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## Per Nørgård – infinity, landscapes and layers.

*The conversation was held by Trine Boje Mortensen, promotion manager at Per Nørgård's publisher music journalist, in December 2015 in Copenhagen.*

The view from the room where we are sitting during this interview is made up of equal parts land, sea and sky. Big clouds rolling, grey and heavy with the remnants of rain. The motion of the clouds at the same time continuous and ever changing.

Per Nørgård's oeuvre is at a first glance too easily put into different phases, and it is true that the immediate expression differs between for instance his works from the 70'ies and his works from the 90'ies. But what we talk about this afternoon while slowly forgetting the magnificent view of the Copenhagen sky is what ties the composer's music together through all outside differences in sound and expression.

The talk flows and touches upon different aspects of music, but we seem to end at the beginning again and again.

### Melodies – beginnings and infinity

*"Melody and my music are intervoven, in the way that already from an early age I was preoccupied with the magic of melodies. The phenomenon that each melody contains infinite possibilities of different continuations and new openings and beginnings, has fascinated me since my childhood."*

*"From the beginning of my career as a composer, I have been preoccupied with the special kind of depth that lies in the melodic possibilities – the inner being of the melody. You can say that melodies open up a landscape without borders; an endless landscape of possible continuations. You could argue that sound can be borderless too, and certainly rhythm! But in all my existence, I have always had an almost mystical experience of the infinity of melody. It is as if a melody can open door, after door, after door. It is audible in my music from the very beginning. My very early works in fact were characterized by a melodic universe to a much higher degree than by sound or rhythm.*

*These early works were filled with beginnings that are moving towards something new. This perpetual ability to begin in a new direction, to continue towards something else – it has always fascinated me."*

It is often quoted how fascinated Nørgård was in his youth by the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius. But even before his keen interest in Sibelius there were other composers who put their indelible mark on his tonal universe. Franz Schubert is one.

*"Schubert has always possessed this mystique, and I've always wondered why. Where did he get it from, this man with a short and in some ways miserable life? His melodies are never truly sentimental or sad. They always possess a shimmering joy. It's difficult to put words on something mystical like Schubert's music, but his music truly possesses a melodic mystique. In my earliest years I was preoccupied by Schubert and Bach. They have always been shining lights and unobtainable goals for me"*

*"When you listen to my earliest works you will find that there is a degree of ... unfinishedness. The music never really ends. Every motif that has seemingly ended is the beginning of something new that continues. And continues and closes just to continue in another direction."*

Endings – that are beginnings

*"My relationship with endings is connected to how I described beginnings. These beginnings are always under way – so you could say that it always begins at the end – and ends at the beginning. The possibility for infinity in this way of thinking has been with me always. From before any of my "mature" works you will find that there are things going on that really have no intention of stopping. And every time you think "well, it must be over now," then the continuation is already on the move."*

Talking with Per Nørgård you often get the impression that he hears more or listens differently than the rest of us. But he is not all ears. From his earliest years he also painted and sketched and after our talk, the first thing he does is pull out art books from the shelves to illustrate an aspect of our talk.

*"I drew and sketched a lot in my teenage years, but I always knew that it was music which could contain the kind of constant challenge of everything beginning all the time. I'm very much AGAINST things that close, and I'm very much FOR things where you can say "But, dear friends, we're still only at the beginning!" To convey the experience of constantly being at the beginning! One would think that it has to end at some point. But I believe that you'll find that endings in my music generally come as a surprise – because it could just as well have gone on. This ambiguity in my music or ambivalence has always been my keenest interest, I must admit."*

Landscapes – endless and forever new

Per Nørgård's music has been described as landscapes of sound, vast and diverse, and he himself likes to think of his music in terms of landscapes.

*"There are many directions in my music – you can choose to walk this path, or this – or that. It is not a coincidence that the only theoretical formation I have worked with – I usually avoid theoretical elaborations of my music – is the one that most people already know about and would mention when discussing my music: the infinity row. And it is not so much a row, as a series of openings, where you can choose to walk different paths. When you think you've begun, you find out you were maybe at the beginning of the end or that you haven't moved at all."*

*"I don't know why I'm so fascinated by this. But this is the reason I chose music instead of painting, even though many people thought that I would become a painter. But I knew from the beginning that that would not be my path. It had to be music because it contains infinity. It is the sound and the movement in time. I still feel that even after all this time. And if the day should come, where I would feel that I have found the "solution" to this conundrum: infinity and music – then I'd stop composing. It is still to this day a complete enigma to me what it is that surrounds us! The mere fact of being alive indisputably carries the seed for the experience of infinity. We all know that we must die, but at the same time we do not really believe it. I do not want to associate myself with any specific religion, but the experience of the eternal or the infinite behind our immediate temporality has always been with me. I cannot tell you where I picked this up. I was a draper's son from Nørrebro (editor's note: a working class neighbourhood in Copenhagen), where would I pick up notions of infinity from an early age? But I did. As an adolescent I never struck anyone as being someone with a coming career as a composer. I kept it to myself. It didn't have a form that other people could grasp at the time. It was my secret. I knew that that was where my path lay. Right from the beginning of my life and through my so called career have I been engulfed in the idea of infinity as a mode of expression. It is a constant, ongoing search. If this search ever stops, I cannot replace it with something else."*

Spaciousness – multidimensional, moving and still.

The idea of infinity is obviously not just temporal, but multidimensional. The beginnings take place not only one after the other, but on top of each other, simultaneously and in different time layers. During our talk the term spaciousness came up, and with it a new beginning.

*"The different phases my music has been said to go through are really not very different from each other. They are all contained in what you call the spaciousness. Multidimensionality has always attracted me a lot. It is at the core of my fascination with music. I stick like a tick to my starting point, my fascination with infinity, so to me it is not chance that I found the infinity row, because it contains this multidimensionality.*

*In some ways the infinity row is closed, since it can be cut up in parts, but it is open, because every part points to a continuation, and a continuation and a new continuation.*

*That can be irritating – and at the same time deeply fascinating. How can this exist?"*

Musical beginnings and endings all the time become intertwined with the constantly renewed starting point for Per Nørgård's compositional career.

*"I am not interested in competing with ... Carl Nielsen or other great composers and in that way making something where "Nørgård war auch dabei". That is not interesting. What has always kept me going is the personal fascination of a specific aspect in music, and that is what I have stuck to."*

*"This moving immobility that is embedded in the fact that I can never finish anything once it is begun - that is kind of my credo. The ending is the beginning, and the beginning is the ending."*

The view from the room where we are sitting during this interview is made up of equal portions land, sea and sky. Big clouds rolling, grey and heavy with the remnants of rain. The motion of the clouds at the same time continuous and ever changing.

Now slightly less grey.

*Translation: Julia Zupancic*