

Summary

Boel Lindberg

Mellan provins och parnass. John Fernström i svenskt musikliv

[From Province to Parnassus. John Fernström in Swedish musical life]

Lund: Arkiv förlag, 1997.

John Fernström (1897–1961) was a musician, conductor, teacher/pedagogue and composer. He was one of the most prolific composers of his generation in Sweden, producing over 200 pieces in the genres of symphonic music, chamber music and vocal music for mixed choirs, male choirs and solo vocals accompanied by piano. Most of his life was spent in Scania, first working in Helsingborg from 1916–1939 as a violinist in Nordvästra Skånes Orkesterförening [*the Northwest Scanian Orchestra*], whereafter he moved to Malmö and worked as a freelance conductor and composer. In 1943 he moved to Lund, becoming the municipal music director in 1948 and held this position until his death. Fernström founded the Nordic Youth Orchestra in Lund in 1951, an annual orchestra school which became an important training ground for generations of Nordic musicians.

This dissertation focuses primarily on Fernström's composing. The aim is to understand the factors in his life and the context in which he worked which had an impact on his composing. The methodological point of departure is Pierre Bourdieu's research on various cultural spheres and traditions. Bourdieu's concepts of *fields* (fields of social competition), *cultural capital* and *habitus* have influenced the structure of the dissertation. These concepts are used to explain Fernström's career in three different contexts: in the musical world of Helsingborg from 1916–39; in the male choir movement from approximately 1928–55; and in the Stockholm concert world from 1943–53.

This analysis of Fernström's career is based upon a great deal of empirical material from the comprehensive private archive kept by Fernström and his family since the 1920s, as well as from public archives in Helsingborg, Malmö, Lund and Stockholm. Part of the research work has involved cataloguing and annotating the autographs, letters and manuscripts which have been transferred from Fernström's private archive to the manuscript collection of Lund University's Library. One result of this endeavour is an annotated list of his works.¹

Other materials consulted include reviews from newspapers in Helsingborg and Stockholm. Some of these were contained in Fernström's own press-clipping archive (clippings of reviews about Fernström's music and himself). Additional articles were obtained through the newspaper archive at Lund University.

Another central reference has been Fernström's posthumously published autobiography *Jubals son och blodsarvinge* (Lund, 1967). This was written in 1956–57 and strongly reflects his life circumstances at that time. He had not

verk: se Appendix D.

Gehrmans musikförlag, 1993.

Sveriges sångbok, Malmö: 1937.

Red John Fernström et al. 2:a uppl. Stock-

elningen, Lunds universitetsbibliotek)

1990 och 23/4 1993 samt ett stort antal sam-

om John Fernström.

och 23/4 1993. Dessutom samtal kring John

1997.

Intervju med Bo Wallner." *Sveriges Radio*,

composed any larger works since 1952, primarily due to ill health. He furthermore felt that interest in his music had ceased entirely in Stockholm and that new tastes were guiding the musical world there. The contentedness with being a provincial musician/conductor which he expresses in his autobiography can be seen as a way of dealing with his feelings over being marginalised from the national scene.

Interviews with Fernström's relatives and others who knew him is another form of source material.

The dissertation has three main sections. Before the actual dissertation commences, a chronological biography is presented. This is based on a more comprehensive biography which will be published separately.² In this biography, Fernström's life is chronicled year by year, starting with his youth in China where his father was a missionary. His school years in Osby and his music studies in Malmö and Stockholm are also recounted. Relatively well documented is further his time in Helsingborg with information on some of the works which he composed in his nearly twenty years in the town. His activities in Malmö and Lund are sketched with an enumeration of the most important of his compositions during his residence in these two towns.

