

Sound of Norway? Reflections on Lasse Thoresen's *Yr*

Yr – a piece for violin solo by Lasse Thoresen on one hand and Norwegian folk music, in particular *slåtter* for hardanger fiddle – a type of Norwegian folk violin – on the other hand, will be the subject of this presentation. I would like to concentrate here on the question “how Norwegian is *Yr*?” in the other words: how national is that piece of music? Saying “Norwegian” I consider neither political nor geographical criteria but the musical ones – the connection to the country’s folk music. I am aware that using ideas derived from folk music does not always mean creating music perceived as national. Ewa Dahlig, a Polish musicologist, is of the opinion that a piece of professional music can be considered national among others “on condition that it consists of some characteristic features of the musical tradition it refers to” (E. Dahlig 2001, 589). These features, she adds, could be picked out based on a comparison with other traditions or at least they should be considered as especially important by the carriers of a tradition. Dahlig supports the hypothesis of some scholars saying that the common denominator of a musical tradition – consisting of different layers, from élite to mass music, from professional to folk music etc. – could be found in folk music, the simplest of the layers (E. Dahlig 2001, 589-590). Jan Stęszewski calls that features “national stereotypes” and says they are the result of “less or more conscious choice of characteristic elements of different folk musics of a country” (J. Stęszewski 1995, 151). Let me look at the Norwegian context from this perspective: a poll carried out by NRK (the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation) some years ago showed that hardanger fiddle is considered one of the most important symbols of the country (second place, just after goat cheese). This result makes me believe that music for hardanger fiddle is easily distinguished in the Norwegian society, especially when I take into consideration very active cultivation and popularization of folk music in this country.

The first time I heard music by Lasse Thoresen was in the moment I was looking for Norwegian professional compositions inspired by the country’s folk music, especially tunes for hardanger fiddle. I had an opportunity to talk to several people working with Norwegian music history and Norwegian musical life here in Norway. Usually, having talked about Edvard Grieg, Johan Svendsen, Eivind Groven, Geirr Tveitt etc. I used to ask about the younger generation of Norwegian composers. On many occasions I used to hear “you should check music by Lasse Thoresen”. I followed the suggestions and began with *Yr* – a piece for violin solo. Later came his *Double concerto for hardingfele, nyckelharpe and orchestra* and other earlier compositions. I have to say – meeting Thoresen’s music, especially the first piece, was a big surprise to me – a person “brought up” on traditional folk music inspiration in compositions of Karol Szymanowski, Igor Stravinsky, Antonin Dvořák, Witold Lutosławski, etc. that could be quite easily considered in the perspective of a typology of folk music borrowings by Walter Wiora (1957, *vide*: M. Tomaszewski 1995, 160) or borrowings in

general by Zofia Lissa (Z. Lissa 1965, 269-315) and Krystyna Tarnawska-Kaczorowska (K. Tarnawska-Kaczorowska 1998, 7-49). When I heard *Yr* the first time I thought: "that is a very well done stylization/imitation of Norwegian *slåtter*" (old layer of instrumental traditional tunes played for dancing). A study of the score however has made the answer to the question "how Norwegian is *Yr*?", more complex. Let me now show the relation between hardanger fiddle *slåtter* and *Yr*.

Before I go on I would like to mention that I base my study of *Yr* on the last version of the composition, published by Pizzicato Verlag Helvetia in 2001. That edition differs from the previous one, the manuscript released in 1991 by Norwegian Music Information Centre, with some details. Thoresen changed a few notes, articulation, replaced the old rhythm signs for new and specified the rhythm of stamped puls.

I will begin talking about the relation between *slåtter* for hardanger fiddle and *Yr* with the most visible similarities which are:

- Scordatura – Thoresen recommends to lower the two lowest strings.



Example 1: Scordatura, L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 2, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

- Most hardanger fiddle tunes are played with use of scordatura. In the largest collection of tunes for that instrument, called *Hardingfeleslåttar*, there are 15 different tunings. Some researchers dealing with Norwegian folk music claim that there exist even more of them – up to 31 (Een, 1977, 128-129). I have interpreted Thoresen's usage of scordatura as a result of inspiration of folk tradition. It has to be said, though, that the idea could as well come from the new, traditional way of performing old music, that appeared last century in the seventies and with which Thoresen got familiar while being in France. It is possible that both sources were the reason.

- Another element binding *Yr* with the *slåtter* tradition is a stamped puls introduced in the second part of the piece.



