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‘Monumentalism’ in Norway’s Music 1930 –1945

I. Building the Young Nation after 1905

The year 1905, when Norway eventually became a fully independent nation and a sovereign state, put an end to the uneasy political union with Sweden. Apparently, it marks the moment, when Norwegian cultural nationalism accomplished its goal. However, achieving independence in 1905 did not make the cultural nationalist movement obsolete, to the contrary: its protagonists were given the task to provide artistic expressions for cultural consensus and historical continuity of the young, Norwegian state at the turn of the 20th Century, aspiring to become a modern, economically thriving, and democratic society.

This meant also to find the means of expression that suited this task. Therefore, many of the major artworks produced during the first decades of the 20. century tell a story about expressing ‘greatness’, in a specific Norwegian way. Additionally, there prevailed the strong ties to Germany in almost every aspect. German engineers helped to establish Norwegian infrastructure and industry, as well as Norwegians during most of the 19th century took advantage from the Germans’ world-leading academies and universities to educate its own cultural and academic elites.

Calling this background into mind, one can understand better to which extent Norwegian artists felt ambivalent about their national responsibility: they had to acknowledge German cultural supremacy, at the same time they had to create artistic monuments which could match the standards of ‘advanced artworks’ equal to the German models, adopting the highly-developed techniques most of them had learned as students at the prestigious German institutions, the famous art- and music academies in Berlin and Leipzig.

With the monumental art of the decades after 1905 up to 1940, there also came the return to ancient history in Norwegian arts, literature and music. Whilst the cultural preconditions and ideological struggles behind the latter phenomenon have been discussed and examined extensively, the sources and motives of the former, the ideological aspects of monumentality in Norwegian art have, at least to my knowledge, never been discussed as a possible framework for the understanding of the music of the ‘young nation’ emerging after 1905.

As easy as monumentality is to *observe* in the art and music of the 1920s and 30s, as

fragmentary is the *understanding* of its historical and cultural context, and as elusive its ideological content and ‘burden’. Accordingly, in Norwegian music historiography, the first half of the 20th century from 1905 to 1945 is rather under-researched. Obviously, there has been a certain reluctance in taking on this part of music history. One of the reasons might be the period of German occupation, when the affinities of some of the most dominating actors in musical life with the ‘wrong side’ of the ideological divide, among them composer, critic, and cultural functionary David Monrad Johansen considered as a leader figure, made it quite difficult to cope with the music in an objective manner: the political and aesthetic realms became mixed in a problematic way, and the obvious monumentality of the major, patriotic works for grand ensembles of the 1920s and 30s might have seemed too controversial, as well as the concept of ‘monumental’ became loaded itself. The solution to this dilemma was to exclude this repertoire as far as possible from national music history, exaggerating even more the much less conflicted and more ‘heroic’ national-romantic heritage of the 19th century with Edvard Grieg as its protagonist, as well as elevating internationally oriented, cosmopolitan composers of the belated post-war period such as Arne Nordheim to Norwegian ‘20th century heroes’, thus attempting to minimize the role of the ‘national-minded’ interwar generation, as well as downplaying the significance of the outspoken national features in the styles and oeuvres of this generation of composers, continuing until the 1960s.

II. *Voluspå*: Opus Magnum of Norwegian Musical Monumentalism

David Monrad Johansen’s *Voluspå*, premiered with huge success in 1927, sparked off a national movement in the music of the interwar years and is to be considered a major reference for musical monumentality motivated by an outspoken monumentalist, nationalist ideology emerging in the 1920s.