Part I. Power and Music, concentrates on Fernström's career in Helsingborg. From approximately 1920, Helsingborg was Sweden's fifth largest town. During the first two decades of the 1900s, a musical field was established as a consequence of the founding of a professional symphony orchestra with state and municipal funding. A primary objective for this orchestra was to spread "good" orchestral music to the working class by giving so-called "people's concerts". Behind this popular educational ambition, other motives can be seen for establishing the orchestra. Symphonic music was at that time a cultural form with great symbolic value for the bourgeoisie. In Helsingborg, this class was not sufficiently large to support a symphony orchestra on its own. It was therefore appropriate to tie into the philanthropic objective of the time, the "uplifting of the common people", combining an honorable goal with pleasure. The tension between these two ambitions for the orchestra remained manifest during Fernström's entire career in Helsingborg.

Important actors in the musical field of Helsingborg comprised of the professional musicians attached to the symphony orchestra (*Nordvästra Skånes Orkesterförening* – NSO), the military musical corps and musicians who played in restaurants and cinemas. Also included in this field were church musicians and music teachers, as well as a pool of half-professional musicians who occa-

2. Boel Lindberg, *John Fernström. En tonsättare i folkhemmets tid* [John Fernström. A composer in the People's Home era] (Lund: Arkiv, in production).

primarily due to ill health. He further-
ceased entirely in Stockholm and that
there. The contentedness with being
expresses in his autobiography can
ings over being marginalised from the

and others who knew him is another

s. Before the actual dissertation com-
mented. This is based on a more com-
plished separately.² In this biography,
r, starting with his youth in China
ool years in Osby and his music stu-
counted. Relatively well documented
information on some of the works
years in the town. His activities in
umeration of the most important of
ese two towns.

n Fernström's career in Helsingborg.
was Sweden's fifth largest town. Dur-
musical field was established as a conse-
symphony orchestra with state and
or this orchestra was to spread "good"
giving so-called "people's concerts".
s, other motives can be seen for estab-
was at that time a cultural form with
n Helsingborg, this class was not suf-
chestra on its own. It was therefore
bjective of the time, the "uplifting of
rable goal with pleasure. The tension
estra remained manifest during Fern-

Helsingborg comprised of the profes-
sionary orchestra (*Nordvästra Skånes*
ical corps and musicians who played
in this field were church musicians
alf-professional musicians who occa-

Folkhemmets tid [John Fernström. A compo-
sition).

sionally were brought in to supplement the NSO. Music critics writing for the
four newspapers in the town should also be included. In Chapter 3, "Friends,
Relations and Positions", some of the actors influencing Fernström's career in
Helsingborg are presented. Already in his first years in the town he assembled a
circle of friends comprising musicians, visual artists with musical interests and
journalists. Fernström and musician colleagues Hjalmar Johansson (1887-
1965), Gustaf Paulson (1898-1967), Waldemar Rudolf (1882-1974) worked
together to develop themselves as composers. All except Johansson began to
study composition under Peder Gram in Copenhagen during the 1920s. The
group can be seen as a special *Helsingborg Circle* of composers who stimulated
and influenced each other. During a few years in the mid-1920's, Knut Håkan-
son (1887-1929) can also be counted among the members of this Circle.

Fernström's friends, both those in the circle of composers as well as his other
friends, possessed a more radical and modern perspective on musical politics
and creation than the dominant clique in Helsingborg's cultural elite. The
Social Democratic journalist Carl Schill was one of Fernström's friends. From
the late 1920s, Fernström also received strong support from Karl Salomonsson,
teacher at the Worker's Education Association (*ABF*) and also an influential
politician within the Social Democratic Party.

The NSO's conductor Olof Lidner had a central position of power in the
established cultural elite when it came to music matters. He had held this posi-
tion since the late 1890s and had managed to strengthen it during the follow-
ing decades. Many of the upper-class members of Lidner's network of contacts
put their own money into keeping the orchestra solvent during the 1920's
when inflation eroded state and municipal funding.

