

John Persen: Electronic Works

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Composer John Persen (1941-2014) is most well known for his works for acoustic instruments, and particularly for the opera *Under Cross and Crown* (1985). The opera was rewritten in 1999 as an orchestral work titled *Over Cross and Crown*, which was performed by the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra at the Ultima festival that same year.

Much of John's music for orchestras and ensembles is available on CDs.¹ However, his electronic music has largely remained a secret, despite the release of the LP *Things Take Time* in 1987.² Now the tapes with John Persen's entire electronic production have been recovered. One of the pieces – *NotaBene: The Title is a Lie* – is released here for the first time, while the piece *Things Take Time* has been digitally remastered for improved sound quality. The piece *Things Take Time* is one of two concert versions from a larger installation work titled *Against Cold Winds*.

John Persen's electronic works sound natural, and the music unfolds without directing attention to the sounds themselves. He does not filter the sounds to create an artificial foreground, and his avoidance of grandiose and dramatic effects makes the music flow lightly and organically. In this way, John steered away from much of the other MIDI-based electronic music that was made at that time, as well as from the aesthetics of much of the acousmatic music we hear today. He also avoided the strong technology-focus that was being introduced with computer music. For these reasons, and because of his clear compositional ideas, John's electronic music has successfully stood the test of time.

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Persen's work with the opera *Under Kors og Krone* was all consuming, and he had stapled several meters long paper strips with musical motifs on the walls of his studio in

¹ See for example *CSV* (Aurora NCDB4940), *Over Kors og Krone* (Aurora CD 5029), *Et Ceterea* (Aurora CD ACD4961), *Arvesøl, Recycled Encores, xEx*, and *Bugs* (Hemera CD 2924).

² *Things Take Time* (NC 4930) was the first LP with solely electronic music released in Norway. Persen's *Things Take Time* comprised one entire side, while the other side had the works from our collaboration: 7'56", 8'27" og 8'05".

Idun's Street. The strips went around the entire room, and on the walls he had written strong statements about life, art and society with a broad marker. The floor space was dominated by a large drawing board that slowly became filled with John's meticulously written notation, as this was years before computers and MIDI became common in processing notes as text. The opera took all available space.

John needed breaks from this intense work, and he took on the organization of the summer school *Forward Music! (For Full Musikk)* from 1979 to 1984, which developed amateur musicians' skills in action and street theater, and in the art of playing in a band. This was part of the "do it yourself" context of the late 1970s, a natural extension of John's engagement in lobbying for artist's rights (*Kunstneraksjonen '74*) and establishing professional organizations for musicians and composers (*Ny Musikk*). He hired composers, jazz musicians, and rock musicians for the summer school from bands *The Aller Værste!*, *Program 81*, *The Cut* and *Kjøtt*, among others. John Persen led many of the initiatives that shaped the professional music organizations we have today in Norway.³

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My collaboration with John initially began with my engagement at the summer school as an instructor with background as a rock musician, but we were both fascinated by the new technical tools and this started our explorations in electronic music. I had bought an 8-track tape machine, a 4-voice Korg MonoPoly synthesizer, a Roland TR-808 drum machine and a Roland Space Echo, while John had bought a Roland Jupiter-6 synthesizer. These instruments, along with the loan of a large AKG spring reverb, were what we composed with, sitting back to back for almost two years in his studio. We constructed sounds and compositions based on detailed drawings and strict pattern design - we drew and calculated. Different musical trajectories were filled with tonal material, dynamic rhythms and pulses, and recorded on tape. And when 8 tracks were not enough, the elements were mixed down to 1 or 2 tracks, slowly building the sound material. In 1984, I moved to the USA to study composition and computer music at New York University, and John made the piece *Against Cold Winds (Mot kalde vinder, 1985)*. One

³ For a brief summary, see https://nbl.snl.no/John_Persen. Visited May 5, 2015.

of the stereo versions of this work became the piece *Things Take Time*, and was released on the LP with the same title. The works resulting from our collaboration were titled with their respective durations: 7'56", 8'27" and 8'05.

In *Against Cold Winds*, John had further developed several themes from our collaboration, and he did not use any factory sounds here either. Instead, he made his own palette of sounds for the type of rhythmic and tonal densities that he employed – not all sounds fit all forms of articulation – and it is possible to also recognize larger forms and elements from previous works. John had also started to use larger and longer sounds, while avoiding drones and exaggerated filters, elements that were not uncommon in much of the electronic music from that period. The tonally oriented synthesizer trends of the 1970s and 80s are situated between the analogue sounds of the 1960s and the digital sound processing of the 1990s.

