

Graciela Paraskevaidis:
“We are really all equally weak and solitary”.
Folke Rabe, Swedish composer *

Born in a suburb of Stockholm, Sweden, on October 28, 1935, Folke Rabe is fifty compositions old, as well as a trombone-player and an organizer of music activities at Rikskonserter (1968-80) and at the Swedish National Radio, first as music producer of programs for children (1980-88), then as member of the music department (1988-92), and at present head of the department for jazz, experimental music, traditional music and mixed forms. As a performer, Rabe has been playing jazz - *a fine source of vitality* - almost uninterruptedly since early youth, attended trombone and composition courses (Karl-Birger Blomdahl) at the Royal College of Music, where he also met Ligeti and Lutoslawski.

Rabe's early pieces date from 1957-60, the time just before his composition studies. His breakthrough as a composer happened in 1961/62 with **Pièce** for speaking chorus.

After extended travelling in Eastern Europe (1963), which brought him deep musical experiences, and later in the USA (1965), where he worked as musical director of the Ann Halprin dance group, a very important and stimulating experience as well, Rabe got involved in the field of music education in the frame of the Rikskonserter activities. Rabe's most interesting contributions to music pedagogics as part of these enriching experiences are to be read in **Sound Workshop** (Ljudverkstad).

It was a time when music politics were a matter on the edge, and there were intense discussions on how to deal with this responsibility. However, as for myself I felt a growing distance to direct music making. For several good reasons I had not been composing at all through the seventies and I had several good reasons for making a major change. I left Rikskonserter and was employed by the Swedish National Radio as a music producer of programs for children. This I did from 1980 through 1988. The change also meant a change as far as my composing was concerned. From 1980 I was back at it again.

Because of Sweden's geographical and cultural "peripheric" situation in relation to the central European context, Swedish new music is unfortunately not much known or performed outside Scandinavia. Even composers' names included in dictionaries are scarce.

Sweden is generally known as an industrialized, developed and (former) welfare country. But we are situated far out towards the arctic periphery and not considered a true member of the European culture community. There are just a few Swedish composers paid international attention to right now, although today we have quite a number of profiled composers, working in all possible genres. However some of them have been paid more attention to than others. Electroacoustic music in general has been an important topic here. In this context, Swedish music has gained a rather solid international acknowledgement. At a fairly early stage high class studio facilities were available (EMS) and this, of course, was a promoting factor. There is a number of Swedish composers (partly in the generation born in the fifties) who enjoy a great international reputation in this field.

There is also a very particular genre closely related to the work at the studio currently called "text-sound composition" which is actually a kind of Swedish "invention" with common roots in Dadaism and in concrete poetry.

This very special genre was very much cultivated here in the sixties and onwards. In this field I think you can consider Sweden as a pioneer country.

What about instrumental music?

Here you can see a recent, interesting development. Some extremely good performers, individuals and groups, are on our stages (as well as internationally) for the moment. Many of them are eager to play the music of their time and their environment. Consequently a number of close relationships between some composers and performers have been developed in recent years.

What trends and influences would you say are actually traceable in Swedish music of today?

Since the second world war, the USA have in many ways been dominating here as in many other countries. We (as a modern, industrialized nation) are quite internationally oriented, with a certain preference of US standards.

Would it be possible to speak of any common traits among Swedish composers?

Of course you can hardly point out any main characteristics in a bunch of such pure individuals as the Swedish composers, but some observers say that they get associations to the special Nordic light. And, of course, the close relation to nature and the variation of light with each season are inherited in every Swede. This may, in some cases, have led to a neo-romanticism. Another characteristic that you occasionally can see is a certain lack of respect (to the heavy traditions of classical, central European art traditions). Some of these attitudes are, I believe, unique for this part of the world.

A most healthy attitude, I dare say, if you realize how "heavy" imposed traditions can be, no matter where they come from, Central Europe or the USA. This situation also reflects the already mentioned fact that Scandinavia has actually remained peripheric to central European centrism. Perhaps this fact has contributed to a more "unbound" way of creative thinking.