From the latter half of the 1920s, the radical circle sought to influence the
musical selection and the concert schedule of the NSO. They wanted to pro-
mote a modern perspective on the role and work of the orchestra, as well as
opening up the concert program for local composers. Initially, the progressives
were successful. With the help of among others Schill and Salomonsson, Fern-
ström succeeded in having the people's concerts replaced with a new concert
form, study concerts with music lectures. In these he both gave the lectures and
conducted the orchestra. Many from the radical group later supported Fern-
ström when he sought to succeed Olof Lidner as conductor in 1939. Despite
the fact that the majority of the orchestra members voted for Fernström, the
board of the NSO decided in favor of another candidate.

Decisive in Fernström's failure to win the conductor position was his lack of
"appropriate" cultural capital. He did not possess sufficient formal qualifica-
tions in terms of technical and academic musical schooling and important con-
ducting jobs. Neither his qualifications as a composer nor his efforts to widen
the public and musical interest in Helsingborg were highly esteemed. The
"popular line" he represented was not supported by the upper-class circle which
was in the majority in the NSO's administrative board. The support which

Fernström could mobilise from among others, Social Democratic corners (during the inter-war period the Social Democrats held a political majority in the town Council and among the politically elected representations on the NSO board), was insufficient to match the dominance of the traditional upper class circle in the cultural sphere.

Fernström's decision to become a composer has several components that can be related to his habitus and cultural capital. One factor is a strong need to express himself artistically which he developed from his early childhood. He turned to composition when he realized that the first career objective which he set for himself, to become a solo violinist, could not be realized, primarily because he could not find anyone to support him economically. Another important component is his interaction with his friends in the *Helsingborg Circle*.

The composing style which Fernström developed during his nearly twenty years in Helsingborg can best be understood from the music which he was surrounded by as a violinist in the orchestra. Chapter 5 contains a wide overview of the NSO repertoire, which during the interwar period increasingly took on a lighter character. This chapter also takes up the other musical environments in Helsingborg with which Fernström came in contact. Fernström's composing style is also marked by his desire to reach, and be understood by a wider audience. Already during his period in Helsingborg he began to produce copiously, composing among other things, six symphonies, solo concerts, diverse orchestra pieces, songs and chamber music. A characteristic element is the great craftsmanship which he displayed already in the 1930s. His activity as an orchestra musician helped him to master and exploit the full timbral spectrum of a symphony orchestra. His music is also well adapted to the technical capacities of different instruments.

Stylistically, the music of Fernström's Helsingborg period is linked to the "main-stream" praxis of the 1910s and 1920s. It is rooted in a tonality in which harmony is colored by unresolved dissonances and chromaticism and the use of scale formations which transport one's thoughts to exotic environments, modes, whole-tone scales and whole-step half-step scales. The tonal context is held together by harmonic progression organized by the 5th relationship, but it is also possible to find hints of late-Romantic chromatic mediant relationships in his music. He also occasionally uses impressionistic timbral effects which displace traditional harmonic chord progressions. From the early 1920s, he became interested in counterpoint, and his great ability in this area is evidenced in nearly all of his works.

Characteristic works from Fernström's Helsingborg period are his suite *Intima miniatyrer*, op. 2 for strings, the orchestral work *Skånsk rapsodi*, op. 13 and *Symfoniska variationer*, op. 17 and *Klarinettkonsert*, op. 30. These works and some songs from op. 1 and 3 are presented in Chapter 6. Also in this chapter is an overview of the six symphonies which Fernström composed during his years in Helsingborg.

bers, Social Democratic corners (dur-
crats held a political majority in the
elected representations on the NSO
ninance of the traditional upper class

poser has several components that can
pitol. One factor is a strong need to
veloped from his early childhood. He
hat the first career objective which he
ist, could not be realized, primarily
ort him economically. Another impor-
friends in the *Helsingborg Circle*.

developed during his nearly twenty
od from the music which he was sur-
Chapter 5 contains a wide overview
nterwar period increasingly took on a
p the other musical environments in
e in contact. Fernström's composing
and be understood by a wider audi-
gborg he began to produce copiously,
onies, solo concerts, diverse orchest-
characteristic element is the great crafts-
ne 1930s. His activity as an orchestra
it the full timbral spectrum of a sym-
adapted to the technical capacities of

