



Rued Langgaard: Symphony no. 9 “From Queen Dagmar’s Town” (BVN 282)

Critical first edition by Bendt Viinholt Nielsen

Preface

About Symphony no. 9

On 1 August 1940 Rued Langgaard was appointed organist and choirmaster of Ribe Cathedral, and on 1 September that year he moved to the town with his wife Constance. At the time he was in an unproductive phase as a composer. After completing the two-hour-long organ work *Messis* in 1937 he had in fact stopped composing entirely, having apparently exhausted himself in his unsuccessful struggle against the Copenhagen musical establishment and his countless attempts to obtain a job as an organist. In Ribe he gradually began to compose again, though at first only piano pieces and some organ preludes and motets for performance in church. Symphony no. 9 was therefore the first orchestral composition he completed after 1940. The previous symphony (no. 8) was more or less finished in 1928, though it was subsequently revised several times, and Langgaard had thus made no new contribution to the genre for 14 years.

The circumstances leading to the writing of the new symphony were as follows. Riberhus Palace Hill, northwest of the town of Ribe, had been the location of a royal residence in the middle ages and renaissance. The buildings fell into ruin after the Swedish wars in the middle of the seventeenth century. The old stones and foundations were gradually removed for re-use elsewhere, so that eventually only the hill, the moat and a few hidden remnants of buildings were left. In 1913 Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen’s statue of Queen Dagmar was placed on the hill and in 1940-41 a government Work Project was carried out, comprising drainage of the moat and reconstruction of the neglected hill; at the same time archaeological investigations were made on the site by the National Museum. On 14 June 1942 a festal service was held in Ribe Cathedral to mark the re-opening to the public of the renovated Palace Hill. Rued Langgaard composed an organ prelude for this service, *Fantasy on “Queen Dagmar Lies Sick in Ribe”* (BVN 280). The piece is based on the tune of the ballad about the death of Queen Dagmar, which since 1933 has rung out daily over the town from the carillon in the tower of Ribe Cathedral.

Public interest in Ribe Palace is mainly due to the connection established in the ballads between the legendary Queen Dagmar and the locality. That this connection is historically very doubtful is quite another matter. One ballad version recounts how the Bohemian princess came sailing to Ribe, anchored off Mandø and was received at the palace by her future husband, King Valdemar II (1170-1241). Dagmar, whose name in baptism was Margrethe, married Valdemar in 1205. She died in childbirth already in 1212 – which according to the ballad tradition occurred in Ribe. She was, however, buried in Ringsted like the king himself. These legends about Queen Dagmar and Ribe were of course resuscitated in 1942 in connection with the dedication of the Palace Hill. Due to the German occupation of Denmark, national and historical themes such as this one were emphasised even more than might otherwise have been the case. At all events the ballads about Queen Dagmar and Ribe inspired Rued Langgaard to begin a new symphony, “From Queen Dagmar’s Town”, a couple of weeks after the festal service in the cathedral. On 1 July 1942 he and Constance went on vacation in Troense on the island of Tåsinge, and on 3 July he began an outline of the first movement of the symphony. This outline was completed in Ribe on 7 September 1942, the finale existed as a sketch by 29 September and the second movement by 8 October. For the third movement Rued Langgaard recycled his

organ fantasy on “Queen Dagmar Lies Sick in Ribe”, which he orchestrated on 17 November under the title *Ribe Cathedral*. The fair copy of the entire symphony was completed in Ribe on 26 November 1942.

Two days later Langgaard submitted the score to the State Radio in Copenhagen. The work was accepted for performance and the orchestral parts transcribed at the radio’s expense. At the end of May 1943 Rued and Constance Langgaard travelled to Copenhagen to attend the rehearsals and first performance of the symphony. Several musicians have bequeathed us reminiscences of what happened in rehearsal when conductor Launy Grøndahl began the polonaise (movement II) and then turned to the composer to ask whether the tempo was right – whereupon Langgaard resolutely stood up, took hold of Constance and danced around with her a few times to the orchestra’s great amusement, answering Grøndahl with the words: “Oh yes, that tempo is absolutely right!”

A few days earlier the regional newspaper *Vestkysten* had printed an interview with the composer about his new work. Langgaard was asked to say something about the symphony and replied:

The symphony is in four parts. Part 1, “Queen Dagmar Sails to Ribe”, refers to the Ribe historian Anders Sørensen Vedel’s ballad version containing the lines “They cast their anchor at Mandø, The young maiden Dagmar was led to Ribe Palace”. This is a musical illustration of the statue of Queen Dagmar on Ribe Palace Hill, standing expectantly and pensively on her ship in the fresh sea air while the vessel approaches Denmark, where “Valdemar King of Denmark stretched out to her his fair hand”. In Part 2, “The Dance at Ribe Palace”, we hear about “knights who are dancing” and “the fair maiden Spædelsko” at the celebration in the palace. Part 3, “Ribe Cathedral”, describes the monumentality of the church, an episcopal seat for a thousand years; the sound of the organ mingles with “Queen Dagmar Lies Sick in Ribe”, which is the carillon melody from the storm watchtower. In reference to Ribe’s glorious history Part 4 takes the form of an apotheosis entitled “The Turbulent Life of the Past”.

