

Knut Vaage
(b. 14.10.1961, Sunde)
Fortuna

First performance: April 20th 1997, Bergen (Norway)
Gro Sandvik (flute), Einar Røttingen (piano)

Knut Vaage, born 1961, is a Bergen-based Norwegian composer. He graduated as a pianist and composer from the Grieg Academy in Bergen. Vaage has worked in different styles of music, with special focus on improvised and contemporary music. Many of his projects have investigated the boundaries between improvisation and composed music. Vaage's production ranges from symphonic works and opera to solo pieces. His music is frequently performed at concerts and festivals in Norway and abroad. Much of Vaage's instrumental music has been released on CD.

Investigation of the acoustic/electronic hybrid-sound is another important area in Vaage's music. He has also written a number of vocal works and works for the stage.

As an improviser Vaage early on explored the boundaries between improvisation and composition as a member of the trio JKL. The tension created between acoustic instruments and electronics was an important ingredient of their style. Vaage's work with improvisation continues with the band Fat Battery, and in staged works like "Achilles or Stupor", premiered at Grec Festival in Barcelona in 2015.

The dissemination of contemporary music for a wider audience forms an important part of Vaage's compositional activity. He has participated in different concert projects aimed towards children, teenagers, and local choirs and orchestras. Vaage has also been deeply involved in administrative work, having served as leader and board member of several contemporary music organizations in Norway. <http://www.knutvaage.com/>

Fortuna is divided in five movements, each of them with a definite character. The first one, "Hocsetus" is a kind of jigsaw puzzle in which the instruments fill in each other's gaps. Before this is fully underway, however, we are made privy to a game of hide and seek between the flute and piano (mm. 1-14), in which the silences are more eloquent than the actual notes. Unison passages also occur, creating a link to the fourth movement. The second movement, marked *Lento con Leggeranza*, is given to the alto flute in the character of a slow ritual. The sound world of this movement is dominated by repeated notes in the alto flute and by rippling arpeggios and repeated chords in the piano. A quick, mercurial octave motif in the piano (see mm. 2, 9, 26 and the final bar) counterbalances the pervading seriousness of the movement. Such gravity is almost entirely absent from the third movement, "Scherzo", in which Vaage pokes fun at a particular brand of Neoclassicism that has taken root in certain strands of Norwegian contemporary music. The normal flute is back. It is an immensely lively and entertaining movement, with one dreamy episode (mm. 93-106) before the piccolo closes the movement in an impish manner. The fourth movement, marked *Cantabile e Sognante* (singing and dreamy) opens and closes with the same contemplative chord, albeit one octave apart. The rippling waves on the piano return, now also spilling over to the flute. Unison passages are again featured. These unleash the one brief episode of turbulence (mm. 27-33). Otherwise, the atmosphere is one of nostalgic reverie, which is safely re-established at the end of the movement. As if to dispel any hint of melancholy, Vaage closes the work with the brief fifth movement, lasting under one minute. It is a short reprise of the material from the central Scherzo.

The composer writes:

Fortuna is the goddess of joy in Roman mythology. The piece looks at the possibility of treating happiness as an ideal in life. But is it possible to depict pure happiness without including some of the dark sides of existence? A personal life event may bring with it something sad into what would otherwise be a musically playful expression. The imbalance is there and casts doubt on whether Fortuna is in charge. There is something that does not add up and perhaps there could be something else behind all the attempts to depict happiness. Perhaps a desire to get back on track after a hidden grieving process? The paradox emerged as a utopia: It is probably impossible to depict a sad event through apparently cheerful music.

Vaage has commented, in a private communication with this writer that a sense of dismal gloom lies at the heart of the piece, making the optimism of the “funny” or “happy” passages be more apparent than real – as the text above corroborates. This is interesting to keep in mind for both performers and listeners, as such gloom – to the extent it may actually be present – is often well disguised by a veil of wistful beauty.

A recording of **Fortuna** can be enjoyed on the CD “Chromos” (PPC 9059), with the same performers who gave the first performance.

Ricardo Odriozola, October 23rd 2023