



Mr. Geir Johnson, the Festival's Director



Mr. Stein Henrichsen, the Chairman of the Board

Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー Norway's Ultima Contemporary Music Festival is held annually each autumn. This year the spotlight is on Japan.

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毎年秋に開催されるノルウェーのウルティマ現代音楽祭
今年は日本にスポット

The Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival held each autumn in the Norwegian capital is Scandinavia's leading contemporary music festival. In 2005, the first week of this festival will focus on Japanese contemporary music as "JAPAN IN FOCUS." We spoke to the festival's director, Geir Johnson, and chairman of the festival's board of directors, Stein Henrichsen, when they visited Japan in December. They gave us their insights on running a quality music festival and building an audience for contemporary music as well as a preview of the Japanese artists who will be appearing next autumn in the Ultima Festival.

(Interviewed by Robert Reed)

The Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival

http://www.ultima.no/Sider/In_English.html

What has made Norway the home of one of Europe's leading contemporary music festivals? What is the cultural background behind contemporary music in Norway?

Johnson: You have to go back almost exactly 100 years to the end of the 19th century. After 500 years under the rule of Sweden and Denmark, Norway was involved in an independence movement, and it was the artists and musicians who were in the forefront of this movement. The composer Edvard Grieg, the playwright Henrik Ibsen and the painter Edward Munch, they were all prominent international artists and were also strong spokesmen for independence, which made them prominent figures in the national consciousness. After our independence in 1905 and WWI, however, there was no strong artist movement. It wasn't until the 1950s and 60s that a strong artist movement came together again and became a prominent part of Norwegian society. During the 1970s this artist movement began to lobby the parliament for grants and laws protecting artists' rights in areas like publishing and printing music for instance. Another important outcome was their lobbying for more art education in the school system. By the 1970s and 80s we got fantastic music schools as a result, and they were beginning to turn out outstanding musicians and the first new generation of composers. You see there was no composition training in Norway before 1973. Grieg and his contemporaries all studied in Germany. So ours was the first generation to come up under a program where the Norwegian government was positively supporting the creation of new art.

Henrichsen: We have to also mention the formation of the Norwegian National Arts Council. After the WWII we had to rebuild the country. Half of the country had been bombed during the War. And as the educational system was being rebuilt, there was an ideal at work that all Norwegians should have the right to receive education in the arts. The National Arts Council took a strong role in making sure that arts education was an important part of the education

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system. And one of the special focuses of the Council was on contemporary arts.

Johnson: So, after many decades when there was no education in the arts going on in Norway, we finally got three nation institutions dedicated to the distribution of art: one in theater, one in music and one for the visual arts. As a result of this focus on the arts we have, for example, some 500,000 active amateur musicians in a Norwegian population of just 4.6 million people.

Henrichsen: And it is important to note that although there is strong government support for the arts in terms of funding, the administration of the funds is done by private-sector organizations. So, there is a good arms-length distance between the operating bodies and the financing bodies so that the arts remain independent from political forces. If you look at our state budget, you will find that almost 1% of the budget goes to supporting the arts. I think that compares very favorably with most countries. But the main reason for the strength of contemporary arts in Norway today is the Arts Council, which is an organization run basically by artistic committees and not by the political bodies.

Johnson: This is a big difference in the Norwegian contemporary arts scene and that in Sweden, where government support for the arts is administered by the government and not by the artists themselves. In our Norwegian system it is artists deciding who gets the funding based on artistic merit. I think this independence we have from government control has made our arts scene very active. Twenty or thirty years ago, by the way, the Swedish arts scene was the most active in Scandinavia by far, but now even the Swedes themselves acknowledge that this is no longer the case.

What are your personal backgrounds? Are you both musicians?

Johnson: I started out as a choirboy as a child and studied music through high school and university, and then I began working in music, I sang in rock bands and such. I actually taught popular music at the university level for many years and eventually got into contemporary music through various job offers.

Henrichsen: I am involved with the Ultima Festival on the administrative side as chairman of the board, and our board is made up of people with artistic backgrounds and well as political and financial background. I personally have an artistic background. I am a trained musician, having studied in Norwegian, American and Danish universities. Later I began working with contemporary music ensembles and I am artistic director of one.

