

**KETIL HVOSLEF**  
**INTERVIEWED BY GRAHAM WADE**

**GW: First of all, how did you become a composer?**

KH: I never intended to be a musician when I was young even though I had violin and piano lessons. I wanted to be a painter. When I compose now I use not only sounds but visual experiences as well. I see the musicians with their instruments and wonder how that sound matches with how they look. I should not have been a composer, I should have been a painter. But in those days I was so nervous I painted less and less. So I stopped painting and played keyboard in jazz and rock bands. That was good training for me.

**GW: So where did you study?**

KH: I studied first at the Bergen Art Academy. But I met Inger, my future wife there and we married in 1961. In 1962 our first child, Trond, arrived. So I decided that instead of becoming a painter or playing in a band, I would study for an organist's diploma at the Bergen Music Conservatoire. Then I was invited to teach at the college and that kept us going for sixteen years! I began composing at that time.

**GW: You also studied abroad.**

KH: Yes, first I went to Stockholm. Then I studied twice in London. Thomas Ranja was my first teacher there, a very nice person. Six or seven years later I studied with Henri Lazarof, a Hungarian. He looked through my score and into my eyes, and said, '*Promise that you will never write music like that again!*' That was how I started with him. So I had to think seriously about what I was doing. That was the best way for me, a sort of awakening. I realised it was much healthier for my composition.

**GW: How old were you then?**

I was twenty-nine at the time. I remember it was extremely cold in London. I couldn't even sit in my room and work. But the composition I wrote was extremely hot! The teacher said he couldn't understand how a Norwegian could write a piece like that!

**GW: So your journey as a composer had begun?**

KH: Oh yes, but you must not discover too clearly who you are. You have to go on exploring and try to be conscious about what you do and why you are doing it.

**GW: And did you get commissions to compose during these years?**

KH: Well, I wrote my Opus I, which was a concertino for piano and orchestra in 1964, and then I was asked to write a quintet for the Bergen Woodwind Quintet. They first asked my father, who was a great composer, to write this but he had no time to work at this piece so he asked me to compose it instead. After that a lot of commissions came in. One of the most interesting was *Mi-Fi-Li* for symphony orchestra which I wrote in 1971. This was a commission from my wife who wanted a piece for orchestra!

**GW: I believe that around this time you changed your name to Hvoslef?**

KH: Yes. By 1979 I had built up some kind of reputation for my work but it was becoming confusing as my father was a composer and we couldn't have two composers of the same name in a small country like Norway. So I changed my name from Sæverud to Hvoslef, gave up my teaching post and worked full-time in composing.

**GW: I'd like to ask some questions about your guitar music. Let's start with the *Double Concerto*.**

KH: Well, as you know this is for flute, guitar and string orchestra. I wrote it in 1977. I thought flute and guitar would be a very romantic combination so I wrote as if it was a kind of

love affair between the two instruments. But there were consequences - the flautist and guitarist really did fall in love and things ended unhappily. It was all rather a disaster. We say in Norway 'Never challenge destiny'. I learned that you have to be careful. And I had not been careful! But it's a true story!

**GW: It's an amazing story! Certainly adds to the drama of the music! How about the work for three guitars with its somewhat mysterious title of *Seonveh*?**

KH: The title of the piece refers to the initials of the three performers for whom I wrote the composition, Stein-Erik Olsen, Njål Vindenes and Egil Haugland.

**GW: Was it strange writing for three guitars when you as a composer do not play the guitar?**

KH: It was a completely new experience to write for three guitars, as well as producing a very special sound. I was so fortunate to have three very good guitarists who all play very differently as individuals. For me this was wonderful because I had a far broader landscape to work in. I was working not only with different personalities but with different guitars. These three guitarists were also my pupils once so I had known them before this came along. That's why I jumped into the job immediately because I knew they were such excellent musicians.

I worked very hard at the piece, so hard that a composition which should have about fifteen minutes long lasted for about half an hour in the final version. At first they practised an earlier version. For a composer this is like a dream because you can hear what is successful and what isn't. As I went along I changed things. The work was finished in the summer of 2011.

**GW: Are you writing any new pieces at the moment?**

KH: Yes, I am writing a strange piece. Last year during the summer I stayed in Texas and heard the mocking bird. The nightingale is nothing compared with the mocking bird. One bird can imitate thirty other birds – it's an extraordinary thing. So *The Mocking Bird* is my new piece for seventeen wind instruments!

**GW: So your long journey as a composer continues, perhaps stronger than ever?**

KH: Well, I keep on exploring and that's why I'm still working and why composers often say they are working on the same piece all their life!