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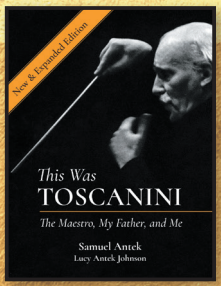

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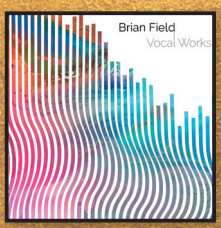

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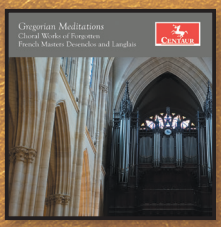

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Blowing One's Own Horn—Naturally! A New Interview with Steinar Granmo Nilsen

BY JAMES A. ALTENA

Back in 39:4 Martin Anderson conducted a wide-ranging interview with Steinar Granmo Nilsen, the virtuoso natural French horn player whose recordings have won glowing reviews, including ones in these pages from Anderson, Huntley Dent, Ronald E. Grames, and Robert Markow (see issues 39:4, 39:6, and 44:5). Now, via the magic of Zoom, Nilsen chatted with me in a follow-up interview in conjunction with his latest release, *The Horn in Romanticism*.

Martin Anderson did such a thorough job in his interview with you that I feel at something of a loss in how to follow up on him! But, we'll give it a try. Anderson discussed a lot of your early schooling; but except for your comments that your teacher, Ifor James, effectively if unintentionally taught you proper articulation for playing the natural horn despite his opposition to playing the instrument itself, you don't really discuss many specifics of playing technique. So, let's start with that. What are some of the specific differences involved in learning to play the natural horn rather than a modern valved horn—breathing and wind support, embouchure, bell-stopping, and so on?

Historical horns have longer tubes and smaller bores, and so the instruments offer more resistance to air pressure. This means that one must play higher up in the harmonic series, with a greater risk of hitting neighboring tones or of cracking notes. So, one must use the lips to form notes much more precisely, and the "Russian roulette" of getting that even slightly wrong is much more evident. The embouchure must be much more exact; lip tension is the same, but it's much easier to make a mistake because the natural harmonics are so close. Also, the hand stopping positions inside the bell mean that diaphragm support must be much more flexible. Finally, playing legato on the natural horn is much more difficult, because successive notes do not have the same hand-stopping positions. The slur must be made much more with use of a legato tongue, resulting in a microsecond gap between notes. It's similar to what a modern trombone does. In early schools of horn playing, such as with Punto, there are three different kinds of tonguing: a normal attack (ta) a soft attack (da), and marcato (daon). This is not really taught in modern schools of playing any more.

Are there any aspects of horn playing that, counter-intuitively or paradoxically, you find to be more difficult on a modern horn than a natural horn?

Yes. Composers of the era had a certain type of expression in mind when they wrote for the natural horn. A stopped tone could sound either very violent or very lyrical. When the same historical piece is played on a modern horn, it's a real challenge to achieve the same kind of expression, because the sound isn't inherently varied in the way it is on a natural horn. One can make the sound on a valved horn less even, but the change is made with the mouth rather than the hand. One tries to create a text, so to speak, but something is lost in translation.

You mentioned in your interview with Anderson that "The French and the British kept playing the natural horn much longer than the Germans and Austrians." Why was that the case? What were the periods of changeover to the valved horn in these different lands? And, what about countries on the periphery of those lands—Scandinavia, Spain and Italy, Eastern Europe and Russia, and the United States and other nations in the Western hemisphere—when did those places follow suit?

The British and the French had very strong schools of natural horn playing. They also kept a smaller bore and bell on their horns for a longer time, which allows for hand-stopping using smaller manual movements. The virtuoso players felt they didn't need the valves until modern composers began writing more chromatically, particularly in the horn's lower register.

In Oslo, Norway, I've seen a photo of a military band from 1864, with the oldest player using a natural horn and the two younger players using different kinds of valved horns. So they mixed the two kinds of instruments. This occurred in many other locales as well. The German influence was felt in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, St. Petersburg (many Germans went to work in Russia, and lived in the Baltic states), and the USA.

In your research, have you discovered any significant "pockets of resistance," as it were, in which devotees of the natural horn put up resistance to the changeover and maintained their old ways? Are there any "fundamentalist believers" who insist that the natural horn is inherently superior and that the introduction of valves somehow spoiled the instrument's sound? (The booklet notes to your newest release suggest that both of these occurred in France.)

This attitude was especially entrenched in France. There are actually newspaper reviews from there in which critics object that the soul of the instrument has been taken away. Sometimes the audiences objected as well.

