was the fact that NMIC would now offer information and profiling on all genres found on the Norwegian music scene. On a practical level this had been done for years through the printed music magazine *Listen to Norway* (1993-2001), and through the news/debate site www.ballade.no. The establishment of a genuinely proactive organisation that exists to strengthen all of Norwegian music's genres is an ongoing process for NMIC. Our hope is that we shall be as successful in this task as we have been in our work for contemporary music.

Contemporary Music

It is our humble belief that Norwegian contemporary music would face an entirely different situation at present without the existence of NMIC. Today, Norwegian composers, regardless of their organisational affiliation, are not forced to rely on a publisher in order to have their music distributed and to inform others about themselves and their works. No offence to the music publishers is intended, but NMIC has for many years maintained its position as the largest distributor of Norwegian contemporary music. Each year we register approximately 300 new works. We produce more than ninety per cent of all parts copied for Norwegian orchestral works. To the extent that publishers distribute Norwegian orchestral music, it is often done at a later stage, after the première, thus resulting in the orchestral material often being purchased from NMIC. On an annual basis, NMIC hires out around eighty Norwegian orchestral works worldwide, and of these a quarter are premières for which we have produced new parts.

With regard to scores, NMIC occupies something of a transitional position between a library and a publisher. Our library contains copies both of manuscripts and published Norwegian contemporary works. NMIC maintains copyright for all works deposited as manuscripts by their composers, all in all more than 7,000 works. We have registered more than 3,000 published works by the same composers. NMIC distributes music by more than 300 composers, of whom two-thirds are still living. Through sales of sheet music, our in-house printing facility generates an annual turnover amounting to NOK 200,000-300,000. Hiring out of orchestral materials generates roughly the same figures.

Central Composers

From time to time, the most coveted composers are acquired by international publishers. In this respect, Arne Nordheim (*b.* 1931), published by Wilhelm Hansen Edition in Copenhagen, is our national leader. To most Norwegians, the name Nordheim is synonymous with contemporary music. During the 1960s, when he brought home unfamiliar sounds from his Warsaw electronic studio, Nordheim was rather disputatious. The fact that he was a very vocal and intrepid music critic did not contribute to an increase in his popularity on the Norwegian music scene. Prior to the establishment of NMIC, however, Nordheim had assumed the role of a national character with a gradually more accessible mode of expression. During MIC's founding year, Nordheim manifested himself with, among other works, the ballet *The Tempest*, which was commissioned by and premièreed at the Schwetzingen Festival in Germany. In the years following, this Shakespeare-based ballet has proved to be one of the Norwegian National Ballet's biggest box-office successes. Throughout the years of MIC's existence, Arne Nordheim has received commissions both from Mstislav Rostropovich and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra, the latter in celebration of its 100th anniversary. 1981 saw Nordheim honoured with the highest distinction achievable by any Norwegian artist: the award of the Norwegian Government's Residence of Honour, "Grotten", which is situated in the Royal Castle's Park. In 1999 Nordheim was awarded both the Polish and Italian Orders of Merit. The latter was awarded to Nordheim for his masterful use of Italian poetry in his music.

Back in 1979, having daily contact with two giants of Norwegian and international church music, Knut Nystedt (*b.* 1915) and Egil Hovland (*b.* 1924), left a lasting impression on MIC's recently recruited staff. Both would come to our office to register compositions so new that the ink had barely dried. The next moment we would receive requests from the USA choir world, which we understood greatly admired and frequently performed these two composers. In the following years, one work from the hands of these giants followed another; from the smallest and most beautiful of choral pieces to major works such as Hovland's ballet *Danses de la mort* and the opera *Captured and Free*, as well as Nystedt's oratorios *Song of Solomon* and *Apocalypsis Joannes*.

Norway's first composition professor, Finn Mortensen (1922-83) was still active back in 1979. He was the personification of serialism, and acted as teacher to nearly all of the younger generation. His significance as a composer, inspirer and educationalist was invaluable. But as early as 1979 both Lasse Thoresen (*b.* 1949) and Olav Anton Thommessen (*b.* 1946) were employed by the Norges musikkhøgskole [Norwegian Academy of Music], and the following years have seen these two appointed and consequently retired as professors. They are perceived today as two of our most central composers, and as resourceful, key figures in Norwegian cultural life. Soon the pair will have completed training a new generation of composers. They have both been preoccupied with a characteristic project of their own: in a series of works, Olav Anton Thommessen has drawn upon themes from composers of earlier ages such as Grieg, Bach, Beethoven, Verdi, Dowland and Lasso, and has made use of this well-known music in much the same way that Grieg utilised Norwegian folk music. In his own tonal vocabulary he has then enclosed these masters' ideas in works such as his full-length work *A Glass Bead Game*, the piano work *EingeBacht*, chamber-music piece *Lass O! Deine Tränen* and violin concerto *BullsEye*, based on the Norwegian violin virtuoso Ole Bull's second violin concerto. However, in Thommessen's extensive list of works one can also find pieces composed without this link to the past. Examples include the cello and organ

concerto *Through a Prism*, which earned him the Nordisk Råds [Nordic Council's] 1990 Music Prize.