The ‘*Stoff*’, content, of this work is based on the first poem in Old Norse of Snorres older *Edda*, dated to the 10th century, the period of transition between paganism and Christianity in the North, evoking the ancient Norwegian (*norrøn*) mythology of the middle ages. The narrative unfolding could scarcely be more ‘grand’ and was predestined to excite the sense of wonderment which could be expected from a true monumental work. It tells the prophecy of the seeress (*volve*), describing the genesis and creation myth of the world and its fall and the final battle of the old Gods, ragnarokk. In the end, a new world rises from the sea. [VIDEO: ‘*Voluspå*’,

from the end of the second part, ‘Ragnarok’, 32’00’’ – 35’10’’, NRK archive,
<https://tv.nrk.no/serie/norsk-konsert/fmus20000887/14-04-1987#t=5m22s.>]

Voluspå stages the transition of paganism and Christianity, understood not as a turn from an inferior, pagan culture to a higher state of civilization, the epoch of Christianity, but as a narrative of continuity: the old, genuinely Nordic culture transfers its wisdom about the cosmos and its deep, mystical relationship with nature to the new faith, the new religious and cultural paradigm coming from the South.

Op. 15 *Voluspå. Dikt av den eldre Edda*. Soli, blandet kor og orkestre. NMF. 1927.

Op. 16 *Sigvat Skald. Efter Snorre*. Solo og orkester. Manuskript, NB 1928.

Op. 17 *Tre mannskor* 1930

Op. 18 *Kantate til Sunnmøre Songarlags 30-årsjubileum* av Henrik Straumsheim. Blandet kor, 2 solister, orgel. NMF 1930

Op. 19 *Tre mannskor* til tekster av Ivar Aasen. NMF og Manuskript, NB

Op. 20 *Ignis Ardens* [Brennende ild]. Universitetskantate av Olaf Bull. Soli, blandet kor, orkester. 1932. Manuskript, NB.

Op. 21 *Symphonische Phantasie*. 1937

Op. 22 *Pan. Symphonische Musik für Orchester*. 1939, CF Peters

Table 1: David Monrad Johansen’s works from 1924–1939

Voluspå might be considered a prototype of Norwegian musical monumentality expressing the national ideology of its period. As such, it is the perfect case for trying to develop a model of a particular musical monumentalism as it dominated during the 1930s, taking its stylistic traits as a point of departure.

