

Dalberg, Nancy (1881-1949)

Danish composer and pianist

Nancy Dalberg grew up in a manor-house in the island of Funen. Her father was a wealthy manufacturer, Christian D.A. Hansen. She began to study the piano early. After her marriage in 1901 and settlement in Copenhagen she continued her piano studies for Ove Christiansen. But a promising career was foiled because of a chronic tenosynovitis. During 1909-11 she studied music theory and composition for Johan Svendsen and from 1913 for Carl Nielsen. The latter was to play an important part in her life. When Dalberg's first string quartet was performed for the first time in her home in 1914, Nielsen was one of the musicians of the ensemble. Nielsen, too, conducted the first public performance of three of her orchestral pieces, in 1915 and 1918. It was Scherzo for String Orchestra op. 6, and Symphony in C sharp minor (composed 1917), and Capriccio for Orchestra (1918). Nielsen had on the whole a great confidence in her technical ability and let her instrument parts of his opera *Aladdin* and *Springtime in Funen*.

Nancy Dalberg's production is not large. Besides the above-mentioned orchestral works and a few more pieces, she composed some fifty songs, from which three were for voice and orchestra. Among the latter is *Marianne Sinclair's* song, one of the pieces of an intended opera based on Selma Lagerlöf's *Gösta Berling's Saga*. Unfortunately, the author had already promised the opera rights to someone else, so that idea had to be abandoned¹

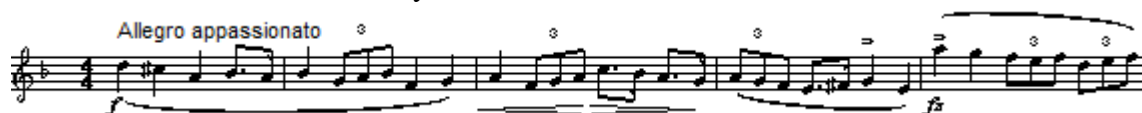
Among the Chamber music works are a number of smaller pieces for violin and piano and for cello and piano. But the three String Quartets have attracted the most attention.²

String quartet No. 1 in D minor

1. *Allegro appassionato* 2. *Scherzo: Allegretto grazioso* 3. *Adagio* 4. *Finale: Vivace*
1914

Nancy Dalberg's first quartet was played for the first time in her home with Carl Nielsen in one of the parts, and it was also her first publicly performed work. However, the quartet was not published during her lifetime, but it is of the same quality as the subsequent two. After listening to it you immediately understand her interest in and skillfulness of polyphone part-writing.

The sonata form of the first movement is obvious. The principal theme is presented by the second violin and after 4 bars by the first violin:



The melody has a touch of a fugue theme, and it will sure enough be treated in imitative counterpoint.

¹ Lisbeth Ahlgren Jensen: *Hilda Sehestedt og Nancy Dalberg*, published by Multivers, Frederiksberg, 2019.

The opera rights were given to the Italian composer Riccardo Zandonai only 14 days before Dalberg's letter arrived to Lagerlöf. The opera, *I cavalieri di Ekebù*, had its first performance in Milano in 1925 and was a great success.

² Nordic String Quartet: Nancy Dalberg, *The String Quartets*, Dacapo 6220655, with Brief notes by Lisbeth Ahlgren Jensen.

The principal area is not long. Transition begins already after 16 bars. It is based on triplets in interplay between the middle strings.

The second theme in B flat major/G minor starts after a ritardando and a short pause.



In the beginning this theme is supported by pizzicato in the other parts.

The second group is long. In the end there is a closing theme related to the second theme:



Notice the point-marked phrases in the two examples above. They will return in the coda.

The development is long and principally working out the first theme, for instance in new polyphonic delicacies. It is finally fading before the recapitulation.

In the recapitulation the second theme is sounding in D major. The concluding coda circulates round the quaver phrases in bars 3-4 of the second theme. They have already been heard in the closing theme (bar 7-8, *dolce*) in enlarged note values. It is the first six notes that dominate the coda.