For a number of years Lasse Thoresen has focused on micro-tonality, partially based on folk music and on the theories of American composer Harry Partch and French spectral composers such as Gérard Grisey. From his list of micro-tonal works one may mention *AbUno* for chamber ensemble, *Sacred Songs* for soprano solo and *Yr* for solo violin. Thoresen has also completed a considerable number of works with titles and connections based in the Bahá'í religion. Examples include the piano trio *Bird of the Heart*, the massive inclined choral work *From the Sweet-Scented Streams of Eternity* to the enormous oratorio that is *Terraces of Light*, composed to texts of Baháulláh and commissioned by the Bahá'í World Center in celebration of the inauguration of the terraces at Mount Carmel in Israel.

Following the development of each individual composer has been a rewarding process for MIC staff. Some of those who were up-and-coming and promising back in 1979 are presently leading, middle-aged composers, while others again have scaled down their compositional activities. In 1979 the career of Rolf Wallin (*b.* 1957) was in its infancy: today he is one of our leading composers, with performances at central festivals world wide. Mathematical formulae and the possibilities represented by today's computer technology have proved to be key inspirational sources for Wallin. He has now left our ranks and is published by Chester Music in the UK. In the years prior to his present status, MIC closely followed his successful path. 1998 saw him awarded the Nordic Music Prize for his beautiful and rhapsodic Clarinet Concerto. At present, Wallin is in the process of writing a new orchestral work commissioned by the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra.

At the time Cecilie Ore (*b.* 1954) paid her first visits to the Centre, she had yet to begin to compose. Her status at that time was that of editor of *Norwegian Music Institutions and Music Life*, a publication that we used for many years to inform ourselves about the various parties on the Norwegian music scene. Prior to the première of her first opus, *Carnatus*, for mixed choir with lyrics based on Japanese poems and Latin designations for butterflies, Ore completed compilation and editing of *Norwegian Pianorama*, a collection of new Norwegian music for piano. She then left Norway for Holland to study composition, returning as a fully-trained, hard-hitting, *avant-garde* composer. Being a composer who would make no compromise, Ore quickly made a name for herself in such arenas as the Concours international de musique electroacoustique in Bourges, France. Ore's most central CD release to date is her cycle *Codex temporis*, which consists of four works that share a common theme of time. In addition to two larger orchestral works, Ore has also composed pieces for various chamber music ensembles.

Belonging to the same generation are Nils Henrik Asheim and Asbjørn Schaathun. Asheim (*b.* 1960) started his composition studies with Olav Anton Thommessen at the early age of thirteen and has gone on to make a name for himself as a composer of both church and secular music. His most significant official commissions were to compose the Olympic fanfare for the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Games and the music performed during the 2001 wedding of Crown Prince Haakon of Norway. In addition to composing chamber and orchestral music, Asheim has developed a highly original and innovative style of organ improvisation that has led to concerts around the globe. Asbjørn Schaathun (*b.* 1961) received his education at the Norges musikkhøgskole and at the Royal College of Music in London. Through studies and work at IRCAM in Paris he has become the Norwegian composer with the closest ties to this scene. Schaathun shares Rolf Wallin's preoccupation with fractals and computer-based composition, and in addition is widely respected as a skilful lecturer and writer. He has

received commissions from the Ensemble Intercontemporain (Paris) and from Gaudeamus in Holland. Schaathun was awarded the Gaudeamus Foundation's Louis Vuitton Prize in 1991 for his bass-clarinet concerto *Actions, Interpolations and Analysis*.

While these composers belong to what may be described as the archetypal new-music scene, there is also a distinct group of Norwegian composers with a more tonal focus. To a certain extent this has caught the attention of foreign music writers, given the slight suppression of this category in many countries. Among the most active of the present composers one should mention Ragnar Söderlind (b. 1945), who is today widely regarded as one of our most central symphonic composers and has completed six symphonies, several solo concertos, four ballets and three operas. In the past couple of years Söderlind has experienced success in Russia, with Moscow Radio premières of his Violin Concerto and his Symphony no. 6. Halvor Haug (b. 1952) is another composer belonging to the tonal scene. His extensive production of orchestral music is characterised by an expressive and lyrical force. The majority of his work is published by Gehrmans in Sweden.

