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Collaboration in Risør

At a Norwegian festival, a marriage of music and art

By Ben Finane

Photographs by Liv Øvland

“**T**hink Globally, Act Locally” is an old city-planning saw that is now so well traveled — from grass-roots environmental group rallies to international corporation boardroom meetings — that no sooner is the mantra uttered than the heretofore attentive listener may be instantly overcome by a sense of gloom and detach himself from any material to follow out of sheer self-preservation. Yet it is this very phrase, gentle reader, that comes to mind — fresh, hopeful and without its customary baggage — when I reflect back on the weeklong Risør Chamber Music Festival, held for the nineteenth year this past June in the picturesque former Norwegian fishing village cum tourist destination.

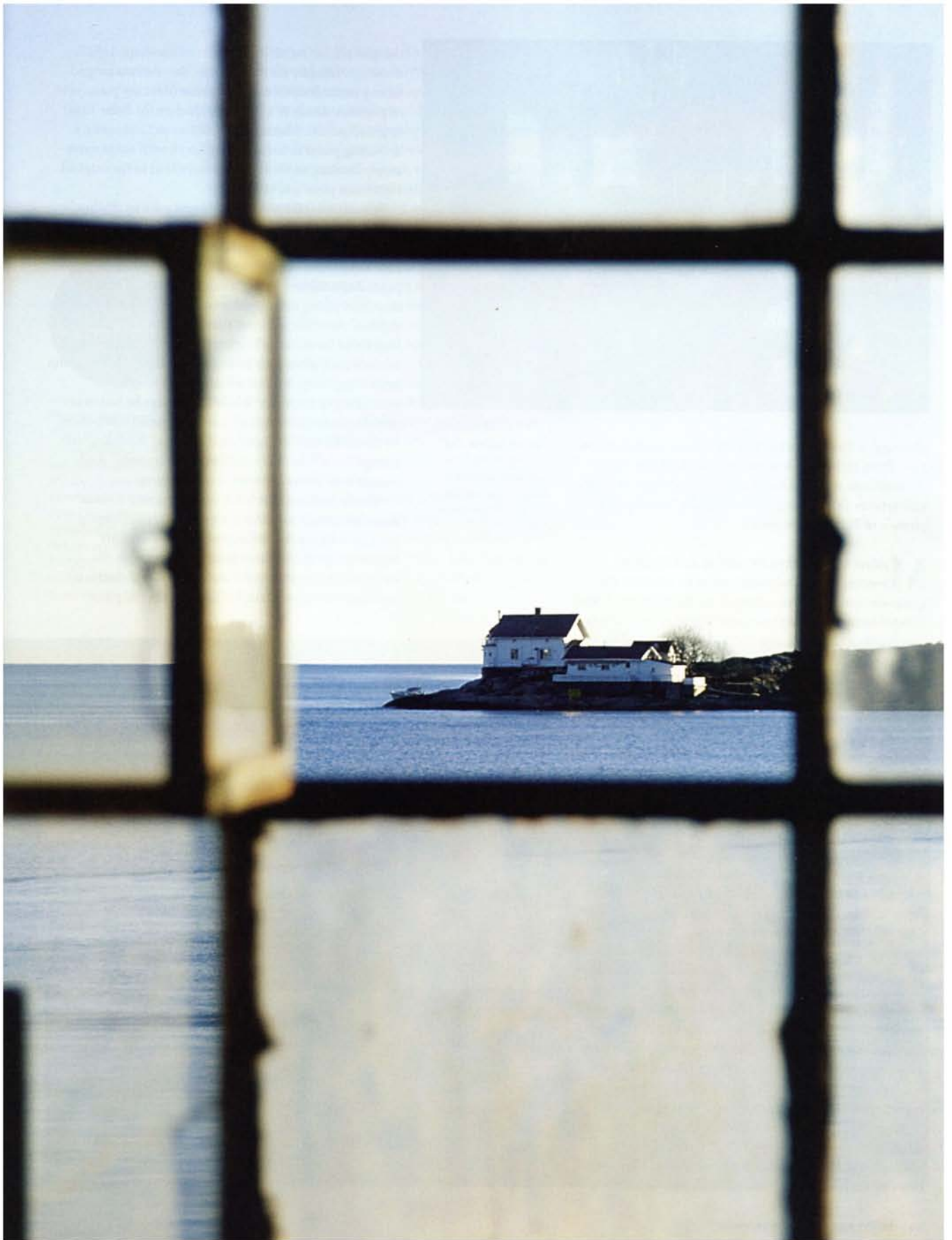
First to the global thinking. The theme of this year’s festival was “Revolution.” Musically, that translated first and foremost as lots of Beethoven. There were performances of Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony, Diabelli Variations, incidental music from *Egmont*, selected piano trios and violin sonatas, and more. Also, Shostakovich’s *Six Poems of Marina Tsvetayeva* and Prelude and Scherzo for String Octet; Stravinsky’s *Histoire du soldat*; Schoenberg’s Five Orchestral Pieces; as well as generally revolutionary works by many other composers, including Antheil, Bach, Eberl, Mahler, Mozart, Piazzolla, Schumann, Schubert, Richard Strauss and Rolf Wallin; and a sneak preview of *Pictures Reframed*, a work that reconsiders Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This collaboration between Norwegian pianist/Risør Festival director Leif Ove Andsnes and South African-born visual artist Robin Rhode will receive its proper world premiere at New York’s Lincoln Center — the commissioning institution — on November 13.

