

Review

Twentieth-Century Music 20/1, 126–131 © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press
doi: 10.1017/S1478572222000159

Philip Ross Bullock and Daniel M. Grimley (eds.) *Music's Nordic Breakthrough: Aesthetics, Modernity, and Cultural Exchange, 1890–1930* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021), ISBN: 978-1-78327-568-7 (hb).

A book by the Danish critic and theorist Georg Brandes (1842–1927), known in English as *Men of the Modern Breakthrough* (1883), is the starting point for this volume. Described here as a ‘provocative survey of recent trends in Scandinavian literature and an impassioned call for its aesthetic renewal’ (1), Brandes was critical of its insular and backwards-looking nature, promoting a model found in the younger literary generation of the time. The current editors note the controversial nature of Brandes’s work, especially ‘its stubborn commitment to a curiously anachronistic “great male” model of authorship’ (1), but rightly consider it to be a groundbreaking and significant study. Applying Brandes’s concepts to Music is the main thrust of *Music's Nordic Breakthrough*, while removing any gender imbalance would be a natural part of any publication today. However, when you look at the chapter titles here and note the highlighted case studies, two issues emerge. The ten figures listed (in order) are: Gustav Vigeland, Einer Jónsson, Sergei Diaghilev, Konstantin Korovin, Wilhelm Peterson-Berger, Jean Sibelius, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Ture Rangström, Fartein Valen, and Jāzeps Vītols. Their artistic diversity, as painters, sculptors, playwrights, dramatists, poets, and composers, is striking. So too is their gender: they are all male. It seems that a ‘commitment to a curiously anachronistic “great male” model of authorship’ is alive and well, as far as the current editors are concerned.

The reader may wonder if there were any female Nordic composers at this time (1890–1930). You bet there were! A series of articles for *Finnish Music Quarterly* by Susanna Välimäki and Nuppu Koivisto, derived from their book project titled *Sävelten tyttäret: Säveltävät naiset Suomen historiassa 1700-luvun lopulta 1900-luvun alkuun* (*Daughters of Music: Finnish Women Composers, from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries*), discusses the lives and music of historical women composers in Finland.¹ Neglect due to gender bias emerges as a strong theme in this survey and Brandes’s attitude in 1883 was typical of that time; but it is hard to fathom the rationale behind current editorial thinking. Moreover, with Finland being the first European country to grant equal voting rights to women (1906), the artistic ramifications of this political breakthrough should surely merit some discussion in a book such as this. There is something worryingly selective about this

1 Preliminary findings are summarized in an initial *FMQ* article (February 2019), see <https://fmq.fi/articles/a-celebration-of-women-who-wrote-music>.

consideration of a ‘breakthrough’, and this seems to persist on a number of levels through the volume as a whole.

The book is divided into three sections or ‘structured along three interrelated axes’ (as the introduction tells us (9), though just how many wood-chopping implements are required to navigate through this dense forest seems a moot point, with women readers especially having a particular axe to grind. We begin in ‘Transnational Space and Local Communities’ with four wide-ranging chapters that seek to provide a broad, background context for the book as a whole. Overall, this section helps ‘to rethink how the North has been constructed . . . as a linguistic, ethnic, national, and cultural space’ (10); it is dominated by studies relating to visual culture as there has been much pioneering work by art historians to promote a non-national view of culture from this region that may work in dialogue with more musicological concerns.

