Readings of Finn Mortensen’s *Symfoni, op. 5*

Until recently there was only one recording of Finn Mortensen’s *Symfoni*:[[1]](#footnote-1) Mariss Jansons’ recording with The Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra from 1982.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the fall of 2011, Terje Mikkelsen’s recording with Münchner Rundfunkorchester was issued.[[3]](#footnote-3) This paper questions how the two mentioned recordings could be read as documents through which we can learn to understand Mortensen and his *Symfoni* differently. It is not important in this context what the performers themselves have claimed about Mortensen or their interpretations. Instead, their interpretations will be read as statements in their own right.

The object of this presentation is not to speak of rights or wrongs in Mortensen’s *Symfoni*. It is an exploratory essay investigating what can be said, in general terms, if we base our understanding on performances. This knowledge could arguably not be derived from mere score studies. Since the *Symfoni* as such is not the theme of this talk, I will not play you musical examples although I will devote parts of the talk to analysis of the two performances. Let us begin the discussion.

## Introduction

There is no neutral reading of any text. Any reading is a series of choices concerning which aspects of the work to ignore and which to highlight. The same applies to the performative interpretation of a score. Even with the most meticulous attempts at recreating what the composer wrote on the page, the interpretation will be distanced from the imaginary neutral that it never was. The uninterpreted score – the notes on the page – is nothing but a heap of indexical references, lacking a pragmatic and syntactical framework in which those references could be understood. The ostensibly neutral score is thus a simulacrum because it is in want of a different original, where the differences could give the key to its meaning. It is only through two texts *not* saying the same that they can begin to have meaning, although we must assume that the two different texts speak of the same matters if we are to understand the differences as meaningful interpretations.

That is why Mikkelsen’s recording of *Symfoni* is so important. Regardless of how excellent Jansons’ recording may be, it has had a limited value in our understanding of Mortensen. On its own it is subject to an imaginary one-to-one relationship to the score, and we would not know which aspects of the interpretation represented a faithful reading of the notation and where Jansons exercised his artistic freedom. It is only through a second recording, such as Mikkelsen’s, that we can truly understand what was at stake in the first recording. It is only in light of the second recording that we can begin to see the significance of the aspects that were ignored in the first recording; and similarly, it is through Mikkelsen’s recording that we can see more clearly which aspects of the score that Jansons’ emphasized. Although we may assume that Mikkelsen’s recording is primarily a reading of the score itself, it is also a reading, re-reading and criticism of Jansons’ reading of the score.

Before we have a look at how these readings manifest and relate to the score and each other, let us take a brief look at the discourse surrounding Mortensen’s *Symfoni*.

## The symphony and its reception

He began composing it in 1945 but it was during the winter of 1952/53 that most of the work was completed (it was first performed in 1963). In the sparse literature, headed by Elef Nesheim who is the only scholar who has devoted a significant amount of time to study Mortensen, it is often called a Neo-classical work.[[4]](#footnote-4) Bruckner[[5]](#footnote-5) was an influence to Mortensen, and so was Mozart and even Bach.[[6]](#footnote-6) *Symfoni* can also be seen as a culmination of Mortensen’s studies of Paul Hindemith’s *Unterweisung im Tonsatz*,[[7]](#footnote-7) a book with which he had worked since the Second World War. All these influences were then incorporated into Mortensen’s own musical language.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The question now is: what is the bridge between musicological/historical knowledge about Mortensen and Jansons and Mikkelsen’s interpretive knowledge? To make the following argument comprehensible I will confine the discussion to the first movement of *Symfoni*. Before setting out on this discussion, I will first elaborate what is narratively at stake in the two performances.

## Two different narratives

The two conductors present very different introductions. At first, it may seem as if Mikkelsen’s interpretation is the more dramatic of the two. He uses a far more extensive dynamic range, and there is more vibrato and rubato. Each slur and phrase is given a substantial weight on its own, and there is no doubt that Mikkelsen’s phrases are more expressive than Jansons’.

But Jansons’ narrative does not rely on the short phrases. The basic unit of his narrative phrasing rather encompasses the fugal introduction as a whole. The dynamic range is limited in Jansons’ interpretation, and he uses little vibrato or rubato. What I called phrases in Mikkelsen’s interpretation are downplayed in Jansons’ rendition of the work. With Jansons, these elements (the short phrases) are not independent but they are instead interdependently weaved into the texture as a whole. Mikkelsen discursively lets one phrase take over from the other. He withdraws the present phrase dynamically and with rubato, and then carefully introduces the next. Jansons way of letting one instrument take over from the next is rather stealthy. It is as if the voices were already sounding when they are introduced; the voices are therefore subordinate to the texture and counterpoint under Jansons’ baton. Thus, the melodies interweave into one coherent texture where the elements themselves are not at the fore, but it is the sum of the texture and timbre that is what artistically is at stake.

## Narration of time

Although both interpreters’ narratives are linear, they narrate time very differently.

