

## An introduction to the organ works of

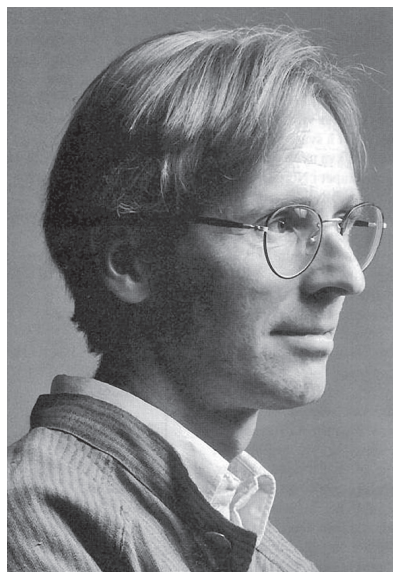
# Kjell Mørk Karlsen

By James D. Hicks

Blessed with a natural environment of stunning, rugged beauty and a culture rich in poetic expression, Norway is also celebrated for its musical heritage. A country that could produce a composer of the stature of Edvard Grieg can also claim composers who have made a significant contribution to the repertoire for the organ. A vibrant school of new music flourishes in Norway, and the Oslo-based composer Kjell Mørk Karlsen has fashioned a diverse and notable body of work over the course of a distinguished career. Karlsen is a prolific artist whose output includes ten orchestral symphonies and eleven oratorios, along with numerous cantatas, concertos, and chamber music. Creating new music for the organ has been an ongoing feature of his endeavors, and I recently had an opportunity to discuss this fascinating topic with the composer while on a concert tour in Scandinavia. All of the information in this article stems from an interview I conducted with the composer in Stockholm, Sweden, on October 10, 2014.

Raised in a home “filled with music,” the Oslo-bred composer was born into a family of artists in 1947. Considering the many creative gifts of his family, it was a natural choice for Kjell Mørk Karlsen to follow the path of a professional musician. Although his mother was a fine violinist and his brother an enthusiastic flutist, it was his father, Rolf Karlsen, who provided the impetus for a career in music. The elder Karlsen (1911–82) was an essential figure in the musical life of twentieth-century Norway. A brilliant pianist, organist, conductor, and composer, Rolf Karlsen served as organist and director of music at Oslo Cathedral. Rolf also taught at the Oslo Music Conservatory and worked as a keyboard musician with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. Rolf was recognized as a master sight-reader, able to condense and realize the contents of the most complex orchestral scores on a moment’s notice. He was, in addition, a pioneer in introducing music from the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque periods to the cultural life of Norway, having studied medieval music in Belgium and harpsichord in Basel, Switzerland. Rolf Karlsen was a leading member of *Musica Sacra*, a movement that strove to restore the primacy of chant within the liturgy, reintroduce the chorale heritage from the Reformation, support new works based upon these ancient themes, and encourage the building of organs influenced by the *Orgelbewegung* (Organ Reform Movement). Karlsen’s compositions show a preference for the use of historical forms, and his organ variations on *Vår Gud han er så fast en borg* (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God) is a representative example of his style (found in *Tibi Laus*, published by Norsk Musikforlag, N.B.O 9599).

The versatility that informed Rolf’s career served as a role model to his son Kjell. Kjell’s musical studies began at age seven when his father bought him a



Kjell Mørk Karlsen

baroque recorder. As a child he studied this instrument so seriously that he eventually took a diploma in recorder from the Oslo Conservatory at age twenty-one. At age eleven, Kjell’s brother, an aspiring flutist, suggested that Kjell take up the oboe as the two instruments might sound well together. Kjell’s education in oboe progressed quickly; he studied with the principal oboist of the Oslo Philharmonic. Karlsen’s affinity for the oboe made it an important means of expression during his student years. He earned a diploma in oboe from the Oslo Conservatory during the same year as he did with the recorder and became proficient enough to be an oboist with the Norwegian National Opera Orchestra. His experience with the orchestra gave him insight into the creation and performance of dramatic music. Working within an orchestral milieu was a formative experience in preparation for the composing of the large-scale works of his maturity.