Is the natural horn experiencing any kind of revival, or does it still remain an esoteric interest even among most hornists, let alone musicians in general? Has the HIP movement in Baroque music in particular served to further the natural horn's cause more generally?

I have been teaching at the Norwegian Academy of Music since 2002, and already at that date almost every horn student there was learning the natural horn as well. This is really quite common in Europe now, and in the USA as well. Audiences are quite positive about the instrument when they hear it. My chamber group, the Oslo Chamber Academy, uses historical brass instruments, and the natural horn blends much better with the strings and woodwinds. Many smaller symphony orchestras use historical brass alongside modern strings for 18th-century symphonic and opera repertoire. For the 19th century, use of the natural horn is coming along more slowly. Interestingly, in Schumann's *Konzertstück*, the first hornist at the premiere refused to use the specified valved horn and played a natural horn.

For me, the natural horn is not a necessity but a choice. But I find that it makes the music of this period really come alive.

How difficult is it to find audiences and venues for natural horn recitals—or indeed, horn recitals in general? How do you work to generate interest in such events?

For me, it's actually been easier to market the natural horn as a solo instrument. Concert bookings are not a problem. For audiences, the instrument still has an exotic flair, which attracts them, as does the idea that the natural horn reaches the core of the music. Audience size can vary greatly, however, depending on location. In Oslo, which is relatively small, I'll get an audience of 150, but in Berlin I'll get 1,500.

In addition to solo work, you also are active in the Norwegian Wind Ensemble in Halden. Its website (dnbe.no/en for English) states that it is 24 members strong; that it is Norway's oldest continuously existing music ensemble, dating back to 1734; that it plays around 120 (!!) concerts per year; and that its two repertoire focuses are historic music up to the time of the First Viennese School and "Realtime" improvisation. That's an enormous workload on its own. How do you and the other players in the Ensemble manage to keep up with all that?

The number of concerts is so high because the ensemble plays in a good many cities. A single program is played five or six times in a row as a result. Initially there was an enormous amount of repertoire for me to learn, but now I know all the standard pieces quite well. The NWE has two "curators" rather than directors, who oversee the repertoire but do not run the ensemble. The post for historic music is vacant at the moment; the other curator is a Norwegian, Geir Lysne, who also conducts a band in Germany. The "Realtime" concerts have no conductor, of course; until recently the historic concerts were conducted from the harpsichord by Steven Devine, who hails from England. During concerts Lysne sits on the stage and gives cues to instrumentalists to play or hold back, but

he doesn't conduct.

You also perform with Baroque orchestras. What are the names of some of those ensembles, and how often are you called upon to participate in concerts with them?

For the past 25 years I've played regularly with the Norwegian Baroque Orchestra, the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra, Concerto Copenhagen, and many less prominent ensembles. I'm too busy now to play with any of them very much and must turn opportunities down.

You are also on the faculty of the Norwegian Academy of Music. What courses do you teach there, and how many students do you have, both in classes and for private instruction?

I have a half-time salaried professorship, and teach two-and-a-half days per week. I offer instruction on both the valved and the natural horn. Typically I have six to 12 names of students on a list for at least one lesson a week. I also teach chamber music ensembles that include the horn.

At the time of this interview, the world is still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic (presently the delta variant). What impact has this had on your various musical activities—public performance, teaching classes, private tutoring, etc.—and what work-arounds have you found? Have you followed the lead of some other artists in giving live or pre-recorded performances over the internet?

The conduct of individual lessons has been almost normal. The Academy was granted exceptions from normal rules by the authorities, so long as two meters of distance could be kept between the tutor and the student. Ensemble rehearsals and concerts were mostly cancelled for 18 months, though some activities occurred on Zoom. The government has been very supportive of the arts to keep them going, providing financing to make up for lost ticket sales. (Revenues from the sale of Norwegian oil have been a big help.) The pandemic is now largely over in Norway, and so things are returning to normal.

As promised in your last interview with Anderson, your latest CD, The Horn in Romanticism*, moves into the later 19th century—and to 1906, in the case of Paul Dukas's* Villanelle*. Three of the pieces on the disc—*Villanelle*, Saint-Saëns's* Romance*, op. 36, and Schumann's* Adagio und Allegro*, op. 70—have standard repertoire status among hornists, and even some recognition outside of horn circles, but the other pieces are far less well known. What motivated your selection of each work on this album?*

All the pieces are ones I've played in concerts and recitals. I recorded the ones that I really feel are mine. Even though I didn't compose them, I feel that I know them from the inside.

