



Andreas W Andersson and Sven-Erik Bäck

Sven-Erik Bäck (1919–1994) was unique as a composer, both within his native Sweden and in the international circles in which he has come to be seen as one of the most important composers of Lutheran music in the 20th century. Born in Stockholm in 1919, he belonged to a small circle of musicians and scholars who, from 1944 onwards, met informally every Monday in the household of the composer Karl-Birger Blomdahl. “The Monday group” as this circle soon became known, was associated with certain aesthetic and intellectual ideals, many of which defined the Swedish modernist music movement. Interestingly several key figures in this group, such as Ingvar Lidholm, Sven-Eric Johansson and Bäck himself had their roots in the free, or pietist, churches – congregational denominations outside the Swedish State Church. Among these Bäck stands out by virtue of his large and varied oeuvre of sacred works: hymns, passions, motets, cantatas, and settings of the Mass.

Aesthetically Bäck deliberately flouted the lavish and highly stylized melody and harmony of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His own individual melodic style may thus, at first, seem somewhat stern and angular but it is one that has continued to grow in reputation and popularity since it first appeared in the 1940s. Bishop and fellow composer Gustaf Aulén characterized the peculiar style of Bäck’s sacred works thus:

“Because this musical homiletic has been conquered only by way of hard struggle with the issues at hand, and because it is never a matter of easily and pleurably attained outcomes, this dynamic music will operate with so much greater power. [...] It breaks its path through problematic frameworks and acts in this vulnerable position not by fanfares but by an inexorable and enigmatic inner dynamic power.”

Andreas W Andersson’s solo saxophone interpretations of three of Bäck’s hymn melodies to texts by Olov Hartman, brings the listener to the heart of the composer’s struggles, both on artistic and spiritual levels. In the improvisations on *En vapenlös Kristus* (‘An unarmed Christ’) and the Gethsemane hymn *Vaka med mig* (‘Stay awake with me’), Andersson conveys both Bäck’s melodies but also, in a very direct sense, Hartman’s poetry and theology. *Du som gick före oss* (‘You who went before us’) was conceived by Bäck and Hartman as part of a minor Passion for Good Friday. The melody is loosely based on a twelve-tone structure, according to which no pitch ought to be repeated until all the other eleven notes in the chromatic scale have resounded. Andersson’s ingenious take on this melody would certainly have been of great interest to Bäck who, on several occasions, spoke highly of the musical ideal of melodic improvisation without accompaniment.

There are several aesthetic connections between Bäck’s melodies and Andersson’s interlinking sections, called *Miniatyr* (‘Miniature’) I–III. The latter express the type of freedom that is essentially only possible within the premises of fixed melodic structures. The idiomatic use of the saxophone, is reminiscent of Bäck’s own compositions for that instrument, notably *Dithyramb* (1949) and *Elegi* from *Bagateller* (1961). Andersson, like Bäck, always transcends the purely atmospheric – we are dealing here with a negotiation with content, not with mere timbre and ambiance. We meet in these recordings musicianship which Aulén called “an inexorable and enigmatic inner dynamic power”.

Mattias Lundberg

Professor, Department of Musicology, University of Uppsala