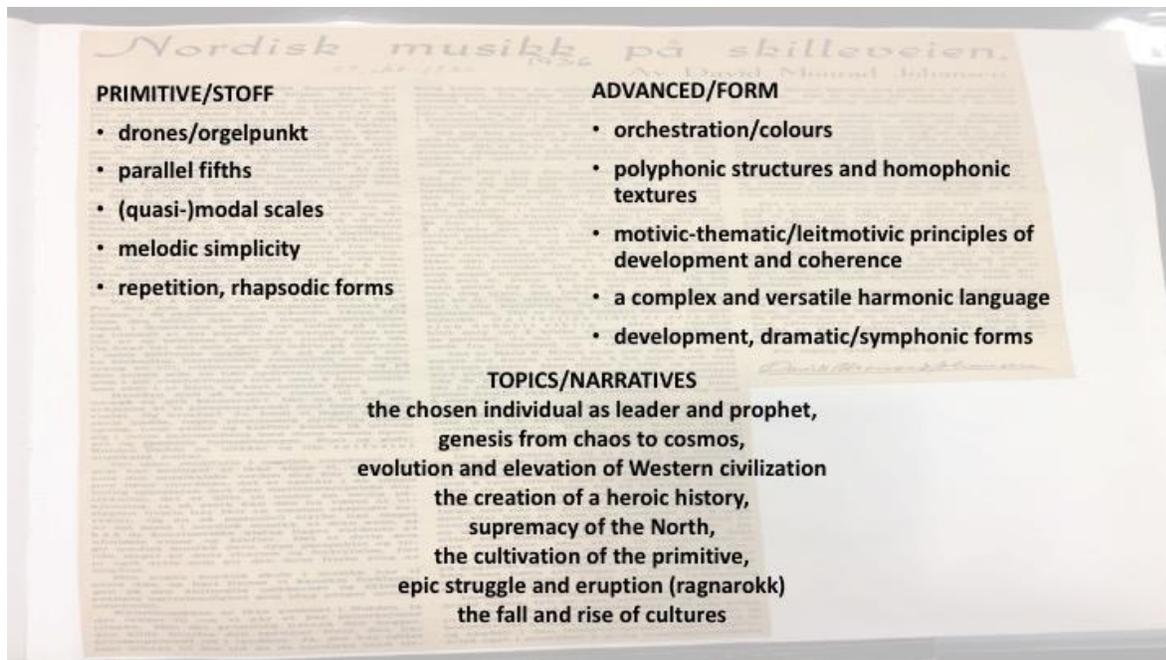


Illustration 1: A Model for Norwegian Musical Monumentalism – Topics, Narratives, and Style

III. Patriotic Gesamtkunstwerk: Cultural Nationalism and Modern Art during the 1930s

According to Johansen, the task of the Norwegian artist, as a chosen individual, a leader figure among his generation, is to ‘release the innate power of the Norwegian culture’. The means to accomplish this task are only given to those who master the most advanced means and techniques available - means which are considered the fruit of many generations of the ‘leading’ European cultures efforts, most of all modelled on the great German masters, and their advanced techniques:

orchestration/colours, dramatic/symphonic forms, polyphonic structures and homophonic textures, motivic-thematic/leitmotivic principles of development and coherence, and a complex and versatile harmonic language.

To achieve the state of synthesis as a true ‘Norwegian tone’ (Johansen speaks of a genuine ‘*norsk tonefølelse*’), these ‘advanced techniques’ ought to be amalgamated with the ‘primitive’ qualities of Norwegian folk music tradition, such as drones/orgelpunkt, parallel fifths, (quasi-)modal scales, melodic simplicity, repetition, and rhapsodic form. In case of a successful synthesis of these cultural stages, the Norwegian culture will achieve a leading position, equal to the German, French, and fellow Nordic neighbours it always had to sub-ordinate to. In many of Johansen’s texts, articles, or reviews, this underlying quest for greatness and cultural equality shines through, alongside with his self-stylization as a leader, a *Führer*, a chosen individual, that

can express the innermost feelings of the Norwegian ‘Volk’, its spirit, and essence. The main topics he chose for his works overlap accordingly: a leader or prophet who envisions the genesis of the world, from chaos to cosmos, the evolution and elevation of Western civilization lead by the North, the creation of a local, heroic history, the cultivation of the primitive, and the eruptive topos of *Ragnarok*, marking the fall and rise of cultures in the most dramatic way, understood as the origin of true historical progression.

Moreover, to Johansen, true culture always has its root in the local soil, it is ‘*stedsbundet*’, as his premise is the *Volksgeist*-idea of a psyche rooted in and shaped by the local environment and surrounding nature.



Illustration 2: Oslo Rådhus (Oslo Town Hall), photography by Mittet & Co A.S. (1945–50), Oslo museum, byhistorisk samling, <https://creativecommons.org>.

The 1920s and 1930s certainly were a period, where the young, modern Norwegian nation could establish its own cultural heritage, its own history. An important step towards full independence and sovereignty was the establishment and consolidation of institutions responsible for the future ambitions, the effective organisation of the present, and the commemoration of the nation’s past: the new campus of Oslo University, Oslo Town Hall, and the National Library. Each of these official buildings illustrate perfectly the architectonic monumentalism of the 1930s.



Illustration 3: Excerpts from 'utklippsbøker' av David Monrad Johansen, with articles and reviews in Norwegian newspapers of his University cantata 'Ignis ardens'. National Library of Norway, Oslo.

Accordingly, the revival of the celebration of new doctoral candidates in 1933, was another opportunity for Johansen to produce a monumental work which purpose was to elevate this ceremony to a national ritual. His university cantata 'Ignis Ardens' was intended to inspire new generations by a monumental epic narrative of the genesis of all things, evoking the audiences' wonderment about the mystical origins of all knowledge about the world.

