

# PLAY FOR THE EXPECTED ONE – THE OPERA "SIDDAHRTA" AND ITS THE MUSIC (1983)

By Per Nørgård

Although the entire opera takes place in the garden of Kapilavastu palace the setting of the first act is vastly different from that of the last two. Whereas the old feudal order, with its king, counsellors and the entire pyramid, right down to the poor children and the itinerant singing beggars, influences the scenery and sound of the first act, the last two acts are a princely construction – an intervention in the ‘natural pecking order’, made even more rigorous, for that matter, by the fact that ‘the beautiful’ have become even more beautiful, while ‘the ugly’ have simply been tucked away down in the palace dungeons.

But how does this difference ‘sound’? In the first act there are many levels of musical effect — from the pompous, ceremonial ‘palace music’ to the children’s Dancing Song and the singing beggars’ Ballad. The palace music that introduces the opera is almost tone painting, depicting as it does the soaring palace associated with the indomitable weight and

power of the princely-patriarchal order (Ex. 1. Note that the examples refers to the Danish version of the opera):

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

Contrasting with this is the other-worldly (and – as the king later discovers — most inconvenient) choric prophesy regarding the events that are to shake the palace out of its routine and even affect the whole way of the world (Ex. 2).

Unlike the above, the children’s *Dancing Song* is catchy and playfully melodious (Ex. 3).

On the other hand, the singing beggars’ *Ballad* is serious, and almost melancholy and archaic in character (ex. 4)

Despite the dissimilarity of these four ‘palace’ themes, they all nevertheless originate from the same musical source – an endlessly

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

KOR: I den-ne nat skal vo - re sind se dy - be - re

Ex. 3

Se! Ma - ya står så e - ne skønt hun har en mand.

Ex. 4

Man kan væ - re dron - ning og ha' sorg

Ex. 5.

*The infinity series (diatonic, from tone d): Hver tone = all tones. Hver 3. tone = every 3rd tone (etc.)*

ramifying sequence, the so-called infinity series, whose continuous stream from note to note (with harmonics and sub-harmonics – see ex. 5) can be used to extract melodies, not least by ‘filtering the stream’, e.g. by using every 3rd note (“Palace”), every 15th (“Dancing Song”) or every 45th (“Ballad”), whereas the prophecy is the slowest ‘wavelength’ at all used in the opera, i.e. every 75th note. (Note that the infinity series reappears with every 4th note, and is indicated by a ‘hook’ on its stem.):

After having been extracted, the themes can also be converted into new ones by changing the rhythm and accentuation such that they acquire an entirely new dress and yet retain their special characteristics. See, for example, the “Dancing Song”, which rouses Queen Maya to a slow sensuous dance for the King

– which leads in turn to Siddharta’s conception, and thereby sets the whole opera going. This springs directly from the beggars’ song, though has been given an entirely different rhythm. In Nature, e.g. in the relative lengths of our finger joints, or in old temples and paintings, we find what is known as the Golden Section (Det Gyldne Snit) – the mysterious circumstance that *the division of a line is such that the whole is to the greater part as that part is to the smaller part* (Ex. 6).

In various works I have converted this ‘beautiful circumstance’ into rhythmical proportions, and precisely the Ballad melody acquires its grace from this gliding, intangible and yet concise rhythm (Ex. 7).