After witnessing his father conduct a performance of J. S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, the younger Karlsen was so moved by this presentation to begin study of keyboard instruments as a logical next step. As with the recorder and oboe, Kjell’s rapid proficiency with the piano and organ was astounding. By age nineteen he became keyboard musician with the Oslo Philharmonic and gained additional ensemble performance to complement his work as an oboist. Karlsen points to the crucial experience this position afforded him in his later development as a composer. He particularly cites the opportunity of performing works by Stravinsky, Bartók, and other twentieth-century masters as a significant aspect of his education. These performances provided an opportunity to learn about American music as well; he participated in several concerts devoted to the works of Lukas Foss. Karlsen eventually took a diploma in organ from the Oslo Conservatory in 1968, serving as organist for the *Sølvgtuttene* (Norwegian Broadcasting Boy’s Choir) and at the Greverud, Oppegård from 1967



Karlsen, about 12 years old, playing oboe

to 1973. Karlsen pursued independent study with the noted Danish organist Finn Viderø and spent the academic year 1980–81 commuting to Copenhagen for lessons. The study of Bach and Buxtehude was the focus of his work with Viderø, and Karlsen remembers Viderø’s emphasis on “lively, rhythmic playing and detached touch.”

Given Karlsen’s long experience with the baroque recorder and his father’s enthusiasm for early music, it seemed like a natural progression for Kjell to organize an ensemble dedicated to historically informed performances of this repertoire. Karlsen formed his own group, *Pro Musica Antiqua*, and served as its first director from 1969 to 1974. Playing a wide variety of instruments, including krummhorns, shawms, and recorders, Karlsen did much to introduce the unique sounds of the medieval and Renaissance repertoire to Norwegian audiences.

Karlsen’s diverse musical activities caught the attention of Norwegian universities and the national church. He began his academic career during the 1970s, lecturing at the Oslo Conservatory, the Norwegian Academy of Music, and the Rogaland Music Conservatory. As his career unfolded, Karlsen also found success as a church musician. He served as organist at Tønsberg Cathedral from 1973 to 1978, Stavanger Cathedral from 1978 to 1981, Sør-Fron, Gudbrandsdalen from 1981 to 1989, Slemmestad Kirke from 1990 to 1995, and Asker Kirke from 1995 to 2011. During this period, he was active as a concert organist, performing throughout Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

Karlsen summarizes his duties as cathedral organist at Stavanger Cathedral:

- play one hundred services annually
- direct four choirs (adult Oratorio Choir, Boys Choir, Girls Choir, Children’s Choir)
- play the cathedral carillon daily for twenty minutes
- play weekly Saturday organ concerts



Karlsen at the organ in Asker church

–play (on average) six to eight weddings per weekend

–conduct oratorio performances

–serve as organ consultant for the region.

Parallel to his work in what was an intense and varied career in performance, Karlsen’s abilities as a composer became equally known throughout northern Europe. His training in composition dates to his formative years, complementing his accomplishments as a gifted instrumentalist and performer. While he was a teenager, Karlsen’s father gave him an ongoing assignment. At this time during the 1960s, the Norwegian National Church discouraged the singing of repertoire from the Reformation and Baroque periods in Latin or German, preferring Norwegian translations instead of the original texts. Kjell’s task, beginning at age fourteen, was to copy by hand full scores by such composers as Scheidt, Praetorius, and Schütz, and set Norwegian words in place of the languages these composers originally used. Kjell continued this laborious process of copying music by hand as he progressed to editing his father’s original scores, producing final copies for publication. As the composer recalls, “This for me was a great school as a composer because I came very close to all sorts of techniques that were used in this era. For a composer, this exercise was a basic way to become acquainted with polyphony, harmony, how to set texts, and so on.”