Jansons builds up to the first climax (four bars before B)[[9]](#footnote-9) by building *one* subtle and slow crescendo. From the perspective of phrasing, this entire minute and a half sequence is the smallest unit that he works with. Mikkelsen, on the other hand, divides the score into phrases and subphrases. Like Jansons he builds the first minute and a half towards the climax but he does it through concatenating small units of meaning. Particular notes of interest are accentuated, be it through dynamics or agogics, but this is done with subtlety and does not stop the build-up towards the climax. As Jansons’ recording lacks this accentuation we could say that his phrasing at a smaller level is more limited than Mikkelsen’s. One could even say that his phrasing is static, focussing durative planes of sound rendering the music as a slowly transforming condition. In this context we can speak of Mikkelsen’s interpretation as discursive and dynamic as it plays out one phrase against the next.

## Gesture and form

We could also voice this as a choice of how to deal with gestures and large-scale form. Mikkelsen’s agogic gestures, his use of ritardando and dynamic withdrawal to prepare for the next element, points out the large-scale elements of the music. Jansons, by contrast, points out the parts of the large-scale form with varying emphasis on texture and timbre. He is, in fact, not very interested in the internal structures of the gestures of the piece. An example is letter A in the score, where Jansons downplays the slurs in favour of building his continuous crescendo towards four bars before B. Mikkelsen emphasizes each slur more clearly in this passage. He brings out the value of the notes relative to each other, and this gestural differentiation of notes plays back on both the character and on his conception of time, which yet again is based upon smaller values than Jansons’ interpretation. Jansons’ more sober interpretation puts large-scale structure and contrapuntal elements to the fore whereas Mikkelsen presents a Mortensen who is more oriented towards gestures. Mikkelsen does bring out the large-scale elements, but it is done through the ways in which he shapes the gestures of the music.

That concludes the analysis.

## Counter-factual historiography

Had the commentaries on Mortensen’s *Symfoni* been rich enough, it would have been interesting to investigate whether the availability of only a single recording – Jansons’ – gave such a limited understanding of the work as I claim; and it would be interesting to see if other commentators than me would also expand their understanding of Mortensen’s *Symfoni* as much as I have through the availability of Mikkelsen’s recording. Now, we cannot counter-factually re-read history, and I cannot fully imagine what it was like only knowing one or the other of the recordings. As I began working on this paper I knew both recordings well.

Nonetheless, what would it look like if I was to write an analysis or criticism based only upon Jansons’ recording? I would most likely rely more on historical knowledge, by, for example, trying to find intertextual references. These references would serve to find evidence of how Jansons’ interpretation signified the score. It would be interesting if I could discuss, from this vantage point, how Mikkelsen’s recording changed and shed light on my understanding of the first recording. As it is not possible to invest myself with retrospective ignorance, I must conclude with stating that the discussion about how the conductors deal with time, timbre/texture and the other aspects I have discussed, would not be possible if we had had access only to Jansons’ recording.

## Intertextual conclusions

I have pointed out the narrative elements at stake in the two interpretations, but how do these relate to the prevailing musicological/historical discourse? With its romantic gestures we could suggest that Mikkelsen’s interpretation is more Brucknerian than Jansons’. Jansons, on the other hand, could be related both backwards in time to Bach and Mozart, and to a more recent modernist aesthetic with his interest in more static conditions and timbrally oriented music. The Neo-classical vein in Mikkelsen’s interpretation could perhaps rather be called Neo-romantic because of the heavy vibrato and use of agogics.[[10]](#footnote-10) Still, the gestural thinking is instead a classical or a baroque feature, alluding to a rhetoric style of playing. On the one hand, Jansons’ sober reading is classical/baroque rather than romantic, but as his interpretation avoids small-scale rhetorical gestures; it would be difficult to speak of it as a Neo-classical interpretation. This sobriety could instead be read in a modernist vein, as already noted. His sparse style could in turn be interpreted in many ways. We could see it as a logical summarization of all the historical influences on *Symfoni*; or we could understand it as an answer to recent modernist tendencies (Second Viennese School and Fartein Valen); or perhaps as heralding his future artistic avant-garde output. Yet another way of seeing Jansons’ Mortensen is in light of his affiliation with Yevgeny Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra. From this perspective, we could argue that the sober and sparse Neo-classical interpretation he invokes is a Soviet one, and more particularly that it follows in the spirit of Dmitri Shostakovich.

These interpretations may seem speculative, and I make no claim that they are anything but. Nonetheless, although they do not lead to clear-cut conclusions I would say that they are more true to the interpretive *possibilities* inherent in Mortensen’s score than the most meticulous philological intertextual investigation. The readings of the interpretations indeed suggest that there are different ways to understand the same passages or forms, and it would be naïve to argue that merely one of these possibilities was artistically valid or true. Each possible interpretation speaks in favour of how the actual work may relate to the intertextual references to other works/composers.

