

Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen  
Piano Works

Rolf Hind



Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen (b. 1969)

## Piano Works

Rolf Hind, piano and voice<sup>2,4</sup>

1 Lille mirakelpræludium (Small Miracle Prelude) (2003) Metamorphosis over the Prelude from J.S. Bach's Prelude, Fugue and Allegro, BWV 998	6:59
<b>Piano Sonata (2019)</b> Text by Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen	41:55
2 I	31:50
3 II Melodies	7:10
4 III Canon	2:56
<b>6 Sonatas (2007)</b>	14:59
5 I Allegro molto	1:33
6 II Allegro	2:12
7 III Cantabile	5:16
8 IV Prestissimo	1:27
9 V Pastorale	2:36
10 VI Allegro	1:53
	Total 63:53

World premiere recording



Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen

## Detaching Itself from the Certainties

By Tim Rutherford-Johnson

Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen's 40-minute *Piano Sonata* (2019) begins with a peculiar solo melody. Just six-and-a-half bars long, it seems to drift through at least as many keys, while at the same time detaching itself from the certainties of a fixed rhythm and even register. Like a shy teenager, it is desperate to join the party but wary of giving too much of itself away.

It is a disconcerting way to begin such a substantial piece of music, and things only get more perplexing from here. Because immediately, and unexpectedly, the music plunges into a grand Romantic fantasy in the style of Liszt. Something like our opening melody remains deep in the texture, but it is shrouded by handfuls of notes that billow up and down

the keyboard. Any sense of shyness appears to be cast aside, replaced by a bravura virtuosity.

And then almost as suddenly as it began, this also stops, before restarting, like a computer rebooting. Is this old music or new music, we're forced to ask. On the surface, it seems old, but then there are hiccups like this, or passages when the texture thins down to a historically anachronistic single line. And as the music continues, even its stylistic foundations shift beneath our feet: hints of Chopin, Ravel, Schubert and even Arvo Pärt can all be heard. Yet either way, the music maintains the same searching momentum of those opening bars.

Olesen describes one of the motivations behind his piece as a kind of 'homelessness', or a restless striving for identity and purpose. This is certainly reflected in the music's endlessly shifting harmonies: moment-by-moment they resemble the classical tradition (or parts of it, at least), but closer attention shows that – like

that opening melody – they avoid or undermine, rather than consolidate, any sense of orientation or direction. Everything spins outwards, rather than coalesce around a central core.

Entropic motion like this is a powerful motivator, but it can't last forever. Something has to bring it to a steady state. (Heat death is the only alternative.) And so it proves, midway through the movement, with the most surprising moment of all. A loud cough announces the voice of the composer, ventriloquising through that of the pianist, Rolf Hind: 'Can I speak?'

This is not the sort of thing that is supposed to happen. 'There is a reason why, as a composer, you should not start talking in your music', says Olesen. And yet once this awkward and improbable situation has happened, there is nothing to do but follow it through to its end.

After jostling with the pianist for the spotlight, the composer announces a new topic for consid-

eration: politics. 'We are living in a world where unscrupulous and bought politicians rule in order to preserve a system which has destroyed the planet.' Is this the reason for the anti-systemic fantasy that has been unfolding so far: rather than been passive wandering, at the mercy of some internal force, all along it has been active resistance, a model for creative disruption. But at the same time, it speaks to a deeper sense of artistic crisis and uncertainty.

The answer for all this lies outside Olesen's composing studio. In late 2019, headlines around the world were dominated by the catastrophic bushfires that raged across Australia for almost an entire year, from June 2019 to May 2020. Almost 250,000 square kilometres of land were affected; at least three billion animals were estimated to have been killed or displaced (many species are believed to have been driven to extinction entirely); and property damage

reached many billions of dollars. Air pollution in cities such as Sydney and Canberra hit many times more than hazardous levels; smoke from the fires was carried halfway around the world to South America; and 715 million tons of carbon dioxide was released into the air – an 80 per cent increase on Australia's typical annual fossil fuel and bushfire emissions.