Helsingborg period is linked to the
20s. It is rooted in a tonality in which
nces and chromaticism and the use of
thoughts to exotic environments,
half-step scales. The tonal context is
ganized by the 5th relationship, but it
antic chromatic mediant relationships
pressionistic timbral effects which dis-
pressions. From the early 1920s, he
s great ability in this area is evidenced

is Helsingborg period are his suite
rchestral work *Skånsk rapsodi*, op. 13
Klarinettkonsert, op. 30. These works
ented in Chapter 6. Also in this chap-
hich Fernström composed during his

Part II. In the World of Male Choirs deals with Fernström's contact as a com-
poser and conductor with the male choir movement. In the late 1920s, he
began conducting the workingmen's choir *Lyran* in Helsingborg. He soon suc-
ceeded in elevating the quality of this choir to the extent that it could begin
competing with the town's other two male choirs. The choirs recruited their
singers from different social classes. The oldest choir contained many members
of the upper class and it was partly via conducting this choir that Olof Lidner,
who also led the NSO, received the strong support he enjoyed from the upper
classes. Another choir recruited mainly from the middle class. The choirs com-
peted with each other through the large annual concerts they gave. They also
cooperated with each other when the town of Helsingborg wished to display its
cultural colours for royal visits, visits by other notables or festive occasions such
as Flag Day and Walpurgis night. The unity which, despite all else, was
achieved in the male choir world reflected a dominant ideology of the parent
organization, the Swedish Choral Society which felt that the movement should
function as a bridge between social classes.

Fernström composed many a cappella songs for *Lyran*. Many of the singers
could not read musical notation, so the music had to be learnt by ear. Fern-
ström took note of this by making all the voices as melodic as possible and
making them easy to memorize by re-using much melodic material. The har-
monies in the songs were not very complex. Many of the lyrics he used in his
compositions for the choir were of a humorous nature. In both melody and lyr-
ics, Fernström consciously departed from the late-Romantic musical style for
male choir repertoires, with its overt nationalistic musical style and hero-wor-
shipping lyrics.

In Malmö, Fernström conducted *Sångarbröderna* (the Singers' Brother-
hood). This was also a workingmen's choir and functioned during the 1930s as
a form of "house choir" for the workers' movement, performing during election
campaigns and trade union events in Malmö. During the 1940s, many of the
large organizations in the workers' movement celebrated 40, 50 and even 60
year anniversaries, and Fernström was commissioned to compose cantatas for
the large anniversary events which were arranged. Between 1942-47, nine rela-
tively long festive cantatas for soloists, male choirs and orchestra were com-
posed for this purpose. It is evident that this music has its origins as
commissioned pieces and that as a free-lance composer and conductor, Fern-
ström for economic reasons took on paid work. He did not however lower his
standards as a craftsman, and was highly capable of adapting the music he com-
posed to the performers. The choral arrangements are usually simple, with the
solo and orchestral arrangements written for professional musicians. In general,
Fernström could rely on the Malmö Symphony Orchestra performing in the
guise of members of the Musicians' Union in the orchestras assembled for the

various events. A component of many of the cantatas is allusion to the songs of the workers' movement. Some of the typical stylistic aspects of the cantatas are described in Chapter 9.

There are no real comparable pieces in Swedish music to the suite cantatas which Fernström wrote in the 1940s. The worker's movement in Malmö was most likely influenced by the festival tradition in the German and Danish workers' movements.