During Karlsen’s time as a cathedral musician in the 1970s, he created a large body of organ and choral works that were intended for use within the many events he supervised. The influence of the German neo-classicists from earlier in the twentieth century, such as composers as Hans Friedrich Micheelson, Hugo Distler, and Helmut Bornfeld, pervades the many hymn-based partitas and other works of this time. The consistent use of quartal and quintal harmonies and preference for the use of traditional forms were recurring features of many of these compositions. A typical example of Karlsen’s early period may be found



# Contemporary organ repertoire



**Example 1. Toccata, mm. 1–6 (*Partita Over Koralen 'Nu Kjære Menige Kristenhet,'* op. 8)**



**Example 2. Ostinato, first two lines (*Partita: 'Se solens skønne lys og prakt,'* op. 20, no. 2)**

in a work dating from 1969 (Example 1), *Partita Over Koralen 'Nu Kjære Menige Kristenhet,'* op. 8 (best known to English-speaking musicians as “Dear Christians, One And All, Rejoice”).

Karlsen’s interpretation of *gebrauchsmusik*, or music for practical use, informs much of his output from the 1970s. An excerpt (Example 2) from his *Partita: 'Se solens skønne lys og prakt'* (“See The Sun’s Beautiful Light And Splendor”) demonstrates Karlsen’s wish to provide accessible music, and, as he has described, “these sort of compositions come from my duties as a cathedral organist.” The late 1970s also witnessed the composer’s increased preoccupation with the possibilities inherent in Gregorian themes (Example 3) in which motives from the chant permeate the entire fabric of the work as seen in op. 51’s *Toccata Over Te Deum*.

By the early 1980s and after years of coping with an increasingly demanding schedule, Karlsen yearned for the opportunity to further explore his interest in then-current styles of contemporary music. He became fascinated with

musical expression that often existed outside the relatively narrow confines of music for the Lutheran Church. It was at this juncture that he began to study the works of the Finnish composer Joonas Kokkonen. On the encouragement of colleagues in the Norwegian State Academy of Music and funded by the Norwegian government, Karlsen uprooted his family and career, moving to Helsinki for a year’s sabbatical of study with Kokkonen. Karlsen spent the better part of 1983–84 studying the Nordic symphonic tradition with the Finnish master. The result of this experience saw the inclusion of serial techniques within his larger-scale compositions. It was during this period that Karlsen wrote his first three orchestral symphonies and a host of chamber and symphonic works, including string quartets, concertos, and sonatas for diverse orchestral instruments. Karlsen regards this period of work with Kokkonen and the immediate years following as “the turning point of my life.”

Abandoning the pattern of creating scores for immediate use in the service



**Example 3. Toccata Over Te Deum, mm. 116–120 (*Orgelmesse over gregorianske melodier,* op. 51, no. 1)**



**Example 4. Molto adagio e espressivo, mm. 1–6 (*Orgelsymfoni nr. 1,* op. 99)**

of the church, the act of composing took on a different frame of reference for this musician. As Karlsen explained, “Kokkonen taught me to think more symphonically. Whereas my earlier style had been oriented toward German neo-classicism and church music, now I learned more about Sibelius and Russian composers such as Shostakovich and others.” The years of the 1980s and 1990s eventually saw the composer move away from primarily providing “practical music for immediate use” and, instead, creating large-scale works that achieved an enhanced formal and thematic unity. The composer thinks this development brought him back “full circle when remembering the symphonic performing experiences of my youth.” Following Karlsen’s Finnish sojourn, his compositions became more ambitious in length and scope. “My first great organ work was the *Symphony I*, op. 99, commissioned by Stavanger Cathedral in 1991 on the occasion of the installation of a new organ. I had already composed three orchestral symphonies, so why not one for the organ?”

After a decade of writing little for the organ, Karlsen’s new direction became readily apparent in this three-movement, seventeen-minute work. A new sense of harmonic astringency, and a more evolved, virtuosic approach to the instrument distinguishes his op. 99. Karlsen’s rather personal approach to serialism

may be discerned in this composition’s second movement (Example 4). The composer explains: “If you look at the first six measures of the second movement, you will find all twelve tones in the left hand. I am not, however, so strict with this system. It might be more accurate to call this a kind of free-tonal style.”

As the 1990s progressed, the austerity found in much of the music of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt provided a balance to the complexity of Karlsen’s mature works. Karlsen points to his *St. John Passion* (1991) as an example of this reconciliation between contemporary and more traditional means of expression. This feeling of, as he describes it, “going back and forth, two steps forward and one step back,” is in an ongoing tension between simplicity and complexity that has characterized his works to the present.

