



**Culture
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**Dane gold
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**Igor
Toronyi-
Lalic**

The Danes have taught us many things over recent years. *Borgen* taught us about life beyond reality TV. *The Killing* taught us how to be unironic with our knitwear. Now it's time to see if the Danes have something to teach us about contemporary classical music.

This weekend the BBC Symphony Orchestra is hosting *New from the North*, a day-long investigation of the latest new music from Denmark and wider Scandinavia. There are new works from the elder statesmen of Danish composition, Per Nørgard and Poul Ruders, and the Finns Esa-Pekka Salonen and Einojuhani Rautavaara. But the boldest Danish musical initiative of the lot is being cooked up at the Royal Opera House, which is assisting the sound art duo, Signe Klejs and Niels Rønsholdt, in a sort of virtual opera, *Breathless Moment*, written to be watched and listened to as an app.

"You have this very private and physical connection with your mobile device," Rønsholdt explains. "For a modern audience, the tablet is an artistic medium. You read literature, listen to music and watch movies on it. Transforming opera from a very public experience into something very private means the art form will gain intensity. You will feel the work speaking directly to you."

Björk pioneered this melding of new technologies to experimental music. Her most recent album, *Biophilia*, released as an app, asked listeners to



Signe Klejs and Niels Rønsholdt, purveyors of app-friendly opera

choose their own path through the songs. Similarly, Klejs and Rønsholdt will give the owner the chance to shape the score. Exploring the funeral of a spurned lover, we will be able to linger over the music of certain characters. The future of opera, the future of experimental pop: in both of these, it seems Scandinavia leads the way.

"The problem isn't that new music is too strange and different," explains Simon Steen-Andersen, Denmark's leading concert-hall experimentalist, "it's rather that it's not strange and different enough." For Steen-Andersen, whose *Study for String Instrument #2* will be played at the National Portrait Gallery on April 12, music should be about radicalism and immediacy. And, in his duets for various instruments and megaphone, he achieves a music that is

so vivid you feel like you could reach out and touch it.

The Scandinavian scene is certainly a playful one. "We are a playful people," Rønsholdt admits. But it goes further than that. "The Scandinavian educational systems, including the music academies, are free," Steen-Andersen says. "In comparison to many other places in Europe they're focused on individuality, rather than craftsmanship and historic luggage."

This independent stance has held Danish composers in good stead, Ruders believes. "We are a rag-tag bunch," he acknowledges. "It's everyone for himself. And it's probably this maverick attitude that is the main reason Danish music has succeeded in more or less side-stepping modernist dogma." That Denmark is home to one

of the world's most innovative publishing houses, Edition S, which specialises in work by composers whose demands go beyond the traditional five-stave score, is also vital.

Two of the greatest early 20th-century Scandinavian composers, the Dane Carl Nielsen and Finn Jean Sibelius, were both artists who did their own thing. Both stuck two fingers up to the prevailing fashions. The 80-year-old Nørgard, who knew Sibelius personally, has continued this Danish tradition of dissent. With Sibelius as a guide, Nørgard has built up his sound world through a conversation with his surroundings, especially the rivers and woods that his compositional hut overlooks. "Being a city boy from Copenhagen, my first experience of canoeing through the waters of Jutland was very important," he says. "You can find a river feeling in my music. It streams."

Succeeding generations have moved away from the natural world. "I'm afraid this is all tourist board propaganda," claims Ruders. Denmark isn't even particularly endowed with impressive scenery, adds Ruders — "it's an allotment garden". But while the influences might have changed, the counter-intuitive streak remains. "Here there is less of a feeling of obligation to certain ways of doing things," Steen-Andersen says. "Thus there's a free ride to be curious and creative in any direction you want."

New from the North, Barbican, London EC2 (020-7638 8891), tomorrow