
LAWO
CLASSICS
Musical Icons
OLE MARTIN HUSER-OLSEN

"I cry to you and you
do not answer me; I stand,
and you merely look at me."
Job 30:20 (NRSVA)

Icons are, for the faithful, deep, stylised meditations over the mystery of faith. As the etymology suggests, it is an image. Where the onlooker sees what is depicted, but where the icon stares back at the beholder as well. The icon's perspective is reversed, and the vanishing point lies with the beholder. It is God's eye looking at you. As we regard Christ, Christ looks back on us.

Icons are most closely associated with the Orthodox Christian tradition, although they are in active use both in Catholic, and to some extent Lutheran, churches. But these four works are not icons in the regular sense. Firstly, they are not painted on wood. They are rather notes that sound through the wood of the guitar. Neither do they have the Orthodox icons' immediate aspect, or the extratemporal quality of that tradition. Ideally, an icon is an image shaped by a passive hand holding a brush guided solely by The Holy Spirit. Bringing the truths of faith to life. Although great art always contains the numinous, the music on this recording nevertheless strikes me in its vulnerable humanity and expressivity.

These works and the Orthodox icons are fundamentally alike, yet these «modern» icons have still more in common with the chorale preludes of J.S. Bach, the meditations for organ of Olivier Messiaen, or the music of Sofia Gubaidulina. Above all, they are profound reflections and meditations over the basic existential and metaphysical conditions of humanity. Interpreted through the Bible and Christian tradition. If icons are theology in colour, this is an attempt at theology in sound.

Storm and consuming fire

Only one of the works is explicitly called an icon, namely Jon Mostad's Musical Icons. Six movements written over six biblical passages, where the composer gives his musical impressions of these stories. The piece contains great contrasts, from the powerful introduction of "storm and consuming fire" to the peaceful gaze upon "The Lamb of God" in the second movement. A musical connection between several of these movements is how he ends them by building a resonating field with a selection from the harmonic series of overtones. This is most completely formed in the "Our Father" of the last movement. It is not the whole of the prayer *Our Father*, but merges the introduction of it (Matt 6) with *The Parable of the Lost Son* from Matthew 15.

The biblical passages directly inform the music, for instance when *The Parable of the Mustard Seed* (Mark 4: 30-32) inspires Mostad to build a tightly woven contrapuntal fourth movement. Everything grows out from a small, four tone motif, stretching gingerly upwards from the introduction. Another example is how the second movement is constructed with the material from a single theme, which is introduced as early as the third measure. It peaks towards the end when one half of the theme is used as accompaniment and counterpoint to the other half of the theme. Thus the biblical metaphors are transformed into purely musical metaphors, while keeping both interpretations within reach of the careful listener.

Song of the Antiphon

The confluence of a simple unisonous mediaeval melody and a considerably younger polyphonic instrument was the genesis of Henrik Ødegaard's *Antiphona X*. Schooled in French monastic chant and having taught liturgical singing to a generation of theological seminarians at the University of Oslo, he has extensive knowledge of and experience with the Gregorian tradition, which manifests itself in almost all Ødegaard's works.

Yet the inspiration is much more tangible. In Old Testament Psalms we naturally find psalms rooted in praise and the power of music. Perhaps the most illustrious is the last, Psalm 150, used by Stravinsky in his Symphony of Psalms in 1930. Stringed instruments are mentioned, together with flute, horn, harp and cymbal. Ødegaard, however, draws his material from another psalm, Psalm 81. In the standard Norwegian translation we are encouraged to lend our voices to "a song, let the hand drum sound, the dainty lyre with the harp." But, like Stravinsky, Ødegaard has fittingly chosen to utilise the most widely used biblical translation through the ages, the Vulgate. Translated by Jerome in 382–405, it became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic church. There the words of Ps 81 read "sumite psalmum jucundum cum cithara." And precisely the word "cithara" allows the composer to bend his mind towards the guitar.

Ødegaard brings the atmosphere and aesthetic of the Gregorian melody, or antiphon, for Psalm 81 into his piece. And just as the original antiphon is sung in three parts, with a short recited middle verse, this work also has three movements. The middle movement revolves around a simple four-tone motif and explores the quarter tones of the instrument using a retuning of the strings incorporated into the music itself. The other two movements extend the range, tonality and polyphony, regarding the mediaeval theme through the lens of our own time, without losing its fundamentally diatonic identity.

