

Arve Rød

CITY HALL ELECTRONICA — THE LOW G OF THE POWER GRID

Arve Rød is a Norwegian critic and writer. In this essay he describes Øystein Wyller Odden's two works for Oslo City Hall, as an expression of the connection between the sacred and the prosaic that he finds in the City Hall itself.

Like most Oslo-dwellers, I pass the City Hall regularly. Now and then I go into the central hall – known all over the world as the backdrop to the annual award ceremony of the Nobel Peace Prize – to listen to the sound of everyday silence in such a large room, and to reflect on the details of Alf Rolfsen's frescoes and Henrik Sørensen's giant oil painting. The City Hall is one of Oslo's most iconic architectural landmarks. The decorations both inside and outside are among the most ambitious in the country. The building itself towers like cliff walls of hand-beaten brick over the urban landscape, with its bays, reliefs and projections, topped by the two towers that stand like bombastic exclamation marks between the city and the fjord. And right at the top, the bell tower makes its daily mark on the centre of Oslo with the ponderous boom of its chimes.

In a vote among the readers of *Aftenposten* a few years ago, the City Hall managed to be chosen both as Oslo's most beautiful and Oslo's ugliest building. "No building divides the city more," the newspaper stated. If nothing else, this is a sign that the building plays a role in the city space and in the everyday life of the citizens. For me, the City Hall is the closest we come to the feeling of a Gothic cathedral in Oslo. It is monumental and ostentatious, and at the same time a little sombre and unapproachable. It is truly a cathedral dedicated to profane forces. The City Hall is after all almost the opposite of a house of God; it is the citadel of the local administration and its pragmatic everyday negotiations. The decoration of the building points to a history of the sweat of the workers' brows and the utopias of society-building, and to power and its exercise. Sørensen's almost 550-square-metre painting, which covers the bottom wall of the majestic City Hall, in fact bears the title *Labour. Administration. Celebration.* – which according to the City Hall's own information brochure "sums up the City Hall's core functions." The rest of the space is devoted to Rolfsen's frescoes. Working Norway from the drifting nets to the forests of the east looms over the north wall. To the east is the *Occupation Frieze*, and on the west wall we see a variation on the figures in the Oslo city arms.

Of all the decorations in City Hall, these are the best known and most discussed. Together, Rolfsen's and Sørensen's contributions form a narrative of a new Norway, of nation-building, the war years and modernization, of Social Democracy, "city and land, hand in hand"; farming and fisheries; industry and engineering.

Less well known is the part of the original interior that surrounds and partly frames Rolfsen's fresco on the north wall. In the upper edges of the frieze, above each corner, there is an arrangement of organ pipes that looks like two crowns built into the architecture. To the left, a set of more conspicuous pipes extends almost ten metres towards the ceiling. The pipework looks like the kind of organ we normally see in large churches, and is something – once you notice it – that further reinforces the feeling of something ceremonial and sacral, as if the divine is nevertheless to be found just around the corner, and the 450 municipal employees relate to something other and more than political processes and meeting agendas.

But the pipes are not in use. In fact they never have been. The story behind them is as trivial as it is spectacular, and was the obvious feature of interest when the sound artist and musician Øystein Wyller Odden chose the Oslo City Hall as the arena for his two contributions to *Oslobiennalen*.

The pipe organ was designed as an integral part of the building in Arnstein Arneberg's and Magnus Poulsson's final drawings in 1930. In the journalist Carl Just's two-volume work on the City Hall in Oslo, which was published for the ceremonial opening of the building, one can read that "up on the north wall runs a lattice, ornamentally designed with mural crowns and arrows in gold. Behind the lattice the large organ is concealed."

But no organ was ever placed behind the lattice – it was removed from the budget at some point after Just delivered his manuscript to the printer, and before the opening ceremony 69 years ago, in May 1950. Three million 1950 kroner turned out to be too onerous an expenditure, and the planned organ was replaced at the last moment by a much simpler Hammond organ at a fraction of the price. The pipes remained as empty decoration, as silent facade.