Asked by the interviewer whether ballad motives are employed in the symphony, Langgaard answered that “with the exception of the Queen Dagmar ballad I have not used ballad melodies, and there is nothing medieval about the music. This is the romantic orchestra describing Ribe” (*Vestkysten* 27 May 1943, signed *-ff.*). Nevertheless, as mottos for the first three movements Langgaard gives quotations from three ballads about Queen Dagmar and Ribe Palace. Langgaard’s source for the first two ballads was historian Anders Sørensen Vedel’s *A Hundred Choice Danish Ballads*, the first printed anthology of Danish ballads published in Ribe in 1591. The anthology was reprinted in two volumes in 1926-27 by Povl Rubow under the title *Anders Sørensen Vedel’s Ballad Book*. Vedel’s versions of the ballads are also found, together with variants, in the third part of the scholarly edition *Old Ballads of Denmark* (DgF) edited by Svend Grundtvig (Copenhagen 1863). The third ballad is quoted by Langgaard in a version corresponding to DgF no. 135A (while Vedel’s variant of the same is designated 135C).

In the first movement, *Queen Dagmar Sails to Ribe*, Langgaard quotes three stanzas of the ballad *Queen Dagmar’s Voyage to Denmark*. It appears from the commentary in DgF that Anders Sørensen Vedel himself introduced the localities Mandø and Ribe palace; there is no specification of place in the older sources used by him. The second movement, *The Dance at Ribe Palace*, is associated by Langgaard with the introductory stanzas of a ballad which Vedel entitles *The Sixth Ballad of Marshal Stig*; it has in reality nothing to do with Queen Dagmar and her wedding in 1205, but relates how Ribe Palace was treacherously captured a half century later. The motto of the third movement, *Ribe Cathedral*, is a stanza from the ballad about Queen Dagmar’s death, better known as “Queen Dagmar Lies Sick in Ribe”. The quotation describes the moment when the king, having ridden in all haste to Ribe, arrives too late at his queen’s deathbed. In answer to his prayer she is called back to life for a short moment.

The premiere was a live studio transmission (without audience) on 31 May 1943 from 8:15 to 8:45 PM. It was the eighth programme in a series on “The Danish Symphony”. The performance took place in the radio’s concert studio in Tordenskjoldsgade, popularly known as “The Starlings’ Nest” (later converted into the New Stage of the Royal Theatre). The radio orchestra and Grøndahl played individual movements from the symphony several times in the following years (only however movements I, II and III; not infrequently movements II and III together). This was music worth listening to and conformed well to the national musical profile launched during the war. The second and third movements were played by Grøndahl as late as 1956, the year in which he retired as conductor of the orchestra.

On 2 November 1949 the Aarhus Municipal Orchestra gave a concert in Ribe with Thomas Jensen as conductor. Rued Langgaard had been invited to the concert but had no idea that the orchestra would play a piece by him that was not announced on the printed programme. After Carl Nielsen's overture to *Maskarade* Thomas Jensen explained that the orchestra wanted to play a piece with local resonance, namely Langgaard's symphonic movement *Ribe Cathedral*. Afterwards the composer was loudly cheered by the audience: "The applause after this quite short movement was almost never-ending. Rued Langgaard had to stand up and was greeted with an enthusiasm which visibly moved him, and which music-lovers in Ribe apparently had lacked an opportunity to display towards him" (*Ribe Stiftstidende* 3 November 1949). The rest of the programme featured works by Beethoven and Knudåge Riisager (music for the ballet *Twelve with the Post*) and an encore by Grieg.

The first concert performance of the symphony as a whole was given on 25 July 1993 in the Tivoli Concert Hall in Copenhagen by the Artur Rubinstein Philharmonic Orchestra from Poland conducted by Ilya Stupel. The previous year this orchestra and conductor had recorded the work for the first time on the Danacord label (DACOCD 407).

Bendt Viinholt Nielsen, October 2010

English translation: Michael Chesnutt

Mottos from ballads about Queen Dagmar and the capture of Ribe Palace.

I Queen Dagmar Sails to Ribe

They cast their anchor at Mandø,
All on the glowing white sand:
They took the young maiden Dagmar
And lifted her first on shore.

They took the young maiden Dagmar
And lifted her first on shore:
Valdemar, King of Denmark,
Stretched out to her his fair hand.

There was silk and scarlet cloth
Stretched out upon the ground:
Dagmar was followed by ladies and maidens,
They took her to the palace of Ribe.¹

II The Dance at Ribe Palace

They dance in the streets of Ribe
– The palace has been captured –²

III Ribe Cathedral

Queen Dagmar raised herself from her bed,
her eyes were red as blood:
"Alas, alas, my noble lord!
Why did you ever meet me?"³

IV Finale. The Turbulent Life of the Past [No motto]

Notes

1. From "Queen Dagmar in Denmark", Old Ballads of Denmark, DgF 133B, vv. 6-8.
2. From "The Capture of Ribe Palace", Old Ballads of Denmark, DgF 147D, v. 1, lines 1-2.
3. From "Queen Dagmar's Death (1212)", Old Ballads of Denmark, DgF 135A, v. 19.