The short Scherzo is in ternary form. The scherzo theme is first played by the violins as a canon with one bar's delay. Then the viola and cello repeat the same procedure, but the canon is now supplemented with the violins' accompaniment figures. The inventive theme is alternating between staccato and legato:



The very short Trio has a completely different character. The cradling theme is introduced by the violins:



The emphasis on the third beat contributes to this impression as well as the grace-notes in the beginning of every measure. (These grace-notes are however omitted in the note example.)

The lively and rhythmic first part (the "scherzo") returns and concludes the movement.

The third movement has also a ternary ABA form. The A theme is announced in unison in the violins. The key is G minor:

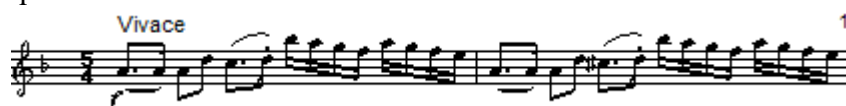


You can suspect that the theme is derived from the first moment's subsidiary theme. The B-part brings a sharp contrast: the time alters to 3/4, the tempo is heightened, and the texture gets more contrapuntal. It is almost twice the length of the A-part, and begins in G major:



When the A-part returns you will find the theme in the cello.

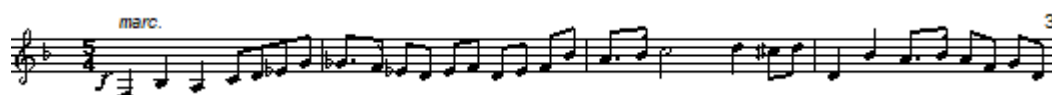
If you look at the rhythm and form, the final is perhaps the movement that makes the greatest impression. Music in uneven time signatures as 5/4 and 7/4 is unusual in Western art music. When it is used it can be for nationalistic reasons; the composer wants to indicate inspiration from folk music, which now and then has uneven meter. But it is not unimaginable that Dalberg here uses 5/4 time to demonstrate her skillfulness in composing. The tempo is high and it is not only the composer who is worth admiration. One must be impressed by the musicians, too, who can play this breathtaking part of halting rhythm in a way that sounds quite natural:



The movement has a sonata form. A syncopated theme comes next in the primary area:



This will after 4 bars continue in a new theme in the lower instruments:



In the end of the principal area the meter is transferred to 4/4. When the second group is to begin, the tempo comes to a standstill and a slow melody in F minor is heard:



This will continue in another theme in F major:



In the long development the five-four meter returns. Only the first group's themes are worked out. One of the high points is when a melody similar to theme 3 is heard in the viola and cello:




In the recapitulation theme 3 and 4 are lacking. The second theme sounds now in D major. A coda based on the principal theme rounds off this marvelous movement of rapid rhythm and slow poetry.

String quartet No. 2 in G minor Op. 14

1. *Moderato* 2. *Allegro scherzando* 3. *Andante con moto e cantabile*
4. *Allegro molto e con spirit*
1921-22

The Quartet was praised by many when it was published in 1926, among others by Wilhelm Altmann. But as usual at that time, it was compulsory to wonder that a woman had been able to bring about something at such great a level!³ The quartet was dedicated to The Breuning-Bache Quartet.⁴

The first movement has a mysterious opening that makes you think of Mozart's "Dissonance" Quartet. It begins in the same way, with the parts coming in after each other:



As with Mozart, the dissonances are resolved and a theme of more tonal nature is heard. The example shows the two violin parts:



The opening's *Moderato* turns during accelerando and crescendo into an *Allegro vivace*, which presents a theme that one surely will look upon as the principal theme.



We recognize triplet figures from the two previous note examples. But all parts differ from each other. The lower part from the *dolce espressivo* example you can now find in the viola. This theme will end in diminuendo and rallentando. The changes in tempo are many and some of a characteristic of the movement.

The subsidiary group enters with the indication *Tranquillo*. The theme is introduced in the first violin and has important commentaries in the viola:

³ Wilhelm Altmann (1862-1951) was a German music bibliographer and publisher of a great number of guide books for ensembles working with Piano Trio, Piano Quartet, Piano Quintet and String Quartet. In his *Handbuch der Streichquartette* from 1928 he wrote about Dalberg's G minor Quartet: "Nancy Dalberg published this work without giving her first name, and, had I not learned by chance that it was composed by a woman, considering also the austerity and native strength of her music, it would never have occurred to me that it was a woman speaking to us. Her mastery of the technique of composition is remarkable, and she has something important to say." To use ambiguous name or a pen-name when publishing for many women was felt as a necessity at that time. Other example is Laura Netzel (Lago) and Melanie Bonis (Mel Bonis).

