

An abstract painting featuring a palette of deep blues, lighter blues, and shimmering gold. The composition is dominated by vertical, textured brushstrokes that create a sense of depth and movement. The gold elements are concentrated in the upper left and lower right, providing a focal point against the cooler blue background.

LAWO
CLASSICS

Exultate

Knut Nystedt—Organ Works
Anders Eidsten Dahl

Exultate

Knut Nystedt's legacy is unavoidable in the musical powerhouse that is twenty-first-century Norway. Nystedt founded what has become one of the world's finest professional vocal ensembles, the Norwegian Soloists' Choir (now under the leadership of his successor, Grete Pedersen). He did so in order that the most interesting avant-garde vocal music could be performed in his homeland—including the music he, as one of the most significant Norwegian composers of the post-war period, was yet to write for it.

That music would influence composers from Ørjan Matre to Eric Whitacre. Nystedt has been described by turns as a Norwegian Zoltán Kodály, for his

structural use of folk-derived music, and a Norwegian John Tavener, given the ecstatic and resonant qualities of his aesthetic—particularly of the choral music that makes up three-quarters of his output. He was at once a neo-classicist and a mystic, a romantic and a modernist. Even at its most mellifluous and idiomatic, his choral music betrays hard-and-fast structures and an urge to test new devices and push timbral limits.

Nystedt was born in 1915 to a musical and religiously devout Oslo family. His earliest formal musical education came courtesy of the Norwegian Boys' Choir (Olavsguttene) and he was soon admitted to the Oslo Conservatory where

he studied piano and organ, frequently accompanying the choir in which he'd previously sang. As an adult singer he participated in Arild Sandvold's performances of sacred oratorios including, in 1937, a performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* that Nystedt cited as the pivotal experience of his life.

At the conservatory, Nystedt was taught composition by Bjarne Brustad, who saw to it that his pupil's earliest works were performed: his String Quartet No 1 and *Høgfell Suite* Op 8 ('High Mountain Suite') for orchestra. One of the first of the composer's large-scale oratorios followed, *Nådvegen* ('The Path of Mercy'), written during the Nazi occupation of Norway and based on Old Norse Christian songs.

At the same time, Nystedt had taken conducting lessons with Øivind Fjellstad of the Oslo Philharmonic, which

he first conducted in 1945. After the war, Nystedt travelled to the USA on a grant from the Norwegian Composers' Guild, where he studied organ with Ernest White and composition with Aaron Copland. While in America, he gave organ recitals in New York and witnessed several performances of his Concerto Grosso for Three Trumpets and Strings.

On returning home, Nystedt began a long association with the Oslo Organists' Association. He had previously been Organist at the Bethlehem Missionary Church in Oslo but from 1955 until 1982 served as Organist at Torshov Church in the city. In 1950, he founded the Norwegian Soloists' Choir, five years later penning *Cry Out And Shout*, a score lasting barely a minute whose expressionistic evangelical zeal would seal the composer's reputation across the Atlantic. Nystedt enjoyed visiting

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lectureships at American universities and in 1964 was appointed Lecturer in Choral Conducting at the Institute of Music at Oslo University (at around this time he founded a second choir, Schola Cantorum).

In a 1960s Europe awash with modernism, Nystedt found his voice—a free reconciliation of the methods of the avant-garde with the adaptable modality and folkloric elements of national romanticism. His style might change from piece to piece—some apparently built of stern Stravinsky-derived neo-classicism, some with the sculptural luminosity of Ligeti, some reverberating with minimalist clarity and some looking south to the opulence of France—even as his methods and mindset remained constant.

Nystedt's most famous work, the motet *Immortal Bach* (1988), proved how bold he could be—dissolving

music into a harmonic essence and effectively transforming a choir of human voices into a sustaining organ. The sort of graphic response to sacred texts that is found all over the composer's motets—particularly from the Book of Revelations—is also present in his organ music. So too is his characteristic ability to draw a great deal from a defined sound palette.

Nystedt's organ works are particularly revealing in profiling the composer's relationship to various deep-seated traditions. As this album demonstrates, they operate within the established conventions of several schools of organ composition, all the while finding subversions and innovations within them. Chorales and hymn tunes are found among Nystedt's earliest compositions and unsurprisingly, chorales from the Norwegian hymnal (of which he edited in the 1960s) as well as hymn tunes from his own hand weave their way through works

that take their structural lead from the chorale prelude tradition.

While still a student in 1937, Nystedt wrote the short Chorale and Fugue in C minor on the hymn tune *Kirken det er en gammelt hus* ('Built on the Rock'). The piece proves the strength of his nascent contrapuntal abilities but also his instinct for toying with texture. The rising major thirds in the final bars profile the composer's Nielsen-like strength of will.

Three years later in 1940, Nystedt composed a set of Variations on the tune *Med Jesus vil eg fara* ('I Want to Go With Jesus')—a well-known folk melody from Sunnmøre. The tune is presented in unison before seven variations ranging from the stark to the playful, from cool canons to frolicking dances. The influence of Marcel Dupré and the improvisatory variation tradition from France is felt particularly in Variation 5.

