

NEW MORNING

KETIL BJØRNSTAD



NEW MORNING IN A CLOSED-DOWN CITY

It was in February 2020 that we began paying really close attention to the news. What was going on in China? The city of Wuhan, with twice as many inhabitants as in all of Norway, was struck by a mysterious virus, COVID-19, also called corona. Many of us had never even heard of Wuhan. China and Taiwan had cities with populations in the millions that were never mentioned in news reports at home. Norway was oriented towards the West. What was happening in the USA was what was important. There was no street crossing on the other side of the Atlantic that was too minor to merit broad coverage from the government-run Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. A dishonest governor or a senator who was guilty of drunk driving always wound up as a major news story in Norway, too.

But what was one supposed to do about bats spreading a deadly illness in an animal market in a Chinese city?

At first we did nothing. We stared at the television screen and listened to expert commentators who hemmed and hawed and placed all the blame on China as a society. *They* had created the virus. Evil was part of their national strategy.

Yes, the winter of 2019-2020 was a period marked by rapidly evolving images of the enemy. By the beginning of March the Norwegian authorities were seriously bewildered. The contagion had spread to Italy, and when a flight filled with Italian tourists landed in Tromsø the discussion flared up. Should Norway close down?

I had my last solo concert at Stormen in Bodø at the same time. I remember going to have my hair cut at the hotel that afternoon. The hairdresser was coughing and sneezing. He said he had a cold. I believed him, and I didn't come down with anything myself. But a few days later, on March 10th, I was supposed to travel to Fosnavåg with Anneli Drecker and Lars Saabye Christensen to present *A Suite of Poems*. It was an important concert for us, at one of the places in Norway that is the most spectacular and exposed to the elements, and it was going to be filmed by master photographer Odd Geir Sæther. But was it safe to go there *now*?

We presented the concert for a small but enthusiastic audience. On the flight to Oslo the next day we knew that this might be the last time we

would see each other for a long time. The government had announced a press conference the following day. Norwegians who had returned home from a ski resort in Austria had already infected everyone they had been in contact with in their local communities.

I remember that the last person I hugged before lockdown was Anneli, when we reached the Oslo airport and knew what was going to happen. We wished each other luck.

The next day Norway was in lockdown. Schools, universities, restaurants, sports arenas, concert halls. Everything was shut down completely.

A few weeks went by. We ordered groceries to be delivered to our door. We saw horrifying news reports from hospitals in northern Italy that were overflowing with dying corona patients. We were frightened, and didn't know what was going to happen. A few more weeks passed.

Then Christer Falck called.

Christer is a close friend who also hosts an outdoor festival, Gåsehud ved fjorden, together with my wife Catharina, only a stone's throw south of our home on Bunnefjorden on the Oslo Fjord. Christer neither smokes nor drinks, so he has more energy and brighter ideas than the rest of us. Now

he was planning to stream a festival from the beautiful Marble Hall at the cultural centre Sentralen in the centre of Oslo, near Stortinget, the Norwegian parliament. A jazz festival featuring some of Norway's foremost jazz musicians, without a single audience member present. All the concerts would be arranged with the most stringent infection control measures possible, and recordings would be made for several days before the concerts would be streamed all over the world.

“Can you give a solo concert at the end of April?” asked Christer.

I was flattered that he asked, but I was exhausted. I had just finished composing an opera about Kirsten Flagstad, in which Birgitte Christensen would perform the main role. I had also recently completed *The Last Decade*, the sixth volume of my book series *The World I Used to Know*. So I said that this was not a good time for such a project. I had planned to take a break, one I felt I deserved.

But saying no to Christer is simply impossible. He doesn't take no for an answer. He sees potential in everything, as does Helge Westbye of the music company Grappa Musikkforlag. Besides, he and Helge liked the CD format as much as I did. An album. A concept. And a DVD, too. Both sound and image. It was tempting.

“Well, all right, then,” I said, in a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

I had four weeks to prepare for the recording.

Was it because I had been working on my series of memoirs *The World I Used to Know* that I began to think about the pianists of my childhood and youth? Who had created me, formed me, during a period when the greatest classical pianists and most influential jazz pianists came to Norway thanks to the efforts of a few capable impresarios?

Oslo was a music centre then. Where I held my debuts with the Oslo Philharmonic and my own recital. Where at the age of 12 I heard Wilhelm Kempff and Arthur Rubinstein, and asked them for their autographs. My piano teacher, Amalie Christie, asked us to invite Claudio Arrau himself to our home at Frogner plass when he played Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A minor with the Oslo Philharmonic at Chateau Neuf, the students’ auditorium, on the same day as I held my first solo concert at the University Aula. It was a memorable evening, when all of us young pianists gathered around the large Yamaha grand piano I had bought after György Cziffra had shipped it to Oslo for his concert a few months earlier. Arrau was one of my idols, along with Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter. Pianists whose touch had a particular weight, a weight that the younger international stars, with Daniel Barenboim in the vanguard, had

also acquired. This also applied to Vladimir Ashkenazy, Stephen Bishop and Martha Argerich. They gave concerts in Oslo regularly in that period, as did Ilona Kabos, who along with her husband gave the world premiere of Béla Bartók's *Concerto for Two Pianos, Percussion and Orchestra*. She was my teacher for a short period of time in both Oslo and London.

Hardly a week went by without such influential figures performing in Oslo. Musically, Oslo was a world metropolis thanks to its energetic impresarios. Even Richard Strauss had visited Oslo for a concert appearance many years earlier.

