
Book Review: *The Northern Silence: Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture*

Andrew Mellor. *The Northern Silence: Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 320 pages.

Americans have long nursed a fascination with Nordic culture. Scandinavia and the North Atlantic regions have been portrayed for centuries as magical and enchanted, thrillingly dangerous and wild, quaintly parochial, and possibly even a little socially backward compared to more cosmopolitan urban centers. These perceptions form a particularly Nordic strain of exoticism that scholars such as Phil Bohlman have termed “borealism.”¹ Yet over the latter half of the twentieth century, the Nordic region has taken on a new frame in the imaginations of many Americans as a kind of utopian fantasy. The last decade saw the publication of several popular non-fiction books and memoirs about Nordic culture. Most of these books present Nordic people and society as models of moderation, individual resilience, personal wellness, and equitable social organization. Representative titles include “happiness researcher” Meik Wiking’s *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets to Happy Living* (2016) and Anu Partanen’s *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life* (2016). One wonders if something happened around 2016 that caused many Americans to seek out comforting accounts of efficiently functioning societies with well-adjusted citizens.

Andrew Mellor’s *The Northern Silence: Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture* treads some of the same ground as these other works of popular non-fiction. It is also written in a similarly breezy tone that makes for a brisk and pleasant read. Much of the book follows Mellor’s travels on journalistic assignments across the region, punctuated by numerous short discussions with musicians, conductors, composers, and administrators in airport coffee shops and quaint fjörd-side villages. At times, the book reads almost like a musical analog to travel programs such as *Rick Steves’ Europe* or Anthony Bourdain’s *No Reservations*. As such, the book is aimed at a non-specialist audience, presuming little foreknowledge of Nordic music and keeping musical jargon to a minimum.

In this approach, *The Northern Silence* also seems representative of a trend in academic publishing towards wider accessibility. One could likely credit Oxford’s *Very Short Introductions* and the 33 1/3 book series as pioneers that inspired several similar series,

1. Philip V. Bohlman. “Musical Borealism: Nordic Music and European History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Fabian Holt and Antti-Ville Kärjä (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33–57.

including Yale's "Icons of America" and "Why X Matters," Bloomsbury's "Object Lessons," and The University of Texas' "Music Matters." There are likely various institutional and financial imperatives at work, but it is also a welcome development considering how arcane writing has historically functioned as both a status symbol and a gatekeeping mechanism within academia. The flipside, however, is that a reader looking for in-depth musical analysis, rich methodological insights, or deep ethnography is likely to come away underwhelmed.

The Northern Silence, in my estimation, engages with this balancing act rather well. Mellor connects his anecdotes and musical examples with social customs, landscapes, architectural and design trends, "Nordic Noir" fiction, Danish colonialism, and other relevant phenomena. These connections also provide Mellor many opportunities to interrogate various aspects of Nordic culture and history, both positive and negative. Although the book prioritizes breadth over depth, Mellor provides an interested reader or researcher with a smörgåsbord of avenues and ideas for further pursuit. The book's chapters are organized into short three- to four-page sections that are more or less self-contained and invite the reader to consume the book in bite-size servings. For scholars of popular music in the Nordic regions, the book provides excellent background reading for connecting the musical lives of stars such as Björk or ABBA with the musical institutions and cultures that shaped them.

The Northern Silence focuses largely on classical music and contemporary art music, detailing not just the music but its institutional and political dimensions. While Nordic classical music icons such as Jean Sibelius, Edvard Grieg, and Carl Nielsen are necessarily prominent, the book also touches on a wide-ranging cast of modern composers, performers, and other musical figures. This focus on classical music is particularly productive for Mellor because much of the infrastructure of classical music in the Nordic countries is of more recent vintage than in continental Europe or the United States. The aristocratic court culture that sustained classical music composition in past centuries never existed in much of the Nordic region, and the demands of simply surviving in more remote areas like Iceland or the Faroe Islands often left little spare time or extraneous resources for personal artistic endeavors. As a result of their late entry into the milieu of both art music and independent nationhood, Nordic composers and musical organizations had something to prove and a lot of catching up to do. This fact animates many of Mellor's most incisive observations, such as when he notes how some twentieth-century Nordic composers were seen as outdated and clichéd by the time their music reached more cosmopolitan audiences, even as they risked alienating audiences on their home turf who'd never encountered modernist music. Yet as a result of classical music's more recent arrival, the infrastructure around orchestras and operas could be intentionally organized for contemporary times. Mellor notes how Norway in particular has fostered a remarkable strain of musical progressivism and support for even the avant-garde sides of the arts, illustrated by the wide-ranging offerings at the ULTIMA Oslo Contemporary Music Festival. Indeed, one of Mellor's overarching threads in the book is that the Nordic regions often do not treat the worlds of classical music, popular music, and traditional folk music as separate musical practices. Euro-American musical institutions, however, have a long history of segregating classical, popular, and folk music into separate silos, often with a clear hierarchy in mind.

For Americans involved in the arts, Mellor's accounts of the Nordic regions' heavily subsidized orchestras, opera companies, venues, and other programs sometimes make for envious reading. The subsidies provide support for comprehensive music education, fueling broad participation in choral societies and other musical activities almost out of a sense of duty. Mellor chronicles isolated villages that sustain modernist concert halls and opera companies, as well as a provincial concert series in Finland, where the local audience expects to hear newly composed art music rather than evergreens from the classical repertoire. Yet Mellor also notes that such heavy government support creates its own set of vulnerabilities if the ticket sales for civically funded ensembles begin to waver or if government budgets shrink.

While the countries' modern social democratic governments and fossil-fuel wealth (in Norway's case) facilitate much of this musical activity, Mellor also makes several connections with deeper cultural currents. Mellor particularly outlines the concept of *jantelov* ("Jante Law"), a Nordic variety of the "tall poppy" ideal found elsewhere in the world that discourages egotism and overachievement while enforcing conformity. While Mellor observes that *jantelov* might be something of a self-reinforcing stereotype, it's also easy to see how the concept could be a crucial cultural influence. Indeed, the tendency for the Nordic countries to regularly top lists measuring "happiness" likely has much to do with having lower expectations for personal grandeur and recognition. Mellor also posits that the months of relative (or near-total) darkness in unforgiving weather and landscapes potentially cultivate the region's familiar comfort with melancholy. The harsh climate and landscape also helped engender a collectivist outlook among its inhabitants, while at the same time requiring everyone to be individually capable of maintaining themselves. Trustworthiness is also paramount under such conditions, no matter one's social station, which Mellor connects with the broad trust and support for government institutions and arts programs among Scandinavians. Although one sometimes wonders whether such characterizations might be overly broad, Mellor is hardly alone in these estimations, and it's clear that many of his interlocutors in the book share these conceptions of themselves and their societies.

In the end, *The Northern Silence* provides a wide-ranging introduction to twenty-first-century trends and issues relating to musical composition, performance, and cultural institutions in the Nordic region. Scholars who are already well-versed in the music of Nordic composers or specific types of music from the region may find little new information about their particular niche subject. But readers will almost certainly uncover new connections and perspectives worth further inquiry due to the book's breadth and its interest in historical currents and behind-the-scenes circumstances that often remain unremarked upon in musicological studies.

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