

PELLE GUDMUNDSEN-HOLMGREEN

Complete String Quartets, vol. 1

NORDIC STRING QUARTET



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NORDIC STRING QUARTET

Heidrun Petersen violin · Mads Haugsted Hansen violin
Daniel Eklund viola · Lea Emilie Brøndal cello

1	String Quartet No. 5, <i>Step by Step</i> (1982–86, rev. 2003)	18:52
	String Quartet No. 1 (1959)	
2	Andante	8:26
3	String Quartet No. 6, <i>Parting</i> (1983)	12:46
	String Quartet No. 3, <i>Five Small Studies</i> (1959)	4:42
4	I.	1:34
5	II.	0:17
6	III.	0:51
7	IV.	0:35
8	V.	1:25
9	String Quartet No. 4 (1967)	6:07
	String Quartet No. 2, <i>Quartetto Facile</i> (1959)	11:44
10	I. Andantino	1:46
11	II. Allegretto	3:31
12	III. Andante	3:01
13	IV. Allegro	3:26

Total: 62:39

World premiere recordings

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PELLE GUDMUNDSEN-HOLMGREEN (1932-2016) *by Jens Cornelius*

Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen stands among the leading Scandinavian composers of the past half-century, a unique voice from the generation born in the inter-war years. In his early works, Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's music took its point of departure in heroes like Bartók and Stravinsky. Around 1960 a phase began where he was influenced by post-war serialism. He rejected this path a few years later and instead became a pace-setter in 'the New Simplicity', as it was called in Denmark: laconic, simplified music which in Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's hands could be provocatively absurd. Often a marked, black-humoured pessimism rears its head under the influence of the Irish writer Samuel Beckett. Childlike wonder meets cynical comment, cliché meets originality, the ecstatic is combined with the ascetic – Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's music is full of such clashes. Never fusty, often entertaining, always adamant.

STRING QUARTETS NOS. 1-6 *by Steen Pade*

A look at the years in which the six string quartets on this release came into being shows how illustrative they are of Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's development as a composer. The first three are all from the year 1959. After eight years, he returns to the genre with the addition of the fourth quartet. And after a further 15 years he is apparently smitten by the potential of the string quartet once more: the first version of the fifth quartet is from 1982, and while he is writing the sixth, he revises the fifth quartet for the first time, but it seems as if he did not complete the vision, since the final second vision of 'Step by Step' (the one presented here) dates from 2003. After this, he continued to write quartets – 14 in all – until 2013, three years before he died.

Step by Step begins with unrelenting energy – also with a touch of hope – and ends just under 19 minutes later in black gloom and with a resigned, despairing gesture. In the meantime, we hear hymns, 'cries and whispers', pulsating life in dense formations of notes, sudden stops and silent sighs – normally initiated by ever-new beginnings, attempts to recreate the optimism of

the beginning. This is music that has to do with movement – we start at one point and end at a totally different one. What has taken place in between, and how is the composer working here, how does he pull it off?

First and foremost it is a forward movement 'step by step', as indicated by the title. We hear a mosaic of various snatches of music that take over from each other in a ritual where the energetic snatches are gradually replaced by and give way to something more contemplative. Repeated listening, however, reveals that we can already sense the despair in that initial energy. It is as if a shadow of what is later going to appear is already present from the outset. Gudmundsen-Holmgreen is able to establish this artifice because the various events *en route* are anchored in a particular pattern of notes he had been working with since the late 1970s. A way of organising tonal material is this: Around a central note (the middle note of the piano, D) he unfolds a grid in a scale-like symmetry. On each side of this D the notes which the grid supplies rise and fall respectively so that the intervals between the notes gradually increase and then decrease. First two semitones, then a whole tone, then a minor and a major third. After this the music goes the opposite way: minor third, whole tone, semitone until we end on A flat and at a distance of an octave plus an augmented fourth from the original D. On the basis of our tonal system's 12 notes, the grid uses 10 – the notes F and B are not used, and there are in fact a number of works by Gudmundsen-Holmgreen where one can search in vain for these two notes. The grid is not a tone row in the Schönbergian sense, rather a mode in the Messiaenesque manner, a limitation of the tonal material used by Gudmundsen-Holmgreen in most of his compositions since the early 1970s, the limitation being that the individual tones are locked into the particular position in the octave determined by the grid through its symmetry of intervals around the central tone D. In a more detailed sense than the overall formal pattern, the quartet thus develops the idea of 'step by step'. Namely in the relation to the various patterns into which the grid 'step by step' can be organised – patterns that are often tangible and simple melodies, such as the hymn-like disposition we hear snatches of right from the beginning. Or the set chorale that spreads out across the closing five minutes. The point that creates unity across these wide-ranging elements is that we involuntarily recognise the notes which, locked to their own positions in the grid, have an underlying identity in the figure, theme or chord they enter into in the individual episode.