⁴ The ensemble got its name from Gunna Breuning-Stor, violin and Paulus Bache, cello.



The development (rehearsal mark 5 in the score) has again the higher tempo *Allegro vivace*. The working out begins with the triplet and quintuplet figures we have met in the *dolce espressivo* theme.

The first theme is worked out as well as several motives, which the different parts have earlier treated. In the middle (mark 8) we can hear the cello play the *dolce espressivo* theme, now in tempo *poco meno*. The first theme recurs (mark 9), and in the termination (mark 10) the eighth-note figure from example 2 above crops up and completes the development, which ends in diminuendo.

The recapitulation starts with the introduction (*Moderato*). The principal group is shortened. Also the second group (mark 14) gets lesser space compared to the exposition. Again, for the fourth time, (mark 15) the important *dolce espressivo* theme is heard. It will during increasing tempo and dynamics give rise to an outburst of the first theme's first motive in fortissimo (mark 16) and is to be played *con fuoco*.

The concluding coda is built round the eighth-note figures from the introduction (see example 2 above). It will once again recreate the mysticism from the beginning of the movement. The whole movement is a magnificent show of polyphone instrumentation art.

The second movement is a scherzo in ternary form. The scherzo part begins with the chirping of birds in the second violin and the viola:



These are soon accompanied by a melody in the first violin, labeled *cantabile*:



These three motives/themes dominate the A-part.

The B-part, the Trio, is a fugato with the parts stepping in after 2, 4, and 6 bars.



The finale, *Allegro molto e con spirito*, seems to be cast in sonata form. The main theme is presented in the first violin. It is in her usual manner rhythmic and harsh. Dalberg is seldom rubbing us the right way.



After a gradual tempo lowering, the long second group begins. It should be played calm, however *a tempo*. The key seems to be D minor:



The development is extended and is mostly dwelling on the first theme. When the second theme is flitting past (rehearsal mark 57) it does not sound in the tonic, and we are obviously still in the development, which will carry on further working out of the principal theme.

A shorter episode, *Pesante poco* (one bar before 58) makes a transmission to the recapitulation. This (one bar after 60) is dealing solely with the principal theme. To omit the second theme in a recapitulation is exceptional.⁵ But Dalberg has a close rebel to lean upon; Carl Nielsen relinquished the second theme in the last movement's recapitulation in his first quartet in G minor op. 13. And with the dissolution of tonality, conventions built upon the old functional harmony must surely be questioned.

String Quartet No. 3 Op. 20

1. *Allegro con passio* 2. *Allegretto semplice* 3. *Tempo giusto*

1927

Like her first quartet this work was never published during Dalberg's life. In 1946 She decided to pay for the printing herself. However, the printing took a long time and the quartet was published first in 1950, one year after her death. It was dedicated to her teacher and friend Carl Nielsen. He died in 1931 but had at least the possibility to listen to the work, when it was performed in 1928 and 1929.

The first movement has an arch form in the pattern A-B-C-B-A, which, in a way can be regarded as a variant of the sonata form. In that case, first A and B make up the exposition, C is the development, and B and A are the recapitulation with the theme groups in reversed order. It is interesting to compare with Bartok, by whom Dalberg was influenced. Bartok's fourth (1928) and fifth (1934) quartets, both in 5 movements, have an arch-like structure. And in the fifth quartet the first movement has a similar mirror symmetrical building. But Bartok's quartet was written seven years after Dalberg's; thus she can be said to have anticipated Bartok, at least regarding the symmetry of this movement.

⁵ In his book *Sonata Forms* (1988) Charles Rosen writes "The Principle of *recapitulation as a resolution* may be considered the most fundamental and radical innovation of sonata style. ... What must reappear in the recapitulation ... is the second group ..." and "A theme that has been played only at the dominant is a structural dissonance, unresolved until it has been transposed to the tonic."

