

Erik Bergman and the Subject of Composing

by Juha Torvinen

“I compose what I hear inside me.”

– Erik Bergman¹

In his article “The Echo of the Subject,” the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe ponders the connection between a “musical obsession” and an “autobiographical compulsion” by analyzing psychoanalyst Theodor Reik’s book *The Haunting Melody*. Lacoue-Labarthe focuses on an involuntary and recurrent reminiscence of a musical fragment, a “tune in one’s head” that “keeps coming back” without any clear and present cause. A “haunting” musical reverberation seems to spring from a personal history and becomes, thus, “an echo of the subject” calling for self-analysis: why precisely this tune, why here and now, and what keeps it coming back?²

It is clear that a certain amount of musical obsession is a necessity (or at least an advantage) for a composer. However, the nature of this obsession and its possible autobiographical undertone vary widely in individual cases. I will focus here on the Finnish modernist Erik Bergman (1911–2011) by musing on his composer profile and listening to its unchanging features as “echoes” of subjectivity. These unchanging features in Bergman’s composer profile are found in 1) his musical style, 2) his inspirational way of composing, and 3) his relationship to exotic cultures. I will propose that the distinctive tone of Bergman’s works, together with other traits of his composer profile, can be approached as signs of an implicit autobiographical compulsion.

1

There is truly something that “keeps coming back” in Bergman’s music. Despite various changes in his compositional style, and regardless of the fact that his compositions arose over nine (*sic*) decades, Bergman’s works build on strong and clearly identifiable “Bergmanesque” musical traits. These include rhythmically accelerating and/or sequentially rising gestures, distinctively contrasting successive musical “moments,” melodies growing gradually from the low register, “tone-painting” sensitive to texts, static fields of sound and pedal points, wedge-like forms on both a large and a



Example 1: Erik Bergman, *Midsommarnatt* (1932), fair copy, mm. 83–103 (Erik Bergman Collection).

small scale, and an unconventional use of instruments and the human voice. Perhaps the most Bergmanesque musical gesture is the frenzied sigh motif in trochaic rhythm (“daaa-da”), especially in evidence in his late works but also found in his less frequently performed early output.

To exemplify how these characteristic elements remained constant throughout Bergman’s career, one can focus on the first of the above-listed traits. Rhythmically accelerating and/or sequentially rising gestures (reminiscent of the *dimax* figure of baroque rhetoric) are equally present in his early music, based on major-minor tonality, and in his late works that build on post-serial harmony. One could compare a piano work from his juvenilia, *Midsommarnatt* (Midsummer Night, 1932; *Example 1*), with the last movement of his String Quartet, op. 98 (1982; *Example 2*).

Handwritten musical score for measures 22-27 of Erik Bergman's String Quartet, op. 98. The score is written for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello (Vc). Measures 22 and 23 are circled and marked with a 3-measure rest. The music features complex rhythmic patterns and chromatic movement. Dynamic markings include 'ff' and 'p'.

Handwritten musical score for measures 24-27 of Erik Bergman's String Quartet, op. 98. The score continues from the previous page. Measures 24, 25, and 26 are circled and marked with 3-measure rests. Measure 27 is circled and marked with a 7-measure rest. The music continues with intricate rhythmic and harmonic textures. Dynamic markings include 'p' and 'ff'.

Example 2: Erik Bergman, String Quartet, op. 98 (1982), fair copy, nos. 22–27, pp. 17–18 (Erik Bergman Collection).

It is precisely due to their pervasiveness that these musical traits readily lend themselves to interpretation as signs of a strong underlying autobiographical compulsion. However, for composers in general, such stylistic traits do not necessarily appear as conscious “echoes of the subject” or cause any need for verbal self-analysis. Rather, they are considered something natural and essential from the point of view of an artist’s work. But, especially in composers like Bergman, it is also possible to see (and hear) the music *itself* as a kind of unconscious self-analysis, a peculiar result of an unrecognized autobiographical need.

2

Bergman’s compositions often had very similar inspirational origins. I will offer here just one example to illustrate his rapturous way of experiencing the world. It is found in his travel diary entry for his last morning on a visit to Istanbul in 1956:

Boats bellowing like cows in the morning dusk down there on the Bosphorus, bells booming, street peddlers shouting in the alleys, cocks crowing. Istanbul wakes up with a choir of sounds and sudden sunlight. Indescribable atmosphere.

Cars hooting ... human voices ... din of machines.

An impressionistic tone poem!

A diverse, manifold world, tones here and there, colliding in dissonances; a colorful play in the gray mist. The blaze of the sun flames red in the fog, rising steeply upwards only to soon create a strong and powerful illumination of an Oriental ostentatiousness. Ecstatic! My chest is about to explode because of the rapture this beautiful spectacle evokes.³

Following this section, Bergman notated the sounds of the boat horns, “an exotic choir of whistles” that echoed “between European and Asian mountains.” Eventually these tones, either heard in the morning as such or merely inspired by the atmosphere of the morning, formed the first half of the twelve-tone row for his orchestral work *Aubade*, op. 48 (1956–58).

