

**Magnar Åm**  
(b. april 9<sup>th</sup> 1952)  
**punkt null – version B**

First performance: Bergen, June 17<sup>th</sup> 1979  
Bergen Chamber Ensemble, Sissel Vist (soprano), Bergen Domkantori,  
Kristen Øgaard (organ), Magnar Mangersnes (conductor)

**Magnar Åm** (pronounced “Ohm”) was born in Trondheim.

His interest in music revealed itself from early childhood and he began to write small pieces around the age of eleven. He did this in order to make sense of his inner struggles. It was then that he discovered (in his own words) “what a helpful friend music can be”. He describes the process as “going around with an emotional knot and yet making something out of it that sounded beautiful and that others appreciated – a process of metamorphosis”. The piano (his instrument of choice) became “a very close friend”. All the above citations, as well as much of the information under these lines, come from an interview with the composer I conducted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2013 in connection with the writing of my book “Opus Perseverat”, Musikproduktion Höflich 2017.

As a 16 year old Åm travelled to Bergen in order to attend high school and get a musical education. He attended the U. Pihl School where he received encouragement from Kjell Leikvoll (1924 - 2019). Simultaneously Åm studied organ with Thorleif Aamodt (1909 - 2003). These organ studies culminated in a debut concert and the acquisition of an organist and cantor diploma in 1971. He also found time to take composition lessons with Ketil Hvoslef (b. 1939), conducting lessons with Magnar Mangersnes (b. 1938) and jazz lessons with the pianist Eivin Sannes (1937 - 2019). With Trygve Fischer (1918 – 1980) he learned score reading, using the old clefs.

Keil Hvoslef was the first person who gave Åm serious feed-back on matters of composition in a contemporary language. The singular most important contribution from Hvoslef, as Åm recalls, was the search for freshness in every note, a principle by which Åm (and, indeed, Hvoslef) lives to this day.

In the obligatory conservatoire study of traditional harmony Åm found a strong sense of the importance of maintaining a singing quality in every voice. He also realized the vital importance of the distance between the voices: how different two voices sound when they are close to one another in the high register versus the low register: the higher the register, the more consonant dissonances become. These realizations would serve him well in his later work as a consummate choir conductor and composer of choral music.

In return for free room and board Åm worked two hours every evening as a pianist at the restaurant of the Terminus Hotel. Given Åm’s inquisitive nature, he used this experience also as a learning process. He closely monitored the effect his music was having on the restaurant guests and adjusted his playing accordingly.

In 1971 Åm travelled to Stockholm to continue his composition studies with Ingvar Lidholm (1921 – 2017).

After his Stockholm stint, Åm moved to Volda, in the region of Sunnmøre, where he has lived and worked ever since – except for one year, in the early eighties, spent in Bømlø where he met and mentored the young Kenneth Sivertsen (1961 - 2006). Åm soon became involved with the direction of several children and amateur choirs with which he was happy to experiment.

Magnar Åm’s production is vast and it includes two operas, music for orchestra, several concertos or *concertante* works, chamber music, music for solo instruments, multimedia and electronic works and a great deal of choral music, with or without instrumental accompaniment.

Åm considers that, particularly in music, the personal and the professional go hand in hand. He sees the creative in music as an allegory for the creative in life: each moment must be accepted as a gift. For him music is an intuitive exercise that can be useful in interpersonal as well as inter-musical relationships. Music, he says, presents a *possible future* that is for everyone’s best. Although artists often reflect, in their work, that which is wrong with the world, Åm feels it is important to offer hope through art.

He writes:

“Time and space structured as music is a formidable tool for one who seeks to make conscious his deepest essence and meaning, whether one creates, performs, or listens. But the pleasure of allowing things to become habit is a tempting veil and a hindrance for all searching, also here. This is why I undertake the task of delving into odd ways of mediating music quite frequently – partly to awaken, partly to develop new rituals that can better strengthen the deeper functions of music” <http://www.listento.no/mic.nsf/doc/art2002100715014263789883>

“In my music I try to appeal to all aspects of listening, including perception of direction. The music must therefore not only respond to the question of what the sound is and when it occurs, but also the question of where it comes from. Sound is like a heavenly body moving through time and space. Concert halls, however, are constructed to concentrate sound in front of the listener [...] Nonetheless I often write for a three-dimensional space, placing sound both above and below the audience [...] Through my work with electro-acoustic installations I am aware that the spatial element contains a potential for powerful experiences which cannot be realized by a single surface of sound. The difference would be like seeing a character step out of a cinema screen and become a physical body. The music changes from being a phenomenon that appeals primarily to the mind and imagination to something that evokes a physical experience to a much greater degree”

Sleeve notes to SONaR – 2L 51 SABD

**punkt null** (point zero) was a commission from the Rikskirkesangfesten (national festival of church song) in 1978. The composer recalls:

The commissioner wanted the work to take the Nicene Creed as its point of departure. I wrote therefore a text that stood as a condensed and personal form of that expression of faith. The work was at first called *Zero*, but I later changed it to *point zero*, which indicates more clearly the religious inspiration behind the piece: a search after a “zero point” wherein I am erased and the music becomes a messenger for something greater than I.

