Some Comments on Vagn Holmboe's Idea of Metamorphosis

By POUL NIELSEN

Niels Viggo Bentzon once said, "The metamorphosis is the form of our time" [1]. But in other respects it is mostly Vagn Holmboe who is associated with the idea of metamorphosis in modern Danish music, and the reason for this is obvious: Holmboe himself has stressed the metamorphosis as the basic form principle for his instrumental music in articles and accounts. Furthermore, this "self-theory" has on the whole been accepted as the basis of an analytic description of Holmboe's music. Arne Mellnäss even writes, "In the same way as it is impossible to speak of Beethoven without referring to the sonata form or to speak of Schönberg without mentioning the word twelve tone technique, it will be difficult in this case (viz. Holmboe) to avoid the conception metamorphosis form, metamorphosis technique..." [2]. Bo Wallner also, who gave new perspectives to the Holmboe-analysis in an analysis of the fifth symphony, talks about "the Metamorphosis technique, which Holmboe carried out later on with great fantasy and a high level of artistic consciousnes" [3].

But what precisely does Holmboe's metamorphosis cover in a strict, technical sense? Is it possible to operate with this idea as a precise term, and is Holmboe's idea of metamorphosis specifically typical of Holmboe's music? Is it perhaps a question of a special form of the metamorphosis technique which this composer uses?

The questions are asked from the view that the composers' self-theories must always primarily be evaluated as theories that are not a priori more relevant to their music than other theories. Indeed, self-theories may be treated with a greater scepticism in their capacity as theories than other explanations, if anything, because they can hold elements of "alibi" which are able to overshadow the regard for an objective description and for the formation of a consistent theory. Which of course does not in any way concern the quality of the music itself.

^{1.} Modern nordisk musik, Stockholm 1957, p. 192.

^{2.} Arne Mellnäss, Vagn Holmboe – kvartettmästare. Nutida Musik, 5, 1962/63, p. 77.

^{3.} Bo Wallner, Reflexioner omkring en symfoni sats, Dansk Musiktidsskrift 1969, p. 152.

In Holmboe's own explanations of the metamorphosis two levels can roughly be isolated.

Metamorphosis is used as the designation of a thematic process of change, with stress on the process. "But when a substance is evolved, it changes, too, and this generally happens through different phases (...). To explain the meaning of the word, metaphors can also be taken from biology; as an example one might cite the metamorphosis in the life of an insect, from the egg through the larva and the pupa to the insect" [4]. "Correspondingly the metamorphosis is based on a process of evolution, which changes one matter into another, without losing its identity, its essential qualities" [5].—In that sense the metamorphosis is to be considered a sort of freely administered form of variation. The distance which Holmboe wants to put between metamorphosis and variation [6] is clearly aimed at the term variation in a classical sence (theme with variations, passacaglia etc.) and hardly at the variation in the broadest sense of the word. Perhaps it might be described as a unity of matter within a plurality of individual thematic shapes. Holmboe writes himself: "Therefore metamorphic music is by nature characterized by unity which means among other things that the contrasts, however strong they are, have always been made up of the same motivic substance" [7].

Holmboe's wish to interpret the metamorphosis as "a form««, in the sense of "a form pattern" or a forme fixe, clash with this in a remarkable way, "I do not think that any metamorphic form has ever been made. At any rate I do not think that I have realized such a form myself. Several possibilities are conceivable, but theories of that kind will be of no artistic interest, till the form (...) has been established through works" [8]. It is obviously a sort of a relic of conventional textbook learning of music history: The idea that every period evolves its characteristic "form", in the sense: a typical pattern for the tectonic composition of music, the baroque era: the fugue form, the classical era: the sonata form. This is in conflict with the style-historical cognition now generally accepted according to which the thinking in form types is replaced by a thinking in forming principles, which do more justice to the richness of reality as regards the form [9]; furthermore, it contradicts the tendency of modern music to an esthetic nominalism, i. e. the lapse of binding esthetic universal categories, and it is finally—as mentioned above—in contradiction to Holmboe's own express interpretation of the metamorphosis as an individualized process.

^{4.} Modern nordisk musik, p. 156.

^{5.} Vagn Holmboe, Mellemspil, tre musikalske aspekter, København 1969, p. 48.

^{6.} Modern nordisk musik, p. 157.

^{7.} Mellemspil, p. 48 (my italics).

^{8.} Modern nordisk musik, p. 156, cf. Mellemspil, p. 49.

^{9.} See for instance Siegmund Levarie, Fugue and Form, 1941, and Jens Peter Larsen, Sonatenformprobleme, Blume-Festschrift.