Such paradoxes and ruptures in rational planning often exert a special attraction to artists – just as the City Hall's status as both the best and the worst thing in the city is fascinating in itself. For Wyller Odden, the City Hall's silent organ pipes became contradictory and thus potentially meaning-bearing artistic material. They could with great inevitability be incorporated into his ongoing project: to reproduce the sound of the power grid manifest in our built environment – or I should say not manifest, since our hearing is so accustomed to this sound that we normally do not notice it.

For the work *Power Line Hum (Composition for the organ in Oslo City Hall)*, which will be played regularly in the course of the exhibition period, Wyller Odden picked out five of the organ pipes which for various reasons were damaged and then restored by experts in the Netherlands. These have been put back in their original place in the City Hall, and made playable by being connected to a simple wind system. The idea is then to let the pipes play together with the instrument which back in time replaced them – that is, the Hammond organ – in a musical transcription of the sound of the electrical power in the hall, and to let the composition build on the difference between the two sounds.

How the composition is performed in purely technical and physical terms is not as interesting as the fact that the result, a drone or so-called 'bourdon' – an unchanging note that can play below a melody, as on the bagpipes or the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle – is an expanse of sound that is just as suggestive and marked by mysticism as it is minimal and static in expression.

More immediately evident as a musical performance is Wyller Odden's other contribution, *Power Balance* (Composition for piano, alternating current and orchestra), with an ensemble as in a chamber concerto with piano. Here the strings will accompany a grand piano programmed by voltmeters which read off the grid frequency in real time, as well as a score that describes how the musicians are to react to changes in this frequency. The piece is arranged for strings by Jan Martin Smørdal. The piano, like the organ pipes, is tuned to resonate with the power grid's relatively constant pulse of 50 Hertz which, translated into sound, lies close to a low G. The grand piano has then had two vibration elements screwed into the body of the instrument. These, like the voltmeters, are connected to the power sockets in the building, such that the current frequency is converted into vibrations that are propagated to the strings of the piano.

The concerto is performed twice in the course of the biennial, when we can experience the grand piano and the strings responding to the fluctuations in the same current frequency. What we hear by way of the dramatic soundscape in Wyller Odden's work is, in other words, something as prosaic and down to earth as the power company Statnett's transmission of electrical power to the country. It is part of the responsibility of the state enterprise to make sure that there is a balance at any time between consumption and production of this power; Statnett orders an increase or reduction in the power production depending on the ups and downs in consumption. This balance fluctuates around 50 Hz, with small variations just above and just below this frequency, depending on the relationship between consumption and production. So by listening to Wyller Odden's work we can at the same time hear Statnett's work of keeping this relationship, and thus this note, stable.

It is part of the story that Oslo is the country's second-largest power municipality (and biggest grid company), through its ownership of power stations all over southern Norway. The soundscape in the City Hall can in this perspective also be understood as a 'bourdon' note in a more metaphorical sense, as an underlying hum of electricity in the wall decorations' narrative of administration, labour and industry.

Electrical power is the single factor that has most radically changed the world and our everyday life since it became possible to systematize it almost a century and a half ago. Hardly a single part of the modern infrastructure shown in Alf Rolfsen's fresco above the north wall was not made possible or crucially formed using electricity. At the same time it is a mysterious – and for many people still incomprehensible – force. For a long time electricity was associated with supernatural magic, even after it was understood that a lightning strike was in no way a sign of God's anger, but something that consists of the same force one could generate as early as the 1700s with the aid of a single Leyden jar. Electricity bears within it an ambivalence of an almost religious dimension. It can cause destruction and death but also create motion, light and life – just think of science's own creation narrative: the story of the building blocks of primitive life, in the form of molecules that were bombarded with electric charges in the 'primeval soup.'

Wyller Odden's interpretation of the power grid is an 'audification' of electrical civilization, with sacral overtones. It is in fact no accident that several of his earlier, similar projects were implemented in churches. The ambivalence of the works thus reflects both electricity's own nature and mythology, and the City Hall building's contrast between artistic and architectural ambition on the one hand, and political and the administrative everyday life played out there on the other. For Wyller Odden, the ambivalence of the sound of power in this space is also interesting for more down-to-earth reasons. As he himself puts it in his description of the project, it is "the sound of the refrigerator, the fuse box and the fluorescent bulbs in the home. But also the sound of cascades in turbines, heavy industry and synchronic patterns in society."

