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## Metamusic and the Analytical Challenges of Jan W. Morthenson's Works

### ABSTRACT

In the 1970s, Swedish composer and intellectual Jan W. Morthenson outlined a theory of metamusic, music about music, an epistemological category through which his works should be understood. Metamusic requires an intertextual framework of elaborate program notes through which listeners reflect on the often-unfortunate paths that music history has taken. He questioned traditional analytical tools and the musical material of modernism: 'By replacing sequences and triads with quintuplets, aleatorics, major sevenths, and clusters, one believes to have established a *new music*. But in reality, this is as meaningless, as letting the eyes and mouth exchange position in a portrait, and far from what the term radicalism as a concept should mean'. For Morthenson the artwork has a peculiar meaning: on the one hand, his compositions have an ontological status as complete entities, fixed with often-detailed notation, with elaborate program notes that point towards extra-musical contexts. But the music and the prose together direct the listener towards the effect of the work. His compositions present features of rational, modernist structure alongside irrational, postmodern elements and shock effects of the avant-garde, and align themselves with everyday life. His aesthetic theory paints a more nuanced picture of the post-1945 avant-garde and modernism and requiring alternative methods of analysis.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

We have to count on continuing to carry a ridiculous status culture, an expensive, fine opera, concert houses with fanfares, superhuman conductors to elevate to the skies, gigantic orchestras in which to count the first violins, perverse elaborations with exquisite interpretation details, vibratos this and that, feelings here and there, brightness in the brass section, ecstatic elevated Isolde arms, etc.

Year in and year out, the same absurd musical world of superficialities, watery emotions, cowardness and intolerance. (Morthenson 1968.)

Swedish composer Jan W. Morthenson (1940–) did not fear controversy, to put it mildly, as you can read in the epigraph. Virtually all of his compositions had a political edge, and he challenged the cultural life's status quo in his prose. He came of age both as a composer and as a confident young intellectual during the 1960s. Rather than attending the conservatory Royal College of Music in Stockholm, he studied composition privately with German musicologist Heinz-Klaus Metzger and aesthetics at Uppsala University. He made his compositional debut at age twenty with the piece *Wechselspiel I* for solo cello, a delicate, pointillist piece that attracted quite a bit of attention. In the following years, he wrote a number of inventive organ works, often with a fascinating graphic notation for his friend the avant-garde organist Karl-Erik Welin, who made headlines in 1964 by injuring his leg with a chain saw during a happening at The Modern Museum in Stockholm. Morthenson received numerous commissions for instrumental and multi-media

works alike throughout the decade. He was especially engaged in electro-acoustic music and experimented with abstract video and music for television in both West Germany and Sweden.

Alongside his work as a composer, Morthenson was also a prolific writer. He published one book, *Nonfigurative Musik* (1966) along with a large number of newspaper and magazine articles, more often than not written in a quite confrontational manner. Indeed, Morthenson's diverse background is unique among Swedish composers. This makes him difficult to pin down — in fact, I don't think it is possible — but the process is worth the effort. And it has implications for music analysis.

Although Morthenson was never heavily invested in the musical avant-garde movement of the 1960s, apart from his contacts with Welin, he sympathized with its goals to shake the establishment, and he was fully aware of and interested in the movement's philosophical underpinnings and problems, as the philosophy of art and avant-garde often go hand-in-hand. During his time at Uppsala University, Morthenson had already developed a life-long attraction for academic aesthetics and studied with Teddy Brunius, a legendary art historian and aesthetician, and during the time Morthenson came of age a number of interesting volumes in aesthetics were published, including Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (1974), Meyer's *Explaining Music* (1973), and János Maróthy's *Music and the Bourgeois* (1974), which he all read. Interestingly, Morthenson was able to incorporate diverse schools of thought in his general journalistic articles and texts on his own works, including ontology, critical theory, and phenomenology.

### 2. THE FOUNDATIONS OF COMPOSITION

A publication that drew little attention but that gives much insight into Morthenson's compositional thinking is his compendium *Komponerandets grunder* (The Foundations of Composition, 1986), intended to be used as a textbook for members of local professional instrumental ensembles in Sweden as part of their continuing education. Here Morthenson begins by giving a brief, fairly neutral review of the history of musical aesthetics from Pythagoras onwards. In a series of snapshots, he shows that music history is based on a number of dialectical clashes: folk music versus formalism, private versus public music making, emotion versus intellect. The compositional exercises begin in a conventional way, especially species counterpoint modeled after Palestrina, Morthenson gives quite a few hints about his own aesthetic views. Morthenson states as a fact that repetitive motives and sequences have to be avoided by all means in this style, and uses charged language, such as 'aimless' (*viljelös*), describing a melodic line, as if it had its own mind and soul. He even argues that Palestrina counterpoint has similarities with serialism.