## Objections to the analysis

Through my analysis and the interpretation of the analysis, I have attempted to show how the musician/conductor can contribute to our knowledge about a musical work. It may seem somewhat frustrating that there are so many plausible answers – many of which may be contradictory. Also, through this way of investigating I no doubt raise more questions than I answer, such as:

* I have made some claims based on artistic differentiation, and my musical integrity is therefore open to examination. Is it required that other informed listeners can or must come to the same conclusions as I did for my argument to be valid?
* Could there be other plausible performative interpretations, and how would the emergence of such a performance affect the argument here?
* Would it matter if such a performance was better or worse than the two existing recordings?
* Who would decide what is better and what is worse?
* What about my suggestion that we were dealing with a Neo-classicism in the footprints of Shostakovich? On what grounds can I make the claim? Which authority does that claim have?
* Can the critical interpreter introduce and perhaps force upon the work affiliations with which neither composer nor earlier commentators have pointed out?
* The question of how music relate to language has long been discussed. Are there unique challenges to the language problem when we deal in particular with performative interpretation?
* Can we claim to say anything at all about the musician’s activity or intentions merely from listening and introspection?
* Is the musician’s intention related to the meaning of the work?
* Can the musician make a statement of which he is not aware?
* What would it take for us to acknowledge that our view is open to contradiction?

These questions surely deserve thorough attention in an expanded version of this paper. Here, the time has come for a summary and some concluding remarks.

## Conclusions

Taking only the score into account, it is difficult to say what is at stake in the work. Jansons’ recording was a first signification, which brought some aspects of the score to sound while repressing others. Nonetheless, it was only with the appearance of Mikkelsen’s recording, that we could more fully understand the choices in Jansons’.

Through his conducting, Jansons tells a story about polyphony and texture, and his first phrase spans the minute and a half of the fugal introduction of the first movement. Mikkelsen, with his gestural approach, phrases each instrumental cue. He gives more weight to singular tones of interest and his narrative consists of many small phrases that together build the form of the fugal introduction.

The two interpretations signify different inherent possibilities of the score, and some of these possibilities could not be pronounced or envisioned until they were realized in sounding recordings. That is why I have called the original score a simulacrum, as it asks us to find meanings that a mere structural/analytical reading of the score cannot reveal. We need to actually play the music to become aware of the possibilities. True, there is a complex texture of references running out from the work, but focussing too strongly on these to understand the meaning of the work would be to blind oneself from what may be at stake in the work. The validity of Jansons’ large-scale phrasing and Mikkelsen’s shorter phrases could neither be decided by a reading of the score nor by referring to earlier influences. Both influences and score do indeed serve as a fruitful backdrop for us to lead our discussion. Also, the interpretations shed light on what influenced Mortensen, but we need to ask different questions than the analytical and philological to grasp the potential of the *Symfoni*.

The two conductors’ different narratives point towards possibilities in the score that only a performative interpretation can reveal. I have tried to voice some of these choices, and I have also attempted to show the necessity of consulting performances if we are to make any sense out of musical works artistically.

Of course, this presentation would ideally be much longer so that I could play musical examples and discuss those in depth. As that was not possible it is now time to thank you for your attention.

## References

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1. Finn Mortensen, *Symphony No. 1, Op. 5* (Oslo: Norsk Musikkforlag, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. First released on LP in 1982: Mariss Jansons and Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, *Finn Mortensen* (Philips 6528 088, 1982). I have related to the cd: Mariss Jansons and Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, *Finn Mortensen* (Aurora Contemporary, NCD-B 4935, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Terje Mikkelsen and Münchner Rundfunkorchester, *Mortensen, Finn* (Simax, PSC 1306, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Elef Nesheim, 'Modernismens Døråpner I Norge : Finn Mortensens Musikk I Lys Av Norsk Etterkrigsmodernisme', (Norges musikkhøgskole, 2001) at 118.; Lorentz Reitan, *Finn Mortensen [Cd Booklet]*, ed. Folke Strømholm (NCD-B 4935: Aurora Contemporary, 1988) at 9.; Folke Strømholm, *Finn Mortensen [Cd Booklet]*, ed. Folke Strømholm (NCD-B 4935: Aurora Contemporary, 1988) at 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Øistein Sommerfeldt points out the ”Brucknerian grandeur in certain passages” (Elef Nesheim, *Finn Mortensen (1922-1983) [Cd Booklet]* (PSC1306: Simax, 2011) at 5.) In a newspaper interview Mortensen says: “Bruckner yes! His works should be performed more often. Without him I would not have thought of writing for orchestra.” (ibid.) Reitain reiterates this connection: Reitan, *Finn Mortensen [Cd Booklet]* at 9. See also: Nesheim, 'Modernismens Døråpner I Norge : Finn Mortensens Musikk I Lys Av Norsk Etterkrigsmodernisme', (at 112 and 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nesheim, 'Modernismens Døråpner I Norge : Finn Mortensens Musikk I Lys Av Norsk Etterkrigsmodernisme', (at 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Reitan, *Finn Mortensen [Cd Booklet]* at 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nesheim, *Finn Mortensen (1922-1983) [Cd Booklet]* at 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mortensen, *Symphony No. 1, Op. 5*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This may be contrary to how a historically informed performance practice was as the almost contant use of vibrato is of later date than Bruckner’s time. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)