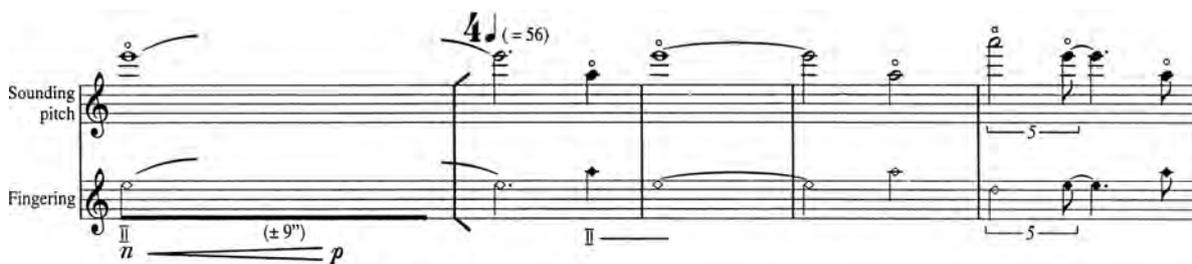
Example 2: Stamped puls, Example 3: L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 5, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

- in that case the composer does not allow any speculation about the source of inspiration – in the comments to the piece he writes: “The performer should audibly stamp his foot in the style of a country fiddler”. The old *slåtter* for hardanger fiddle are always played with clearly marked puls stamped by a performer.

- The last of the most visible elements of the hardanger fiddle tradition Thoresen exploits in *Yr* is a rule of playing without vibrato. As he writes in the comments, it is valid for the whole piece. That idea, again, can be interpreted to be inspired by the new way of performing old music. Again, it is not unlikely, both experiences influenced the composer.

Other elements derived from the folk tradition can be discovered by a more profound look at the piece. It will be useful to begin with the structure of the composition.

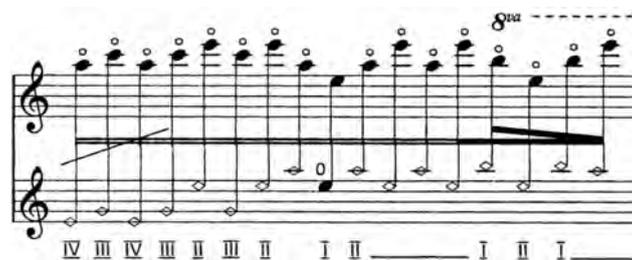
Yr is built on three figures: The first two I will describe only roughly as they are not influenced by hardanger fiddle music.



Example 3: Figure one, L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 2, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

The first figure, initiating *Yr*, is built on harmonics. Harmonics are not performed on the Norwegian folk violin. Thoresen exploits that idea three times in the run of the composition: the first and the last time are mirror images – the first is based on long rhythmical values first and shorter ones later. The last one – on the short ones first and the long at the end. The second time harmonics appear on short values.

The second figure: I would like to call “yr” as it reflects the meaning of the title the strongest. *Yr* in Norwegian can be understood in three ways: as a noun – meaning “drizzle”, as an adjective – meaning “giddy”, “making giddy” and as a verb – “to swarm”, “to teem with”. Typical of that figure is a wavy melodic line of a big range performed in the higher registers by use of harmonics, not always though.



Example 4: Figure two, “yr”, L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 2, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

The main difference between that figure and the first one is rhythm: the second figure is based on very short values, which become even shorter – also by changes of tempo, so short that it is impossible to recognize their values.

Even if neither harmonics nor such short values, or precisely – vague rhythm – appear in the *slåtter* for hardanger fiddle it is possible to find a thin line going from hardanger fiddle tradition to the second figure: among the harmonics there are some pitches reminding of non-professional or Non-Western music created on scales based on natural tuning (c#” on 2nd string).

The last figure of *Yr* has the strongest roots in the tradition of *slåtter*. It is a short – only three-four notes’ long theme.



Example 5: Motive, L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 2, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

Its size is not common for the professional Western classical music, but in tunes for *hardanger fiddle* such short themes are usual. I will call that figure “a motive” as the researchers working with Norwegian *slåtter* call main musical thoughts of the *slåtter*.

Although the size of the motive of *Yr* reminds of a motive from hardanger fiddle tradition, the figure in its first presentation differs from motives of folk tunes in several ways: it is based on long rhythmical values and both small intervals and small range. Farther variants are closer to folk music motives – the most common one exploits triplets which are very often seen in the transcriptions of the tunes for the Norwegian folk violin and wire-like shape of a melodic line.



