

Erland Sjunnesson Lightning Talk Script

Introduction: The goal of this presentation is to highlight newly composed pedagogical sets titled *Nordic Piano Ballads* by Swedish composer and teacher Erland Sjunnesson.

Background

Sjunnesson was born in 1967 and studied both jazz and classical piano at the Music Academy in Malmö, Sweden, where he earned a Master of Fine Arts in 1997. He currently teaches piano at a music school in Helsingborg, Sweden, and he operates his recording studio 7son Musik and Produktion. In addition to writing piano music, Sjunnesson has composed background music for film and other media. He primarily teaches genres other than Classical, such as jazz, pop, gospel, R&B, and rock, and he instructs “both how to accompany the songs and how to play them like solo piano pieces.”

Nordic Piano ballads

Sjunnesson has composed pedagogical piano pieces in three volumes titled *Musik för Piano*, and is planning to complete a fourth volume this year. The first two books are available in the U.S. under the title *Nordic Piano Ballads*. Regarding compositional style, many pieces are reminiscent of movie soundtracks, have descriptive titles like “Fairy Tale,” and many of the pieces have jazz influences. When composing, Sjunnesson states that he re-harmonizes simple chord structures by altering the voicings and adding color tones. The pieces are lyrical and have very expressive qualities. They have various accompaniment patterns and key signatures, and many are in three-part ABA form. The pieces have thick contrapuntal textures up to four parts, but the easier pieces typically only have three voices. The songs titled “Nordic Theme” have folk music influences including natural minor modes, swung rhythm, open fourth and fifth intervals, and stepwise and skipping motion of the melodic lines. He also notes that “melodies in the dance songs are often happy and cheerful. Also, there is a specific melancholic mode that is significant

to the Swedish heart and soul which influences the music.” These qualities are certainly evident in his pieces.

List of pieces

Each volume has a set of 17 pieces, and I have ranked the difficulty of each piece based on Jane Magrath’s leveling in her *Pianists’ Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature*.

Selections

You will notice in these incipits from *Musik for Piano* that Sjunnesson uses jazz notation; however, *Nordic Piano Ballads* is in regular notation and larger print. The Vals Simple has been a favorite among my students because of its modern sound and expressive melody and harmony. [Play recording] The Nordic Theme no. 4, one of my favorites, is certainly in the style of a dance and could even exemplify the style of the traditional Swedish polska dance. The uneven polska uses swing rhythm with a triplet feel and emphasizes beats 1 and 3, as opposed to the waltz only emphasizing beat one. [Play recording] Also, both the “Vals Simple” and “Nordic Theme no. 4” teach sustaining different voices.

Contribution

Several of my students have greatly enjoyed playing these short pieces. Sjunnesson has composed refreshing, modern, and very expressive songs that your late-beginning and intermediate students would love to explore. The Nordic folk music influences make the “Nordic Themes” unique and attractive to a variety of students. Many of the pieces are also useful for teaching contrapuntal textures, swing rhythm, and modern jazz chords. Lastly, I encourage you to listen to Sjunnesson’s recordings of several of the pieces that are available on his website.