Even if the Swedish music has been isolated to some extent from central European music life, in the history you can find exceptions, that is Swedish composers who have made an international career. Hugo Alfvén, Kurt Atterberg, Lars-Erik Larsson and Dag Wirén belong to the earlier part of this century. Bo Nilsson and his music enjoyed much attention on the continent in the fifties and sixties. The generations just before (Blomdahl, Lidholm and Bäck) had individual successes at ISCM festivals, but you cannot say that they are regularly present on the international scene of today.

Does this have to do with a lack of information and/or interest?

It is not only that the world is seemingly indifferent to Swedish music. The information in Sweden about new music in for instance Austria, France, Germany and Italy is very poor today compared to the situation in the fifties and sixties. We are much better informed about new music from the USA.

Being acquainted with Rabe's music, I would risk approaching it in decades, since there are rather clear common trends in pieces composed in the sixties, in the seventies, in the eighties and in the nineties so far. I would define the sixties as a decade of mainly rich experimentation with sound and discovering new means of expression, as represented by the already mentioned **Pièce**, and later on by **Rondes** (1964) for mixed chorus or for male chorus, a very short but strongly impressive music using overtones, a technique to which he will return in **Joe's Harp**. I would include as well **Bolos** (1962) and **Polonaise** (1966), both for four trombones and in collaboration with Jan Bark as part of the Kulturkvartetten work, and the electroacoustic continuum music **Va??** (¿¿Eh?? or **Was??**, 1967), on which Rabe wrote an explanatory text to accompany the record edition:

*[...] in Western compositions the intervals, the rhythms and the timbres, when escaping notation, have become the subordinate parts of a philosophical idea or at least of a thematic and formal one. The sound event in itself has been pushed to the background and the West, in its ethnocentric autoidolatry has set up its cultural superiority as a dogma, be this Beethoven or Coca Cola. But in the world there are music areas where the qualitative element is born out of sound itself. [...] **Va??** is built starting from harmonic formulas. These sounds follow each other through the enharmonics of their intermediate sounds [...] due to their internal hierarchy, reinforce themselves and can produce certain acoustic illusions.*

The seventies could be considered a sort of gap as far as compositional activities are concerned,

because of institutional work which I considered to be cultural political pioneer work. I may not have been so far away from composing anyway. I have always considered to be sound workshops a kind of collective compositional work. So, in a way, the seventies were not a complete gap for me as composer.

Another period of travelling in the early seventies to very distant geographical, sociocultural and musical realities through several Latin American countries - Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Peru and Uruguay - left several musical impressions traceable in pieces like **Altiplano** for wind band written ten years after his South American experience, which was a commission from the Stadtkapelle Feldkirchen in Kärnten, and performed at the opening concert of the 1982 ISCM World Music Days.

*Getting in touch with various aspects of Latin American music culture, first of all the music by the young composers attending the Cursos Latinoamericanos de Música Contemporánea, and - furthermore - the local, popular and very interesting music expressions of the Río de la Plata region, including tango and "Los Olimareños" brought sight into other cultures and ways of thinking and making music. I was invited to the First (Uruguay), the Seventh (Brazil) and the Tenth (Dominican Republic) editions of the "Cursos", all of which have contributed profoundly to my musical perspectives and have had some consequences for my compositional output (**Altiplano** and also a work on a*

poem by Pablo Neruda from "Canto General" which I have been working on the last few years).

In the eighties, there seems to be a deeper search for simultaneously diverse sound paths in pieces such as the already mentioned **Altiplano**, **Basta** for trombone solo (1982), the tape music **To the Barbender** (1982), dedicated to John Cage's seventieth birthday and the **Ship of Fools** (1983) a collective multimedia composition by the Nya Kulturkvartetten, of which Rabe is a member, freely based on the medieval story reflected in an image of man's self-destructive folly, with different sections alluding to the rise and fall of different conceptions of the world.