The opening chapter, ‘National, Nordic, Universal: Gustav Vigeland and Einar Jónsson’ by Charlotte Ashby, offers a lucid case study of two Nordic sculptors (from Norway and Iceland, respectively) arguing that the emphasis to date on national characteristics can obscure other identities. Exploring a balance between national and international and between the individual and the universal provides the larger context in which to evaluate these creatively original figures. Being conventionally framed as national heroes has become a limitation that can sideline considerations of the relationship between the nation, the region, and the international. Acknowledging the significance of the transnational and universal is, it is argued, the way to understand the ‘Modern Breakthrough’. This trope continues into the second chapter about visual art: ‘Sergei Diaghilev, Konstantin Korovin, and the North in Russian Art, 1890–1905’ by Louise Hardiman. Outlining the kinship between Russian and Nordic modernism, a discussion of the north as a metaphorical bridge and inspiration reveals preoccupations with ‘seemingly less cluttered landscapes and sense of remoteness . . . an artistic concern with light, line, and a certain simplicity’ (42). Korovin, a designer and painter, is an interesting figure enthusiastically evoked in this searching account. Connections with Diaghilev and his promotion of Nordic modernism, the 1900 Paris Exhibition, the renaissance in northern art, and the ‘national modern’ movement emerge strongly. Here, as in the previous chapter, the consideration of non-text-based arts and their potential to offer a universal language invites the reader to draw parallels with music. However, the degree of abstraction that music offers – especially in relation to visual arts which are as representational as this – might undermine the strength of that connection: music is rather distinctive in this regard.

By Chapter 3, ‘Wilhelm Peterson-Berger’s *Four Songs in Swedish Folk Style*, Op.5: A Critical Appraisal’ by Kirsten Santos Rutschman, music actually seems to be making a breakthrough. Peterson-Berger is hardly a mainstream compositional figure and, despite his being surprisingly prolific, only a few people have come to know this music. He is described as a ‘noteworthy composer’ (63) but quite by whom and to what critical acclaim remains unclear. Sibelius scholars are aware of his day job as a music critic, given the ill-informed and highly critical comments he made regarding this composer. One is reminded of Sibelius’s oft-quoted remark that nobody has ever erected a monument in memory of a critic. A well-argued case that these four songs constitute a cycle emerges, though mainly as a result of new source evidence about

the text and its underlying literary coherence; musical evidence rests on a recurrent formal scheme evident in all four songs, but some might argue that structural variety is part of any cyclic scheme and this basic formula (a piano prelude that doubles as interlude and postlude in all cases) is rather uninventive. Certainly in relation to the tonal and harmonic language involved, there is little in the way of a musical breakthrough; indeed, even for its time, it is extremely conventional, rather clichéd and lacking in originality.

‘Sibelius and the Ecological Breakthrough’ by Tomi Mäkelä, the last chapter in this section, takes the composer’s lifelong enthusiasm for nature and elevates it to that of an ‘early environmentalist’ (81): Jean the Eco Warrior. The initial claim, that Sibelius’s refusal to compose a symphony for the opening ceremonies of the Imatra power company in 1929 was an ‘environmentalist gesture’ (81), is delightfully provocative and attention grabbing – but does not really withstand serious scrutiny. By 1929, Sibelius had essentially stopped composing and, although he would not have been able to predict the 30-year silence to result from his longevity, was already immersed (if not drowning) in a creative blockage that was of far greater personal significance than the building of a dam to generate hydro-electric power. Nevertheless, the author persuasively puts the case that producing so many works with nature-related titles over such a long timescale reveals an underlying ecological attitude of real significance. Any musical examples in support of these rather sweeping claims are thin on the ground, with a tendency to impose some kind of extra-musical programme onto Sibelius’s undoubtedly enigmatic titles (such as *Tapiola*). Overall, though, this is a thought-provoking account even if it’s left to the reader to find supporting evidence.

Moving into Part II, any reader waiting for a *musical* breakthrough will have to remain patient as ‘Intermediality’, which ‘foregrounds the prominent role played by hybrid, multimedia forms in the breakthrough’ (10), continues to examine broader artistic contexts alongside occasional musical references. Chapter Five, ‘Shooting Tuonela’s Swan: Modern Myths and Artistic Convergence in Finnish Symbolism’ by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, offers a searching account of the Symbolist movement in Finland from the 1890s, which originally emerged in the visual arts and literature as elsewhere in Europe. This is seen as an antagonistic reaction to realism and technological, scientifically orientated modernity: ‘an alternative “modernity”’ (111). The case studies here of a composer (Jean Sibelius), a poet (Eino Leino), and an artist (Akseli Gallen-Kallela) crystallize around their exploration of a common episode from *Kalevala* mythology: *Lemminkäinen*. Reinterpreting ancient myths, drawing on the network of associations evoked by symbolism, in order to introduce modernist ideas (including the nationalist struggle for Finnish independence) is an important theme here.

