Backer Grøndahl, Agathe

Die Komponistin und Pianistin Agathe Backer Grøndahl

Agathe Backer Grøndahl

1 December 1847 in Holmestrand, Norwegen
† 4 June 1907 in Kristiania (heute Oslo), Norwegen

Composer, pianist, pedagogue

„She composes, she says, in the quiet of the evening, when the day’s work is done: chiefly, indeed, in the evenings of December, when the year’s work is done. ‘What work?’ I ask, astounded. ‘Oh, all the things one has to do’ she replies, the housekeeping, the children, the playing, the three lessons I give every day to pupils.’ I rise up in wrath to protest against this house, these children, these pupils swallowing up the ministrations that were meant for mankind; but (she adds, with a certain diffidence as to her power of expressing so delicate a point in English), that it is as wife and mother that she gets the experience that makes her an artist.”


Profile

Agathe Ursula Backer Grøndahl was a very busy pianist, composer and piano pedagogue who was acknowledged by critics, colleagues and the public. Due to her living circumstances as a housewife and mother, she was not able to dedicate herself to composition to the extent that she would have wished. Nonetheless, her compositional oeuvre includes numerous art songs and piano pieces, several choral works, a cantata and two orchestral compositions. Her “Scherzo for Orchestra” was the first orchestral work composed by a woman to be publicly performed in Norway.

Agathe Backer Grøndahl was active as a piano pedagogue for her entire life.

Already at the age of 27 she was accepted as a member of the Royal Swedish Academy and received the medal "Pro liberis et artibus" from King Oscar II.

Cities an countries

At the age of ten, Agathe Ursula Backer moved with her family from her native town of Holmestrand to Kristiania (today Oslo/Norway), approximately 80 kilometres to the north. She studied at the New Academy of Music in Berlin. In addition, she received instruction from Hans von Bülow in Florence and from Franz Liszt in Weimar. From Kristiania, the focal point of her life and activities, she undertook numerous concert tours that took her through all of Europe and Scandinavia. She died in Kristiania.

Biography

Agathe Ursula Backer, born on 1 December 1847 in Holmestrand, south of Kristiania, grew up in a family in which music and art were an integral part of everyday life. At the age of eleven she received her first piano instruction. Her parents were somewhat sceptical about her career as a professional concert pianist; but when it became clear that she would indeed be successful in this field, she was constantly encouraged by them. She celebrated international successes as a concert pianist, chamber musician and composer, becoming one of Norway’s most important pianists. She also continued her concert tours and compositional activity after marrying the musician Olaus Andreas Grøndahl. Due to her poor constitution...
Agathe Ursula Backer was born in 1847 as the third of four daughters of the businessman, ship owner and consul Nils Backer (1815-1877) and his wife Sophie Smith Petersen (1819-1882). Agathe Backer Grøndahl's musical talent was recognised and encouraged by the family early on, but it was only after they moved to the Norwegian capital of Kristiania in 1857 that she received regular piano instruction, first from Miss With (first name unknown) and shortly thereafter with the composer, conductor, organist, author and music critic Otto Winter-Hjelm (1837-1931). In the year 1861, after Winter-Hjelm had moved to Germany in order to study, she received instruction from Halfdan Kjerulf (1815-1868). At Kjerulf's initiative, she began studying music theory and composition with Ludvig Mathias Lindeman (1812-1887).

After careful consideration and the intensive consultation of Kjerulf, Agathe Backer Grøndahl decided to study at Theodor Kullak's New Academy of Music in Berlin, a private institute that specialised in the training of pianists. She studied there from 1865 until 1869. She was taught by Theodor Kullak (1818-1882) in piano and by Richard Ferdinand Würst (1824-1881), a pupil of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, in harmony and composition. During this time she made her first appearances as a soloist and composed both of her orchestral works "Andante quasi Allegretto" and "Scherzo". After her return to Kristiania, she developed a busy concertising schedule as a soloist and chamber musician which took her through all of Scandinavia and to Germany, France and England. She performed with the violinist Ole Bull, the singer Nina Grieg, the pianist Erika Lie Nissen and with Edvard Grieg. With the last-named as conductor, she made her debut in Kristiania in 1868 with Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.5. In 1871 she made a guest appearance at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, where she was celebrated by the public but negatively evaluated by the critics (see Grinde 2003, p. 116). After this concert she travelled further, to Hans von Bülow (1830-1894) in Florence, with whom she studied for several months. In addition, she attended several master courses with Franz Liszt (1811-1886) in Weimar.

In 1875 she married the choral director and singing teacher Olaus Andreas Grøndahl (1847-1923), with whom she had four children. The first, a girl, died two months after her birth. She contributed to the family income with her continuous concertising activities, but especially with her activities as a piano pedagogue. In 1889 and 1890 she performed in London, where she became acquainted with George Bernard Shaw who, in his capacity as a music critic, wrote several articles about her, calling her "one of the greatest pianists of Europe" (quoted in Grinde 2003, p. 119).

Agathe Backer Grøndahl was also committed to pedagogy. She was described by her pupils as a conscientious teacher with a special interest not only in her pupils' musical development, but also in their personal development (see Sandvik 1948, S. 106). For Agathe Backer Grøndahl, training them to become artistically independent stood at the forefront. She continuously taught three hours each day, including several pianists who embarked upon notable professional careers. Her experience from her period as a student in Berlin at Kullak's Academy had an especially strong influence on her teaching. Edvard Grieg also played an important role in the artistic activity of Agathe Backer Grøndahl; he was not only her patron, but also her friend. Backer Grøndahl gave world premieres of several of his songs, including the song cycle "Haugtussa".