Today I am a periodical composer, combining work at the Swedish Radio with periods of composing. Today my music does not follow any kind of continuous line as far as means of expression are concerned. One or two works may be composed in a certain technique, but the next one is constructed in a quite different way. Thus, I believe, I can say that the techniques I use are unique for each work or group of works.

Perhaps this means that the emphasis on different aspects of music has changed in different periods of Rabe's work:

*To me intense listening is obviously the most important and fundamental condition for music appreciation ... which is a particularly strong feature in the pieces composed in the sixties: Works like **Va??**, **Joe's Harp** and **Hoxten Drikker** emphasize this and the entire idea of the **Sound Workshop** is along the same line.*

Joe's Harp opens the seventies by extending the choir features common to previous pieces to an intense presence of "drones" producing harmonic overtones in contrast with clusters of sounds. From this piece on Rabe is led to work mostly on deeper sound variations including extramusical elements and

expanding traditional sound sources (such as the voice or the trombone),

like in **Pièce**, **Bolos**, **Impromptu** and **Rondes**.

These works led up to the continuous performances which Jan Bark and I were developing with the original Kulturkvartetten and the Bel Canto Choir in the sixties and early seventies.

Brass instruments still remain his favorite in the eighties and early nineties, though the composer's approach and demands tend to a more eclectic treatment:

*It is music for super virtuoso musicians like **Basta** (1982) for solo trombone, **Escalations** (1986) for brass quintet, **All the lonely people ...** (1990) for trombone and chamber orchestra, **Nature, Herd and Relatives** (1991) for French horn and string orchestra, and **Tintomara** (1992) for trumpet and trombone.*

A compositional element that is again present in some recent pieces after **Altiplano** refers to direct quotations, a controversial issue in handling music by others, from other cultural areas or other music languages such as the Lennon-McCartney quote in the

trombone concerto **All the lonely People**, which for an "art" music audience bears an uncomfortable intertextual experience:

It is a technique which has been developed in a way that has some connections to the serial techniques of the earlier 20th century (retrogrades, inversions, et cetera).

Quoting is also the nuclear point in **Nature, Herd and Relatives**, a concerto for French horn and string orchestra from 1991. Here, like in **Altiplano**, the transcoding is heard more as a kind of "reminder", of homage, rather than as a confrontation.

Actually, it opens with a transcription of the dense, noisy sounds which I heard at distance from the roaring sea at Sudret, the south end of the island Gotland in the Baltic Sea. The Lappish yoik is one of the most individualistic of musical expressions; a highly affected singing, often practised in solitude. When I began thinking about this concerto the yoik was close to me. Four north yoiks (or rather "vuolle" which is the proper term in Lappish language), transcribed by me from phonograph records, are present in this piece, where I have turned them and twisted them around, combining them with themselves and each other. The soloist in a solo concerto may represent the lonely individual (in relation to the collective, the orchestra). When planning this piece I was thinking about various forms of loneliness. Nature, herd (the reindeer) and relatives are the most frequent topics in the yoik. This is also the title of my concerto, composed with great respect for people who have been living in harmony with these fundamental components of existence. The work, by the way, happens to be the most classicistic piece I have written so far.

Although the a cappella choir cycle **To Love** composed in 1984 to poems by Edward Estlin Cummings seems to be much more "classicistic" and sounds much more "traditional" as far as harmonic and melodic processes are concerned, being based on a syllabic text setting almost unknown in Rabe's former choral pieces.

Concerning the quotations in the very recent concertos, there also seems to be a kind of philosophical "Leitmotiv" bringing them close to each other. The composer speaks of loneliness when referring to the relationship between soloist and orchestra, between man and crowd, between one and the many others, between the individual and the anonymous mob. This is also the point in the Beatles song related to the trombone concerto:

We are really all equally weak and solitary,

he concludes.

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