When evaluating the mature style of Kjell Mørk Karlsen, perhaps the most salient aspect of his work is the composer’s increasing identity as a specifically Nordic composer. Possessing a keen appreciation for the history and folk culture of his country and other Nordic lands, Karlsen has infused many of his works with the unique characteristics of Scandinavian music. The *Sinfonia Arctandriae-Orgelsymfoni nr. 2* (Icelandic Symphony) begins with the use of *Tvisöngur*, a type of Icelandic folk music sung in parallel fifths (Example 5). All of the titles of this work are connected with the traditions of medieval Iceland. The influence of Nordic folk tradition is apparent in the *Suite for orgel og spelemennslag* (Suite for organ and folk music violins), op. 89 (Example 6); the third movement develops motives from Hardanger fiddle music. Norwegian medieval folk ballads (*Draumkvedet* or The Dream Song) serve as the inspiration of *Sinfonia Norvegica* (Symphony IV). Example 7 shows Karlsen’s depiction of the ballade text (“The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide”) by the weighting of three upper-range tones to depict the ever-shining moonlight.



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**TVISÖNGUR**

Kjell Mørk Karlsen, opus 105

Maestoso ♩ = ca. 60

Ped. *ff*

Example 5. Tvisöngur, first two lines (*Sinfonia Arctandriae*, op. 105)

25 *tutti* *f*

Example 6. Springleik, mm. 25–28 (*Suite for orgel og spelemannslag*, op. 89)

A crucial aspect of Karlsen's identity as a Nordic composer is his ongoing devotion to the cult of the Norwegian medieval saint, St. Olav. His newest major work for organ, the epic five-movement *Sinfonia Grande*, op. 170 (2013), derives its themes from the chants associated with the St. Olav liturgy. When asked about the relationship between his music and the cult of St. Olav, Karlsen relates:

All Norwegians know about St. Olav. When I was young and played the oboe, every summer I traveled to the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim. Every year I played in the performance of an oratorio composed and conducted by the cathedral organist Ludvig Nielsen that used the melodies of the St. Olav liturgy. These melodies, therefore, have been with me a long time. The St. Olav liturgical music is the only medieval Norwegian chant in Gregorian style that we know today. I tried to infuse the timeless qualities of this music within my new *Sinfonia Grande*.

Kjell Mørk Karlsen remains prolific in his output. The year 2015 finds him working on his next major project, a symphony for organ, strings, and bells (the latter requiring five players, employing handbells, chimes, glockenspiels, and related instruments) being composed for the intended 2017 installation of a new organ at the northern Norwegian cathedral at Tromsø. He is also working on an a cappella setting of the *St. Matthew Passion*, a project that will complete his setting of the four gospel accounts.

Kjell Mørk Karlsen concludes:

It is important for me to bring elements from the entirety of music history into my work. I have such a profound respect for my predecessors, and wish to be remembered as following in their footsteps. For me contemporary music can be modern or it can be conservative. What is important is that it be personal and have an individual spirit. Without this, it is nothing. ■

James D. Hicks holds degrees in music from the Peabody Institute of Music, Yale University, and the University of Cincinnati, has studied at the Royal School of Church Music in England, and is an Associate of the American Guild of Organists. He has held positions throughout the eastern United States and in 2011 retired from a 26-year tenure at the Presbyterian Church in Morristown, New Jersey. He has performed throughout the United States, Australia, and Europe. James Hicks has recorded several collections of organ music on the Pro Organo label.

