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A short introduction to Alf Hurum's life and work

Alf Hurum does not belong to the most well-known Norwegian composers. He was born in 1882 and was active as a composer from around 1910 to 1930. Even if his number of works are not extensive, his work has historic significance and importance: he was the first Norwegian composer to display an influence from Claude Debussy. Not only that, recent research has shown that he was in fact the first *Nordic* composer to succumb to the spell of the great Frenchman. This took place in a period when new French music, and especially the music by Debussy, were recognised as extremely radical by the conservative Norwegian music critics. Hurum's view was that the future of Norwegian music was to be sought for a great part in modern music of France.

Hurum's first musical studies were in Kristiania (Holter, Knutzen). From 1905 to 1910 he studied at the Royal Academy of Music in Berlin (Kahn, Bruch and da Motta). He married Leslie Wight of Honolulu, Hawaii, in Berlin in 1908. After a short stay in Norway in 1910 they decided to go to Paris. Here Hurum encountered the music of Debussy for the first time changing his musical outlook. During the summer of 1911 he composed his first Debussy-inspired piano pieces which were published shortly before Christmas under the title *Impressions*.

After the stay in Paris during 1911 Hurum stayed in Berlin until the summer of 1915; then he left Berlin for good and moved back to Norway. During the winter of 1916-17 he studied orchestration with Maximilian Steinberg in St. Petersburg. After the stay in Russia he lived in Kristiania until February 1924, interrupted only by short travels abroad. In 1924 Hurum and his wife went to visit her family in Honolulu. Here he was asked to become the conductor of the city's small orchestra, the Honolulu Symphony, consisting of some 25 members. He agreed to becoming the conductor but not on a permanent basis. However, he reorganised and enlarged the orchestra so that it became a full-fledged symphony orchestra of 70 members. The 1924-25 season consisted of 7 concerts, and Hurum conducted all of them. Today the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra is still alive and well.

Hurum arrived back in Oslo in April 1928, and attended the premier of his d-minor symphony. In the fall of 1929 he once again left Norway, this time never to return. Initially he stayed for some time in Berlin, but in 1930 went on to Paris. There he decided to take a few

weeks vacation from music to study painting. First he studied with Andre Lhôte, but the cubist trend was not to his liking and instead he turned to the Japanese artist Hiraku Harada and the very old technique of oriental colormaking and silkpainting.

After further studies in Peking and Tokyo Hurum settled in Honolulu in 1934 and continued as a painter. Music he left for good. In a fairly short time he became a famous painter in the Pacific area. He died in 1972 just before his 90th birthday.

Hurum's encounter with the music of Debussy in 1911 really made an impact on his development. This is clearly seen from an interview in *Aftenposten* published 3rd of January 1912. After five years of studies in Berlin and one year in Paris he says:

I know the Germans, and now I'm beginning to gain an understanding of French music as well, and I say to the Norwegian musicians who are about to go abroad: Come to France!

He takes a painter's view saying about Debussy that

he is practically a musical impressionist, he lets music and painting flow over into one another to a greater extent than ever before. Ö He uses the music, almost as a visual illustration.

In a letter to David Monrad Johansen dated 14 May, 1918, Hurum is even sharper in his characterisation of French and German music than in the interview in 1912:

About the modern French and English piano pieces it is right when you say that you miss something in them, that they lack something in content. Just be careful, so that what you end up with is not like the bourgeoisie German Erbsensuppe mit Schpeck [sic!] [German peasoup with bacon]. Keep in mind, that the French are artists. Their taste is so much more developed than that of the Germans or the English.¹

Even if the Debussy-characteristics were applied in a pastiche-like manner in the pieces which he composed in the summer of 1911, two of them (Op. 4 No. 1 and 2) became very popular. They contain some of the most well-known impressionistic means such as non-functional chord progressions, parallel chords, a distinct modal sound, brief, fragmented melodic motives without any forward drive and a relatively frequent change of metrum just to mention a few.

After this first touch of French influence the further development in Hurum's compositions can most simply be described like this: a simple, but distinct Debussy-imitation style in 1911 gave way to a more consistent and in-depth use of impressionist elements around 1918-20. In between these two points in time, some of his works were classic-romantic, some were impressionistic and in some we find elements from both styles. (Presenting Hurum at the

¹ The letter is preserved in the National Library, Oslo.

conference the piano piece 'Det sner og det sner'^a (It's Snowing and Snowing), no. 4 in Op. 16, served as an example of Hurum's impressionism as found around 1920).

Around 1920 another change of interest is found with Hurum. We can see a deep interest in the Middle Ages for some years and his music turns more and more modal in its sound. Even if it is not clear what the source of this interest was, it corresponds to the French view of being modern by using topics from the Middle Ages combined with the use of modality.

In 1930 then Hurum left music to paint and up to around 1955 he was very active and participated regularly at exhibitions in Honolulu. Most of his paintings are preserved in the Honolulu Academy of Arts.