By their sheer, almost surrealistic scale – as Hind's voice of the composer notes, not even the Book of Revelation could have imagined such apocalyptic scenes – the Australian bushfires pushed global consciousness through the looking glass of climate catastrophe. This, it seemed to many, gazing on from afar, was what environmental breakdown looked like. At home in Denmark, Olesen was in the midst of composing his Sonata. He began to wonder what role he, as a composer, could meaningfully play in the face of such destruction. His approach to this unanswerable ques-

tion is played out in the rest of the movement: after experimenting with some 'illustrative' clusters and glissandi (in which hints of our opening theme remain apparent), he returns to an imitation of Pärt's tintinnabuli style. With its bell-like alternations of consonance and dissonance, it is emblematic of the paired steps of angels and men. But even this is only a partial answer – 'I stole it', admits the composer. If the aim has been to find harmony without losing sight of the individual, then this has only been partially achieved. Nevertheless, what composer and pianist arrive at remains music. And a love of music (or love expressed through music) can provide at least a refuge from the sense of hopelessness and voicelessness prompted by the climate crisis and other disasters.

Having reached this point, the second and third movements can be much more straightforward. Where the first is referential and theatrical, they are cool and abstract; where the

first spirals centrifugally outwards, they are focused and still.

The second movement is almost the exact opposite of the first, in fact. It is tightly controlled, almost to the point of driving itself to a standstill. Until its final two pages, it is made up of a single four-bar chorale whose three voices are repeated in every possible combination and with no other variety except changes in dynamic. Again, the harmonic underlay is unstable, but it gains certainty through sheer dint of repetition. (To the list of other passing references, we can now add Erik Satie's *Vexations*, with its 840 repetitions of an off-kilter, 26-beat phrase.)

Only in the short third movement is true stability achieved, with the gentle unfolding of a simple farewell canon. When the pianist begins to hum his own counter melody, perfectly in accord with the traditional rules of counterpoint, a sense of calm descends upon the piece. Voice and piano – composer and pianist – are

unified. 'Composing means it's all planned', as the voice of the composer noted in the first movement. It's not where we expected to end up, but it is a kind of resolution.

Like the grand Sonata, Olesen's miniature *6 Sonatas* (2007) draw in their own elements from musical history, although in a more playful fashion. The first association is with Domenico Scarlatti: these are character pieces, short studies in a particular motif or idea: a jabbing, lopsided rhythm; an insistent alternation of right-hand chords; a kind of ragtime on a 23-note tone row; a pastoral overlaying of rising harmonies. The third sonata – which is to be played 'as if the sound is more or less coming from another room', according to the score – is a distorted dream of Mozart, compiled from fragments by the Austrian composer. And the sixth is a study in unrealisable clockwork precision. Reduced to no more than the four notes of a C minor seventh chord, it

only hints at its musical idea, leaving the rest for the listener to fill in.

There is also a conceptual relationship to fill in with Olesen's *Small Miracle Prelude* (2003). For once, the source material here is a concrete historical work: the Prelude from J.S. Bach's Prelude, Fugue and Allegro in E-flat major, BWV998 (a work composed for lute or harpsichord but generally heard today in an arrangement for guitar). Inspired by his love for this piece, Olesen set out to place it in a modern perspective, but without changing a note. To do so, he employed a systematic reordering of the four hundred or so notes of Bach's melodic line, before applying a similar process to the bassline. Even though the bass process has to be repeated (because it contains fewer notes than the melody), unexpectedly this meant that the two lines converged harmonically at the work's climax, a coincidence that earned Olesen's piece the 'miracle' of its title.

Olesen's steady counterpoint and smoothly uncurling arpeggios certainly recall Bach, even if quirks in the new counterpoint – momentary deviations in rhythm or harmony – suggest a Bach going in and out of focus. And he retains the structure of the original: in fact, the ornamented fermata just before the Prelude's coda is identical to Bach's.

'Historical music is an unavoidable part of us', Olesen says. 'Trying to avoid it in order to be 'modern' doesn't in fact make you modern.' As Olesen's Piano Sonata alter ego would doubtless agree, composing is about speaking your mind; and that inevitably includes all that has come before. And perhaps by doing so, we can begin to answer some of the questions of today.



Rolf Hind

Rolf Hind's career has established him as a major force as soloist, composer, recording artist, chamber musician, pedagogue, collaborator and concert planner. He has given recitals at many of Europe's leading new music festivals, and at Carnegie Hall, Sydney Opera House and on tours of South Korea, Taiwan and Cuba.

Hind has worked with many leading conductors, including Vladimir Ashkenazy, Oliver Knussen, Sir Simon Rattle, David Robertson and Sir Andrew Davis and appeared seven times at the BBC Proms. Orchestras he has worked with include the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Munich Philharmonic, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Malmö Symphony, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, many appearances with the London Sinfonietta, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and with all the BBC orchestras.