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Ultima is a contemporary music festival, but you also have classical music like opera on your schedule. How do you define contemporary music?

Johnson: It is a very difficult question and one that we always have to deal with in running a contemporary music festival. Is it contemporary because it is written today, or is it contemporary because it reflects something today that was said in the past? We try to be quite open-minded about this question. Our resources are basically geared toward developing new work. That's the main bulk of our program, maybe 70 to 80 percent. So we have maybe 35 world premiere performance in our festival each year, and about one third of these are international. It comes to somewhere between one third to almost one half of the festival budget.

For example, at this year's (2004) festival we presented Dutch music from the 70s and 80s centered around composer Philippe Hurel and his students, and we also had music from Paris and from Central Asia, from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan. What is the common denominator in all this?

I will tell you a common denominator that is not in the program: Igor Stravinsky. He was a Russian who came to Paris and had a lifelong influenced many composers all over the world. This was a program based around Stravinsky, but no Stravinsky works were in the program. But we also have medieval or baroque music if it goes well with the performers. You see you have to acknowledge that performers are living human beings who have to have an inner motivation to do what they do. And the inspiration for a top-level performer is always a matter of quality. So, if the performer wants to perform something earlier, say from the 1920s all the way to the 13th century. If it has artistic reason, we can just as well do it rather than having them play a 15-minute contemporary piece that they don't like. Because what are we really doing? In the end, you are trying to bring good concerts to the audience. But our main focus remains to present new works that bring new practices, new repertoire and new insights.

In general I would say that about 30 to 35% of the Ultima program is new works, about 50 to 55% comes from the last 20 years and the rest are special things that come from consulting with the artists and giving insight from other perspectives. Like we have one classical event every year. This year it was the "Via Kabul" program of music from Central Asia. In the past we have done Chinese opera, music from Syria, the mosques there; and we did Japanese ancient Gagaku music in 2000. So, we try to present a broad picture of where inspiration comes from. The festival is owned by 18 Norwegian institutions, and they all have the right to propose content, the final decisions are always made through discussion in the program committee.

Japanese music will be one of the themes of your 2005 Ultima Festival. How do you go about the work of putting together such a program?

Johnson: As we work to put together a Japanese program, it is very hard to say what is Japanese. Does it mean being born in Japan? Is it Japanese to be living in Japan or trained in Japan? There are plenty of fantastic Japanese composers and musicians who have been living in other parts of the world that Europeans consider to be Japanese but many here in Japan would not consider Japanese because they haven't lived here in Japan for 20 years.

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About putting together a program...there are a wide variety of styles among these composers, and even in the last ten years I have seen so many new names coming out. They may base themselves in Paris, London, in the United States. They choose to live in other parts of the world even though they were born here in Japan. On the other hand, you have people like Jo Kondo, whom we met the other day and who has a very strong international name because he stayed in the US in the 60s. Many Europeans actually think he lives in Europe because you see his name is featured everywhere in Europe, he performs and records everywhere in Europe. I thought he lived there but, no, he lives here in Japan. So you see, the international community doesn't tell you where a musician lives, it only tells you about the quality of their work. And that is again what we are trying to find, quality. We are not pretending to be presenting an overview of Japanese music, because that's impossible. We have commissioned three works. One work is by Jo Kondo, who is the oldest then we have commissioned, we have commissioned a work by Akira Nishimura and we have commissioned a work by a very young woman named Sachiyo Tsurumi, very talented and very different from the other two. Kondo is representative of the 60s outbreak from the central European tradition. Nishimura is involved in redefining the Japanese way of treating to the European tradition, while Tsurumi is moving toward a reinterpretation of the Japanese tradition with a very nihilistic outlook. It is great fun and it is very innovative music.

These three will make the core of the program. We will invite one Japanese dance ensemble, Leni-Basso. We have formally invited them but they have a lot international commitments, but hope they can come. And we will again invite Reigakusha, the Gagaku ensemble to play a contemporary piece by Toshio Hosokawa. And we are inviting some other performers and composers, so it is about 25-30 works in all. I would say we will play works by 15 Japanese composers in all. With a focus I might say on Hosokawa and Nishimura, who I consider to be the leading Japanese composers of my generation. This Japanese program will constitute close to one half of the 2005 Ultima program covering the week from the 2nd to the 9th of October. So the festival will begin with a Japanese focus and it will end with a German-French focus. And in between we will have a schedule of Norwegian world premieres.