### Compositions of Kjell Mørk Karlsen

All works published by Norsk Musikforlag a/s, except as noted

#### Works for organ with instruments

##### Opus

7.2 *Short Chorale Partita* for alto recorder and harpsichord (organ), 1975

7.3 *Partita on a folk tune from Lom (Norway)* for flute and organ (piano), 1981

7.4 *Sonatine on a folk tune from Etne (Norway)* for flute and piano (organ), 1991

13.1 *Choralsonata no. 1 'Jesus Christus, unser Heiland'* for alto recorder (flute) and harpsichord (organ), 1969

13.2 *Choralsonata no. 2 'Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir'* for cello (bassoon) and harpsichord (organ), 1971

13.3 *Choralsonata no. 3 'Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein'* for trumpet and organ, 1972

28 *Concerto* for organ, 9 brass instruments, and percussion, 1973/86

28B *Version* for organ and symphonic band, 1973/86 (manuscript only, at the National Library of Norway, Oslo)

35.1 *4 Norwegian folk tunes arranged for violin, cello, and organ*, 1976 (Norske Komponisters Forlag)

36.1 *3 choral intradas for organ and 4 brass instruments* (2 trumpets, 2 trombones, or 2 trumpets, horn, and trombone), 1975

36.2 "Intrata festivo" for organ, 4 trumpets, and timpani, 2009 (manuscript only, at the National Library of Norway, Oslo)

51.2 *Mass on Norwegian folk tunes* for organ and 6 brass instruments, ad. lib., 1979

87 *Missa da tromba* for trumpet and organ, 1988

89 *Suite for organ and folk-music violins*, 1992

94 *Sonata da chiesa per tromba et organo*, 1989 (Noton)

129 "Triptykon" for organ and 3 percussion players (33 percussion instruments), 1999 (manuscript only, at the National Library of Norway, Oslo)

161 "Concerto pour Orgue et Cordes," 2008 (manuscript only, at the National Library of Norway, Oslo)

164 *Liturgic suite* for organ and ten brass instruments, 2010

164B *Miserere* (Sarabande) for trumpet and organ (from *Liturgic Suite*)

176 "Hymn for St. Olaf" for violin, oboe, and organ, 2014 (manuscript only, at the National Library of Norway, Oslo)

+) Hold down the key. *Hold tangenten nede.*

man. HV + fl. 4'

ped. fl.(ged.) 8'

Example 7. Capriccio, p. 17, line 1 (*Sinfonia Norvegica*, op. 157)

#### Works for organ (1967–2014)

##### Opus

2 *Ten chorale preludes*, Book 1, 1967; Book 2, 1969 (Lyches Musikkforlag)

8 *Partita Over Koralen 'Nu kjære menige kristenhet,'* 1969

14 *Magnificat noni toni* (with liturgic song ad lib.), 1969

20.1 *Six partitas on Norwegian folk tunes*, 1968–71

20.2 *Four organ partitas on Norwegian religious folk tunes*, 1974–78

26 *Variations on an organ tablature from 1448*, 1973

33 *Te Deum* for organ, 1975

43 *Twenty-one easy preludes on Norwegian folk tunes*, 1977

47 *Twelve improvisations on Gregorian melodies*, 1972–80

51.1 *Organ Mass on Gregorian melodies*, 1977–82

51.2 *Mass on Norwegian folk tunes*, 1979 (with brass sextet, ad.lib.)

81 *Six pieces for organ*, 1973–87

99 *Organ Symphony No. 1*, 1991

105 *Sinfonia Arctandria* (*Organ Symphony No. 2*), 1991/93

116 *Sinfonia Antiqua* (*Organ Symphony No. 3*), 1996

121 *Christus-Meditationen für Orgel*, 1997

124 'Esto mihi'–6 liturgic organ pieces, 1998 (Cantando Musikkforlag)



James D. Hicks in Västerås Cathedral, Västerås, Sweden

134b *Organ meditations for Good Friday*, 2013 (Cantando Musikkforlag)

142.2 *In nativitatem Domini,' 7 Organ Meditations*, 2005

143 *Sonata 'De profundis,'* 2003

148 'Et lite barn så lystelig,' *Christmas music on Norwegian folk tunes*, 2005

155 *Offenbarungs-Meditationen, Åpenbaringmeditasjoner für Orgel*, 2006

157 *Sinfonia Norvegica* (*Organ Symphony No. 4*), 2007

167 *Luther Mass* for organ, 2011 (with liturgic song, ad lib.)

171 *Sinfonia Grande* (*Organ Symphony No. 5*), 2014

171. 2 *Toccata grande II*, 2014

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