Composers who have worked with Hind or written for him include

Tan Dun, John Adams, Helmut Lachenmann, Unsuk Chin, Elliott Carter, George Benjamin and James MacMillan. Hind's compositions include a piano concerto, *Maya Sesha*, a song cycle commissioned by Wigmore Hall, *Blue to the Throat* and an opera *Sky In a Small Cage* commissioned by Mahogany Opera Group.

As pianist Hind curated and performed in *Occupy the Pianos*, a piano festival which became a regular feature at St John's Smith Square in London and also travelled to France and Denmark. He initiated a project in March 2020 which produced over a hundred new short piano pieces from composers far and wide, intended as responses to lockdown, a fascinating range of pieces which he is now including in recital and which has been performed in London, Glasgow and Zagreb. He re-visited a masterpiece in the form of Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus*.

## At distancere sig fra forudsigeligheden

Af Tim Rutherford-Johnson

Thomas Agerfeldt Olesens 40 minutter lange klaversonate (2019) begynder med en særpræget solo-melodi. Den er kun seks en halv takt lang og synes at bevæge sig gennem mindst lige så mange tonearter, men på samme tid også at distancere sig fra forudsigeligheden i en fastlagt rytme eller sågar et fastlagt register. Som en anden genert teenager er den på samme tid desperat opsat på at deltage i festen og varsom med at komme til at blotte sig for meget.

Det er en foruroligende måde at begynde et så omfattende musikstykke på, og tingene bliver kun mere forvirrende herfra. For få øjeblikke senere kaster musikken sig uventet ud i en stor, romantisk fantasi, som var det Liszt. Dybt inde i den musikalske

tekstur er noget i retning af vores åbningsmelodi stadig til stede, men den bliver sløret af tonekaskader op og ned ad klaviaturet. Enhver antydning af generthed lader til at blive kastet bort og erstattet af virtuos opvisning.

Og næsten lige så hurtigt ophører også denne musik igen og begynder forfra, lidt ligesom når en computer bliver genstartet. Er det gammel eller ny musik, tvinges vi til at spørge os selv. På overfladen virker den gammel, men der er samtidig også brudflader som denne eller passager, hvor tekturen bliver udtyndet til en i sammenhængen anakronistisk enkel melodilinje. Og mens musikken fortsætter, synes selv dens stilistiske grundlag at ændre sig under fødderne på os – der hentydes både til Chopin, Ravel, Schubert og sågar Arvo Pärt. Alligevel fastholder musikken den samme søgende fremdrift som i de indledende takter.

Som en af inspirationskilderne til værket angiver Olesen en form for "hjemløshed" eller rastløs jagt

på identitet og mening. Det kommer også klart frem i musikkens konstant foranderlige akkorder – isoleret set vækker de mindelser om den klassiske tradition (eller i hvert fald visse dele af den), men viser sig ved nærmere lytning – ligesom den indledende melodi – snarere at undgå eller underminere enhver form for overblik eller retningsfornemmelse frem for at bekræfte den. I stedet for at samle sig om en kerne synes alt snarere at kredse udad.

En sådan bevægelse mod entropi er en stærk drivkraft, men kan ikke fortsætte evigt. Noget må bringe den i en stabil tilstand. (Det eneste alternativ er at dø af varme). Det sker da også midt i satsen med dens mest overraskende øjeblik overhovedet. En højlydt hosten viser sig at være komponistens stemme med pianisten Rolf Hind som bugtalerdukke: "Må jeg sige noget?"

Den slags bør normalt ikke ske. "Der er god grund til, at man som komponist ikke skal begynde at tale

i sin egen musik," siger Olesen. Men da den akavede og usandsynlige situation først er indtruffet, er der ikke andet at gøre end at følge med frem mod afslutningen.

Efter at have kæmpet med pianisten om rampelyset bekendtgør komponisten et nyt emne til overvejelse: politik. "Vi lever i en verden, hvor skrupelløse og korruperede politikere regerer for at opretholde et system, der har ødelagt kloden." Er det også det, der er begrundelsen for den antisystemiske fantasi, der hidtil har udfoldet sig – at i stedet for blot at være passiv bevægelse overladt til en indre krafts nåde har der hele tiden været tale om aktiv modstand, om en måde at forstyrre kreativt på? På samme tid forholder det sig imidlertid også til en dybere fornemmelse af kunstnerisk krise og usikkerhed.