As to the local action, the Risør Festival brings with it an unparalleled level of local enthusiasm. All the town’s residents appear to either attend the concerts, volunteer in aid of them, or both. The vast majority of concerts take

place at a wooden Baroque church, with the four hundred or so seats always filled — largely with Norwegians from nearby and far away. The increasing heat, which, with the presence of the midnight sun, remained through the evening concerts, ultimately necessitated opening the church doors during performances, but with everyone gathered within, the silence outside was unbroken apart from the occasional call of a seagull. When not sweating it out in the church, the musicians were stationed on a nearby ship (hotels being expensive in Norway), where they rehearsed and dined together.

The last-minute cancellations, due to illness, of two scheduled soloists — violinist Lisa Batiashvili and cellist Truls Mørk — brought down the level of musicianship at the festival. But if the concerts tended to disappoint this concertgoer, the Norwegian audience (for whom the unison clap is a staple ovation) remained fiercely supportive, and there were, in any case, a number of worthy highlights. Oboist François Leleux played the Bach Concerto for Oboe and Violin without violin (Batiashvili, his wife), but with wondrous control and passion, reminding us why we always come back to Bach. Andsnes delivered thoughtful performances of two fugues by Anton Reicha from the composer’s 36 Fugues for Piano. Famed actress of Fassbinder films and *Sprechstimme* singer Barbara Sukowa electrified in a theatrical set of Lieder by Schubert and Schumann, *Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai*, artfully orchestrated, arranged and conducted by Reinbert de Leeuw. The incidental music for *Egmont* was also given a welcome dose of theatricality, with narration by the popular Norwegian actor Bjørn R. Sundquist.

The festival’s closing concert took place outdoors, on an island less than a mile away, where a former lighthouse is now a restaurant. The concert included Andsnes’s account of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata and the bracing brass



Clear summer skies.

The picturesque and pristine former fishing village of Risør, located on the eastern coast of Norway's southern tip, hosts an annual chamber music festival in late June.



playing of a diminutive Norwegian trumpeter, aptly named Tine Thing Helseth. A few concerts also took place on the mainland at a third location known locally as Holmen, a cavernous former fish-processing plant, including the preview of *Pictures Reframed*.

Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, written in 1874, was inspired by an art show the composer saw in St. Petersburg of works by his late friend, Viktor Hartmann. The piano suite imagines an observer touring the exhibition, with each movement alluding to a different work of art and an interspersed "Promenade" theme depicting the viewer's walks between works.

Pictures has had plenty of interlopers over the years. Early orchestrations by Mikhail Tushmalov and Henry Wood disappeared in the wake of Ravel's masterful arrangement, whose gorgeous coloration makes his orchestration the most performed and recorded version of the piece. Later arrangers include conductor Leopold Stokowski, jazz genius Duke Ellington, English progressive rock band Emerson Lake & Palmer, and Japanese electronic-music composer Isao Tomita.