Consequently it is hardly possible to consider Holmboe's self-theory of the metamorphosis as a logically constistent theory. What about its technical concretion? Here the article from 1957 probably is the most illuminating. The book *Mellemspil* does not use any music examples; it carries the stamp of an essay and its technical definition of the concept of metamorphosis is most clearly expressed in the laconic sentence: "Starting from a complex of theme, rhytm and sound or from a series, the single units of which are musically recognizable, the transformation of units which takes place might be interpreted and understood as a metamorphosis" [10]. In this article from 1957 Holmboe concretizes this by examples from the scores, in order to illustrate the principle of the metamorphosis in three symphonies, No. 6 and (especially) No. 7 and No. 8.

The illustration is made in this way: the composer trots out important themes and motifs from the symphonies in question with connecting remarks. The object is to show the inner unity of the plurality of the theme and motif material, but it is hardly a question of a technical explanation: Holmboe does not use brackets, motif and basic structure derivatives as they are known from other thematic analyses. You must feel or from time to time guess the relation. His explanation of the seventh symphony is characteristic: having given some initial themes, Holmboe writes that he considers all that follows after this "not only a mere development, but also phases of change of the first thing manifested (examples 8–12)" [11]. Here are themes so different as can be seen in the examples 1 a and 1 b, without any connecting remarks.

Holmboe makes an important distinction between his seventh and his eighth symphonies by stating that in the first case it is a question of "the plurality of he unity", while the eighth symphony represents an attempt "to make a unity from a multiple material". Two contradicting tendencies to metamorphosis of which the purpose of both is, however, to let the contrasts in the music appear as changing forms of manifestation of the same basic germ.

So much for the outlining of Holmboe's self-theory and his substantiation of it. How can this conception of the idea of metamorphosis be compared with the one which is found in the analytic litterature?

The metamorphosis is understood as a variation principle in a wide sense. "In modern works the free variation principle can also be found: for instance in Bartók's 3rd string quartet and in Hindemith's Theme and four variations for strings and piano ("The Four Temperaments"). Hindemith subscri-

^{10.} Mellemspil, p. 48.

^{11.} Modern nordisk musik, p. 158.

bes to the age-old and eternal principle of variation through the title of the work Metamorphosen", writes Kurt v. Fischer, who locates the metamorphosis under the basic concept "Fantasy Variation" [12]. That great importance must be attached to the proces of development of an identical motif or theme material in connection with the idea of metamarphosis is also in agreement with Wilfried Brennecke's critical analysis of Strauss' and Hindemith's metamorphosis works. Brennecke stresses here, analogous to Holmboe, a distance to the idea of variation in a heavy-handed traditional sense [13]. In the Riemann Musiklexicon it is stressed that the metamorphosis changes the material more extensively than the usual theme variation [14]. In the Harvard Dictionary of Music the idea of metamorphosis is attached to the cyclic principle of the romantic era, and in continuation of this, Sibelius' thematic technique is mentioned, where "the metamorphosis is of a more abstract character". By music examples from Sibelius' fifth symphony it is demonstrated how the motif elements can be freely replaced by each other: the relationship between the different material components is shown in the rentention of a melodic structure, but in the change of rhythm, and vice versa [15].

An extremely strong emphasizing of the difference between the metamorphosis and the variation is made by Jan Maegaard; he considers them two diametrically opposite principles, "The range of variations aims at plurality in unity, the metamorphosis aims at a regular order of the plurality". According to this, Holmboe's seventh symphony is a work of variation, the eighth a metamorphosis work (cf. Holmboe's own distinction to which it is referred above). Maegaard concretizes his point of view by describing what he calls the borderline case, in which a work of variation develops the material into completely new musical ideas, but which at last repeats the material in its original version: "If the "new" musical idea is demonstrated and its character (i. e. its dissimilarity to the original theme) is elaborated, them it is a question of plurality (...) in an organic, regular order. If, on the contrary, the theme is finally put forward and its internal connection with the "new" thought is explained, then the unity principle is prevailing and it is an instance of a variation form". This is probably too rigorous. In a metamorphosis work the motivic unity behind the plurality must probably always be the point. It is difficult to see why a composer should not be allowed to let previous stages of the development of the material occur later on in the course of a metamorphosis work. On the whole the composers cannot be sworn in by teaching doctrines which forbid them to shuffle the cards,

^{12.} Kurt v. Fischer, *Die Variation*, Das Musikwerk. Eine Beispielsammlung zur Musikgeschichte, XI, Köln 1955, p. 4, column 2.

^{13.} Wilfried Brennecke, Die Metamorphosen-Werke von Richard Strauss und Paul Hindemith. Gedenkschrift Hans Albrecht in memoriam, Kassel 1962, p. 269.

^{14.} Riemann Musiklexicon III (Sachteil) entry Metamorphosis.

^{15.} Harvard Dictionary of Music, 1966, p. 442.

