

This was the city of Bergen. Snow storm one day and silence, blindingly white, the next. But mostly the snow streamed at an even pace, obliquely, through the air. Children on sledges in the alleys. It was 150 years since the composer Edvard Hoem had written something for the occasion.

Snow and sea. Against the black being water and the black being mountain-side, it keeps snowing as inside a mirror. A three-masted ship, lanterns lit, by the German Bridge. With his back to the mountain and close to the Maria cathedral, the Norse chronicler Snorre Sturlasson poses as the statue of himself with a book opened up in his hand. The city observes itself as in a historical novel from eternal *Grunderzeit* (day of founding). In Edvard Hoem's book on the poet and second world war martyr Nordahl Greig, you get to know this Bergen. And one of Edvard Hoem's own, best novels begins here 'in the Chronicle City' by the main protagonist's sitting on a stair with all his belongings in a plastic bag. We're informed that this person used to be 'the last farmer out west in the fiords to cultivate roses and believe in Heaven.'

And this leads the gaze through the snow towards a different music.

Not that of Grieg. That of Fartein Valen.

Fartein Valen lived at one of the fiords out west here, he cultivated roses and believed in Heaven.

Through atmospheric disturbances, on the radio in my hotel room in Bergen, I hear several of his works for the first time ever: it's a memorial programme. There's the violin concert from 1940, written in the memory of a young, dead relative. There's also his very last work, a piano concert from the early 50s.

This man's music has been poorly marketed, says one of the radio anchormen. That's probably true. I have looked for it here and there lately. By now I've collected a few recordings but there's surprisingly little to be found.

Fartein Valen, during the last ten years of his life, cultivated cactuses instead of roses. He named them after composers he wanted to have around, and after people in the neighbourhood, and cross-bred them bravely.

In his orchestral music, there's

last page

Fartein Valen, in snowfall*

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always the landscape with its steep stillness, and a strong, surreal light, a sea light.

He grew up in the city of Stavanger. No, not really. His very first years he lived in Madagascar, where his parents were missionaries, and where he later on remembered having walked around singing an a-tonal song.

The strange transparency to his sound-light—one says it's due to a sense for polyphony working even with the intervals of overtones. He could hear with full clarity up to nine overtones to the striking of a piano key. Mirages diffracting and mirroring the light of mirages.

His rose garden froze asunder during the winters of the second world war.

Fartein Valen was a thin and frail man with a voice not much more than a whisper. The Swedish poet Augustin Mannerheim, who has written the best piece on him, felt his face to have been painted by El Greco.

It was in the village of Valevåg, north of the town Haugesund, that Fartein Valen cultivated roses: he moved there after seven years of studies in Berlin. He then spent seven more years composing two small pieces: in one of them, an 'Ave Maria' for solo voice and piano with the duration of six minutes on my CD player, he opens the door out of tonality; in the second, a trio, he closes it behind him, very gently, and finds himself in the landscape where pollination is to go on thereafter. It's the same year that Schoenberg fully develops his twelve-tone principle. They walk out through the same door into very similar and very different landscapes.

A second time, Fartein Valen moved to Valevåg, after having supported himself throughout most of the 20s and

30s as a music archivist and private teacher in Oslo. He was given a government grant and sat himself down in order to compose intensely for a year. He stayed on. The first nine years, he's supposed not to have made a move any farther than to Haugesund. This is when his symphonic production began. For the fifth symphony, on which he was working at the time of his death, there hasn't, however, been a single written note found.

Fartein Valen made his fugue exercises in the mornings with the cat in his lap. The cat bit his finger if he tried to shove it aside.

On Fartein Valen's tomb there's a stone on which he used to seat himself. The stone stood on an old cholera cemetery in Valevåg. Fartein Valen thought of this cemetery when, in Mallorca in 1932, he read Paul Valéry's *Le cimetiére marin*. His orchestral piece named after the poem moves in long, rushing waves: in the highest haze of strings there is a light barely possible to look into.

Fartein Valen believed firmly in Heaven. His mystique of death still casts long and sharp-edged shadows, as in a frozen rose garden.

Fartein Valen read some ten languages.

Johann Sebastian Bach visited Fartein Valen once. It was in Berlin and it was in a dream. Johann Sebastian Bach in the dream went to the sheets of music lying on the table and pointed out, peremptorily but amiably, what was wrong with it.

Fartein Valen was working at the very end of his life on an H. C. Andersen tale. A young mother seeks her child who has been carried away by Death. She then comes to a garden, and is led into a greenhouse full of flowers.

No note material connected to this tale has ever been found either.

A winter-garden, I imagine. Inside there he walks around. Snowfall outside, thickening. Now you don't see Fartein Valen anymore.

* Fartein Valen was a Norwegian composer.

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