Musically, this shows itself in the first movement as a prayerful outcry that abruptly (in a zero point) goes over to a devout waltz. In the final movement, a section inspired by the powerful and the holy goes, in the same manner, over (in a zero point) to the same waltz. The middle movement is inspired by the zero point itself: giving oneself over to a greater hand.

A specification of the commission was that the listeners should be able to join in parts of the piece. Therefore, a simple vocal part, suitable to be sung by all present, is included in the waltz sections.

Åm’s simple and vivid description of the piece leaves very little to be said in addition. It would be idle to comment on the form of the work or on diverse motivic relations within it. Five and a half decades of creative output have made Magnar Åm’s impeccable craft fully evident. Åm’s motivation for writing music goes well beyond making “tidy art”.

**punkt null** exists in two other versions than the one presented in this edition. All of them include the vocal parts, including those for the “congregation” (as the listeners are designated in the score). The instrumentation in Version C consists solely of a church organ, while version A uses a symphony orchestra, including the two classical guitars. The latter version, Åm says, can be performed by amateurs.

The concept of a zero point is central to the understanding of Magnar Åm’s music. He has, at times, referred to it as the “empty room”. This refers to the still point within each of us, where creativity – a timeless event within the continuum of Creation – may take place. Nothingness, in combination with an impartial alertness, has infinite potential. The creative person becomes, as Åm explains, a vessel, conduit, messenger or sound pipe for Music. This state is both extremely subtle and thoroughly practical. It is easy to explain but it requires disciplined practice to achieve.

This zero point is apparent throughout the piece in its one technical aspect worth mentioning: the nearly constant presence of pedal points. Very large sections of the music rest on a pedal point or drone. On top of it, the music proceeds in two predominant ways. In the waltz sections – virtually

identical in movements 1 and 3 – a fervent melody and a yearning harmony unfold on top of the pedal point. In both cases, the pedal point (a D) becomes the note sung by the congregation, side by side with the choir and the organ. In the prayerful outcries and expressions of awe in the first and third movements, the pedal points support the exquisite weaving of Åm's characteristic atonal – or free-tonal – polyphony. As the text shows, the three persons of the Holy Trinity are addressed separately in each of the three movements.

The first movement cries out to a cosmic power of unfathomable character and dimensions. Although expressed as a request, it is in fact a selfless offer: 'Father/take my song/and my everything'. The answer to such a prayer can only be the gift of inner nothingness where the act of Creation can be accessed and partaken.

The brief middle movement, placed between its much longer outer companions, acts as the work's bona fide zero point. There is no prayer as such here, but an expression of wonder for The Son: 'Jesus/the resurrection/grace and purity/my mystery'. Here the instrumentation consists of two guitars. The solo vocal part is a lot more elaborate than in the outer movements. It is, appropriately, the most musically intimate section of the work. In the absence of any sustaining instruments, the choir takes on the role of harmonic support, with shorter, rather understated pedal points and harmonies that alternate between the devotional and the mysterious.

The final movement, only slightly longer than the first, focuses on The (implicitly Holy) Spirit, to which the text refers as a "fire of longing and presence/eternal power". The return of the waltz brings back the 'Father' prayer from the first movement and the single notes from the congregation. The very end offers a sense of resolution with its sustained, swelling G major harmony. The choir sings an indeterminate cluster to the word 'alt' (everything). This final harmony acts, thus, as the convergence of nothingness (represented by the peaceful G major harmony) and the immeasurable vastness of the living universe in one common sound.

*punkt null* is an inspirational work that aims to unite all who participate in its performance, regardless of creed or walk of life. This writer conducted a performance of it in Bergen on February 15<sup>th</sup> 1998, at the same concert Åm's *spegle det* (mph. 4253) was premiered. A recording of version A (with full symphony orchestra) can be heard on the Aurora 4914 album with music by Åm, Kenneth Sivertsen and Eivind Solås. Sivertsen's work in that record is *For Ope Hav* (mph 1876), written five years after *punkt null* and shortly after Sivertsen's stint as Magnar Åm's student.

### **Regarding this edition**

Following the original manuscript, the texts sung by the choir are written between the alto and tenor staves when the entire choir sings the same text. If the text is divided in pairs or any other numerical combination, the text is only written for one of the voices, either above or below the staff. It is understood that all voices with the same rhythm sing the same text.

In the first movement, measure 81, the second note in the soprano (*Gb* in the manuscript) has been changed to *F#*, in order to facilitate intonation with the rest of the choir. The *Gb* in the flute and clarinet has been kept.

Although in the manuscript rests are absent from instrumental and vocal lines when they have long periods of inactivity, this edition has, by and large, kept the rests in the traditional manner.

Fermatas on general pauses appear on active lines only, in accordance with the manuscript. All of them are included in the individual parts.

Ricardo Odriozola 26.12.2024