Together with the monumental decorations of the new, monumental buildings and the grand, ceremonial compositions commissioned for the celebrations and rituals arranged at these sites, one can speak of a Norwegian 'Gesamtkunstwerk'-aesthetics, bringing together Norwegian arts, architecture, and music within the central institutions of the modern Norwegian nation.



Illustration 4: Alf Rolfsen's fresco in Oslo Town Hall (1938–1950). Photography: Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, 2010, <https://creativecommons.org>.

Fresco painters such as Axel Revold, Per Krogh, Alf Rolfsen, or Aage Storstein represent another group of artists and ideological position contributing to monumental art in the 1930s, even if their monumentalism inspired by Cubism and Bauhaus-functionalism during the occupation years later on should be considered as Entartete Kunst. Accordingly, these artists' monumental decorations of the Oslo Town Hall were stopped by hostile Nazi authorities during the occupation years, as well as most of the expressions of 'Norwegianism' in literature, arts, and music became victim of a more and more rigid censorship culminating in 1943. With the University *Aula* burned down, the resistance movement announcing a full boycott of all concert life after the rather unsuccessful celebration of Grieg's centenary, and the University's closing down, caused by the uprising among students and teachers, the remaining spaces of intellectual freedom and ideological opposition were effectively eliminated.

IV. Disgraced Greatness: Monumentalism after 1940

The question remains, to which extend the German occupants were succeeding in their efforts to a. manipulate the Norwegian history and collective memory by turning monumentality into a propaganda instrument, and b. to which extend pre-war Norwegian monumentalism represents an ideology which could be 'occupied' by the Germans invading the historical topics, spaces, rituals,

and events.



Illustration 5: Article by Klaus Egge about Ludvig Irgens Jensen ‘Heimferd’, *Die Tonkunst* No. 4, 1937, National Library of Norway, Oslo. Photographic reproduction by Arnulf Mattes.

The fate of Ludvig Irgens Jensen’s major work *Heimferd* from 1930 and the events at the Olav wake, *Olso*k, at one of the most mythical sites of Norwegian history, Stiklestad, might illustrate the gap that opened between Norwegian pre-war national monumentalism and German-lead propaganda performed mostly by the local NS-regime.

Irgens Jensen’s monumental work for choir, children’s choir, soloists and orchestra won the competition announced by the committee organising a major event of the young nation: the Olav-celebrations in 1930 in Trondheim, celebrating the rise of Christianity in Norway. Stylistically and when it comes to the use of ‘advanced techniques’, this setting of a *nynorsk* text of Olav Gullvåg, borrows elements used in German monumental works, such as Wagnerian leitmotiv procedures, Bruckner’s symphonic layers, and Brahms’s extensive melodic lines, blended with archaic elements, such as modal scales, signifying the Old Norse ‘saga-tone’.

In 1941, *Heimferd* still could be performed, as it is documented by the programme note of Arne Eggen’s ‘Festkonsert’ arranged October 10 1941, with excerpts from Irgens Jensen, Arne Eggen’s own monumental epos *Kong Olav*, and his opera *Olav Liljekrans*, with Odd Grüner Hegge conducting the orchestra of the Philharmonic Selskap, and Arild Sandvold the

Ceciliaforeningens choir and Oslo Domkor.

This is quite remarkable, since *Heimferd* already in February 1941 was forbidden to be performed by the German censors, according to a protocol of Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. *Heimferd* was considered too risky: the Germans feared that associations to *Kong Olav* within the current situation might lead to demonstrations and uprising. One might interpret this as a sign of civil resistance: under the cover of a celebration of a national-minded Norwegian composer, the Oslo Philharmonics chose to perform excerpts of *Heimferd*, risking being punished by the German cultural administration. According to Hampus Huldt-Nystrøm, this still might have been a possibility in 1940 and 1941, since Germans to begin with were hesitating to confront Norwegians too much, as far as the performed works supported the Nazi ideology and the idea of Nordic-Germanic brotherhood: the shared culture should demonstrate the 'Gemeinschaft' of the people and races. However, the occupation in 1940 meant the beginning of the end of Norwegian monumentalism!