Svaret skal findes uden for Olesens arbejdsværelse. I 2019 trak det overskrifter verden over, da Australiens gennem næsten et år, fra juni 2019 til maj 2020, blev hærget af katastro-

fale naturbrande. Et areal på næsten 250.000 kvadratkilometer blev berørt, og mindst tre milliarder dyr mentes at være blevet dræbt eller jaget på flugt samt mange arter antagelig komplet udryddet, mens skaderne på fast ejendom løb op i adskillige milliarder dollar. Luftforureningen i byer som Sydney og Canberra overskred faregrænsen adskillige gange, og røg fra brandene blev ført om på den anden side af kloden til Sydamerika, ligesom der blev udledt 715 millioner ton CO<sup>2</sup> i luften – eller 80 procent mere end Australiens gennemsnitlige årlige udledning som følge af fossile brændstoffer og naturbrande.

Alene i kraft deres nærmest surrealistiske omfang – som Hinds komponiststemme konstaterer, kunne ikke engang Johannes' Åbenbaring have forestillet sig så apokalyptiske situationer – blev de australske naturbrande også et definitivt gennembrud på verdensplan for bevidstheden om en forestående klimakatastrofe.

Sådan, forekom det på lang afstand mange, så et miljømæssigt kollaps ud. Hjemme i Danmark var Olesen allerede i fuld gang med at komponere sin sonate. Han begyndte at overveje, hvilken meningsfuld rolle han som komponist kunne spille over for sådanne ødelæggelser. Hans reaktion på det ubesvarlige spørgsmål er tema for resten af satsen. Efter at have eksperimenteret med "illustrative" clusterakkorder og glissandi (hvor antydninger af vores åbningstema stadig er til stede) vender han tilbage til at imitere Pärts såkaldte tintinnabuli-stil. Med sine klokkelignende skift mellem konsonans og dissonans er det indbegrebet af engles og menneskers fælles skridt. Men selv dette er kun et delvist svar – "jeg har hugget det", indrømmer komponisten. Hvis formålet var at skabe harmoni uden at miste individet af syne, er det i så fald kun lykkedes delvist. Ikke desto mindre er det musik, som komponisten og pianisten når frem til. Og kærlighed til musik (eller kærlighed udtrykt

gennem musik) kan i hvert fald blive et tilflugtssted fra den følelse af håbløshed og afmagt, som klimakrisen og andre katastrofer kan afstedkomme.

Efter at være nået så langt kan anden og tredje sats tillade sig at være mere ligetil. Hvor første sats er citerende og dramatisk, er de kølige og abstrakte, og hvor første sats kredser udad i stadig større bevægelser, er de fokuserede og stillestående.

Anden sats er endda noget nær den diametrale modsætning af første. Den er stramt styret og nærmest tæt på at tvinge sig selv til at stå stille. Indtil de sidste to sider består den af et fire takter langt koralmotiv, hvis tre stemmer bliver gentaget i alle tænkelige kombinationer uden anden variation end dynamiske ændringer. Igen er det harmoniske grundlag ustabil, men får klarhed gennem gentagelserne i sig selv. (Til de andre referencer i forbifarten kan vi nu tilføje Erik Saties *Vexations* med dens 840 gentagelser af et uregelmæssigt, 26 takter langt motiv).

Kun i den korte tredje sats opnås der sand stabilitet gennem en enkelt, blidt udfoldet afskedskanon. Da pianisten begynder at nynne sin egen modstemme, som er i fuld overensstemmelse med traditionelle regler for kontrapunkt, sænker en stemning af ro sig over værket. Stemme og klaver – komponist og pianist – er blevet forenet. "At komponere vil sige, at det hele er planlagt," som komponistens stemme bemærkede i første sats. Det er ikke der, vi forventede at komme hen, men en form for løsning er det dog.