From the mid-1960s onwards, Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's works position widely different elements in a space where the form deals with how (or how little) they can be made to talk to each other. Spectacularly in the piece *Plateaux pour deux* (1970), where a cello and two squeeze-bulb horns attempt to come into contact with each other. Such *objets trouvés* assume a different nature within the more abstract form of the string quartet. In the fifth string quartet, the ghosts of historical ancestors of the genre haunt the work, colouring every note, so to speak. Bartók's irregular time signatures meet up with the static snatches of scales from Stravinsky's *Three Pieces* for string quartet. The intense, polyphonic texture we know from the late Beethoven quartets is enclosed in dense clouds of notes that remind one of Ligeti and the American minimalists. The miracle of the quartet is that everything at the same time, and unmistakably, sounds like Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen – no other composer would have precisely that sound. To the connoisseur, two bars are enough to identify the person who wrote the music; no one else could have written this fantastic work, which must be considered a major work in the Danish string quartet tradition.

The artistic idea that underlies Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's juxtaposition of widely different elements is strongly inspired by absurd theatre, with Samuel Beckett as a key figure – something the composer never tired of emphasising. With regard to the constant run-ups and re-starts that only end up with despair and resignation in the fifth string quartet, it is hard not to think of *Endgame*, where the servant, Clov, repeatedly tries to climb a ladder but falls down every time.

The association with Beckett is perhaps even stronger in the sixth string quartet, *Parting*, where from the very beginning we find ourselves in a landscape of remnants, a 'wasteland'. The quartet also has to do with movement, that of farewell, which is also present in the small building blocks of this quartet. This is already the case in the gesture that we hear in the first bar and that is present like a ritornello throughout the quartet, a figure that is audibly reminiscent of the sight of the stone we throw into the water and the spreading ripples that fade away, a kind of composed-out echo. *Parting*: the process where we say goodbye, put to music with exclamations that die away, hold their hands to their mouth because they are opposed or cannot muster the strength to continue, leaving behind listening silence. With natural sounds, where heights and depths mirror each other, observe each other, turn away and wonder, and with the composer's question as to how little is necessary for a sequence to be kept going and stay alive.

The sixth string quartet also builds on the tonal grid, in which Gudmundsen-Holmgreen finds his objects – here inspired by the sounds of nature. Violent and overwhelming, where the music just over halfway through its course bursts into the cries of migrating birds, this time sustainedly and repeatedly, so that also a mirror is evoked in the deep register of the instruments. Until this outburst also fades away, leaving us with the farewell of the final echoes.

The fourth string quartet is one big natural sound. The composer once told me how this short, completely static and motionless work was inspired by the chirping of cicadas in Greece. The experience of dozing off to the constant, enervating formation of cicadas that precisely resemble the tonal clusters of close intervals in which the music rests. Only towards the end does a small change take place, the sound grows a little louder, the intervals widen slightly and send us memories of a more familiar harmony of triads. The string quartet is a strong, simple expression of the minimalism which at this time in the late-1960s has its breakthrough even with composers who had grown up in the shadow of the complexity of the modernism of the 1950s.

The three early string quartets show in their separate ways Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's artistic point of departure. The first single-movement quartet deals with the harmonic implications of a twelve-tone row. Quartet no. 2, *Quartetto facile* in four movements, organised in a traditional pattern with the scherzo-like second movement followed by a slower third movement, has thematic material which is present in all the movements. Narrow intervals that expand and contract once more in a way that owes a debt to Bartók's motif technique, but that maybe is also a portent of the grid that emerges almost 15-20 years later? In the conclusion of the third movement, quiet trills form a static sound image that simultaneously shows the influence of Bartók and points forward towards the motionless cicada noise of the fourth quartet. The third quartet concentrates the musical expression into five small momentary images, each of which deals with a single idea, and that can remind one of Webern's *Six Bagatelles* for string quartet, Op. 9. The music sounds initially complex, but in its rhythmical simplicity it pays homage to a basically different aesthetics of perception than that common in the modernism of the 1950s.

Steen Pade, 2018

Nordic String Quartet



Nordic String Quartet was formed in 2013 and consists of Heidi-run Petersen (the Faroe Islands) and Mads Haugsted Hansen (Denmark), violins, Daniel Eklund, viola (Sweden), and Lea Emilie Brøndal, cello (Denmark).