This new CD restricted its selection of repertoire to French and German composers. Might we look forward to another CD with Romantic music from other European climes? Or, perhaps, a disc of 20th-century works played on the natural horn?

I feel that I've said what I have to say about the transition from the natural to the valved horn, and in the early natural horn repertoire. My next recording will likely be with the valved horn. I might consider a disc of natural horn music from other European countries, but I want to record some more modern pieces. I also want to go back and record some Baroque horn music, predating my previous CDs of 18th-century music.

Have you commissioned any new repertoire for the natural horn? If so, what are those pieces, how have they turned out, and what has been their reception?

Three pieces of chamber music, all tonal in style, were commissioned for the Oslo Chamber Academy, from one Turkish and two Norwegian composers. They are *The Last Days of Sultan Selim III* by Mert Karabey; *Canticle* No. 5 for Four Winds and Piano by Wolfgang Plagge; and *Retour à la Nature* by Ketil Hvoslef.

What are your future plans at the moment for recitals, touring, recording, and teaching?

Things are picking up again after the pandemic. Chamber music concerts are being staged in Oslo and Norway, and Germany is always a huge market for classical music. Another recording may take me five years to do, because recordings require so much preparation and work. There are also unforeseen circumstances. *The Horn in Romanticism* recording was to be made at the Academy of Music in Oslo, which has a couple of beautiful auditoriums. But renovations were scheduled at that time, and the historical piano could not be taken out of the academy. I called an elderly friend, who is a piano technician, and asked if he knew of any available historical pianos. He said no, but he

knew of a historical grand piano in a café in a Viking museum. The director of the museum agreed to give me the piano, but I had to pay to get it out of the house where it was located, and then it cost a small fortune to restore it. So now, in addition to several different historical French horns, I also own a historical piano from 1854, by Ernst Irmler of Leipzig.

BEETHOVEN Cello Sonatas: No. 2 in g, op. 5/2[1]; **No. 4 in C,** op. 102/1[1]. **Horn Sonata in F,** op. 17[2] • [1]Bjørn Solum (vc); [2]Steinar Granmo Nilsen (hn); Kristin Fossheim (fp) • 2L 79 (SACD: 55:30)

Although a companion disc to this one, featuring the Cello Sonatas opp. 5/1, 69, and 102/2, was reviewed by Michael Ullman in 26:2 (2001), this sequel release from 2010 somehow escaped attention. Ullman's verdict on the previous was that "The performances don't, to my ears, achieve the power of those of Schnabel and Fournier. But they are lovely, lively, and intelligent…." I will second that opinion here, with a bit of further elaboration. Bjørn Solum, the longtime alternating principal cellist of the Oslo Philharmonic, plays a 1740 Montagnana instrument. Kristen Flossheim accompanies him on a 1991 Andreas Jungwirth copy of a 1790 Anton Walter piano in the op. 5 Sonata, and on an original 1825 Andreas Graf instrument in the op. 102. Both instruments are far more tonally full-bodied and powerful-sounding than the copy of the 1805 Walter instrument employed in *The Romantic Horn Sonata* disc I also review here. I wish that one of these two instruments had been employed on that release as well, as the 1805 Walter has a rather thin, tinny tone. Interpretively, these are rather gentle performances of Beethoven. Since the instruments do not have the power of their modern counterparts, the players accordingly (and wisely) make no efforts to attempt to force more power out of them in order to expound a stormy, tempestuous Beethoven; and (with equal wisdom) they also refrain from the tack taken by some other players of period instruments of roughening their tone with raspy attacks or deliberately wiry sound to achieve a similar end. This is Beethoven that sings genially, even gently. That is not to say that these performances are bland, inexpressive, or lacking in character—far from it. Solum and Fossheim are thoroughly beguiling and winsome; if you have previously shied away from period-instrument performances of Beethoven's chamber music, these performances just might make a convert of you.

Scanning the listings at ArkivMusic, I was surprised at how many sets of the cello sonatas include the Horn Sonata as a filler. It turns out that six cellists—Norman Fischer, David Geringas, Steven Isserlis, Peter Martens, Miklós Perényi, and Guido Schiefen—have recorded a transcription of the work for cello and piano, though there is one other two-disc set of the cello sonatas (with cellist Alexei Grynyuk on Onyx) that includes the Horn Sonata in its original form. Here, Steinar Granmo Nilsen stands out from the pack by playing a valveless natural horn, a 1991 copy by Andreas Jungwirth of an 1820 Marcel-Auguste Raoux instrument, with Fossheim again playing on the 1790 Walter. The horn makes this sonata a more extroverted, heroic-sounding piece; Nilsen fulfills that assignment ably, but also finds much lyricism as well. Of the over 40 recordings presently listed in the active catalog, there are any number of top-notch ones, with Dennis Brain, Barry Tuckwell, and Ifor James (Nilsen's teacher) being three especially illustrious names. Suffice it to say that Nilsen is fully worthy to stand beside all of them—and given that he is playing on a natural horn instead without the advantage of valves, that is really saying quite a lot. As on his other releases, Nilsen's playing here is deeply expressive, and a total joy to hear. The recorded sound is first-rate; the digipak includes a booklet with fine notes and attractive photos and illustrations. While the performance of the Horn Sonata by Nilsen on a valveless period instrument is what makes this release exceptional, this disc and its earlier companion release make for a fine period set of the cello sonatas as well. Heartily recommended. **James A. Altena**

