

Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen
(b. 11. January 1964, Oslo)
Blue Fragments (2008 - Rev. 2001)

First performance:
Sortland, January 19th 2009
Ensemble Blå, Håkon Kristiansen: percussion

Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen was born in Oslo but grew up in Lofoten, Northern Norway. He took his education as a trumpeter in 1986-1990 at the Bergen Music Conservatoire - now Grieg Academy - where he also studied music pedagogy. In 1989-1990 he was in the composition class of Mogens Christensen. From 1990 to 1994 Aagaard-Nilsen taught contemporary music at the same institution. For two years he studied mathematics and computer science at the Bergen University. He was the director of Bergen's Autunnale Festival also in the early 1990s. Since 2004 he has been artistic director of Bergen's Brasswind Festival, which focuses on new music for all kinds of wind ensembles. In 2006 he founded the concert series Avgarde together with Ketil Hvoslef, Jostein Stalheim and Knut Vaage. The series, which is still running today, is an arena for local musicians and composers. Aagaard-Nilsen works as conductor of various school and amateur orchestras, and also as a teacher at the *Manger Folk High School* in Northern Hordaland. Manger Musikklag, the brass band from the same town, acts as the "house orchestra" in the Brasswind Festival. Aagaard-Nilsen regards composing as a form of social activity. He writes:

'Composers (and artists in general) play an important role in modern society. We are competing for attention with increasingly powerful media. Art can do what commercial media cannot: it finds its way under the skin, as imprints of experiences. This aspect alone makes it imperative to keep going'.

Aagaard-Nilsen's music has been described as direct and impulsive. Nature and visual aspects are important sources of inspiration and the music often has a narrative quality. His language is free-tonal, with melodies and harmonies taking on the roles of objects that are open for development.

His wide-encompassing work with amateurs and youngsters has lent great versatility to his music. He is adept at writing music that is both intricate and accessible.

Although he is rightly recognized for his music for wind ensembles, he has also written for sinfonietta, symphony orchestra and a variety of chamber ensembles and solo instruments

About **Blue Fragments** Aagaard Nilsen writes:

The quartet Blue Fragments is written for piano trio and percussion. A trio that, on Håkon Kristiansen's initiative, was expanded into a quartet.

All the musicians of the quartet [for which the work was written] live in the blue city of Sortland. The trio call themselves 'Ensemble Blå' [Ensemble Blue]. I set out to work by presenting myself with a problem or task for which a solution was needed: how could I describe the moods of a Blues without writing a Blues?

I made small vignettes with a "blue" atmosphere. It can come in the form of so-called "blue notes" or music that at times approaches the melancholic or situations that may perhaps create associations to the Blues.

At the same time, the piece can resemble a variation work. In this case there is a constantly returning melody that is presented in a variety of guises.

Aagaard Nilsen has succeeded in fulfilling his stated intentions. The music is imbued with the spirit of the Blues without ever resorting to pastiche.

The work is divided into nine sections or variations, each designated by the name 'Blue' from I-VIII, the ninth one being a reinstatement of the main theme. Interestingly, said theme only appears in rhythmic unison in the 6th section (beginning on measure 142). Elsewhere it appears in different forms and environments. In 'Blue I' the theme is played at two different speeds simultaneously by the piano and vibraphone on top of the established, strummed chords of the cello and the somnolent microtonal waves of the violin. It seems as if "the band" is aimlessly jamming, not yet having found its common groove. In 'Blue II' the piano attempts to assert itself rhythmically while the vibraphone continues extemporizing as the strings begin to

find common ground. 'Blue III' continues with the dominant presence of the piano before the violin insinuates the beginning of the theme, soon taking the cello along with it. This variation cautiously introduces the un-pitched percussion in the form of a light saucer. By 'Blue IV' this turns into a more assertive hi-hat, in conjunction with the dainty and unpredictable rhythms of the piano. Meanwhile, the violin and cello are content to explore a new variant of the theme, this time played somewhat slower than earlier. A crescendo in the violin introduces 'Blue V'. Here the temple blocks take the lead, playing dramatic figures backed by sharp, crystal-like chords. The strings take a backseat until m. 108 when the piano suddenly turns to the lower register, making its block chords much more defining for the texture. It is in this transitional section that the group finally locks into a rhythmical unit until the strings play the end of the main theme on mm. 135-139. This is followed by a short, peculiar percussion solo consisting of several staccato cymbal hits. The melodic aspect that was, by and large, absent from the preceding section is in sharp focus in the first six measure of the above mentioned 'Blue VI' which then reintroduces the strummed chords of the cello, while the melody is played by the piano and vibraphone - now in the same rhythm - with increasingly complex harmonies, creating an almost inebriating atmosphere. This time it is a cymbal whose crescendo ushers in the next section: 'Blue VII'. This brief variation introduces the tom-toms into the picture, thus creating a stronger sense of physicality than ever before. This follows seamlessly into 'Blue VIII' where, for the first time, a Blues-like triple rhythm, becomes the driving force of the music. Having finally found the groove they were looking for all along, "the band" gradually peters out, leaving the last word to the strings' ghostly trills. The main theme appears one last time in the final section, 'Main Theme/Blue I'. The violin plays the tune in parallel with the vibraphone's luscious harmonies, with the cello's arpeggiated chords back in place. In the coda, beginning in m. 227, the piano and vibraphone again revert to playing the theme in individual tempos. The violin joins at the end with some sleepy glissandi. The vibraphone plays two almost desultory chords and the cello has the last say, with three surprisingly loud arpeggios at the very end. The jam is over and the band have packed their instruments and gone home.

Blue Fragments is work of rare beauty that skates a thin line between the material and the immaterial. For all its attempts to converge into a more solidified expression, the music remains ultimately elusive. This characteristic is the main reason for the work's irresistible allure.

Regarding the notation:

In the violin passage between measures 9 and 23 it is understood that the quartertones only apply to one of the strings, while the other (the third string in this case) remains constant.

A quartertone higher:



Three quartertones higher:



A quartertone lower:



Three quartertones lower:



Quartertones apply within a bar until a new accidental is given.

Ricardo Odriozola, 28. February 2023