‘Music Beyond the Breakthrough: Sibelius, Hofmannsthal, and the Summoning of *Everyman*’ is the next chapter. Daniel M. Grimley begins in 1915 with Sibelius’s own breakthrough event: his fiftieth birthday and the Fifth Symphony composed (and hurried) for that occasion. The artistic struggles accompanying the complex genesis of this piece are well documented elsewhere, but the context of being part of a ‘breakthrough generation’ (a group of ‘artists, writers, and musicians born in the 1860s who experienced the force of Brandes’s galvanizing call for a new aesthetic orientation across Scandinavia and the Nordic countries’, 128) offers a different perspective. Sibelius’s melancholia, self-doubt and creative anxieties

are revealed in the complex reworkings of his new symphony, but at that time he was also writing incidental music for a production of a Finnish translation of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Jederman* (*Everyman*), first staged in November 1916. Personally, I have always been a little underwhelmed by Sibelius's incidental music in relation to the far more significantly modernist achievements in formal and temporal organization of his mainstream works – as evidenced in the final version of the Fifth Symphony for example. However, with that repertoire having been so thoroughly scrutinized to date, it is refreshing to gain insight into another strand of his compositional output. In this chapter, more than others so far, the integration of different artistic expressions – the 'hybrid, multimedial forms' of this section in the book – are convincingly realized. Issues of the balance between light and dark for example, though directly stemming from Hofmannsthal's dramatic narrative here, resonate powerfully with Sibelius's experiments elsewhere in purely musical contexts.

In Chapter Seven, 'Composing a Nordic Renaissance: Ture Rangström's Music for *Till Damaskus* (III)', Leah Broad continues the consideration of incidental music to accompany drama, broadening this to include a particularly obscure example. There is no doubt that Sweden is something of a neglected region within studies of Nordic music, and I have great respect for anyone championing the underdog, but sometimes it is worth interrogating why a composer has apparently been overlooked. The author argues that Rangström had 'a fundamentally different conception of what contemporary music should be' (152) to defend the late Romantic nature of his idiom, suggesting that it was not a question of upholding those conventional nineteenth-century features but a rejection of more radical harmonic language of the early twentieth century. I am not convinced by such euphemisms. It seems clear that Sweden took a leading role in the idea of a 'breakthrough', but in terms of literature, rather than music. Most certainly it is the drama that drives any innovation in *Till Damaskus* (III) as the music itself is very traditional: uninventive and unoriginal. Ultimately, there are good reasons to ignore bad music. The final chapter in this section, 'Gramophones and Modernity in the North' by Julia Mannherz, offers a very different slant on things, a surprise for the reader no doubt, but a welcome one. Acknowledging that gramophones are seen as part of popular consumption, this historical account addresses larger social, political, and artistic implications. This technology, bringing recorded sound to a wider audience, is not merely reflective of artistic modernism but also inspires creative endeavours too: 'It changed the forms of private and public entertainment and potentially unsettled gender norms' (191); good to see that final point being made at last.

There is something of a breakthrough in the final section of the book, 'Modernist Legacies', as it is more musically centred. Chapter 9, 'Fartein Valen's Atonal Breakthrough' by Arnulf Christian Mattes, offers an in-depth and wide-ranging case study of Norway's sole 'atonalist'. Deeply rooted in issues of national romanticism following the so-called 'golden age' of Norwegian culture (including Ibsen and Grieg), early twentieth-century composers faced difficult choices in order to break away from that illustrious past while connecting with new artistic developments in continental Europe. There were a number of aspiring new-generation composers, and Mattes notes that very few women were able to establish themselves at this time, among whom Pauline Hall (1890–1969), 'one of the most outspoken critics of the