3

Yet another type of “echo of the subject” in Bergman’s composer profile is to be found in his outlook on exotic cultures. He spent almost half his life traveling around the world, and in all exotic cultures he developed an interest in phenomena with which he was in a way already familiar; by exploring other cultures, he explored himself. For example, as music scholar Julia Shpinitzkaya has pointed out, in the early 1970s Bergman was enthralled by the drone principles of Buddhist ritual music.⁴ Such principles were, however, very close to the pedal points and static sound fields he had applied in his early works, for example in the song “Olet tuskani” (You are my pain) from *Rakastetulle* (To the loved one, op. 6, 1942).

Another example is to be found in Bergman’s relationship to Sámi music. In “Yoik,” the second movement of *Lapponia* (1975), Bergman tried to capture, in his own words, “the essence of *yoik*” by focusing on the two

principles he thought were most prominent in *yoiks*: a short two note motif in iambic rhythm, and the gradual rise of the baseline pitch in the course of singing. However, among the various traits of Sámi music, Bergman seems to have focused on these two precisely because they reminded him of his own musical style. For example, a rising pitch and consequently growing intensity were key principles in the fourth movement of the *Hathor Suite* (1971).

As mentioned above, Bergman is considered a major modernist of Finnish music. In modernist thought, there is a certain implicit contradiction between concurrent beliefs in a unified subjectivity (i.e. the composer's self) and the superiority of musical innovation and progress. This contradiction vanishes only if one considers (as modernists often do) music to be something independent of the composer's self, that is, if one sees the musical subjectivity and the biographical subjectivity of a single composer as two distinct realms. Interestingly, Bergman the modernist was almost a personification of such a contradiction: while always aiming at novel musical inventions and challenging conventional ways of listening, he did so within the limits of a strict aesthetic and recognizable musical principles that indicate, both musically and biographically, a strong and unified subjectivity.

To understand this contradiction and its significance in Bergman's case, it could be said that instead of being haunted by some clear (purely) musical fragments or ideas, Bergman was obsessed by a certain way of experiencing things or, in other words, by a certain kind of immutable affective mode of being, a *Stimmung*.⁵ A good example is found in his relationship to exoticism. Rather than simply specifying foreign places or cultures, exoticism also meant detachment from the common in many ways – physically, conceptually, geographically, and emotionally. His urge to go towards something that defies explanation remained unchanged throughout his life and in all his stylistic phases. For example, one of his reasons for abandoning serial techniques in early 1960s might be that they no longer had an aura of mystery to be resolved. Bergman's aspirations were at least as closely related to the world-views of many Eastern religions, shamanism, medieval mystics (Meister Eckhart), and American transcendentalist philosophers (Emerson, Thoreau) as they were to those of modernist composers.

Altogether, Bergman's easily recognizable musical style, his inspirational relationship to composing, and his generally "exoticist" attitude towards life can be seen as signs of a subjectivity that was sensitive to and relied on constant and unchanging affectivity (*Stimmung*) as a basis for a relationship to the world. Following the ideas of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, one can say that Bergman *heard* himself (that is, he took the sense of his relation to himself and to the world as given), but he did not *listen* to himself, that is, he did not question the meaning of these affective echoes and their relationship to the formation of his self and subjectivity.⁶ (Otherwise he

would probably have realized that he did not start every work from a zero point, as he often claimed.) The resulting music is modernist in its strong way of revealing a constant and unified subjectivity and in its unique musical style, but less modernist in its limited elements of innovation and progress – at least when seen in the course of Bergman’s overall career.

Bergman was a composer whose modernist “musical obsession” had an especially strong biographical undertone that is revealed in a constant search for novel ways to capture his personal and existential *Stimmung* in music. The work of composing, however conceptual, was for Bergman, first and foremost, a form of nonconceptual self-reflection. As he mentioned in 1995, “I compose what I hear inside me.”

¹ Orig. “Kirjoitan sen minkä sisälläni kuulen”; Harri Kuusisaari, “‘Kirjoitan sen minkä sisälläni kuulen’: Erik Bergman ei hellitä säveltämisen paatoksesta,” *Rondo*, 6 (1995), pp. 8–11.

² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Echo of the Subject,” in idem, *Typography*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 139–207.

³ The original travel diary (in Swedish) is to be found among the holdings of the Sibelius Museum in Turku, Finland (trans. J. T.).

⁴ Julia Shpinitzkaya, “Erik Bergman: Shaping Sound through Myth: Cultural Experience and Sound Strategies,” lecture delivered at the Erik Bergman 100 Symposium in Turku, Finland, on September 26, 2011.

⁵ See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Echo of the Subject” (see note 2), p. 186.

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *À l’écoute* (Paris: Galilée, 2002); Eng. trans. by Charlotte Mandell as *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).