Ex. 6

Ex. 7

Ex. 6

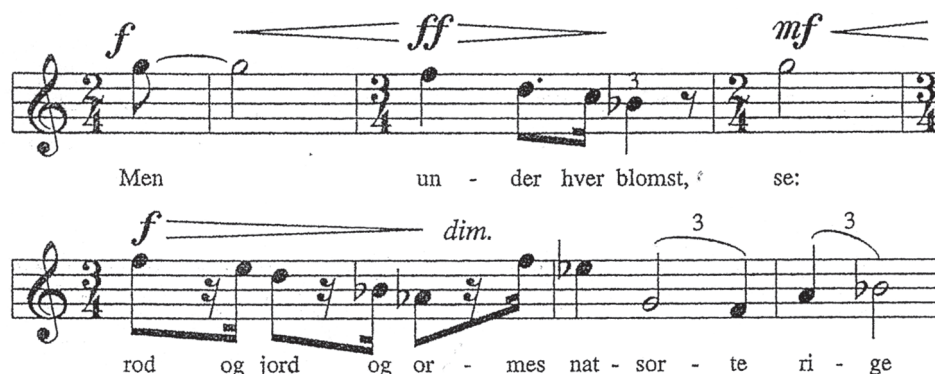
Ex. 7

When incorporating a given melody in another equally organic rhythmical pattern by changing the accentuation, not only the character of the melody is transformed but even the theme itself may be transformed into something only barely recognisable, despite the fact that not a single note or duration is altered. This (new) technique is employed particularly in the 'pleasure-garden music' of the two following acts, as a seductive ('black-magic') trick for combining the familiar (and safe) with the unfamiliar (and titillating!). In the first act such a transformation occurs only once – organically and naturally incorporated in the conception, pregnancy and birth episodes. The 'innocent' *Dancing Song* acquires a touch of syncopation and now forms the basis for an orgiastic (almost Lennart Nilsson-like 'spermic') dance far removed from the simplicity of the original, in which the exhilarating background of trumpets, piccolos and percussion instruments increases the rhythmical *élan*.

Ex. 8



Ex. 8

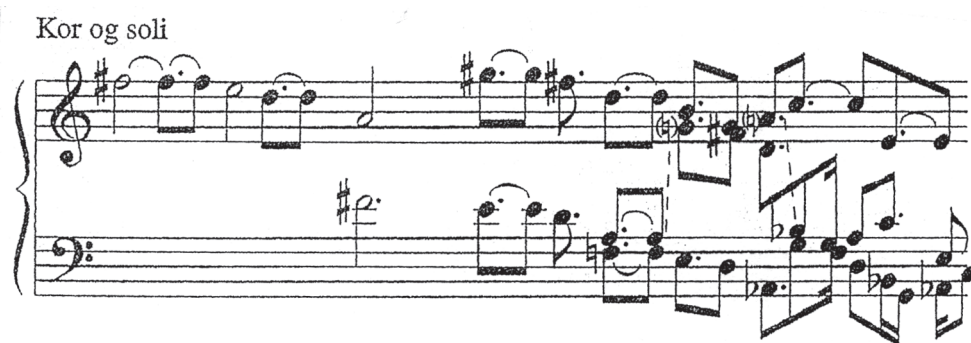


Ex. 9

There are no 'Leitmotifs' in this opera, but the unity underlying even the most contrasting passages makes possible reappearances and transformations that are capable, for example, of illuminating a state of mind, and possibly its similarity or dissimilarity to a previous state. Thus, Prajapati sings an aria, which reoccurs twice in the second act, in which her protest against her brother-in-law's regal command – to remove the painful sides of life from the young prince's sight – is expressed in an accelerating cadence which rises at the finish:

Ex. 9

The exactly opposite mood is manifested when king, counsellors and people extol the blessings of the new order – a kind of *golden canon* that nevertheless reveals the dissonance underlying the manipulated 'unity'. The people all *believe* they are living in mutual harmony, oblivious of the fact that they are really living in a 'curved' tonal universe in which what, in the high octave, is, for example, a 'sharpened



Ex. 10                      Lys -        ten skal        bin -        de        Sidd -        har - ta til magtens lyk - ke - land

Text, not in the note example: "Lysten skal binde Siddharta til magtens lykkeland!" ("All earthly pleasure shall fetter him...")

note' is in the lower octaves a natural 'dissolved note' and, further down, possibly even a 'flattened variant' of this! It *scours* – but note also the suggestion of Prajapati's aria!

Ex. 10

Since Siddharta is an opera of melodies and clear-cut motive: is difficult for me to limit my examples. They insist on being mentioned and preferably in the form of notes; but lack of space compels me to impose stricter limits than the composer in me really cares for. That most of the examples in this aria are taken from the first act is due to the need to illustrate interconnections between the various themes of the opera. So far as the last two acts are concerned, I shall limit myself to a couple of examples, purely in order to illustrate the artifice prescribed 'pleasure-garden music', of which most of the music in act 2 and 3 consists.

As mentioned, what I express as desirable is a combination of the *familiar and safe* – and the *unfamiliar and titillating*. The sparse use in the first act of a technique involving a change of accentuation almost becomes an orgy of transformation music in the second act, where theme after theme, orchestral passage after orchestral passage, is revealed on closer hearing (or reading) being identical with earlier passages or themes. The "new metric structure" is solely responsible for this illusion! For example, the ambiguity of the opening "Ball-music" in the second act is immediately manifested in the two main themes underlying the dance in the youth's 'eternal noon'. One of them is merry – festive – square cut:

Ex. 11

– while the other is restless – elegant – scudding:

Ex. 12

Moderato, grazioso

Ex. 11

Moderato, grazioso

Ex. 12



*Allegretto Commodo (gioviale)*

"Ja, min fa - der" så - dan ly - der al -

Ex. 13

le slæg - ters råk

But the notes of the two examples are identical!