RIES Grande Sonate in F, op. 34. **DANZI Horn Sonata in E♭,** op. 28. **KRUFFT Horn Sonata in E** • Steinar Granmo Nilsen (hn); Kristin Fossheim (fp) • 2L 113 (SACD + Blu-ray audio: 67:38)

Titled *The Romantic Horn Sonata*, this disc presents three early 19th-century examples of that genre, dating respectively from 1804 (Danzi), 1811 (Ries), and 1812 (Krufft). As colleagues Martin Anderson and Robert Markow (both 39:4), Huntley Dent (39:5), and Ronald Grames (39:6) all reviewed this release in considerable detail, discussing both the challenges of playing the natural horn

and the characteristics of each composition, I can afford to be relatively brief here. The *Grande Sonata* of Ferdinand Ries (1784–1838), like many other works by that composer, bears the definite imprint of his teacher, Beethoven, from the latter's early and early middle years of his career. That said, this is no pale imitation, but a piece with its own character and well able to stand on its own two feet. The sonata of Franz Danzi (1763–1826), by contrast, shows an equally great weight of influence from a superior genius, but this time from Mozart. This too is well crafted—enough so that it could almost be mistaken for one of Mozart's earlier works (say, around a K 200 catalog number), though it lacks that master's degree of thematic and harmonic inventiveness. The great rarity here is the sonata of Nikolaus, Freiherr von Krufft (1779–1818), an Austrian nobleman and diplomat who pursued composition as an avocation. It is a bit of an odd duck; its style fluctuates quirkily between Haydn, Mozart, and early Beethoven, with hints looking forward to Chopin (it even includes a Polacca finale!), but never settling down into any single groove.

Hornist Steinar Granmo Nilsen performs near-miraculous feats of technical execution in dispatching the many virtuoso demands of these works, with their rapid runs, wide intervallic leaps, staccato tonguing, and what-not. Such demands would be formidable for a player of a modern valved horn. That Nilsen executes them so flawlessly on a valveless natural horn (a modern copy from 2000 by Andreas Jungwirth of a Lausmann instrument from Bohemia dating from c. 1800) is an occasion for admiration; that he does so with such deep expressivity in his playing as well is a cause for wonder. The fortepiano, a 1983 Kenneth Bakemann copy of an 1805 Anton Walter instrument from Vienna, is decidedly lightweight—overly so to my tastes for use in the Ries *Grande Sonate*. It serves better, if not ideally, in the Krufft Sonata, and is well matched to Nilsen in the Danzi. I wish that the tonally richer 1790 Walter instrument used to record the Beethoven Horn Sonata on that release discussed above had been employed instead; Kristen Fossheim is an able supporting partner to Nilsen, who is superb throughout, but has less opportunity to shine here than in *The Horn in Romanticism* disc reviewed below. The recorded sound is all that one could desire; the set comes with a detailed booklet and two discs, one in SACD and the other in audio Blu-ray format. Horn aficionados should definitely treat themselves to this trio sampler. **James A. Altena**

THE HORN IN ROMANTICISM • Steinar Granmo Nilsen (hn); Kristin Fossheim (fp) • 2L 162 (SACD + Blu-ray: 59:01)

DUKAS ***Villanelle.*** **GOUNOD** ***Andante.*** **SAINT-SAËNS** ***Romance,*** op. 36. **CHABRIER** ***Larghetto.*** **CZERNY** ***Andante e Polacca.*** **F. STRAUSS** ***Nocturno,*** op. 7. **SCHUMANN** ***Adagio und Allegro,*** op. 70. **STRAUSS** ***Andante***