Within the space of just a few years, the quartet has established itself both nationally and internationally. The quartet has also played together with a number of internationally recognised top musicians, including Boris Berman, Sergejs Osokins, Anthony Newman, Mats Lidström, and Michala Petri.

By invitation from the Danish Monarchy, the Nordic String Quartet played in August 2013 at Queen Margrethe and Prince Henrik's castle in Caix, France. In 2014, the Nordic String Quartet was accepted as an ensemble in the Advanced Postgraduate Soloist Programme at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, Copenhagen, where it studied under Professor Tim Frederiksen.

Along with Messiaen Quartet Copenhagen, Trio Amerise and Dahlia String Trio, the Nordic String Quartet has been actively involved in running the Østerbro Concert Association. This is a distinctive music association which builds bridges between various chamber musical constellations and which constantly strives to communicate musical experiences 'at eye level' with its audiences.

Nordic String Quartet has a particular predilection for Nordic composers. This applies not only to earlier, world-famous names such as Grieg and Sibelius but also to up-and-coming present-day composers such as Martin Stauning and Andrea Tarrodi, who also feature in the quartet's repertoire. For as a Nordic string quartet, the four musicians of the quartet feel they have a special obligation to communicate the repertoire of this part of Europe.

Nordic String Quartet has been awarded the *Odd Fellow Logernes Musikpris 2014*, *Léonie Sonnings Talentpris 2017*, and *Carl Nielsen og Anne Marie Carl-Nielsens Legats Talentpris 2018*. The quartet gave its debut concert in the winter of 2018 at the Concert Hall of Royal Danish Academy of Music, Copenhagen.

PELLE GUDMUNDSEN-HOLMGREEN (1932-2016) af Jens Cornelius

Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen står som en af Nordens førende komponister fra det sidste halve århundrede, en unik stemme fra generationen født i mellemkrigstiden. I sine tidlige værker tog Gudmundsen-Holmgreens musik udspring i helte som Bartók og Stravinsky. Omkring 1960 begyndte en fase, hvor han var påvirket af efterkrigstidens serialisme. Denne vej afviste han få år senere, og han blev i stedet toneangivende inden for "den ny enkelhed", som det blev kaldt i Danmark: En lakonisk og forenklet musik, der i Gudmundsen-Holmgreens hænder kunne blive provokerende absurd. Ofte træder et markant sortsyn galgenhumoristisk frem under påvirkning af den irske digter Samuel Beckett. Barnlig forundring møder kyniske kommentarer, klichéer møder originalitet, ekstase forenes med askese – den slags sammenstød er Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreens musik fuld af. Aldrig mosbegrøet, ofte underholdende, altid egenrådig.

STRYGEKVARTETTER NR. 1-6 af Steen Pade

Et blik på tilblivelsesårene for de seks strygekvartetter på denne udgivelse viser, hvor illustrative de er for Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreens udvikling som komponist. De tre første er alle fra 1959. Efter 8 år vender han i 1967 med den fjerde strygekvartet tilbage til genren. Efter yderligere 15 år bliver han tilsyneladende bidt af strygekvartetens muligheder: den femte kvartetts første version er fra 1982; samtidig med at han skriver den sjette, reviderer han for første gang den femte, men bliver tilsyneladende ikke færdig, idet den endelige, her foreliggende anden revision af den femte strygekvartet, *Step by Step*, stammer fra 2003. Herefter fortsatte han med at skrive kvartetter – det blev til 14 i alt – indtil 2013, tre år før sin død.

Step by Step begynder med sammenbidt energi – ovenikøbet med et anstrøg af håb – og slutter knap 19 minutter senere i sort fortvivlelse og med en resignerende, opgivende gestus. Undervejs hører vi hymner, "hvissen og råb", pulserende liv i tætte formationer af toner, opbremsninger og stille suk – som regel igangsat af stadigt nye begyndelser, forsøg på at genskabe begyndelsens

optimisme. Dette er musik, der handler om bevægelse – vi begynder ét sted og slutter et helt andet. Hvad er der sket undervejs, og hvordan bærer komponisten sig ad?

