


Fanfare Magazine, 2020 March/April Issue Review by Jerry Dubins

 **PICTURES** • Pål Eide (pn) • DANACORD 847 (78:11)

GRIEG *Mountain Dance*, op. 19/1. *Wedding Procession*, op. 19/2. *From the Carnival*, op. 19/3. *Lyric Pieces: Butterfly*, op. 43/1; *To Spring*, op. 43/6; *March of the Trolls*, op. 54/3; *Bell Ringing*, op. 54/6. **NORWEGIAN FOLK SONGS AND DANCES**, op. 17/2: *Cattle Call*. **SÆVERUD** *The Ballad of Revolt*, op. 27/5. **DAVID MONRAD JOHANSEN** *Pictures from the North: Profile of a Woman*, op. 5/1; *The Little Stone God*, op. 5/2; *Reindeer*, op. 5/3 *Towards the Mountain of my Forefathers*, op. 5/4. **KOCH** *The Mirror of the Mind*. **MUSSORGSKY** *Pictures at an Exhibition*

In a previously reviewed program of works by Liszt, Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky, performed by Pål Eide, I characterized the pianist as “a tremendously gifted graphic artist who traces his designs on the keyboard in the medium of music.” That album, reviewed in 40:6, was titled *Grey Clouds*, and my description of Eide as a “graphic artist” turned out to be remarkably prescient and predictive of what Eide would do next.

His latest release, titled *Pictures*, is a celebration of “representative” music—i.e., a category or subset of program music in general, the intent of which is not to be a surrogate for the action of a dramatic narrative (something music is sort of good at through its unfolding in the motion/time continuum), but rather to evoke the experiential essence of visual ideation (something music is less good at, since there are no established equivalencies between aural and visual stimuli—unless, like Scriabin, one is afflicted with synesthesia—and therefore individual listeners are bound to “see” different images in response to the same musical sounds).

What Eide has assembled here is a collection of musical portraits and picture postcards, not one of which would likely conjure the intended imagery, if not for our being told its title in advance of hearing it. But that has never deterred composers from writing such pieces or listeners from enjoying them. There are one or two oddities, however, in Eide’s gathering together of the country folk, flora and fauna, gnomes and trolls, and assorted characters from Norse legend that populate his album

Of the five composers represented on the disc, four are Scandinavian, three of them, specifically, Norwegian: Grieg (1867–1907) of course, David Monrad Johansen (1888–1974), and Harald Sæverud (1897–1992). The non-Norwegian Scandinavian is Jesper Koch (b. 1967), about whom I’ll have more to say later. He is Danish. That leaves Mussorgsky (1839–1881), the odd man out in this fivesome of composers, who, the last time I checked was still Russian.

Mussorgsky, in fact, is the only composer of the bunch that didn’t live to see the turn of the 20th-century, while all of the others, by dint of their dates, are 20th-century composers, and to a greater or lesser degree, men of Modernist methods and modalities.

Like Thomas Beecham who, when allegedly asked if he’d ever heard anything by Stockhausen, replied, “No, but I think I’ve stepped in some,” I have to say that I’d never before heard a single note of Sæverud’s music, but may accidentally have tracked some in on my shoes. Paul Snook, who had a much higher tolerance for the avant-garde than I have, described a disc of the composer’s works thusly in a 20:2 review: “The music of Harald Sæverud (1897–1992) is totally *sui generis* almost to the limits of eccentricity ... the distinctive traits of his manner became fixed: chiseled themes usually derived from—but never directly quoting—Norwegian folk melos; a highly charged, freely dissonant, and often contrapuntal harmonic texture; emphatic meters, frequently in ostinato form, whose repetitive insistence sometimes reaches near-obsessive levels; a drastically unsentimental forthrightness bordering on the hard-boiled; and a generally acerbic, rebarbative humor approaching the grotesque, even the macabre.”

Sæverud is represented on Eide’s program by just one number, *The Ballad of Revolt*, which was also on the disc Snook reviewed. It lasts for only three and a half minutes, and is not at all off-putting, as I was expecting it to be. It begins with a simple repetitive motive that has a folk-song-y character to it, and sounds rather like the beginning of a student exercise from one of the earlier volumes of Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos*. Dating from the 1940s, the *Ballad* is a protest piece against the Nazi occupation of Sæverud’s homeland. In terms of the composer’s applied technique, the piece is pretty easy to explain, follow, and understand; it’s a precursor to musical Minimalism. The initiating motive or cell is repeated, ostinato-like, over and over again, to which ever-increasing, mostly dissonant harmonies are piled on, as the dynamic level gets louder and the tempo gets faster. Strangely and unexpectedly, though, some unseen force of gravity grips Sæverud and his *Ballad* in a tonal vise from which there is no escape. The piece becomes more and more Romantic sounding as it circles closer and closer to its tonal sun, until finally vaporizing on a cadential minor chord. I wonder if this is what Snook meant by “humor approaching the grotesque, even the macabre.” Three other Johansens hold sway in the *Fanfare* Archive, but none of them is David Monrad Johansen. If you like Debussy at his most Impressionistic and advanced—say, for example, in Book II of his *Préludes*—you’re sure to like Johansen’s three pieces from his piano suite *Pictures from the North*. Not without cause has he been called a Norwegian Impressionist. His study of the style while in France assured that tone clusters, high-order chords, often with indeterminate roots, and modal and whole-tone scales would feature prominently in his music from the 1920s until the early 1930s, at which point he abandoned that path in favor of a Stravinsky-influenced Neoclassicism. Unlike his Norwegian compatriot, Sæverud, who joined the resistance movement against the Nazis, Johansen embraced them with open arms, joining the Fascist party and becoming a member of the Nazi-appointed Kulturting (Cultural Council). After the war, Johansen was tried and convicted of treason, and spent four years in a forced labor camp, getting at least a tiny taste of what