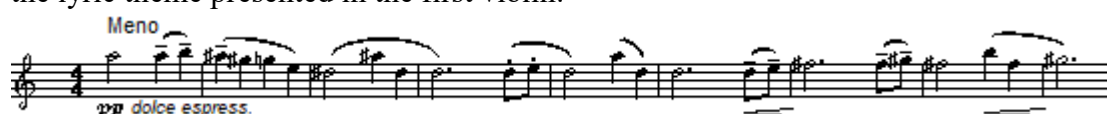
The main theme, A, is characterized more by its rhythm than by its melody:



The theme dominates the whole movement. Yet after a while there comes a passage of even quarter notes as a counter-part to the thematic rhythm:



The quarter notes forebode the second group, where partly similar phrases are to be found in the lyric theme presented in the first violin:



The theme is eventually repeated in the high register of the cello.

The development, C, is working out both these themes, and shows an arch form too; The motives of the main theme are developed in the entire section, but in the middle this process is accompanied by the second theme as a counter-part, at first in the first violin and then in the cello.

The recapitulation offers the theme in reversed order, first B and then A.

A coda in *alla breve* time (2/2) completes the movement. It is not easy to find a tonal center in the movement, so rich in chromaticism, but it ends at an F major chord.

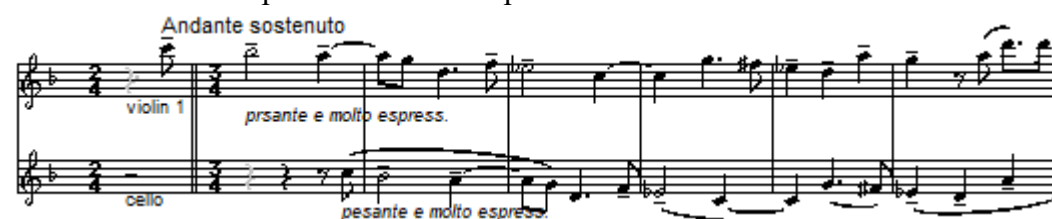
The middle movement, *Allegretto semplice*, is in D minor. Two themes dominate the movement that has a ternary form. The A theme mainly features small interval changes like the first movement's main theme.



Variety is effected by theme phrases wandering between the parts.



In the middle part, B, the time is changed to 3/4 and the tempo is slowed down a little. A theme of 16 bars is presented in a two part canon that is heard 4 times:



The example shows the parts of violin1 and cello, which are first out. The cello part lies in the upper register, only one octave under the violin part. As can be seen in the example, there is one bar's displacement between the two parts. The middle parts are resting. Then the middle parts take over the canon, while the first violin and the cello supplement with sparse remarks. The 1:st violin and cello return, now with the cello in the low register. The texture becomes denser owing to the middle parts' counter melodies. When the canon is heard in the middle parts for the last time its displacement is only one quarter. The indication of dynamics is *pianissimo* and that of performance *espressivo* as well as *misterioso*.

A shortened first part, A, returns and finishes the movement, which ends at a D major chord.

The finale, *Tempo giusto*, has ternary form, too. It is interesting that Dalberg in the coda connects to the first movement. Nielsen did the same in the last movement's Resumé in his String Quartet in G minor op. 13.

In the A part you can already find the principal motives in the first bars. The opening motive, which is heard in the cello and the viola, turns up now and then, but gets a part of its own later on. The sixteenth-figures in the first violin may be looked upon as the principal theme:

The even eighth-notes in the viola/cello are important counter-parts in the whole movement. The second violin is first pausing but then joining in at bar 12, with a counter-part to the main theme in the viola and pizzicato in the cello:

The main theme is then exchanged for a theme built on the two opening motives:

But the new theme has similarities to the violin theme above, too.

In the middle part, B, both time and "key" are exchanged. The theme is dominated by movable triplet figures in the violins. The lower strings proceed in a slower way:

The A part returns with its different sections. Again Dahlberg ends with an *alla breve* coda. It begins with the quarter phrases from the *first* movement, now played in the violin and the cello in imitative technique. Then the motive of the main theme from the same movement steps in, now in a more regular variant. To make the quartet cyclic in this way was used by Beethoven already. Other well-known advocates for the technique are Mendelssohn and many French composers of the late 19th century. The ending chord is an A major triad.