

KNUDAGE RIISAGER

David C F Wright DMus

Knudage Riisager may not be a great composer but he is an important one. He was born in Port Kunda, Estonia on 6 March 1897. His father was an engineer and built a cement factory. When F L Smidth died in 1899, Riisager was summoned home to Copenhagen to work for Smidth's Company. The Riisagers set up home in Frederiksberg where Knudage lived all his life.

His first real interest was political science which he studied at Copenhagen University and from 1925 to 1950 he was a civil servant and, from 1939, was Head of the Ministry of Finance Department. This may explain why he did not give more attention to music and why, as a result, his music may not be top drawer. But it is up to each individual to make up their own mind.

His musical training was largely with Otto Malling and, on his death in 1915, Riisager moved over to Peder Gram. It was the great French composer, Albert Roussel, that changed the Dane's direction. Riisager went to Paris in 1923 and encountered Roussel and became his pupil. He also had some lessons with Paul Le Flem and the French influence can be detected in Riisager's music. It has been said that Riisager's earlier music was like Carl Nielsen but some comparisons are unfortunate and often misleading.

Riisager was also impressed with Prokofiev and Bartok and even more so with Stravinsky and his own music developed worthy developments such as dissonance, bitonality and a quirky sense of humour which was not always appreciated.

Some of his progressive sorties may have misled him. His work T-DOXC, Poem mecanique of 1926, has as its third movement a portrait of a Japanese aircraft and the whole concept of mechanical music may not sit with inspiration. Having said that there will be those who will say that Honegger's Pacific 231 is mechanical music but people do talk nonsense at times.

In 1928, Riisager became involved with the Royal Theatre Ballet composing music for Elena Jorgensen's ballet Benzin which was, like all of Schubert's stage works, both a disaster and a flop. His next ballet score was for Borg Ralov's Hans Christian Andersen ballet Twelve by the Mail and then Fool's Paradise and Qarrtsilui. These later ballet scores established him as a composer. His ballet The Phoenix appeared in 1945 and a selection of studies by Czerny became his ballet Etudes. This was highly successful.

Riisager was a driving force in promoting contemporary music in Copenhagen and was a founder of the Society of Young Composers and, in fact, chairman between 1922 and 1924. In 1937 he was the chairman of the Association of Danish Composers which post he held for twenty five years. He was a great leader and involved in committees and societies and not only in Denmark.

He studied counterpoint in Leipzig under Hermann Grabner in 1932.

In 1956, he became the Director of the Royal Danish Academy of Music.

His only opera Susanne was not a success although it was revived in 1957. There were to be two more ballets Moon Reindeer of 1957 and The Lady from the Sea of 1960 which was premiered in New York. But they do not seem to have caught on.



It raises the question advanced by Stravinsky who was asked what was the most important feature in ballet, the choreography or the music. He replied try watching Swan Lake without the music and the answer is obvious. It is ridiculous to say, for example, a ballet is by Frederick Ashton since he was not a composer.

In the last decade of his life, Riisager worked on The Song of the Infinite to a text by Leopardi.

As to his symphonic works Opus 1, the Overture for Erasmus Montanus, completed in 1920, was rejected by both Peder Gram and the Danish Concert Society. Eventually, Ture Rangstrom premiered it in Gothenburg in October 1924. It has its weaknesses and, even at the time, it was suggested that it was re-orchestrated. The Overture Jack the Dullard of 1929 and Comoedie of 1930 were to make up a set called Danish Pictures. But they have a humour that is somewhat coarse and it is said that they conjure up moods and characters which would be lost on most of us.

His fascination with rogues is worrying as in his Carnival Op 20 dedicated to the rogues and all the fun-loving girls of Copenhagen.

It is when he contemplated 'serious' music that his skill is shown. His Symphony no 1, Op 8 was completed in June 1925 and the sonata form of the first movement was disliked. It was written in memory of the composer's father who died in 1919. There are some good moments but there is that underlying type of sarcasm which adds to the confusion.

He tried to persuade Neilsen to put on his Symphony no 2 in 1927 which premiered in 1929 and did not have any good reports. The Symphony no 3 of 1935 was called Sinfonia and, as with its predecessor, it was not successful although it has a driving force at times. It was received with boos, hisses and some applause but it was, with truth, the confirmation that you never knew where his music was going and the texture was declared to be bare.

To go back a few years Riisager wrote his Concerto for orchestra in 1931 which shows the influence of Stravinsky and the Die Irae from the Catholic mass. There is a predominant rocking rhythm and the finale is in a baroque style.

The Primavera Overture is cheerful and dissonant.

There is a good Violin Concerto and an attractive Concertino for trumpet and string of 1933 which was said to an example of the French orientated trend in Danish music. Others called his music neo-classical.

There is also much piano music but the piano was not his instrument, the violin was, but the piano was an Achilles heel for him as it was with Sibelius and Elgar. Riisager's main piano work was his Sonata Op 22 of 1931 which also struggles with style. This composer never found a personal style and his music is episodic.

He composed six string quartets and film music.

He died in Copenhagen on 26 December 1974.

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