life was like for the prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps. The stain of having been a Nazi collaborator doesn't wash out easily, which probably explains why Johansen's music has been largely ignored, though I notice that there is a Simax recording of two of his piano concertos, performed by Håvard Gimse and the Oslo Philharmonic. Perhaps it's an indication that Johansen has begun his posthumous reintegration into civilized society.

There is only one entry in the *Fanfare* Archive for Jesper Koch, and it is mine. The year was 2004, the issue 28:2. I was still a rookie reviewer at the time when the magazine's Commander-in-Chief, as yet unaware of my abiding antipathy to the musical avant-garde, sent me four discs of works by contemporary Danish composers. Not unexpectedly, some of the content was godawful beyond imagination, like the percussion pieces by Niels Rosing-Schow that could make mush of your brain faster than mad cow disease. And then there was the disc devoted in its entirety to Jørgen Plaetner and his efforts to train vacuum tubes to sing—aka, electronic (?)music(?). But one of those four discs, containing a collection of compositions by Jesper Koch, came as a welcome relief. Mind you, it wasn't Mozart, but it was such a respite from the tinnitus-inducing banging and buzzing of Rosing-Schow and Plaetner that Koch's "modern" idiom struck me as "symphonic in sweep and richly Romantic in gesture and expression." It was like an oasis in the desert.

Koch's *The Mirror of the Mind* is a short piece of just over three minutes, composed in 2007, expressly for pianist Pål Eide. I wish I could say the piece is in the same vein as Koch's *Alice-in-Wonderland*-inspired numbers I reviewed on that album back in 2004, but *The Mirror of the Mind* sounds rather mindless to me. It evokes an eerie uneasiness of distant, detached disembodiment, as of a plasmodial presence in the room that's not quite "there, there," to invoke Gertrude Stein. Considering the title of the piece, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that Koch is playing around with mirrored musical cells, but in the end, what we respond to and what moves us in listening to music is what he hear, and this sort of random-sounding, vacant doodling on the keyboard holds little emotional appeal.

As a familiar staple of the repertoire, in both Ravel's orchestration and Mussorgsky's original score for solo piano, *Pictures at an Exhibition* needs no comment. Neither, for that matter, do the selections from Grieg's *Lyric Pieces*, which are well known. What does warrant addressing, however, is the instrument that is heard here on Pål Eide's *Pictures* album. The piano is Grieg's 1892 Steinway, recorded at the Grieg Trolhaugen (Troll Hill) residence in Bergen. The instrument has a lovely sound, a bit mellower and more velvet in tone perhaps than Steinway's more recent models, but clearly suitable and appropriate for Grieg's own music, as well as for the Mussorgsky, which was composed in 1874.

One does wonder, though, if the Sæverud and Johansen pieces from the 1940s, and the even later Koch from 2004 might have benefitted from Steinway's later innovations and improvements. In 1932, for example, American pianist Josef Hofmann challenged Steinway to come up with a faster, more sensitive action. The company's response was the "Steinway Accelerated Action," proven by laboratory tests to "repeat 13% more quickly than any other piano." Perhaps that particular improvement is of no consequence in the pieces on Eide's disc, although I'd bet that Mussorgsky would have appreciated it for the "Ballet of Unhatched Chicks" in his *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Still, as noted above, the Mussorgsky predates Grieg's Steinway, so the work, technically difficult as it is, is completely playable on Grieg's 1892 piano. The question only arises if and when later-composed works make technical demands on the instrument that it wasn't designed to handle, or at least not as effectively as one might like. I don't know whether that's the case here or not. What I can and will say is that the instrument enables Eide to bring an intimacy, delicacy, and singing quality to some movements, such as "The Old Castle" and "The Tuileries Gardens" that one doesn't usually hear on today's modern pianos. Needless to say, of course, the piano doesn't play itself; it's the artist, Eide, at the keyboard who works with the instrument to bring out the beauties of its voice.

I have to admit that at first I was skeptical, but the more I listened to Eide's Mussorgsky the more I came to be persuaded, not just by Eide's technical abilities, but by his interpretive ideas. Once again, as in his previous *Grey Clouds* album, Eide proves himself a graphic artist who paints in music. An unexpected pause here, a flip-off of a cadence there, an unusual phrasing, voicing, or weighting of chords, and all of a sudden, the "picture" comes alive, and you can see, almost literally, the subject of the painting.

I can't say in all honesty that Eide sold me on the Sæverud, Johansen, or Koch items, but it's not Eide's fault if I just don't care for the music. On the other hand, he made me fall in love all over again with Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and that is more than enough. **Jerry Dubins**