The main lesson is not that Morthenson twisted music history to fit his own aesthetic stance — many composers have done that and that it's part of the game — but how conservative he was in many respects, adhering to a traditional *Bildungstradition*. The traditional canon of exercises had to be covered as a foundation, which would be a highly unorthodox stance for a revolutionary avant-gardist. Furthermore, the *Materialehre*, the study of the musical material, is the foundation for his compositional thinking, and it might explain his shifts between a traditional, even conservative, modernism and the avant-garde, not unlike Theodor Adorno, who received cult status among the young modernist composers during the 1950s and 60s (and Morthenson attended the Darmstädter Ferienkurse). Indeed, there is no doubt that Adorno's work, especially *Philosophy of Modern Music*, deeply penetrated Morthenson's thinking about music's political aspects and his aversion toward popular music, which he combines in a text with the highly Adornian title 'Rock er militærmusik' (Rock is Military Music). As he argues:

My personal aversion toward rock is not based so much on rock's musical tediousness. The world is being flooded by musical nonsense, but the consequences are not so serious as rock music's. The rock problem concerns cultural issues. A musical form, that with consequent commercial exploitation ends a whole generation's capacity to have an intelligent relationship to music and makes choices impossible, is devastating, regardless of the musical content. But nevertheless, there are of course objective properties in just rock music that make it almost comic through its holding onto clichés. One has to squeeze the lemon to its last drop. (Morthenson 1981–82, 30–32.)

Like Adorno, Morthenson's analysis was lacking in detail, and like Adorno, his knowledge of popular genres was limited. But one thing is for sure, despite his claim to the contrary, his aversion towards commercial popular music was firmly anchored in its musical language, but societal issues would play a larger role. In 1978 he participated in a debate on popular music and the demoralizing qualities of the pop group ABBA, and in the article 'A unified resistance is necessary' (Morthenson 1978), he describes the art musical world and modernism as having liberated the composer from serving the role as the 'deceitful cultural greasepaint serving the authorities'.

In his early 20s, he outlined his project of *Nonfigurative Music*, in the book of the same title mentioned earlier. His analysis was incredibly radical for its time and well written for such a young man. Referring to visual artists Josef Albers and Kasimir Malevitch, thereby showing his early attraction to the visual arts (and Morthenson would later emerge as a recognized painter), he argues that the musical discourse is outdated, using a similar cliché argument as in his critique of popular music. Musical arts have

continued the traditional discussion on systems for pitch organizations, tone length, dynamics, etc. By replacing sequences and triads with quintuplets, aleatorics, major sevenths, and clusters, one believes to have established a 'new music'. But in reality, this is as meaningless, as letting the eyes and mouth exchange position in a portrait, and far from what the term radicalism as a concept should mean. (Morthenson 1963–64, 18.)

As was the case with popular music, the status quo had to be criticized. Here he departs from the modernistically central notion of teleological development, and turns it on its head, just as Adorno did in his 1955 article '*Das Altern der neuen Musik*',

accusing the modernist movement of being old-fashioned. Like Adorno, his critique of the avant-garde was equally devastating:

The most broken cry of anxiety results soon in nothing more than a shrug. The instrumental theater must, as far as I can understand, partly be seen against the background of the expressive music's state of crisis — one grasps for all means available to create any kind of emotional activity, to any price. (Morthenson 1962–63, 23.)

His point is simple, the relentless pursuit for novelties — cheap tricks in his mind — was equally despicable in popular music as it is in the avant-garde. But at the same time there is something rigid about his general approach towards composition. And one might ask, if music's role is to counter commercial forces, how could any kind of non-commercial music lack aesthetic value? The societal conflict is the central notion, rather than the musical content, a reading that is confirmed just a few years later when he went as far as to argue that music is only a medium with its real content hiding behind the sound. Therefore, he argues, 'debates that take as their foundation what is heard become so fruitless. It should not only be a matter of sensual sensations but more about connections of the values that guide the peoples' and cultures' lives' (Morthenson 1981–82). That's a stunning comment coming from a composer who teaches Palestrina and twelve-tone technique. Music is not sound; music consists of its ideological underpinnings, of 'values'. How then could one compose music and how could it be analyzed?

### 3. NONFIGURATIVE MUSIC AND METAMUSIC

Despite his ideological slant, there is Morthenson, the pragmatic artist, who offered two solutions to these problems, conceived about a decade apart: nonfigurative music and metamusic. The nonfigurative music included works that lacked any kind of gestural elements that could be associated to the musical tradition. In hindsight, in an interview in 2007, Morthenson held that he wanted to 'remove every imaginable demagogical expression of music. His nonfigurative music consisted of stationary *Klang* fields that eternally slowly, like a dark dissonant non-rhythmic minimalism, were transformed and existed on purely sounding grounds' (Morthenson 2007). The idea was that by purging the music — not primarily of motives and rhythms, that just happened to be the end result, but of its 'demagogical expressions' — music could once again rise up to the task of becoming a negative mirror of society. Musically, nonfigurative music never became a successful genre, of course, but as an aesthetic category, it still has its merits.

The demagogical aspects of music turn up quite often in Morthenson's thinking. I believe the notion of music as an uncontrollable power that goes beyond the intellect was disturbing to him. Metamusic, music about music, challenged music's demagoguery, but embraced its traditional appearance. On the one hand, he felt that traditional modernist and avant-garde techniques and genres, such as serialism and instrumental theater — and nonfigurative music must certainly be included here — were outmoded and that contemporary music lacked philosophical and aesthetic consciousness, but on

the other, after the musical dead end of nonfigurative music he wanted to write music that sounded like music.