From the mid-1930s, Fernström became increasingly active in the male choir movement's umbrella organizations *Skånska Sångarförbundet* [the Scania Choral Society] and *Svenska Sångarförbundet* [the Swedish Choral Society]. In the *Skånska Sångarförbundet* he advanced to the position of first conductor and in 1949 he was elected Chairman of the organization. From this point he also received a post at the national level as third conductor in the *Svenska Sångarförbundet*. Even more important was his participation in a committee which worked to change the standard male choir repertoire. Fernström managed to have no less than four of his own a cappella male choir songs incorporated in the new edition of the *Svenska Sångarförbundet's* Pocket Songbook which was the result of this committee's work. Two of these works, *Vårregnet* and *Som palatsen i Österlanden* are described and analyzed in Chapter 9. Earlier in the 1940s, Fernström argued for a renewal and modernization of the male choir repertoire in articles written for the *Svenska Sångarförbundet's* magazine *Sångartidningen*. Fernström felt that many of the songs in the traditional repertoire were pure kitsch.

Fernström apparently thrived in the male choir world and commented favorably on his social interaction with the choirs in his autobiography. Both the popular and class-transcending ideology of the male choir movement appealed to him. His success in this field can also be explained in terms of his cultural capital in the form of many years of conducting male choirs and good contacts with Social Democratic politicians in Helsingborg, which were highly respected in this environment. In the highbrow musical field in Helsingborg where a bourgeois cultural elite dominated, this capital was of little value.

Part III. Guest Performance on Mount Parnassus takes up Fernström's success in the musical field of Stockholm in the years 1943–53. His friendship with the composer Ture Rangström (1888–1947) made it possible to have Fernström's *Concertino för flöjt, damkör och liten orkester*, op. 52 performed by *Stockholms Konsertförening* [what later came to be the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra] in late Winter, 1943. The concert was well received both by the public and critics. A performance of *Songs of the Sea*, op. 62 for coloratura and strings a few months later in Stockholm reaffirmed his earlier success and led to Fernström's music coming into great demand. His great breakthrough in Stock-

Fernström cautiously tried to adapt his style to the new tastes. This is most apparent in his *Symphony No. 12* and *Violinkonsert no 2*. In general, the works were met with acclaim and they were written about seriously by influential critics in both the avant-garde and more traditional camps. This should have encouraged him to continue in the same direction. After 1952 however, Fernström did not compose any large orchestral works and ceased composing all together around 1955.

Fernström's ill-health from 1953, when he suffered his first heart attacks, is the best explanation as to why he virtually ceased composing after that year. Through the visual arts (since his childhood he was highly interested in painting) he continued to give expression to his artistic impulses, and his ambitions in this realm were easier to reconcile with the physical limitations which arose due to his illness.

Even though Fernström no longer was composing, there were still a great number of his larger orchestral works which had not been heard in Stockholm and which might have secured his place in the standard repertoire of Swedish music which is considered part of the national heritage. Two explanations as to why this did not happen can be offered. The first is that the conductor Carl Garaguly, who was one of Fernström's foremost proponents, disappeared from Stockholm's music field in 1953. Other Fernström supporters in Stockholm such as the composer Ture Rangström had died. The other explanation is that the Monday Group succeeded in occupying many of the most important positions in the musical field, and thereby could primarily promote the music on concert programs which was most in line with the groups values. There was no longer a place for a composer from the periphery with his roots in 1920s Modernism.

Part III ends with a review of three of the works which Fernström enjoyed success with in Stockholm: his *Sixth*, *Tenth* and *Twelfth Symphonies*.

In the final chapter, "Between the Periphery and Mount Parnassus", Bourdieu's concepts of field, cultural capital and habitus are employed to recapitulate and explain Fernström's career as a composer. Fernström's career proves to be a useful prism through which characteristics of Swedish musical life during the first half of the 1900s become visible. Using Fernström, it is possible to see the conditions which were attached to the smaller and limited autonomous music fields which emerged in some provincial towns during this period. It also becomes easier to understand the tensions between provincial and national culture. His career can also be used to discuss the concepts of cultural capital and habitus and their applicability as explanatory concepts in analyzing the success of actors in a competitive cultural field.

Översättning: Chris Mathieu