It is as if John Persen in a way composed for instruments in his electronic music, and he achieved a fine balance between the electronic use of sounds and more typical compositional constructions. The tonal foundation for his electronic music makes it easy to hear parallels to his orchestral works, although the electronic tools allowed him to articulate space and distance more dynamically than is possible with orchestral and ensemble music. There is another perception of time, in the sense that it seems that some of the music is coming from far away, thus having existed for a longer time and travelled a greater distance than what one normally finds in a concert hall.

Against Cold Winds was envisioned as a six-hour concert where the audience could come and go as they liked. The music was recorded on three stereo tapes of different lengths, so the soundscape would never be the same when the tapes were played in staggered loops. However, the only place *Against Cold Winds* was actually performed as a six-hour concert was in The Netherlands, where John lived in 1984-85 together with his wife Aili Strømsted, who had a work grant during this time. The piece has never been performed in Norway as originally intended, although attempts have been made. In connection with a planned performance at the Black Box Theater, then located in Aker Brygge, John's

request for 1, 300 lit candles in the room was denied by the fire department. So John dropped it. He also unsuccessfully attempted to use the site that was being excavated for the foundation of the new Bank of Norway building, and contacted the city's port and transport authorities as well, but in 1985 it was impossible to find a place to install the work in Oslo.

The intention was to perform *Against Cold Winds* in an extremely light and warm room, and John pursued his interest in installation art's potential for creating space in later works as well. In his ideas for a further development of *Against Cold Winds*, the work was reconceived to be installed in a remote location in the icy cold Jotun mountains – only to be heard when the weather was rough - a diametrical opposite to the concept for the Black Box Theater. John planned to apply to a national foundation for regional development to fund the project (*Distriktenes utbyggingsfond*). John used such extremes to emphasize that struggle and effort were necessary to make and experience art. Other installations included *The Birds Know* (*Fuglan veit*, 1989) and *O sole mio* (1992).

In 1988, John developed a new sound palette for *NotaBene: The Title is a Lie* (*Tittelen er en løgn*), a work that was commissioned by NICEM.⁴ Here, the sounds more closely resemble those produced by analogue instruments, perhaps most prominent in the percussion sounds. The shift may be linked to his work with clear minimalist structures at the time, for example, in the ensemble work *Et Cetera* composed the year before. However, precursors to his minimalism are apparent as early as in the works on *Things Take Time*, which contain similar methods for building up textures and constructing cluster effects through layers of tightly arpeggiated chords. Using this technique, *NotaBene* was thoroughly worked through at a detailed level, more so than what is otherwise heard in much electronic music from the same period. This may be attributed to the influence of the instrument tradition in forming the use of electronic sounds, from textures of marimba-like sounds to dusty, trumpet-like clouds that recall Jon Hassel's

⁴NICEM, the Norwegian section of *International Confederation for Electroacoustic Music*, was established in 1986. This was the most important organization for technology-based music in Norway until 1993. NICEM disseminated information about new digital developments and opportunities, arranged courses for composers in acoustics, signal processing, and programming, and produced concerts in the period 1990 – 1993. NICEM played an essential role in the foundation of NOTAM in 1992-94.

recordings. There are also sounds more characteristic of electronic music in the piece, but John did not use spatial manipulation in the same manner as earlier. He also refrains from allowing sound processing to become significant for the composition itself. This became a clear trend in the genre of computer music, which at that time had just begun to emerge in Norway with Øyvind Hammer's unique music machines.

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Now, the release of these pieces in digital format shows that electronic music was not completely absent in the period following the 'golden years' of the late 1960s and early 70s, with Arne Nordheim, Kåre Kolberg and Bjørn Fongaard as important composers. New synthesizer technology became adopted in popular music and jazz music much quicker than in art music, as these were defined at the time, and there were only a handful of Norwegian composers working with sound technology when John Persen wrote this music. Neither did they make many pieces.

John Persen's two pieces on this CD stem from a period of deep-reaching transitions, from analogue to digital, and show us some of the background for the resurgence of electronic music that followed the establishment of NOTAM in 1992. The works are important parts in the little history of Norwegian electronic music.

Mix: John Persen

Digital mastering: Cato Langnes, NOTAM

Program notes: Jøran Rudi, NOTAM

Translation: Palmyre Pierroux

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