

Nordic Voices

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Eloquent Sextet Stretches Bounds Of Vocal Art



Nordic Voices gave a performance of contemporary repertoire for Vancouver New Music. (Photo by Fredrik Arff)

By David Gordon Duke

VANCOUVER — [Nordic Voices](#), a six-member vocal ensemble based in Norway, ended their latest North American tour in Vancouver on Feb. 19 with a concert of contemporary repertoire. This was their second appearance for [Vancouver New Music](#), a hybrid presenter/producer organization that has a strong following within the relatively small but focused local audience with an appetite for the new and experimental.

Nordic Voices sang to a sold-out house in a relatively new space, the 200-seat [Orpheum Annex](#), an attractive black box-style performance space recently created behind the heritage Orpheum Theatre. It's an example of the city's successful (if a trifle cynical) program

of giving developers zoning breaks in exchange for new cultural facilities.

The program consisted of works by a trio of living Norwegian composers, plus samples of music by [Goffredo Petrassi](#) (1904-2003) and [György Ligeti](#) (1923-2006), all unified by the slightly misleading rubric "Everything's gonna be alright."

Well, it certainly was from a musical standpoint. Nordic Voices is a polished sextet of performers who stretch the boundaries of vocal music in intriguing ways. As founding member [Tone Elisabeth Braaten](#) explained to me in an earlier conversation: "In 2007, we were in a workshop exploring how to get classical singers to use the voice differently. This was a huge step, because the sonic world is so much bigger than you think. Then the challenge becomes to work with

composers to make this not about techniques, but about what these techniques enable us to express.”

Three different strands were interwoven in the program: compositions featuring a lexicon of techniques derived from traditional but non-classical practice, works in a more conventional modern vocal mode, and a single composition that explored contemporary extended vocal technique combined with post-modern quotation.

The program began with *Solbøn* (Prayer to the Sun) by [Lasse Thoresen](#) (born 1949), a striking vocal workout and an impressive opening salvo. Thoresen mixes and matches his vocal effects to create a rich sound spectrum, a sort of orchestration made from disparate vocal techniques. His music may well fuse techniques that cross cultures and centuries, yet it has a strong sense of place and deep cultural roots. As an interlude, there were three of Petrassi’s *Nonsense Madrigals*, settings of limericks by [Edward Lear](#). These proved an excellent change of pace, with their clever word settings and deftly handled textures, though (and this may be the prejudice of a native English speaker) missing some of the naughty silliness expected from the limerick form.

The anchor work of the program’s first half was by [Cecilie Ore](#) (born 1954). *Dead Pope on Trial* is a dolorous saga documenting the posthumous travails of the medieval Pope Formosus. Ore knows her stuff: the vocal writing suits the ensemble, and the pacing is purposeful. Still, I tired of the work’s morbid whimsy and the composer’s fondness for quartal sonorities. Ultimately, I was glad enough to hear it. Once.

The program’s second half duplicated the arc of the first, commencing with a second Thoresen piece, *Himmelske Fader* (Heavenly Father). Here, a traditional song is incorporated (“stretched out” was the apt description from the platform), most remarkable when a modal folk melody floats over vocal clusters and overtone singing, with effects as evocative and memorable as the Northern Lights, and just as elusive. Ligeti’s “The Alphabet” (from

his *Nonsense Madrigals*, written a few decades after Petrassi’s) proved just the right palate cleanser, a brilliantly conceived miniature sung with real sensitivity and commitment.

This brought the program to its final work, *A Dismantled Ode to the Moral Value of Art*, by composer (and sometime music critic) [Maja Ratkje](#) (born 1973). Written in 2012 and referencing four decades of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” as the European Union anthem, the piece begins enigmatically with textures that sound like vocal approximations of the sonic vocabulary of electronic music from half a century ago. As momentum builds, fragments of Beethoven (and, apparently, Grieg) drift into the texture. The work ends theatrically: singers casually exit, leaving a solo baritone intoning riffs from Canadian rock legend [Neil Young](#), with the text “everything is gonna be alright.” Is it? Given the context of the program, it seemed more about sad irony than affirmation. Whether or not Ratkje has created a lasting masterwork, *A Dismantled Ode* is a brilliant and provocative piece. If her bag of tricks is drawn from mainstream contemporary practice, the conception is striking. Nordic Voices’ execution was magisterial.

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