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Where did the idea for the Japan program come from?

Johnson: Johnson: When I first took over the job of festival director in 1998 we had just had a Japan-focused festival in 1997 and I thought it was a great success. So, in 2000 I invited the Tokyo International Music Ensemble and they gave a fantastic performance of "In an Autumn Garden" by [Toru] Takemitsu. And I promised our Japanese guests at that time that we would have another Japanese focus in 2005.

Henrichsen: And we told the government that it would be appropriate to make a cultural exchange program with Japan at that time because Japan was one of the first countries to recognize Norway's independence in 1905, and 2005 is a centennial celebration of Norwegian independence. In 1999 we presented the idea that we would include a Japanese work in our Festival every year until 2005, which we have done.

Johnson: And I should say that we will not stop working with Japanese artists after 2005. It is an ongoing relationship and after working with Japanese artists for so many years we have a lot of friends here. We seek quality everywhere, and regardless of the fact that they are Japanese, they have very high standards, for example a person like [pianist] Aki Takahashi, she is a fantastic performer. We speak to people all the time, and there are numerous composers, performers, organizers who we get ideas from. We also have a large network of European artists who suggest Japanese artists to us who they have met.

What programs do you have to nurture an audience for contemporary music in Norway?

Johnson: We have quite a strong educational program. One performer we sent out this year met with 500 music students around the Oslo area giving concerts, talking to children about music. We also do programs actively reaching out to kids, both those who are already trained in music and those who aren't. We have one for best young string instrument players in Norway, where we expose them to contemporary performers and improvisation. These are young people who may eventually end up in the Oslo or Bergen philharmonic orchestras, so we want to expose them to other types of music. Our Ultima educational program is only run during the two weeks leading up to the festival but, still, we were able to reach about 4,000 school children in 2004. We don't have the money to do this year-round, however, so we have been developing projects that other people can adopt and use at other times in the year.

Henrichsen: There is also a strong educational aspect to our festival itself. We have a master class for composition students every year for example. There is an important part of our program.

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Do you have any measurements of the success of these activities?

Johnson: Yes. The contemporary music audience was about 10,000 in Norway in the early 1990s and it is now 15,000 and 20,000. Actually the work of building a contemporary music audience is a process of constantly rebuilding your audience because it is not an audience that stays with you for a long time as the times change and the musicians change. But I think we are building a more professional audience that seeks international level performances. As you know, it is very easy and cheap to travel between countries in Europe, so people can easily go to London or Berlin or Amsterdam or some other city for a concert, which means that we are in effect competing against all these European capitals. That is another reason why we have to maintain very high standards, so that we can keep rebuilding an audience in Oslo.

After your Japanese program in 2005, will there be any kind of reciprocation, where you will be sending Norwegian musicians to Japan?

Johnson: We hope there will be further exchanges, but we never make that a demand from our side. If other countries want to cooperate with us for their sake, that's fine. But, we do not say, "We will take your artists if you take ours." We don't work that way. Everything has to be based on completely independent judgment. We are part of a Paris-based international network of 17 or 18 festivals around Europe, and we meet four times a year to discuss and disseminate ideas.

Henrichsen: This network is a fantastic tool for exchanging information about artists and disseminating ideas. And because of these connections, for example, the Jo Kondo work we have commissioned will also be performed probably in UK, Austria and Germany. And they will be taking the program because they think it is interesting, not because of any obligation. And that is the way it should be.

We hear there are many Japanese music students studying in Norway

Johnson: That's right, In fact there have been Japanese musicians in Mr. Henrichsen's ensemble from time to time. There are many Japanese who have studied in Norway over the past ten years especially. And now there are some professional Japanese musicians performing in our orchestras. And we have a Japanese woman working on our Festival as a program coordinator who studied music therapy here in Norway. I hope such active exchanges between Japan and Norway will continue to expand toward the future.