Agathe Backer Grøndahl was completely deaf in one ear already at the age of thirty. As she aged, her remaining powers of hearing worsened to the point of complete deafness during the final months of her life. Additional health problems, including insomnia, tinnitus and nervousness forced her to gradually withdraw from concert life from 1894 onwards (see Hambro 2008, p. 159). Thus she increased her activities as pedagogue and composer.

It was Edvard Grieg who encouraged her to return to the concert stage once more in 1898. Her career as a pianist then drew to a close in 1903 with a final appearance in Eidsvoll, Norway. She spent her final years primarily at her residence on the island of Ormöya in the Oslo Fjord. She died there on 4 June 1907.

Appreciation

Agathe Backer Grøndahl was famous during her lifetime as a concert pianist and chamber musician, very positively evaluated and even excessively praised by critics and public. Today, she is still considered one of the most important and successful Norwegian concert pianists. In her view, she could not sufficiently realise her need to
compose; she was too involved in the constraints of everyday work and the necessity of earning a living for her family of five, together with her husband, with teaching and concerts. Two works from her student years in Berlin – "Andante for Piano and Orchestra" and "Scherzo for Orchestra" (both 1868/69) – are the only orchestral compositions in her oeuvre, which consists of approximately 180 art songs (including numerous folksong arrangements), 120 piano pieces and numerous choral compositions. With the choice of these genres, she largely remained within the limits of what was socially tolerated from a woman during the 19th century. Her musical language is mostly romantic to late-romantic and atmospheric, with occasional echoes of the so-called Nordic tone. For all that, she prefers clear, symmetrical forms which are sometimes interrupted by austere, rough harmonies.

It is unusual that almost all of Agathe Backer Grøndahl's complete oeuvre was published during her lifetime. A photograph taken on the occasion of the Bergen Music Festival in 1898, initiated by Edvard Grieg for the presentation and performance of Norwegian music, shows how outstandingly important her role as a female composer in Norwegian musical life was. Here, she is seen as the only woman amongst nine male colleagues.

Reception
Agathe Ursula Backer Grøndahl was already an acknowledged pianist during her lifetime. Her concerts as a soloist, chamber musician (especially the duo concerts with Erika Lie Nissen, with whom she performed ever since her student days in Berlin) and as a composer were frequently mentioned both in daily and specialist journals at home and abroad ("Nordisk Musik-Tidende", "Aftenbladet", "Svenska Dagbladet", "Signale für die musikalische Welt", "The Star", "Allgemeine Deutsche Musikzeitung"). Critics including George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Comettant, praised her powerful expression as well her ability to conjure up inner images in the listeners, her independence both in her playing and in her orchestral compositions, her unaffected, finely nuanced, brilliant, very musical playing (see Grinde 2003, p. 115ff.). Recognition of her achievements was also reflected in her membership in the "Svenska Musikaliska Akademien" (1875) and her being awarded the medal "Pro liberis et artibus" by the Swedish King Oscar II (1885).

In 1875 Agathe Backer received an offer from the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, USA to accept a professorship in piano. The Conservatory was then directed by the Danish composer Ager Hamerik, a friend of Niels W. Gade, on whom she had apparently made a good impression after her successful concerts in Copenhagen (see Hambro 2008, p. 115 f.). She preferred, however, to build a life near her family in Oslo.

The musician also refused an offer from the Music Conservatory in Helsingfors (today Helsinki), which she received in 1888 thanks to a successful concert that she had presented there.

Her works (70 opuses) were published in Kristiania by the Brødrene Hals, the Norsk Musikforlag and Wærnths Musikforlag, in Copenhagen by Wilhelm Hansen and Christian F.E. Horneman and in Stockholm by Abraham Hirsch, and enjoyed great popularity. Interest in the composer Agathe Backer Grøndahl grew over the course of the 20th century. Especially in 2007, the 100th anniversary of her death, there were numerous events and lectures (in Holmestrand, amongst other places) as well as concerts, e.g. at the Music Academy in Oslo.

Research
Unfortunately, relatively few primary sources (e.g. letters or diaries) exist. The most important material for the reconstruction of her artistic activity is primarily formed by commemorative studies and reviews. Important sources for the person of Agathe Backer Grøndahl are the largely preserved diary entries of her sister Harriet Backer, a renowned painter of the national-romantic epoch in Norway. These provide insight into childhood, family, living conditions and shared study and concert travels.

The music journalist Cecilie Dahm wrote a comprehensive biography of the composer in 1998. Camilla Hambro submitted a dissertation on Agathe Backer Grøndahl entitled "Det ulmer under overflaten" in May 2008 at the University of Göteborg, up until now the most extensive work on the life and work of this musician.

Need for Research
The artistic activity of Backer Grøndahl has been researched for the most part.

There is a great lack, however, of analytical investigations of her compositions. In addition, there has not yet been sufficient research into her work as a pedagogue and the influence that she had on the following generations of artists. Research comparing the socio-cultural circumstances of Scandinavian and Central European women composers would be important, so as to better classify the importance of her work.

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