Først og fremmest er det en fremadskriden "step by step", trin for trin som titlen siger. Vi hører en mosaik af forskellige stumper af musik, der afløser hinanden i et ritual, hvor de energiske stumper gradvist skiftes ud med og viger for de stille og mere kontemplative. Flere gennemlytninger viser imidlertid, at vi i energien allerede kan ane opgivelsen. Det er, som om en skygge af, hvad der dukker op senere, allerede er til stede fra begyndelsen. Dette kunstgreb kan Gudmundsen-Holmgreen etablere, fordi de forskellige begivenheder undervejs er forankret i et bestemt tonemønster, han arbejdede med siden slutningen af 70'erne. En måde at ordne tonematerialet på: Omkring en centraltone (klaverets midterste tone D) folder han et gitter ud i en skalalignende symmetri. På hver side af dette D stiger, henholdsvis falder de toner, gitteret stiller til rådighed, således at intervallerne mellem tonerne gradvist bliver større og derefter mindre. Først to halvtoner, så en heltone, dernæst en lille og en stor tert. Derefter går det den anden vej; lille tert, heltone, halvtone, indtil vi ender på As i afstanden en oktav plus forstørret kvart fra det oprindelige D. Ud af vores tonesystems 12 toner anvender gitteret 10 – tonerne F og H finder det ikke anvendelse for, og der er faktisk en lang række værker af Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, hvor man vil lede forgæves efter disse to toner. Gitteret er ikke en tonerække i Schönbergs forstand, det er vel snarest en slags modus i messiaensk betydning, en begrænsning af tonematerialet, som Gudmundsen-Holmgreen har anvendt i de fleste af sine kompositioner siden begyndelsen af 1970'erne – med den indskrænkning, at de enkelte toner er låst fast til den bestemte oktavbeliggenhed, som gitteret med dets intervalsymmetri omkring centraltonen D her fastlægger. I en mere detaljeret forstand end det storformale mønster udfolder kvartetten derfor ideen om "step by step". Nemlig i relation til de forskellige mønstre, som gitteret trin for trin kan ordnes i. Mønstre, der ofte er håndgribelige og letfattelige melodier, som den hymniske ansats vi hører brudstykker af helt fra begyndelsen. Eller den stivnede koral, der breder sig ud over de afsluttende fem minutter. Pointen, der skaber enhed på tværs af de vidt forskellige elementer, er, at vi uvilkårligt genkender tonerne, der bundet til hvert deres eget sted i gitteret har en bagvedliggende identitet uafhængig af den figur, det tema eller den akkord, som de i den enkelte episode indgår i.

Fra midten af 60'erne anbringer Gudmundsen-Holmgreens værker vidt forskellige elementer i et rum, hvor formen handler om, hvordan (eller hvor lidt) de kan bringes til at tale sammen. Spektakulært i stykket *Plateaux pour deux* (1970), hvor en cello og to båthorn forsøger at komme i kontakt med hinanden. Sådanne fundne objekter antager i strygekvartetens mere abstrakte form en anden karakter. I den femte strygekvartet spørger genrens historiske aner og inficerer så at sige hver en takt. Bartóks skæve taktarter finder sammen med de statiske skalastumper fra Stravinskys *Tre Stykker* for strygekvartet. Det intense, polyfone satsarbejde, der kendes fra den sene Beethovens kvartetter, lukkes inde i tætte toneskyer, der giver erindringer fra Ligeti og de amerikanske minimalister. Kvartetens mirakel er, at alt samtidig og umiskendeligt lyder som Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, ingen anden komponist ville have præcis den lyd. For kenderen er to takter nok til at identificere ophavsmanden, ingen anden kunne have skrevet dette fantastiske værk, der må stå som et hovedværk i den danske strygekvartet-tradition.

Den kunstneriske forestilling, der ligger bag Gudmundsen-Holmgreens sammenstilling af vidt forskellige elementer, henter en stærk inspiration i det absurde teater med Samuel Beckett som en nøgleperson, komponisten ikke blev træt af at fremhæve. Hvad angår den femte strygekvartet stadige tilløb og begyndnen forfra, der kun fører til opgivelse og resignation, er det svært ikke at tænke på *Slutspil*, hvor tjeneren Clov igen og igen forsøger at klatre op ad en stige, men hver gang falder ned.

Associationen til Beckett er måske endnu stærkere i den sjette strygekvartet, *Parting*, hvor vi helt fra begyndelsen befinder os i et landskab af sidste ting, et "wasteland". Også denne strygekvartet handler om bevægelse, afskedens bevægelse, som er til stede også i musikkens små byggesten. Allerede i den gestus, vi hører i første takt, og som en ritornel er til stede kvartetten igennem, en figur, der auditivt minder som synsindtrykket af den sten, vi kaster i vandet, og de dønninger, den efterlader, der bliver mindre, et slags udkomponeret ekko. Parting: processen, hvor vi siger farvel, tonesat med udbrud, der går i sig selv, holder sig for munden, fordi de bliver modsagt eller ikke orker at fortsætte og efterlader lyttende stilhed. Med naturlyde, hvor højt og dybt spejles, iagttager hinanden, vender sig bort eller undres, og med komponistens spørgsmål om, hvor lidt skal der til, for at et forløb stadig holdes i gang og er levende.