Ligesom den store sonate henter også Olesens små *6 sonater* (2007) elementer ind fra musikhistorien, om end her på mere legende vis. Den første association er til Domenico Scarlatti – der er tale om karakterstykker, små etuder med udgangspunkt i et bestemt motiv eller indfald – en hakkende, skæv rytme, en insisterende akkordsekvens, en slags ragtime ud fra en 23 toner lang række, en lyrisk

opbygning i lag af stigende akkorder. Den tredje sonate – der ifølge partituret skal spilles, “som om lyden mere eller mindre kommer fra et andet rum”, er en forvrænget drøm om Mozart og sammensat af fragmenter fra den østrigske komponists musik. Den sjette er derimod en etude i uspillelig, urværkslignende præcision. Den er reduceret til kun de fire toner i en c-mol septimakkord, antyder kun sin musikalske grundtanke og overlader det til lytteren selv at forestille sig resten.

Også Olesens *Lille mirakelpræludium* (2003) kredser om fælles tankegods. For en gangs skyld er udgangspunktet et konkret historisk værk, nemlig præludiet fra J.S. Bachs *Præludium, fuga og allegro* i Es-dur, BWV 998 (oprindeligt komponeret for lut eller cembalo, men i dag typisk hørt i et arrangement for guitar). Med afsæt i sin kærlighed til dette stykke gik Olesen i gang med at placere det i en moderne sammenhæng, men uden at ændre

en eneste tone. Til formålet anvendte han en systematisk reorganisering af de omkring 400 toner i Bachs melodilinje og udsatte bagefter basstemmen for en tilsvarende proces. Selvom processen skal gentages for basstemmens vedkommende (fordi den omfatter færre toner end melodien), får det overraskende nok også de to melodilinjer til at falde harmonisk sammen på værkets højdepunkt, og det er dette sammentræf, som “miraklet” i titlen på Olesens værk hentyder til.

Olesens stabile kontrapunkt og glat rullende akkordbrydninger vækker så afgjort minder om Bach, også selvom skæve elementer i det nye kontrapunkt – kortvarige rytmiske eller harmoniske afvigelser – antyder en Bach skiftevis på vej ind og ud af fokus. Ligeledes bevarer han originalens struktur – den ornamenterede feramat umiddelbart før præludiets coda er sågar identisk med Bachs.

“Historisk musik er uundgåeligt en del af os,” siger Olesen. “Man bliver ikke

moderne af at prøve på at undgå den for at blive ‘moderne.’” Som Olesens andet jeg i klaversonaten givetvis ville kunne tilslutte sig, handler det at komponere om at sige sin oprigtige mening og omfatter derfor også nødvendigvis alt det, der er gået forud. Og ved at gøre det kan vi måske også begynde at få svar på nogle af nutidens spørgsmål.

Rolf Hinds karriere har cementeret ham som en betydelig kraft inden for flere musikalske discipliner, både som solist, komponist, kammermusiker, pædagog, samarbejdspartner og koncertarrangør. Han har givet recitals på flere af Europas mest anerkendte festivaler for ny musik og optrådt på prominente scener som Carnegie Hall og Sydney Opera House samt turneret i lande som Sydkorea, Taiwan og Cuba.

Hind har samarbejdet med adskillige anerkendte dirigenter, herunder Vladimir Ashkenazy, Oliver Knussen, Sir Simon Rattle, David Robertson og Sir Andrew Davis, og han har optrådt syv gange ved BBC Proms. Blandt orkestrene, han har optrådt med, finder man Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Münchens Filharmonikere, DR Symfoniorkesteret, Malmö Symfoniorkester og Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Han har desuden haft gentagne samarbejder med London Sinfonietta, London og Royal Philharmonic Orchestra samt alle BBC-orkestrene.

Blandt de komponister, der har arbejdet med Hind eller skrevet værker til ham, kan nævnes Tan Dun, John Adams, Helmut Lachenmann, Unsuk Chin, Elliott Carter, George Benjamin og James MacMillan. Hans egne værker inkluderer klaverkoncerten *Maya-Sesha*, en sangcyklus, *Blue to the Throat*, bestilt af Wigmore Hall og operaen *Sky In a Small Cage* bestilt af Mahogany Opera Group.

Som pianist har Hind kurateret og optrådt ved *Occupy the Pianos*, en klaverfestival, som er blevet en fast tradition i St. John's Smith Square i London og som også har besøgt både Frankrig og Danmark. I marts 2020 startede han et projekt, hvor over 100 nye, korte klaverstykker blev skabt af komponister fra hele verden som en reaktion på corona-nedlukningen. Disse stykker har siden været en fast del af hans recitalprogram og er blevet opført i blandt andet London, Glasgow og Zagreb. Han har også genbesøgt Messiaens mesterværk *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant-Jésus*.

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