When Siddharta finally leaves the palace he must necessarily sing his farewell-song in precisely the style he has been brought up with – what else would he have at his disposal? Despite its painful contents the farewell-aria thereby acquires a strangely ironical charge in relation to the pleasing and conflict-free surface of the ‘pleasure-garden music’, which constitutes the entire repertoire he can draw upon. This irony is nevertheless only a mask covering an almost explosive yearning for everything he had not previously known, but which now insists on being seen and felt. Thus, paradoxically, the constant ambiguity that pervades Siddharta reaches its culmination in precisely the aria with which the prince rejects the palace and all its works!

Ex. 13

And as he walks away he is met by delicate, soft motifs, rhythms and tones, which are as new and unfamiliar as the very future he is about to enter <sup>1</sup> ...

## Notes

- 1) In a later version of this article – for a CD-booklet in 1995 (Dacapo Records, with the revised version of the opera and the percussion concerto *For a Change*) Nørgård added: In *For a Change* (1982-83) – the orchestral version of the solo percussion work *I Ching* (1982) – the motifs and rhythms that Siddharta met as he left the illusionary world of the palace is unfolded.

Precisely these works are a kind of continuation, employing the same technique, in an instrumental work, as the opera *Siddharta*.

■

Texts by Nørgård on the opera consists of the present one and *The collaboration with the Danish poet Ole Sarvig – on "Siddharta"* (1981) – also in this archive. It should be mentioned that these texts (written between 1981-3) refers to the first ("Stockholm")-version of the opera. In 1984, having experienced the works of the schizophrenic artist Adolf Wölfl (1864-1930) Nørgård changed and enlarged Siddhartas central "Farewell-aria" in act 3, using words by Wölfl. The relation between the operas *Siddharta* (1972-79/1984) and the 'Wölfl-opera' *The Divine Circus* (1982) is described in the articles, in Danish, *At handle eller ikke at handle – Is that a question?* (1983), *Indenfor Udenfor* (1985) – and *Kvalmemusik?* (1984), all three in this archive.

Facts about the opera:

SIDDHARTA – PLAY FOR THE EXPECTED ONE (1974-79/1984). Opera-ballet i 3 acts (I. Morning. II. Noon. III. Evening), for soli, mixed choir, children's choir, symphony orchestra – and ballet dancers (and acrobats, ad lib.). Duration: appr. 125 minutes. Libretto by Ole Sarvig in collaboration with the composer. Versions of the opera exists in Danish and in Swedish; English and a German versions are in preparation at Edition Wilhelm Hansen (2013).

■

The original version of the present text was written for the premiere in Stockholm in 1983, including note examples (Swedish version) in the composers hand, shown here, below).

Ex. 1

viol.

Ex. 2

Visionarico

piano

pp

cresc.

f

Kor: I denna natt skall människans sinn se djupare

Ex. 3

Se! Maya står så ensam som sin makes brud.

Ex. 4

Man kan vara drottning och ha sorg

Ex. 5

O ändlighetsserien (diatonisk)

Varje ton

Varje 3. ton

Varje 15. ton

(Varje 45.)

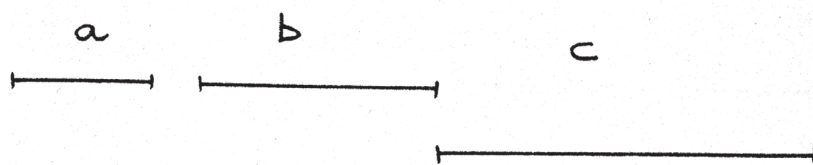
Varje 75. ton)

Man

kann vara

i

den - na



Ex. 6

$a : b = b : c$   
 $(a + b = c)$  ("Gyllene Snittet")

Ex. 7

Kor: "Gyllene" "Gyllene" "Gyllene"

Se! Ma-ya dan-sar, ja: Ma-ya dansar nu

Ex. 8

Allegro (Trompet m.m.)

*Ex. 11*



*Ex. 12*



*Ex. 13*