In his view, music had come to serve a number of intolerable masters, such as dictatorships and commercialism — and he wanted to make the audience aware of these conditions by composing musical works that confronted the issues and composed a number of works that raised questions about the decadence of particular genres, such as church music, opera, and military music.

Perhaps his most sensational work was *Alla Marcia* from 1974, in which he explored his aversion towards military music. In *Alla Marcia*, a Salvation-Army choir is confronted with loud sounds from the orchestra, stroboscope flashes, and a tape part featuring war-like sounds.

His most popular work is not as theatrical and exaggerated as *Alla Marcia*, however; it is a String Quartet, *Ancora*, written in 1983, which has met with considerable success and has been performed by well-known ensembles such as the Kronos and Arditti quartets. The work follows a straight-forward, traditional formal path; it begins with a peaceful melody in the cello (Example 1). Gradually this theme is transformed. The beautiful melody comes under attack by the other instruments and the piece grows increasingly modernistic (Example 2). Eventually, another tranquil melody appears to conclude the piece (Example 3).

Ex. 1. Morthenson, *Ancora* (extract).

Ex. 2. Morthenson, *Ancora* (extract).

Ex. 3. Morthenson, *Ancora* (extract).

The composer provides us with the following commentary in the liner notes for the recording:

*Ancora* is a composition about folk music. It was written in response to the fact of the world's inherited music being threatened with dissolution and deformation by multinational communications technology. [...] In the string quartet *Ancora* ('yet'), fragments and shadows of folk music from the Balkans confront splinters of western musical modernism. Both forms of culture are equally threatened with extinction. Despite the stylistic and aesthetic differences, they have a common tone in their vulnerability. The dual roles of string instruments in folk music and art music provide an acoustic link between the different idiosyncrasies. (Morthenson 1988.)

Morthenson quotes *Eri*, a dirge from Rhodos in the beginning and a Macedonian song at the end. The explanation of the title — *Ancora*, meaning 'still' or 'yet' — also accounts for the end of the piece: yet, there is folk music. The sympathetic relationship between modernism and folk music that Morthenson describes is not evident in the piece, however, as, in fact, it is the more modernistic music that attacks the folk music. That's of course a result of letting music make comments upon music: metamusic is both a culturally derived illustration of its own intra-musical style as well as an extra-musical representation.

*Ancora* is an appealing piece, and demonstrates, in a strange way, how metamusic liberated Morthenson from stylistic considerations and the tyranny of music history and the dullness and musical cul-de-sac of nonfigurative music, as he could freely blend a beautifully set folk song with modernist outbursts. Music integrated with the prose work, forming an indissoluble unit.

## 4. CONCLUSION

For Morthenson the artwork has a peculiar meaning: on the one hand, his compositions have an ontological status as complete entities, fixed with often-detailed notation, with elaborate program notes that point towards extra-musical contexts. But also, the music and the prose together direct the listener towards the effect of the work. This double effect may appear static, but since his music addresses general aspects of western music history — its expressiveness and emotional content or very widely recognized genres such as church music or military music — his works acquire a dynamic character. It is neither modernist nor avant-garde, or perhaps it is both: his works have the rational structures of modernism, but at the

same time shock effects, and bringing the work in line with everyday life. As he writes in his notes for *Labor* for chamber orchestra, another metamusical composition:

The composition shall give the impression of an increasing physical and psychological pressure. The musicians represent physical exploitation of people in the modern industrial society. Their efforts become overwhelming at last and the work ends in a collapse. (Morthenson 1973–74.)

Yes, these works are autonomous but in their integrations of extra-musical aspects, the solid modernist integrity of the work is shaken. The governing force is not any logical musical principle, and this makes traditional analysis methods of his works highly problematic. Without his comments, these works would not be particularly interesting, in the same way Penderecki's *8'37"* for string orchestra gained immense attention only after being retitled *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*. There is power in words.

On the one hand, we may need to cave in in our analytical pursuit in favor his own interpretations of his works. Traditional analytical tools would not help us much, not because Morthenson tells us that the notes are not important — on the contrary, he does — but because the music is gestural, meaning, any pitch — except for the folk-music quotations — could be exchanged for any other randomly selected pitch. Any rhythm could be approximated. This is paradoxical, but a distinctive feature in Morthenson's oeuvre. The conscientious teacher of Palestrina counterpoint and twelve-tone technique, has capitulated as an artist for ad libitum structures, as is clear in Example 2, above.

Jan W. Morthenson is like a bright modernist flower grafted onto a culturally traditionalist stem and nurtured with water from the avant-garde well. Morthenson's works tell us something important about aesthetic categories in music: how the organization of the musical material is only a small part of the musical work, but, as his teaching illustrated, how important it is nevertheless.

## KEYWORDS

Jan W. Morthenson, Metamusic, Nonfigurative Music, Analysis.

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