"It is a question of two contrary principles, which can hardly be combined without the disturbance of form (!)" [16].

On the whole the quotations taken from the analytic literature show that there is hardly any justification in using the term 'metamorphosis' as a precise concept. It is in a wide sense a question of a technique in which the different components of material of a work have a mutual relationship through a common substance by means of which an organic connection is made in the course of the work. Consequently, Holmeboe's idea of metamorphosis does not differ from the current ideas of metamorphosis.

It only remains now to consider the question of the relation between this idea of metamorphosis and Holmboe's music.

Here some general problems arise: What analytic method can reveal the metamorphosis technique as the leading principle. Just as vague as Holmboe is himself in that respect, just as confused are the criterions in the passages quoted from the literature.

Especially in connection with Holmboe, however, this has already been stressed by Mogens Andersen. He writes in an analysis of Holmboe's *Epitaph*, in which it is shown that the material of the music has been extracted from a central "germ motif", "Besides being the axis on which all thematic development turns, it (sc. the germ motif) is to be found as an accompanying figure (...) and as a chordal structure (...). The frequent use of the tritone seems also in most of the cases to have a thematic importance; *how far the interpretation shall be put is a question of method*" [17]. Just that: It all depends on how you look at it and how you listen to it. The analytic problems of the metamorphosis technique are actually identical with the ones which apply to the so called "structural, thematic analysis" in general. And they are tangled. Space forbids a more thorough discussion of them [18]. But a few important point must be stressed.

Any substance relationship must have technical correlates as the basis for the interpretation. From the beginning it is necessary to try—if possible—to distinguish between a substance relationship of a more common nature and what is presumably specifically important to the formal unification of the single work, i. e. one must try to differentiate between general 'stylistic' relations and relations that are specific, formal factors. Where these are identical it is necessary to realize the consequence: esthetic nominalism (cf. above p. 160). It is important that the examination of the substance relation is not too optically founded: It is necessary to regard the relation as a result of a process.

^{16.} Jan Maegaard: Metamorfose og variation, Dansk Musiktidsskrift 27, 1952, p. 112.

^{17.} Mogens Andersen: Vagn Holmboe's "Epitaph", Dansk Musiktidsskrift, 34, 1959, p. 103-106 (my italics).

^{18.} It is referred to the chapter about structural analysis in Poul Nielsen: Den musikalske formanalyse (1965) Copenhagen 1971.

Finally, the specific substance relationship must be compared to the other structural factors of the music: tonality, rhythm, contrast of sound and thematic contrast, contrapuntal technique, *thematische Arbeit* etc.—especially with a view to the priority of the factors, which can be said to have the greatest fundamental importance as forces of form-establishment.

As far as Holmboe's own analyses are concerned it has already been indicated that the substance relationship between the different themes in the seventh symphony does not straight away seem obvious. If Holmboe's own examples (in *Modern nordisk musik*) from the seventh symphony are compared with those from the eighth symphony it seems rather to be a question of a substance relationship across the works. This is the case, for instance, in the relation between example 7 (p. 159) and example 16 (p. 160), both of them representing a melodic type of theme with intertwined thirds and seconds known from Bartók. Or between the adagio theme (example 10) from the seventh symphony and the first allegro theme (example 15) from the eighth symphony in which an upwards directed stepwise theme is found.

We shall now examine the eighth symphony, the *Boreale*. Fundamentally it is a polythematic symphony, both in the relation between the different movements and within the single movement. In the first movement four themes are presented in the initial part, that is until four measures before figure 4 in the score. (se the examples 2 a, b, c, d). Out of these themes Holmboe himself calls the two first ones "the germ of the eighth symphony". More exactly the first one might be described as a sort of "motto motif", the second as a "development motif" (*Entwicklungsmotiv*); motorily it carries the movements by means of its characteristic 2+2+3-rythm. The last two ones are real themes, i. e. melodic-rhythmic individualities. One has a characteristic, masculine quality, the other a more singing quality. It is necessary to say that the first of these, already when it is being presented (measure 5 after figure 1) has the *Entwicklungsmotiv* as its accompaniment.

Holmboe now writes, "This is the thematic element of the first movement, and what happens later on depends on these motifs, their development and resolution, their fusion or constellations in a mutual relationship" (p. 160). The formulation of this is almost so wide and inaccurate that it might refer to the material of any symphonic movement, which is rightly called so. Now there is reason to suppose, however, that precisely in this process the metamorphic work of intrisic unification takes place to which Holmboe refers, when he (p. 159) is speaking about "the symphonic development of ideas (...) with an object in view that can only be called metamorphosis". However, the four examples which he gives (Nos. 17–20, p. 160–161) are in the main only different combinations of theme 3 with the *Entwicklungsmotiv*, i. e. different manifestations of a relation already shown in the exposition of themes.