In 1951, Nystedt completed *Deus, sancta trinitas* ('God the Holy Trinity'), a severe neo-classical statement of faith in three movements. After a stern but restless chorale, we hear an almost folksy Andantino with two solo reed stops in dialogue with an unobtrusive pedal foundation—a ländler-like trio in reflecting the theology of the Holy Trinity. The extensive Allegro moderato, expressing joy in a different way, builds considerably towards a hymnic statement of faith and Trinitarian unity. The piece is followed here by the 1964 *Bryllupsmarsj* ('Wedding March'), a cautiously celebratory work marked 'festivo', its melody picked out on a solo trumpet stop.

In 1958, a new Aeolian Skinner organ was inaugurated at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Buffalo, New York State. Nystedt was commissioned to write a new work for the instrument and delivered another piece rooted in

the tradition of the chorale prelude. The composer's Partita on *Hos God er idel glede* ('In Heaven is Joy') is a straight, compact set of variations that barely alters the speed and form of the hymn's melody, rendering it easily discernable in each variation and meaning each is a similar length (around 55 seconds).

The melody is presented, by turns, in sparse two-part harmony, with running accompaniment, in high registers with glistening little pendant arpeggios and over chattering lower voices. Texture becomes more complex by degrees; soon the tune is heard in the feet with a thrifty French-style toccata like accompaniment above until, in its last airing, Nystedt pushes and pulls at the tune (and extends the duration to 77 seconds) in a smiling final flourish that unites northern and southern European organ traditions. If the Partita hints at more southern styles, *Tu es Petrus* ('You are Peter')

veritably indulges them. This frequently dark and dramatic work, inspired by Christ's challenge to Peter, was written in 1973. On this recording it forms the first of a series of pieces in freer, more rhapsodic style that show Nystedt working more under French (Catholic) influences than Nordic/German (Lutheran) ones—even if this piece remains, effectively, a fantasia and fugue. Flurries of notes tear up and down the keyboard in the first part in a style reminiscent of Charles Tournemire. Nystedt's fugal writing is fluent (the fugue subject is launched at 05'21) but more remarkable are the places it visits as it weaves its way along—through darkness and light, and into the pulsating chords which appear to commandeer it.

Exultate ('Rejoice') followed two years later, another rhapsodic work but this more experimental in texture, recalling Olivier Messiaen in its constellations of static diatonic

harmonies and its advancing of the structural use of pulsating chords as heard in *Tu Es Petrus*, which here power the music forward to inexorable effect. Truly, this piece captures the celebration and joy of faith inherent in its title.

Nystedt's French connection, particularly the influence of Marcel Dupré, is heard to even greater effect in *Monté a la Gloire* ('Rise to Glory'). It was written for a 1992 festival around the inauguration of a new 3-manual organ at the square, concrete Spjelkavik Church on Norway's west coast—an instrument built by Marcussen & Son of Denmark with plenty of power, a warm, singing sound and highly effective solo trumpet stops. Nystedt designed a piece liturgically appropriate for All Saints' Day that quotes the hymn tune *Den store hvite flokk* ('Behold, a Host, Arrayed in White') prescribed for that day.

It is a vision of heavenly ecstasy cascading with sound that celebrated the sonorous qualities of the new instrument, including its vox celeste stops. That allowed for maximum contrast between the work's blazing, ascendant celebrations and its throbbing mysteries.

In 1999, Norsk Musikforlag published Nystedt's *Two Preludes for Mourning*. The first is a spare, sincere arrangement of the spiritual Amazing Grace. The second, *Beati*, uses music from the composer's then-forthcoming symphony *Apocalypsis Johannis*, a recessional in three parts.

Andrew Mellor

Andrew Mellor is author of The Northern Silence—Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture (Yale University Press)



Anders Eidsten Dahl Organ

Anders Eidsten Dahl (b. 1976 in Drammen) graduated with a degree in church music from the Norwegian Academy of Music and later completed a Master's degree in solo organ performance at the same institution. Following two years of solo performance study at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen, he gave debut concerts in Copenhagen and Oslo in 2003. He has studied organ with Professor Terje Winge, cathedral organist Kåre Nordstoga and Professor Hans Fagius.

Eidsten Dahl is much in demand as organ soloist, chamber musician and harpsichordist, and he has given organ concerts at festivals in a number

of European countries. His repertoire spans from the Baroque to the music of today, with emphasis on J. S. Bach and organ music from the Romantic period. Since 2001 he has served as organist and director of music at Bragernes Church in Drammen, where he is artistic and administrative director of the church's organ concert series.

A recipient of the Government Work Scholarship for Younger and Newly Established Artists, Eidsten Dahl has released a number of critically acclaimed albums on the LAWO Classics label. He is also Associate Professor of organ at the Norwegian Academy of Music.



Credits

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