

KNUDÅGE RIISAGER

(b. 1897)

Knudåge Riisager is the cosmopolite among modern Danish composers. His parentage and his travels have given him an international orientation and the *cachet* of the man of the world. All the same, he is a true Dane of distinctly Nordic character. Such differing qualities might be dangerous; but in the case of Riisager they are favorable, being united within an energetic and many-sided personality.

He was born at Port Kunda, half-way between Reval and Leningrad, then called St. Petersburg, where his father was in charge of a cement factory. In the year 1900, the family had already returned to Denmark, where the father remained as chief engineer of the well-known firm of F. L. Schmidt & Co. The son inherited his father's mathematical intellect. A strong sense of logic, together with a sensibility handed down from his mother, made him an artist.

In his childhood, Knudåge Riisager was taught the violin by the virtuoso, Peder Møller; his father regarded his musical ambitions with sympathy, but insisted all the same upon his son's taking his degree at the University. The time left over from his studies of political economy he spent at Peder Gram's, learning composition. Having obtained his degree in 1921, he went to Paris, where he

studied under Paul le Flem and Albert Roussel. He made himself familiar with everything new and inspiring in the present-day French music. He also made the acquaintance of quite a number of prominent French composers, and was often seen in the company of Maurice Ravel.

After a fruitful stay in France Riisager went back to Denmark, rich in impressions. Open-handed he spread his new ideas over the Danish fields of music; at first, he caused nothing but scandal. He was fighting for his convictions. Not only on the music sheets, but also in periodicals and newspapers, and the result was a slap in the face of the traditionalists. No wonder! Riisager's writings breathed the fresh air of great Europe. In all his activities as an organizer and author, he endeavoured to open the floodgates to the streams flowing from the world outside, to fertilize our musical ground. Several people were upset, when Riisager, in the review "Dansk Musiktidsskrift", ventured to question whether our inherited harmonic system might not, after all, depend on prejudices? Wasn't it bad enough that Carl Nielsen had made breaches in the system? In his own compositions, Riisager simultaneously used polytonality, polyrhythmic, and very characteristic syncopations, with an audacity hitherto unknown in Denmark. But his music was so refreshing that even the sourest critic was put into a good humour when listening to it. With such works as "*Erasmus Montanus*" — the overture to one of Holberg's classic comedies — and the capricious "*Introduzione di traverso*" (1925), he soon made a name for himself.

Since 1922 he had been a chairman of the "Society of Young Musicians", and in this capacity he managed to arrange some very interesting exchange concerts with France, in consequence of which the musical tendencies in Denmark turned away from the Neo-Germans. Thus



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our young musicians were enabled to refresh themselves at the musical springs of France.

In 1926, Knudåge Riisager was appointed to a post in the Central Administration, and until recently he was head of a department in the Ministry of Finance. His official duties, however, have by no means restrained his artistic growth. In 1931, he received the Ancker Legacy, which he used for study at Leipzig; in half a year he went through the three year's curriculum in counterpoint, under Hermann Grabner. Of this severe musical cure traces may be found in a formerly not noticeable interest in Baroque style, which, in some measure, has left its mark on his work of the subsequent decade.

Among Riisager's compositions for orchestra, his many variations should be mentioned. He himself enjoys varying themes and motifs, the most fundamental of all functions of composition. In this fine art he is a true master. His variations on a theme by Mezangeau, the suite, "on the Occasion of —", varying Danish nursery songs, and on a theme by the Swedish rococo poet and composer Bellman, are all things of beauty. A considerable number of overtures with literary allusions are among his works, such as "*Klods Hans*" (tale by Hans Andersen), "*The Curly Fritz*" (unfinished student novel by Poul Martin Møller), "*Comoedia*" (based on Ludvig Holberg's comedies), "*Shrovetide*", "*Tivoli, Tivoli*", and others.