The small tonal image *Light in Darkness* is a further musing around the same motif from Psalm 81. Originally a part of the finale of *Antiphona X*, it was removed and reworked as a new small piece.

A Mass for the Dead

I have always felt the guitar could handle a requiem. Not of the grandness of for instance Brahms or Verdi, but precisely a Small Requiem. In Ewa Serafin's work the instrument gives voice to the naked vulnerability of humans confronted with death.

The work moves from darkness to light in two ways. Firstly, a requiem largely follows the structure of an ordinary Mass, from the cry for mercy in a Kyrie movement to the taste of Paradise in the *Agnus Dei* of the eucharistic liturgy. So also Serafin, who ends *In Paradisum.* The other way from darkness to light goes through the deep structure of the work. Embedded in it are the Gregorian melodies from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. Initially quite abstract, they act like building blocks more than something we can identify in surface listening. But towards the end more pronounced quotes steadily emerge. They lend an air of reconciliation to the music which up until now has favoured the most dissonant intervals. This bestows a great force to the music, as well as an anguish over being confronted with the sting of Death.

The last movement highlights two musical elements especially, turning anguish into something else. After a small prelude, we are introduced to a fragment from a Polish folk song which the composer knows form her childhood, repeated and varied with increasing intensity until we are at last presented with a short excerpt from the Gregorian Mass.

The folk song which carries the final movement is not just any folk song, but one in which The Virgin Mary rocks her baby boy to sleep. This scene is mirrored many years later, in the Pietá motif, the image of Mary holding her dead son in her arms after his body has been taken down from the cross. Thus the circle from cradle to grave is completed.

As we all are to be rocked, to fall asleep. But where One, as is so beautifully put in Rilke's famous autumn poem, "dieses Fallen unendlich sanft in Seinen Händen Hält." And so the piece ends, in a gradual escalation through the consonant fourths of the guitar, until we faintly sense the sound of a major third way up high.

Ole Martin Huser-Olsen

Ole Martin Huser-Olsen has a Master's Degree in Classical Guitar from The Norwegian Academy of Music. He has commissioned and premiered upwards of 50 pieces, and was awarded the honor of «Performer of the Year» by The Norwegian Society of Composers in 2022. He has toured large parts of Norway and Europe, and has collaborated with musicians and ensembles such as Oslo String Quartet, Oslo Sinfonietta, Aksiom, Roma Tre Orchestra, Vilde&Inga, Bernt Ola Volungholen and Knut Skram. Ole Martin has previously recorded twice with LAWO (2016 and 2019), with MERE Records (2016) and his first solo recording, *Lockdown Miniatures,* with Aurora Records in 2022.

HENRIK ØDEGAARD

Antiphona X Sumite psalmum jucundum con cithara (2020)

1. Antihpone 1__**05:24**
2. Recitative__**03:56**
3. Antiphone 2__**03:04**

EWA SERAFIN

Lite Rekviem
Small Requiem (2021)

4. Introitus__**04:17**
5. Kyrie__**04:21**
6. Sanctus__**03:42**
7. Lacrimosa__**03:12**
8. Agnus Dei__**03:27**
9. In Paradisum__**03:22**

JON MOSTAD

Ikoner i Musikk
Musical Icons (2019–21)

10. I storm og fortærende ild
In storm and consuming fire
(Ps. 50,3)__**03:13**
11. Se, Guds lam
Look, the Lamb of God
(John 1,29–30)__**04:58**
12. Den besatte fra gravhulene
The Demon-possesed from the Tombs
(Mark 5,2–15)__**04:20**
13. Sennepsfrøet
The Mustard Seed (Mark 4,30–32)__**04:26**
14. Den Hellige Ånds vind
The Wind of the Holy Spirit
(John 3,8; Acts 2,1–4)__**03:16**
15. Vår Far
Our Father
(Matt. 6,9b; Luke 15,20b–24)__**05:31**

HENRIK ØDEGAARD

16. Light in the Dark (2021)__**02:22**

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