Også den sjette strygekvartet bygger på tonegitteret, hvori Gudmundsen-Holmgreen finder sine objekter – her navnlig med inspiration i naturens lyde. Voldsomt og overvældende, hvor musikken lidt over halvvejs gennem forløbet bryder ud i trækfugleskrig, denne gang vedholdende og gentagende, så at også et spejl i instrumenternes dybe leje kaldes frem. Indtil også dette udbrud klinger ud og efterlader os med de sidste ekkoers afsked.

Den fjerde strygekvartet er én stor naturlyd. Komponisten fortalte mig engang, hvordan dette korte, helt statiske og stillestående værk er inspireret af cikadernes lyd i Grækenland. Oplevelsen af at døse hen til den stadige og enerverende formation af cikader, der netop ligner de toneklynger af tætte intervaller, som musikken hviler i. Kun hen mod slutningen sker en lille udvikling, lyden bliver lidt kraftigere, intervallerne udvider sig lidt og sender os mindelser om en mere velkendt treklangsharmonik. Kvartetten er et stærkt og enkelt udtryk for den minimalisme, som på dette tidspunkt hen mod slutningen af 60'erne slog igennem også hos komponister, der var vokset op i skyggen af 50'er-modernismens kompleksitet.

De tre tidlige strygekvartetter viser hver på deres måde Holmgreens kunstneriske udgangspunkt. Den første, en-satsede strygekvartet beskæftiger sig med den harmoniske uddyndning af en tolvtonerække. Strygekvartet nr. 2, *Quartetto facile* i fire satser, ordnet i et traditionelt mønster med en scherzolignende andensats efterfulgt af en langsommere tredje, har tematisk materiale, der går igen i alle satser. Snævre intervaller, der udvider sig og trækker sig sammen igen på en måde, der står i gæld til Bartóks motivteknik, men måske også er et forvarsel om det tonegitter, der dukker op små 15-20 år senere? I slutningen af tredje sats danner tyste triller et statisk klangbillede, der på én gang viser påvirkningen fra Bartók og peger frem mod den fjerde kvartetts stillestående cikadestøj. Den tredje strygekvartet koncentrerer det musikalske udtryk i fem små øjeblikksbilleder, der hver for sig beskæftiger sig med en enkelt idé, og som kan bringe mindelser om Weberns 6 *Bagateller* for strygekvartet, op. 9. Musikken lyder umiddelbart kompleks, men hylder i sin rytmiske enkelhed en grundlæggende anden opfattelighedens æstetik end gængs 50'er-modernisme.

Steen Pade, 2018

Nordic String Quartet blev dannet i 2013 og består af Heidi Run Petersen, violin (Færøerne), Mads Haugsted Hansen, violin (Danmark), Daniel Eklund, bratsch (Sverige) og Lea Emilie Brøndal, cello (Danmark).

På få år har kvartetten markeret sig både nationalt og internationalt. Kvartetens samarbejder tæller en række internationalt anerkendte musikere, heriblandt Boris Berman, Sergejs Osokins, Anthony Newman, Mats Lidström og Michala Petri.

Efter invitation fra det danske kongehus optrådte Nordic String Quartet i august 2013 ved Dronning Margrethe og Prins Henriks årlige sommerkoncert på slottet i Caix, Frankrig. I 2014 blev Nordic String Quartet optaget som ensemble i Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatoriums Solistklasse, hvor kvartetten har studeret hos professor Tim Frederiksen.

Sammen med Messiaen Quartet Copenhagen, Trio Amerise og Dahlia String Trio har Nordic String Quartet siden 2016 været med til at drive Østerbro Koncertforening. En markant musikforening, der bygger bro mellem forskellige kammermusikalske konstellationer, og som hele tiden bestræber sig på at formidle musikalske oplevelser i øjenhøjde med publikum.

Nordic String Quartet har en særlig forkærlighed for de nordiske komponister. Ikke blot ældre, verdensberømte komponister som Grieg og Sibelius, men også nulevende, up-and-coming komponister som Martin Stauning og Andrea Tarrodi er på kvartetens repertoire. Som nordisk strygekvartet føler de fire musikere i Nordic String Quartet sig nemlig særligt forpligtet til at formidle det nordiske strygekvartet-repertoire.

Nordic String Quartet er modtager af *Odd Fellow Logernes Musikpris 2014*, *Léonie Sonnings Talentpris 2017* og *Carl Nielsen og Anne Marie Carl-Nielsens Legats Talentpris 2018*. Kvartetten afholdt i vinteren 2018 deres debutkoncert i Konservatoriets Koncertsal, København.

DDD

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