Foremost among his four symphonies is the "*Sinfonia Gaia*", the Merry, or, as he prefers to call it, the Optimistic. Here the Baroque style is evident within a modern, rhythmic, and individual tonal language. A most important work is "*Quarrrsiluni*". The term comes from Greenland and means: something expected to burst. It derives from a book by the well-known Greenland explorer Knud Rasmussen, entitled "The Gift of the Feast". "For our ancestors believed that the songs are born in this silence." On this episode, a ballet scene has been built, which has become part of the permanent repertoire of the Royal Theatre. In *Quarrrsiluni*, Riisager is introducing the instrumental effects of primitive music into a modern orchestra. Percussion instruments are dominant, and sudden passages for wood-wind players penetrate the monotonous drum rhythm. The main figure of the ballet scene is a Greenland wizard, a so-called *Angek*. Gradually the music and the dance grow wilder and more ecstatic, until the wizard collapses. At last the burning red sun, anxiously expected by the Greenlanders, rises in the background, raised by the *Angek*. With this work, the com-



Scene from the ballet *Quarrrtsiluni* by Knudåge Riisager.

*/performed
by the corps
of the G.S.C.M.
at Palermo
1949 (Teatro
Massimo)

poser has succeeded in evoking a message from our most elementary emotional life, otherwise wrapped up by cultural restraints. */

Riisager's piano sonata (1931) seems partially inspired by Bela Bartok's famous sonata composed a few years before. The formation of the main theme is highly rhythmic; but the first movement also contains a period of plain lyric nature, whose legato-feeling contrasts with the strict rhythm. The harmonics are rather "tight", characteristic through their degrees of seconds, frequently used in modern music. The thematic structure is quite organic. From the very first touch of the rhythmic bass figure until the last sonorous C major third figure, the effect is unbroken.

A small collection of piano pieces, entitled "A Merry Trumpeter", shows Riisager from quite a new angle. There is a good deal of *pastiches* to be found in this collection, but he never becomes malicious like Stravinsky

or Milhaud; it is rather a matter of jollity, as for instance, in the short piece, the "Dandy", in which this sort of fellow is vividly seen strutting along, all dressed up in the height of fashion.

Very similar in character to these musical fragments is Riisager's ballet "*Slaraffenland*" — Cockaigne. And here we enter upon another field, perhaps the most important in his work, theatrical music. In this field he has attained his particular aim as an artist: improvisation on fables and dreams. In 1930 he set music to a grotesque ballet by our popular humorist, Robert Storm Petersen, entitled "*Benzin*" (Petrol). In 1937 he wrote the brilliant accompaniment to a mythical play, "*Darduse*", by the Nobel Prize winner Johannes V. Jensen. His third ballet, "*Twelve by Mail Coach*" (1942), based on Hans Andersen's tale about the months, appeared as a result of his collaboration with Harald Lander, Ballet Master of the Royal Theatre; together the three ballets mentioned form a complete evening performance. His latest ballet is called "*The Phoenix*" (1946). 1948: *Etude* (based on Cyereys *étude*)

Knudåge Riisager has also composed popular tunes; among others, the *Danish Song of Liberty* (text by Svend Møller-Kristensen), which during the last days of the German occupation became the triumphal hymn of the Resistance. The music to the play, "*Niels Ebbesen*" (by Kaj Munk, shot by the Germans in 1944) was also inspired by the distress of our native country during the War. Ebbesen is a national hero, who killed the Count Geert, and thus freed Jutland from the Holstein troops in 1340.

In the choral work, "*A Danish Hymn*", the text of which dates from the XVI century, the music is to some extent based on the church modes.

Knudåge Riisager's works have made their way far and wide, from Sweden to U. S. A. (conducted by Stålvorby,

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Wicalai Maalbo, Thortz
Beisch of

First performance January 1950 of the opera
libretto "*Susanne*" (after the biblical Susanna in the bath)
but changed as a Copenhagen *millieu* at the year 1800.
The royal opera, Copenhagen.

for instance,
: Wilhelm Hansen, Copenhagen, Denmark
Germans Musikforlag, Stockholm, Sweden
Lydets Musikforlag, Oslo, Norway

Today he is chairman of the Danish Composers' Society and a member of the committee of the KODA and of several other musical organizations, foundations, official boards, etc.

Owing to Riisager, the impulses flowing from the Great World, represented by names such as Stravinsky, Bartok, Hindemith, Ravel, Milhaud, and Honegger, have been of importance to the further development of the de-romanticisation of the Danish tone that was begun by Carl Nielsen on a purely Nordic basis.