The Norwegian music flora continues to grow new shoots, and during the past couple of years a number of fresh and interesting newcomers have made a mark. Eivind Buene (b. 1973) is a composer who, instead of choosing one of the prevailing styles, views his work as continuous and total but also as a process that has not been brought to a conclusion. Rather than viewing each piece as a separate and closed entity, he sees them as provisional "deposits" caused by a continuous, ongoing work that has the composer working increasingly deeply on a set of musical problems that evolve over time. His electric-piano concerto *Objects of Desire* (which spawned the name of his début CD) drew considerable attention in 2000.

The approach to compositions of Maja Ratkje (b. 1973) is closely related to a performing musician's viewpoint. Her background is that of a violinist, vocalist and member of free-improv-collective SPUNK. In her capacity as a composer and improvisational artist she was assigned to compose and perform stage music to Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* during the Northlands Festival in Scotland. Her curiosity has also led her to a stay in Japan, which resulted in the work *Gagaku Variations* for accordion and string quartet. Her most extensive project to date is an opera based on Apocrypha texts, which at the time of writing (2003) is still under development.

Arenas

It could hardly be described as modest to claim that all of this activity could be attributed to the MIC: Norwegian contemporary music is blessed with a number of other institutions. Norway has a population of 4.5 million. These 4.5 million souls inhabit a stretch of land that spans the same distance as from the southern tip of Norway to Rome. Given this scattered population, it is self-evident that the country is not a prime breeding-ground for many large concert institutions. Today, Norway has five professional symphony orchestras and one opera company. It has been the norm for each symphony orchestra to commission one new orchestral work each season. The Norwegian National Opera's commissions have not been so frequent.

The Rikskonsertene [Norwegian Concert Institute] was established in 1968 to meet the demand for a government body that would facilitate live performances of music for all Norwegian citizens, regardless of place of residence. Each year the Rikskonsertene organises a large number of school concerts and public evening shows all over the country, and

contributes support to concerts with local promoters. It has proved to be an important employer both for composers and performers.

Ny Musikk, the Norwegian Section of the ISCM, has since 1938 held a position as a central meeting point for composers and interested musicians. For Norwegian composers the association has represented a means of being heard, but additionally the Norwegian Section of ISCM has acted as an importer of vital foreign development. It is active today in all major Norwegian cities, and has a head office and administration in Oslo. The association also houses its own ensemble, Cikada, which performs in various groupings, from a duo to a *Pierrot Lunaire*-sized group with percussion. During the 1990s, both the Oslo Sinfonietta and the Bergen-based sinfonietta-ensemble BIT 20 strengthened their positions. The latter ensemble collaborates closely with the contemporary opera association Opera Vest. The common denominator for the three ensembles is extensive international touring.

Festivals

The oldest Nordic festival dates back to 1888, when the first Nordic Music Days were held in Copenhagen. The festival has since then seen the Nordic Composers' Associations arranging the event on a regular basis. Several national contemporary music festivals have followed in its wake during the past couple of decades. In 1976 the Norwegian Section of ISCM inaugurated its Nordlyd-festival in Oslo, thus creating a central arena for Norwegian composers. However, some felt that the festival's financial foundation was not solid enough. Consequently it was decided to initiate collaboration with several of the largest concert institutions, with the intention of creating a broader foundation for a future contemporary music festival. In practical terms, this collaboration implied that each member organisation would take responsibility for its separate festival events. Among the member organisations we find the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, the Norwegian National Opera, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, the Norwegian Soloists Choir, Oslo Sinfonietta and BIT 20, to name only a few. In addition to these organisations' individual events, the festival promotes its own concerts and assumes responsibility for overall co-ordination. The new creation was named Ultima, and the first festival was held as part of the 1990 ISCM World Music Days in Oslo. Since 1991 the festival has grown to become one of the capital's biggest, showcasing a repertoire that mirrors all currents in Norwegian and international contemporary music. In addition to Ultima in Oslo there are contemporary music festivals in other major Norwegian cities: Bergen sees "Music Factory", arranged in parallel with the Festspillene i Bergen [Bergen International Festival], while Harstad celebrates the return of the sun in late January with its "Ilios" Festival.

It has been exciting having MIC as a lookout-post with a clear view of the Norwegian music scene during these years. Composers, initiatives and institutions have come and gone. Those which lacked ability to survive have disappeared, while others have grown to become substantial and vigorous. Technological development has affected the arts as well as arts organisations, perhaps to such an extent as to cause some concern. But we choose to have a positive outlook, and anxiously await the technological advances that wait around the corner.