In reviewing Nilsen's previous releases, colleague Robert Markow (himself a professional hornist) wrote: "What puts Nilsen nearly in a class by himself is how he goes beyond technical mastery to engage the listener with utter conviction—much like Heifetz on the violin or Horowitz on the piano. His musicianship transcends horn playing and enters the realm of pure music. He sings into the instrument as I have heard few others do. Every note has meaning: spirited, joyful, reflective or yearning as required." This is playing that is distinguished less by technical excellence—though that is present in abundance—than by interpretive depth. Nilsen is a master of an abundant array of tonal shadings; I was also a brasswind player in my youth (trombone, euphonium, and tuba), and I simply remain astounded at the range of subtle colors and inflections Nilsen has at his disposal. His control of dynamics is similarly phenomenal, ranging from whisper-quiet confidences to boldly ringing declarations. Finally, there is his perfect control of breathing and articulation, with an ability to sustain long lines and to play legato or *détaché* to varying degrees at will. And all of this is put at the service not of displays of virtuoso prowess, but of profound musical expressiveness that touches the core of the soul. If he were a violinist or cellist or pianist, he would be among classical music's most celebrated artists.

The eight pieces here, divided into two sets of four by French and German composers, date from 1839 to 1906. The Dukas, Gounod, and Franz and Richard Strauss works were written (partially in the case of the Dukas) for the valved horn, the others for the natural horn. Four different horns are employed, each for two works. This disc opens with the two extremes of that time span, the *Villanelle* of Paul Dukas and the *Andante* of Charles Gounod. The former, the last test piece written for the Paris Conservatoire that required students to demonstrate mastery of both the natural and the

valved horn, opens with a bold peroration but quickly subsides to gentle lyricism, though it returns to the initial material in due course during its ruminations. Both Gounod's *Andante* (drawn from his *Six pièces mélodiques originales pour cor à pistons et piano*; one wishes that Nilsen had recorded the entire set) and the *Romance* of Camille Saint-Saëns (from 1874) after that are unpretentious, gentle, songful pieces with kinship to Mendelssohn and Schumann. As with many other of his pieces, Chabrier's *Larghetto* (1875) shows the influence of Spanish music, though this is most prominent at the opening. It is somewhat discursive, though it always holds one's attention.

The second quartet of pieces opens with Carl Czerny's *Andante e Polacca* from 1848. This is an unabashed virtuoso display piece, written in the glittering style of Chopin, Thalberg, and a host of similar figures from the same era, and the piano as well as the horn gets a considerable workout. If rather lacking in musical substance, it is nonetheless entertaining. On the other hand, the op. 7 *Nocturno* from 1864 of Franz Strauss, hornist father of Richard, is a finely crafted work that makes one immediately recognize why this musically talented father sired a genius in his son. It also makes me eager to hear more compositions by Strauss *père*, whose Horn Concerto No. 1 is his other repertory staple for the instrument. The *Adagio und Allegro* from 1849 is vintage Schumann in his Eusebius-and-Florestan bifurcation, with the soulful opening half suddenly giving way to its ebullient successor. Finally, the 1885 *Andante* of Richard Strauss was penned for his parent as a silver wedding anniversary gift. If its lush melodiousness does not yet express that composer's mature voice, it certainly displays the groundwork from whence that arose.

If the focus here is on Nilsen, one should nonetheless give all due recognition and praise to pianist Kristin Fossheim for her vital contributions to these proceedings. She is not only technically adroit, but also quite expressive in her own right on the 1854 Ernst Irmler historic piano. The recorded sound and booklet notes are again excellent. Unlike in *The Romantic Horn Sonata* release, the SACD and audio Blu-ray discs here are simply stacked atop one another on the same spindle in the case, rather than on separate spindles, so I suggest a bit of care in removing the discs to avoid scratches. Markow placed this release on his 2021 Want List, and no wonder. This is simply a disc that belongs in the collection not just of lovers of horn music, but all lovers of Romantic music, period. Urgently, emphatically recommended. **James A. Altena**

The sound of the horn epitomized stormy emotions for composers of Romantic music. Robert Schumann is said to have spoken of the horn as being the orchestra's soul. For poets, the horn's sound was a symbol of the soul's longing. For horn players, however, what was at stake for much of the Romantic period was the soul of the horn itself, for it was an instrument that faced experiment and change occasioned by new technology, notably the invention of the valve. This recording explores and illustrates this important era in the evolution of the horn.

Paul Dukas, Charles Gounod, Camille Saint-Saëns, Emanuel Chabrier, Carl Czerny, Franz Strauss, Robert Schumann and Richard Strauss

Steinar Granmo Nilsen historical horns Kristin Fossheim fortepiano

Recorded in DXD 24bit/352.8kHz

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2.0 LPCM 24/192kHz 7.0.4 Auro-3D 96kHz

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