But Oslo was also a jazz metropolis. When I held my debut with Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3 in 1969, the 21-year-old Keith Jarrett had already performed here with Charles Lloyd. At the same time as my own recital debut two and a half years later, Jarrett played in Oslo with Miles Davis, the day before making his legendary recording *Facing You* on the ECM label. And during the same period, ECM founder Manfred Eicher brought Paul Bley, Chick Corea, Bobo Stenson and many other jazz greats to Arne Bendiksen Studio. While making their recordings they also gave concerts at Club 7 in the city centre. And at the major jazz festivals in Molde and Kongsberg we could see performers such as Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock

and Joe Zawinul. We could literally see and hear a new chapter of music history being written.

While I was practising for the concert at Sentralen, I thought about all these pianists and the influence they had on my own playing, regardless of genre. I had just finished replacing the hammers on my indispensable Steinway Model A made in the 1960s, when grand pianos had a much heavier and deeper touch than today's instruments. These instruments had a level of resistance that demanded a certain amount of technical strength. Many jazz pianists avoided them, because their piano technique was developed to carry out improvisation and scales that required a lighter touch. Piano technician Thron Irby, for many years called "Mr Steinway" in Norway, was a regular visitor to my home, where he fine-tuned the instrument while we conducted fascinating conversations about the personalities and distinctive characteristics of grand pianos. He was still tuning the grand pianos at the Oslo Concert Hall, and had to deal with pianists who from week to week demanded very different kinds of action on the instruments. This could result in damage in the long run. In my case it seemed as though Irby, without being aware of it, was preparing me for the fine Steinway Model D that was already waiting for me at Sentralen, and

which, despite its more modern brilliance, offered substantial resistance and powerful dynamics.

But I didn't know that then. I prepared myself for a concert that I thought would be extremely introspective, without strong contrasts, a reflection of the current state of the world when we were often alone with our own thoughts. And when I arrived at Sentralen that April day in 2020, having driven my own car due to the danger of contagion on public transport, I had to ring a bell on the door of a building that was nearly empty. Only a few technicians, maybe seven altogether, and Christer himself, who opened the door for me and maintained a distance of several metres.

"Everything is ready," he said. "The grand piano is there, waiting. How long do you want to spend warming up?"

"I've already warmed up," I answered. "We can get started right away."

"Really? Just a short soundcheck?"

"Yes."

Perhaps it's a pianist's fate, or gift, to play on unfamiliar instruments. I had always enjoyed developing the trajectory of a concert, which was basically an

improvisation without a planned order of pieces, while at the same time I got to know the instrument, learned how to be surprised, discovered the strong and weak areas of intonation. Always driven by enthusiasm, but maybe also disappointment.

But this instrument excited me with its possibilities. Or was it just because I had not given a solo concert for six weeks? I had hardly even greeted the audio and visual technicians. They were hidden behind black curtains. I wanted to get going as quickly as possible, and when I started it was with an improvisation in an empty room. I sat all alone in a beautiful marble hall, with one camera in front of me and two on the side, and microphones in the usual places. All I knew was that I was going to play for an hour and a quarter without a break, and that the concert was absolutely not going to be as introspective as I had thought.

I made use of all my memories while playing, and at the same time all my expectations. The music could not be stopped by corona. The music intensified everything, and reminded me of the situation we were living through. It brought to mind the fear, the grief, but also the joy of being right here, this April day, with the grey light. The trees that had not yet budded. The spring that had not yet appeared, but would arrive regardless of the

situation. What could I *myself* expect? I didn't know. I was approaching the age of 70. My body was beginning to make more and more of my decisions for me. But still, the sense of anticipation was there. The joy of being able to play, improvise and be alive, despite everything. A new morning, although it was already late in the day.

Oslo, 2 January 2022

Ketil Bjørnstad

APRIL, 2020

The contagion has shrouded the city. A sheath
Almost like Teflon, grey and glossy, protective as the wax
covering the jam in a glass jar
The people are tinned in cohorts and quarantine

But through the ice-cold wind on Rådhusgaten
I see a person far away on the pavement
I pull away onto a side street, I don't want to
meet people now; I'd rather look for bats from Wuhan
It's the Chinese who are guilty, always the Chinese
The wet market in Huanan. The Chinese words rhyme but
the news reporters are always confused
by anything that isn't American
Trump wants to wage war against the Chinese, they pillage the stock market
they spread the infection, the plague, we must protect the West

but we don't need masks, and the borders must remain open, while
the institute that is meant to protect our health asks for time
asks for research, no hasty conclusions now
just wait as long as possible, get the facts on the table
the sacred words *empirical data*
And this is a pandemic

But who are we in this quiet city where everything is hidden
and nearly forgotten. All the big buildings that are empty
where did all the people in the restaurants go
in the Opera, in concert halls and jazz clubs, where did the
customers of the butcher and fishmonger go. They are
in the department stores, they stand in a queue to buy alcohol,
they have their groceries delivered
I am going to Sentralen to play Chopin
A grand piano in a huge hall that is practically empty
The green light of the lamps, the pungent smell of the people's absence
In the corners the bats are roosting

It's not our fault, they say. Not ours
While the Institute of Public Health does research
and old people in Sweden are dying
We are still in control, they say
When summer comes we'll have all the answers
COVID-19 was just a bad dream
The billionaires tighten the knots on their ties
The market prices are pointing upwards again
The boldest are first in the queue
In the West we get answers for things
The sacred words empirical data
And this is a pandemic
The bats are roosting in their corners, quiet as mice
and *glancing at each other, frightened*

A poem from Ketil Bjørnstad's *Båt på fjorden* (*Boat on the Fjord*)
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