Given the source of inspiration for the suite, the addition of a visual component to the music does not seem foolhardy (or even revolutionary). For the late-night, packed-house preview at the fish factory (insert sardine or to-the-gills joke here), a different stop-action film or series of stills was projected onto a screen behind the pianist for each movement, with five additional screens angled at him but not used for projection purposes. Andsnes was saved the artistic restriction of playing "on the click" to the visuals thanks to a behind-the-scenes technician who could speed up or slow down the imagery to match the pianist's tempo — allowing, notes Robin Rhode, "for a more organic ending and beginning, and room to maneuver."

Rhode, whose work is influenced the street culture of South Africa, literally turned the "Promenade" on its head, opening with a street performer who promenades in front of a wall on his back and hands, his feet never touching

Sacred space. The majority of the Risør Kammermusikkfest concerts take place in this wooden Baroque church.

the ground, but rather juggling rhombus-shaped chalk drawings. Imagery for the "picture" movements ranged from a meticulous focus on minutiae (dancing piano wire in *Gnomus*, details of a print of a chicken for *Baba Yaga*) to grand gesture (abstract ink splatters in *Catacombs*, a drowning piano in *Great Gate of Kiev*), with some movements showing an identifiable connection to the original Hartmann piece and others not.

"Visuals sometimes have a different pace or rhythm," Andsnes told *Listen* the day after the performance, glancing over at Rhode, the visuals specialist. "It's great to see how sometimes, when things go different directions, how psychologically interesting it can be both to see and to hear. Everything doesn't necessarily need to have the same rhythm." Andsnes admitted that he would have had no idea about "such things" before the project. The two had to teach each other their respective lexicons, with Andsnes explaining compositional structure and Rhode the vocabulary of visual art. While Rhode says he had many conversations with Andsnes about the visual component, he claims he had "no input on the music." Andsnes, with a laugh, says, "You did — indirectly; afterwards." And therein may lie the key to the collaboration.

Rhode explains that his attempt to create a visual accompaniment to *Pictures* was "hugely challenging because it has such a strong narrative." Certainly Mussorgsky's masterpiece already arrives with the strongest of programmatic associations, but Andsnes says that Rhode's art has, for him, "made the piece



bigger — expanded its horizons. An ingenious piece of music like this can only expand with great visual art.” Andsnes’s assertion serves as a gauge for the success of Rhode’s visual accompaniment: does it successfully expand our view of the Mussorgsky work? In literature, this effect is known (by way of literary critic André Topia) as “contamination.” A source text is placed by another writer in a new context, and, when successful, can “contaminate” the original by convincingly casting it in a new light. An example might be Aimé Césaire’s *Une tempête*, a postcolonial retelling of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, convincing enough to make us reconsider Shakespeare’s Caliban on Césaire’s terms. Contamination is a concept that can easily be applied to music (Brahms’ reference to Beethoven’s Ninth in his own first symphony) or film (Robert De Niro’s scene in *Raging Bull* rehearsing Marlon Brando’s celebrated speech from *On The Waterfront*). These examples can be considered successful because we may well now think of Brahms when hearing the most famous of Ninths or recall De Niro as fallen boxer Jake La Motta when hearing Brando’s Terry Malloy say, “I coulda been a contender.”

Andsnes admits that his playing has been impacted by Rhode’s pictures. “It’s difficult to say how much,” he says, noting that he had played the work long before he met Rhode, “but I think there are certain images that are so strong that they start to mean something very substantial. The railway station — there’s something extremely dark about it and I’m sure that’s influenced my playing.”

The pianist is referring to Rhode’s haunting imagery for a somber movement, *Bydlo* (Polish for “cattle”): black-and-white film footage of a train station, shot so ominously as to recall nothing less than Auschwitz. The imagery will certainly haunt me through future hearings of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, with or without the visuals. I will also remember the arresting and glorious imagery of the finale for *Pictures Reframed* (*Great Gate of Kiev*): a piano being submerged in water, until, once drowned, it is seen on the bottom of the ocean. Whether I accept Rhode’s notion of “the piano as object becom[ing] an antiquity of our time” is another matter. But if even only two of his accompaniments have contaminated my view of the mightiest of warhorses, then I must deem this collaboration a worthy undertaking. ■



Pictures Reframed. Visual artist Robin Rhode shares his vision with pianist Leif Ove Andsnes (below left) at a converted fish factory, where he performed (below) Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The CD/DVD (above) will be available in November on EMI.