As a matter of fact this is the most important events of the movements as far as the thematic development is concerned. No real proces of intrinsic unification takes places between the different components of material. They are alternately formulated in a dynamic, symphonic development which unambiguously prepares a culmination and a following relative relaxation (relative, because the resolution does not take place till in the last movement). Even with the above very broad definition of the metamorphosis in mind, this has almost nothing to do mith metamorphosis, and it is necessary to ask, which structural forces do carry this symphonic form?

The best way get to an answer is to examine what happens at the crucial points of the course: the start, the culmination, the relaxation.

a) The start: it takes place from the initial motto motif (see example 3). The bass clarinet plays the motif which has a phrygian character (semitone tensions f-e, c-b, and vice versa); the accompaniment is a pedal point on f; this gives a frustrated tritone tension which is, however, kept: the f is supported through a descending semi tone step g flat-F (b. 5-6). I spite of this the tendency of the motto motif is to calm down on b, with the semi tone step c-b as the resolution which can force the f down on e. The insistence on this is illustrated in b. 10, in which c-b is hammered out, forcibly, at a high pitch in order to emphazise the c-b of the bass clarinet. This also gives the desired effect b. 11-12: the bass slides down on e, but then so much explosive tension has been accumulated, that the *Entwicklungsmotiv* is resolved as a motorial factor: the symphonic course has begun.

This interplay with semitone tensions (they could be called leading-tone tensions in a wide sense of the word) in the motto motif is fundamental to the movement: this can also be seen from the great importance attached to a compressed version of the motif later on in the movement: a version which in the first case functions as the conclusion of the first tutti passage, figure 2 (see example 4).

- b) The culmination: the resolution of the symphonic tensions takes place during several phases after figure 8. But the crucial point is what happens from about figure 13 to eight measures before figure 14. In connection with the centering around the compressed edition of the motto motif the initial f-b-tension of the movement takes place once more, including the stubborn c-b semitone step at a high pitch (b. 5 after figure 13). No resolution down to e by the bass in produced, on the contrary the f is maintained; this gives the apparent relaxation caused by the entrance of the singing theme 4 from b (b. 8 before figure 14) a somewhat temporary character.
- c) The relaxation: The real relaxation sets in with the g of the bass figure 15: this is the beginning of a falling bass line, first down to the desired e, later on further down to c. In this way a frame is created in which the motto

motif can fade away in surroundings which are consonant. It should still be noticed how important the falling semitone is as a resolution figure (a flat-g, d flat-c).

Earlier in this article this relaxation was called relative. This was due to the fact that clearly enough, the tonic of the motto motif was e, with the interval e-b as chord frame. Logically, it becomes the terminal point of the whole symphony (see example 6). It is obvious that the f-e motion of the bass, which was aimed at in the beginning, finally marks the real resolution, the symphonic conquest.

From start to finish this movement is a question of a centering around the same structure of tonal tension, based on a falling leading-tone step as a cadential solution. This has a constitutive function. Curiously enough Holmboe only refers to it en passant, "That the motivic material is mainly diatonic and the tonalities (!) modal" (p. 164). And more curious is the fact that he uses the idea of metamorphosis as a precise technical term to a work which can hardly be regarded as anything but a traditional symphonic form in which the contrasting themes are juxtaposed, creating a tonal tension, with some signs of the principle of cyclic form; only some signs, because, after all, it would be too excessive to call the motto motif a real idée fixe.

As indicated above the idea of metamorphosis has hardly any real specific qualifications in itself. In Holmboe's formulation of it is so vague and inaccurate that it can be used to all sorts of formal development. The tightening of the thematic unity, which can be seen as a common feature in Holmboe's latest works (cf. Mogens Andersen's article about Epitaph, and the quotations from the 6th quartet, example 7) must therefore be considered a graduation. The vagueness of the description of the seventh and the eighth symphonies may be due to the fact that Holmboe uses some experience of which he was not conscious till later, to a material from an earlier date. But this leads to the question of the justification of Holmboe's self-theory of metamorphosis. What can be seen in Holmboe is a very traditional, tonal and melodic concept of form, with a tendency to a tightening of the thematic and motivic unity of the music. This is in accordance with a general development of modern symphonic music, which depends on a freer tonality and which uses thematic relationship in order to strengthen the coherence of form. A radicalization of Holmboe's tendencies to a consistent substance relationship is not found till we meet it in the paradoxical tonal serialism of Per Nørgård, his pupil; here a specific theory of metamorphosis is appropriate. As far as Holmboe is concerned, it would be a very profitable working hypothesis to quarantine the idea of metamorphosis—at any rate to demythologize it, because there is hardly any reason to place it on a level with Beethoven's sonata form and Schönberg's dodecaphonic technique.