“cultural neo-nationalism”, was the most prominent (196). In the broader scheme of this book as a whole, it does seem a pity not to have made her the subject of this case study, but the position of the atonalist Valen (1897–1952), ‘an isolated phenomenon, situated geographically, aesthetically, and chronologically on the periphery of European modernism’ (196), is an intriguing and thought-provoking one. His study abroad, adopting the principle of so-called ‘German Aesthetics’ (198–9), the relationship with national identity (Norway only became independent in 1905), and all the political ramifications of two world wars, while also adopting an ever-increasing dogma of aesthetic autonomy, makes for a fascinating read.

The case study of Chapter 10, ‘Northern Light: Jāzeps Vītols, Cosmopolitan Nationalist on the Axis Riga–St Petersburg’ by Kevin C. Karnes, seems on the face of it to be a rather odd choice. Vītols (1863–1948) was from Latvia, which is not, strictly speaking, a Nordic country at all. However, Karnes’s arguments for inclusivity should not be dismissed, indeed discussions around cosmopolitanism are to be welcomed, but with issues of Nordic identity being somewhat fragile even within the currently defined geographical limits of the region, this still seems a puzzling decision. The discussion of ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ here is carefully handled and a case that it is intimately connected with Vītols’s modernism is persuasively made but, interesting though it is, the connection to *Music’s Nordic Breakthrough* does seem rather tenuous.

Chapter 11, ‘Sibelius Reception in Britain, 1901–39: Centre and Periphery in the Musical Construction of the North’ by Philip Ross Bullock, in some ways continues that discussion as its title suggests. The critic Cecil Gray, well known for bringing Sibelius’s music to the attention of British audiences, is the focus here and it is noted that he moved away from nationalistic considerations to outline the formal and structural qualities of this music. Certainly later scholarship has found these features, especially in relation to musical timescale, to be highly significant in any appreciation of Sibelius’s modernism: a real breakthrough. However, Gray’s analytical limitations are problematic. He seemed intent on emphasizing the traditional elements of form and structure as a way of promoting this music to a (essentially conservative) British, concert-going public. Nevertheless, the argument that ‘Sibelius not only taught British composers how to write but also inspired them to think of themselves less as peripheral figures on the continental mainstream than as key participants in the musical construction of a European north’ (234) is convincingly made and parallels between the so-called ‘English musical renaissance’ and the modern breakthrough in the Nordic region are interesting. ‘Breaking Down the Breakthrough’ by Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg is a promising title for a final chapter that aims ‘to map the present-day aesthetic and political ramifications of the Modern Breakthrough and to trace some of the controversies it has generated’ (251). A balance between such broad points of reference as the Nordic welfare model and a more specific focus on Denmark (Nielsen in particular) is nicely judged in this engaging account. There is a thorough critique of Brandes’s work, though with little interrogation of its gender bias, and of the emerging ‘popular breakthrough’ that challenged it. This is a thought-provoking final chapter that encourages further debate rather than drawing any conclusions for the book as a whole, but an enjoyable read nonetheless.

So what can we conclude? There are a number of really interesting, thoughtful and well-argued chapters in this volume, many (rather) obscure creative figures are introduced to the reader and we certainly learn something new. But we get a very oddly balanced picture here. Considerations of music in relation to other forms of artistic creativity and the cross connections between these are insightful and interesting. Yet somehow the ‘music’ in *Music’s Nordic Breakthrough* appears to be so reliant on other art forms that it gets rather submerged, and certainly we get the impression that all those responsible for its breakthrough were men. Of course neither of these things is true. Perhaps a useful analogy might be found in that characteristically Nordic phenomenon: flat-packed furniture. (I will not name any brands here, but I Know Everyone’s Aware of one in particular.) The reader is presented with a number of diverse elements, all very interesting in themselves, but then is somehow left to assemble them into a coherent whole for themselves. Moreover, as crucial parts are apparently missing, I can only wish readers the best of luck in trying to piece this all together.

Tim Howell

tim.howell@york.ac.uk