Illustration 6: Vidkun Quisling. Leader of the Norwegian national Nazi party giving a speech at the Olav monument, 1944, Stiklestad Nasjonale Kultursenter, <https://creativecommons.org>.

Either censored or put into a compromised context by German propaganda, even the sacred Olav's wake, *Olsok*, re-established as a highly esteemed national, patriotic ritual in 1930, became

invaded, as a kind of symbolic occupation of a commemorative site, in this case performed by the German's puppet regime of Quisling, and documented in the typical grandiose pathos by the Norwegian Filmavisen. [PLAY VIDEO: *Filmavisen* reports about Olsok at Stiklestad 1944, NRK archive, <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/filmavisen/fmaa44003144/07-08-1944#t=2m56s>].

The attempt of Quisling to revive the Olav-celebration during the occupation obviously failed, as historical photographs of the events demonstrate: what has been a veritable mass event in the 1930s turned into a rather pathetic gathering of a small group of dignitaries. The Olav-monument created by Wilhelm Rasmussen and erected 1944 at Stiklestad could not change this situation. It never became accepted as a valid part of the rituals of commemoration at this historic site, and hence, it was vandalized and destroyed right after the end of the occupation.

IV. Coming to Terms with the Past? History of Monumentalism and Monumental History

It should take more than 60 years, before there was made a new effort to recover and restore the artefacts of this compromised part of Norwegian history: In 2014, a group of local historians suggested to excavate the remains of the monument and to restore it, as an artefact of recent history challenging the observer to engage critically with the more recent past. It never happened: the public resistance against such a provocative idea was too strong, as well as the anxiety to offer a welcome opportunity for neo-Nazi movements to re-invade the historical site of collective commemoration.

In his *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen. Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*, Friedrich Nietzsche discusses the 'practical use of history': He reflects on the role of critical judgement in historiography, coining a dialectical model of 'monumental', 'critical', and 'antiquarian' species of historiography. Monumental history is the history of the victor; the strong-willed, creative and powerful individual; it is about commemorating the heroes and their deeds; the purpose of monumental history is to strengthen the moral of the historical heroes' successors; it is about constructing idols; a TRADITION connecting the great individuals of history, the heroes of the past with the actors of the present.

Another, more cynical, aspect for Nietzsche's concept of the monumental is the sentiment of being 'belated in history': the self-stylisation of the present actors as epigones, the elevation of the past as a heroic epoch, an ideal state in history which cannot be repeated or achieved by those

born afterwards.

Nietzsche's reflections also raise the question of forgetting and remembering: critical history, as a 'destructive approach' opposed to monumental history, brings forth the aspects of history, which either could and should be forgotten. Yet, both 'practices' are not to be conflated with scientific historiography: its ideal of 'objectivity' obstructs the practical use of history, which is a 'just' relationship to the past empowering the new generations to actively shape a better future.

Thus, true historians are not the academic professionals, but the artists: only artworks inspired by history can inspire new generations to participate in their own future, as well as to engage with their own roots in a productive and constructive way.

In many ways, these kind of thoughts can be found in the ideological frameworks of the Norwegian monumentalists, too, raising the question for us today about how we should perceive, remember, and eventually judge there monumental works in retrospective, works which were meant to fulfil explicit purposes in their community, works that were intended to constitute history and which evoked, in retrospective, connotations to certain ideas of greatness and supremacy, which became deeply compromised during the 1940s – ideas and ideologies of a kind we no longer like to identify with. At the same time, the monumentality of the interwar period meets the present need for cultural consensus and common origins, in times, where nationalist sentiments again flourish, and collective commemoration of a common past seems to offer comfort in a globalized society conceived as divided and fragmented.

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