

Magnar Åm
(b. april 9th 1952)
pas de deux (1984)
First performance: 1985,
Ivar Bremer Hauge (violin) and Inger Jensen (cello)

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 7th 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 Bømlo 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

Magnar Åm wrote *pas de deux* in 1984. The autograph score bears the dedication:

Til Inger Jensen og Ivar Bremer Hauge
- en helsing frå "Elvhaug"
(To Inger Jensen and Ivar Bremer Hauge
- a greeting from "Elvhaug")

The composer writes:

The work was a private commission from Marit Mossige Ryssdal and Jon Ryssdal, who lived in a house they called "Elvhaug" in Sogndal. They wanted the piece to be dedicated to two young musicians they knew, Ivar Bremer Hauge and Inger Jensen, both of whom lived in Denmark at the time, but came to Elvhaug and performed the work at a private concert in the living room there. Marit and Jon later created a scholarship that supports til gifted musicians: Marit Mossige Ryssdal and Jon Ryssdal's fund.

[...]

Elvhaug is used for concerts to this day, often for music school students. It is owned by the museum "De Heibergske Samlinger" (the Heiberg collections).

(email to R.O., 18. september 2020)

The premiere took place in 1985 (exact date unknown).

The work became, in 1986, the core of the third movement of Åm's first piano trio *fritonale samtalar* (free-tonal conversations). In the trio the movement bears the title "kjærleik" (love). In another email to this writer (dated September 4th 2020) the composer says:

*Here is something I wrote about another work ("polyfone dansar" for accordion).
But I think it applies just as well to "pas de deux":
I often think of music spaciously, as of a living, moving creature, invisible like a spirit,*

though still very present. And it often moves with the same feeling of uplift and resilience as a ballet dancer. In a way music is as much about weight and weightlessness, playful rhythm and presence in the room as is the visual dance

The two key words to understand this delightfully elusive music are "love" and "dance" - accompanied by "moving" and "spirit". As is his wont, Åm almost consistently erases any sense of steady pulse here. Musical lines often enter unnoticed (from silence) and disappear in the same manner. As soon as one of the instruments settles into a recognizable pulse, the other one is sure to throw it off kilter. The frequent use of quarter tones and occasional "illogical" dynamics contributes further to destabilize the music, which seems to hover above ground a lot of the time, indeed like a skilled dancer.

The first two thirds of the work suggest a simple slow-fast (or song-dance) structure. This is thwarted in the final third, when short episodes of singing and dancing character alternate, as if the music cannot decide which of the two expressions it would rather embrace. This reluctance to commit is beautifully outlined in the opening music, where we seem to be witnessing two potential lovers who, in spite their mutual attraction, do not dare to take the first step towards one another. They remain, as the song goes "no closer than as dancers". As soon as they have found a common groove (mm. 70-75) doubt sets in again: "Should we?". "Let's!". "And yet..." (mm. 76-84). The process repeats. When the hapless fairytale seems to be on the verge of ebbing out irrevocably (m. 111), a short, strident fanfare-like rhythm brings the dancers (and their spectators) back down to earth. Weight and weightlessness, uplift and resilience have played themselves out in front of an unsuspected audience. The only thing left to do is quickly exiting the stage with a half-embarrassed whimper. Tellingly, in the piano trio version the last quick upward glissando is immediately followed by an unapologetically annoying, slow and long scraping noise on the lowest string of the piano, marking the end of the piece. The noise is absent from the duo version, which has more of an open ending, but it retroactively informs it.

Performance note:

An arrow next to a note indicates a quartertone.

Likewise, trills with an arrow above them are meant to be quartertone trills.

Ricardo Odriozola – Svelvik, 25. September 2020