Example 6: Shapes of the motive, L. Thoresen, *Yr*, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

Moreover, as in *slåtter*, the motive of *Yr* is normally supported by a central note which constitute harmonic basement. By introducing it the composer achieves the same thick texture typical of hardanger fiddle music. Interestingly, similarly as in the traditional music, the central notes in *Yr* are often, not always though, pitches of the open strings. However, the central notes reign normally over longer sections than in *slåtter*. That is how Thoresen puts the three figures together in the piece:

I: fig. 1 - motive – fig.2 – fig.1 – motive – fig.2 - |:motive:| - fig.2 - |:motive:|

fig. 2 – motive – fig. 2 - |:motive:| - fig. 2

II: |:motive:| - |:fig.2:| - |:motive:| - fig.2 - |:motive:| - |:fig.2:| - fig.1

The formal scheme of the piece shows dominance of the motive-figure, the one that is the strongest inspired by the folk tradition. Scrutiny of these parts of the composition reveals further connections of the motive fragments with hardanger fiddle tunes. Let's take a look at the second appearance of the motive:

Example 7: L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 3, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

First it is built on long rhythmic values. Thoresen divides it from the next presentation by means of the second figure. The second time the motive moves faster. A very important thing is that the section dominated by motive does not end here. It is followed by many repetitions of the motive, normally not identical with its original shape. That way of developing musical material one finds in *slåtter*. Repetitions escape from the initial shape slowly but steadily so that after a while similarity could be hard to point. Eivind Groven describes it vividly. He writes: “blooming lies at the bottom of recreation of a motive of a *slått*” (vide: A.J. Kydland, 1983, 16). That means that the shapes of motives are built one on another, they grow out from each other. Tellef Kvifte calls that way of development “the rule of continuous variation” (Kvifte, 1978, 76).

Every time Thoresen introduces the motive — he consequently exploits the principle of developing musical material derived from *slåtter*. He creates repetitions by making changes in:

- melody – new pitches, new intervals, transpositions of the motive to different registers,
- ornamentation,

- rhythm – shortens or extends rhythmical values,
- changing the placement of a motive in the bar,
- harmonic,
- articulation (bowing).

The general motive development rules are partly identical with the ones governing in *slåtter*. Again there are several divergences between these two musics as the artist tends to throw the listeners out of the point of reference, e.g. in the case of the earlier discussed part of the piece, by using a figure derived from professional music, from a cadenza solo.



Example 8: L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 3, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

However the main reason for different results achieved by Thoresen is that he, in all of that aspects, realizes his own development plan, looks at the piece and its every fragment as at the whole and exploits the possibilities of written music. Let's look at a couple of examples: Thoresen makes shapes of repetitions dependent on their place in a chain of repetitions. E.g. in example 9 he stops the movement gradually by consequently shortening one note of the motive - d'' - and emphasizing e''. Such complex ideas do not exist in folk music transferred orally.



Example 9: L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 5, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

Second, the artist also uses meter for reshaping the motive. Let's look again at example 7: Thoresen uses his own way of notating meter here. The digit "3" indicates that the section consists of three beats' bars. Beats are however not equally long, meter is then asymmetrical – as the further part of the meter signature used by Thoresen shows – the last unit is longer than the two first. The asymmetrical beats are well known in Norway as they are typical of an old Norwegian folk dance called *springar* accompanied by *slåtter*. The regional/local versions of the dance vary exactly with the proportion of the beats. It is very likely that this is the origin of the Thoresen's idea. But again the composer has not stopped there. He made a step forward by:

- introducing more than one meter in some of the sections he used the idea,
- changing the length of the bar repeated in the same meter but with a different beats' proportion,
- realizing a plan of the tension development in a section of the composition by means of asymmetrical meter (example below).



Example 10: L. Thoresen, *Yr*, pp. 7, Udine 2002, Pizzicato

Finally, the last area of inspiration by Norwegian folk music is the sound system lying at the bottom of parts of *Yr* dominated by the motive. The piece is based, as many other Thoresen's pieces, on microintervals. The composer admitted many times that the sources of this idea can be found both in his interest in ethnic music that goes back to the seventies of the last century and in spectral music.

The motive closes in tetrachords (here called so conventionally) built on two types of intervals: major and natural seconds. Their most common sequence in *Yr* is:

M M N N

The other tetrachords are:

M N N M

N N M M

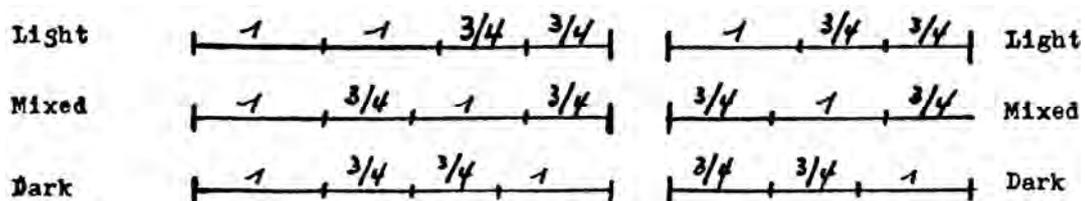
N M M N

The shapes of the tetrachords are different versions of the same unit. The composer achieved three last ones by making some pre-compositional calculations based on tetrachord number one: he created every next tetrachord by a reference to the previous one. Thoresen built the sequences of intervals beginning with the second interval of the previous tetrachord and moved the first interval to the end, e.g.:

First tetrachord: M M N N

Second tetrachord: M N N M

Moreover, the shape of the main and the most often used tetrachord does not seem to be chosen at random: in the theoretical writings on the scale of Norwegian folk music, first of all in the texts of Eirik Eggen (1923) Eivind Groven (1927) and Reidar Sevåg (1974) that sequence or precisely: that part of the row of partials and its conversion, was considered to lie at the bottom of the hypothetical scale of Norwegian folk music. In his article on the problem of mode in Norwegian folk music (1974) Sevåg presents different variants of tetrachords of the hypothetical scale of Norwegian folk music. The scale is based on seven notes and two tetrachords each.



Example 11: Variants of tetrachords of the Norwegian folk music scale, R. Sevåg, *Neutral tones and the problem of mode in Norwegian folk music*, (in:) “*Studia Instrumentorum Musicae Popularis*” 1974, nr III, pp. 210

Interestingly, the shapes of the tetrachords “calculated” by Thoresen correspond with some tetrachords presented in Sevåg’s article: the first tetrachord corresponds with the first one of the light scale,

the second – with the first one of the dark scale. The third one can be understood as a part of the second tetrachord of the dark scale. What makes it even more significant is that Thoresen often follows the name of a scale by e.g. placing passages built on the dark scale tetrachords in lower registers.

Summary: Lasse Thoresen transplanted several elements of the hardangere fiddle tradition and the Norwegian folk music tradition in general to his composition but he treated most of them only as the exit point for his ideas: he gave the main figure of the piece, the motive, a similar shape to the motives of the *slåtter* – he made it very short – but differently than in the tradition he built its first shape on long rhythmical values and all of them on both small intervals and small range. Although as in *slåtter* he connected the motive with chains of its repetitions with small but permanent changes, he acquired different results since the chains were longer than in folk tunes and he carried out through them his ideas in chosen elements of music, such as: consequent extension of a chosen bit or consequent shortening of a chosen pitch up till its disappearing. He used asymmetrical meter in *Yr* but changed the lengths of beats according to his own meter development plan. He exploited the row of partials lying at the bottom of the hypothetical Norwegian music scale. Also here, however, he went a bit further – he made three transpositions of the sequence of partials and based the motive or its fragments on them. There he met the folk tradition again as some of the transpositions corresponded with variants of the folk music scale's tetrachords. Moreover, he used the pitches of the open strings as harmonic supports of the motive and its repetitions, creating thick texture but he let them reign over longer sections. Finally, he placed the ideas deriving from folk music in his original formal structure with a clear tension plan and planned picture of melody shape in the run of the whole composition, which do not exist in traditional music transmitted orally.

All in all, the piece seems to be a conscious reference to the folk tradition on one hand, and a conscious withdrawal from the folk tradition on the other hand. That impression gets even stronger when one adds further “inconsistencies” such as: used in *Yr*, intentionally or not, harmonics not present in hardanger fiddle music but achieving pitches reminding of natural tuning of folk music or, another one, composing the piece for violin solo but recommending to play it as the hardanger fiddle – with scordatura.

Coming back to the main question: has Lasse Thoresen created a piece sounding Norwegian? Looking from the perspective of a listener, unconscious and fresh, as I was before – the answer could be “yes”. Looking from the perspective of a musicologist – it would be “partly”. The last perspective left to consider is the one of the composer. I had an opportunity to ask Lasse Thoresen about how Norwegian his music is. This is what he answered: – *My ideas in this respect may be influenced by my belief in the Unity of Mankind. Although this unity ultimately is transcendent and intelligible, and not fully*

manifest to perception or experience. The idea is that human rationality, and human existence have common features, although they may have different forms in the manifest world. Some musical forms may be pretty universal, such as the drone, the regular pulse. These have got certain Gestalt qualities that make them potent in organizing sound in a comprehensible way. Limitation in numbers of pertinent values is another principle you find in musical reality. The conclusion was: – So folk music – or the music of the peoples of the planet have more in common generally, than what separates them. For me folk music symbolizes the humanity's universal nature – the ideologically opposite of nationalism.

In the context of *Yr* this answer gets its complement in one of the radio programs with the composer as a guest devoted to another piece of Thoresen called *Løp, lokk og linjar*. He revealed there that he finds working with both “all [that is] old, archaic” and “from laboratory” utterly interesting. “I am fascinated with finding the points where these two worlds meet, being between folk music, not constructed one and *learnt music* where one thinks with concepts” (Bodil Johanne Jensen, 2004).

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