

Agnethe Christensen

by Leah Stuttard

Agnethe Christensen (1959-2024) was a uniquely creative and generous singer with a self-described “intriguing vocal clarity” that was prized by audiences and collaborators around the world. Her career encompassed complex contemporary opera as well as film music and even backing vocals for Miles Davis. But it is for her work in early music that she will be best remembered and most missed.

She had never intended to become a singer, playing wind instruments and obsessing over tropical fish as a teenager. Singing was kind of an afterthought, just a second study suggested by her mother when she was learning the flute and playing in a marching band. That changed when she met Andrea von Ramm, the pioneering singer in the Germany-based medieval music ensemble, the Studio der frühen Musik. This encounter proved decisive in directing her towards becoming both a singer and a medieval nerd.

Born in Uppsala, her heart was resolutely Swedish even if she spent a good part of her life in Copenhagen after studying at the Royal Danish Conservatory. She was proud of her ability to sing the high pitched Swedish kulning, something she insisted you had to have started very young. Tradition and her own roots were important to her and this guided the musical directions she travelled in. Her fascination with the Middle Ages in Scandinavia meant she investigated the rich poetic heritage of Denmark, Sweden and Norway, transforming words into original songs in a believably authentic way, authentic both to her own voice and to the historicity of the texts. This work was deepened by her meeting with the ensemble Sequentia for whom she interpreted ancient Icelandic texts. With Ulv she enjoyed exploring Nordic ballads and chorales, restoring to sound the incredible styles of hymn singing from the Faroe Islands, Estonia and the Ukraine. Solo projects saw her visit places as far apart as Greenland and Tanzania, taking innovative multimedia performances there and learning from their folklore and singing styles.

Agnethe could have been a showstopper in any repertoire at all. But her musical heart found its home where she could have expressive freedom and the meeting point of contemporary, folk and medieval music gave her just what she was looking for, a space for wide hearted and open, creative generosity. Many musicians have benefitted from her joyful and experimental spirit as well as from her bravery and tranquillity. This will be her lasting legacy.

A Probably Incomplete Discography: Agnethe Christensen (1959-2024)

Medieval

With Elizabeth Gaver

2023 Hildegard von Bingen - Viriditas (Apple Blossom Music ABM006)

With Leah Stuttard

2018 Secret Life of Lutheran Chorales (Modern Roots 004)

2014 Oluf Strangesøns Dyst/Joust - A Musical Scrapbook (Modern Roots 001)

Sequentia

- 2012 Celestial Hierarchy (Deutsche Harmonia Mundi (Sony) 88765 46864 2)
- 2002 Lost Songs of a Rheinland Harper (LSS128)
- 2001 The Rheingold Curse (LCC00572)

Alba

- 2001 It barn er født (CLASSCD395)
- 2001 Die tenchen morder (CLASSCD335)
- 1998 Hildegard von Bingen (CLASSCD198)
- 1997 Songs of Longing and Lustful Tunes (CLASSCD170)

Ensemble Charneyron

- 1991 Memoria Mortis with Ensemble Charneyron (KP32082)

Ars Nova

- 1989 Gombert: Sacred Music (Kontrapunkt 32038)

Contemporary

With Music for the Mysteries

- 2012 The Testimony of Melangell (Meridian CDE84617)

- 1996 Davids Nimm by Karin Rehnqvist (PSCD85)

With Per Dybro Sørensen

- 1994 Für Gitarre, Three Chinese Poems by Axel Borup Jørgensen (PACD81)

- 1993 Orfeo-Fragmenter by Bo Holten (EXLCD30055)

Baroque

Aurora

- 1997 Music from the Court Chapel of Frederik IV (DACOCD473)
- 1992 Italian Love Songs (CLASSCD125)

Concert spirituel

- 1996 Actus Tragicus (FFP 001)

Folk influenced early music/early music influenced folk

Ulv

- 2015 Ljus i Mörker (Apple Blossom Music ABM002)
- 2012 Eldprovet (Apple Blossom Music ABM001)

The Nordic Hymn Duo with Henry Linder

- Northern Church Sounds (Modern Roots 002)

With Helen Davies

2007 West Over the Sea (CLASSCD734)

Agnethe specifically asked if I would write something about her to share with her friends after she had gone. An honour and privilege but also heavy and difficult, of course. You can find a more official “obituary” (above), but I wanted to gather together some personal memories and reminiscences to give a more defined shape to the kind of person she was, not just list some of her amazing achievements.

I was introduced to her only in 2012, so I came into her life quite late by comparison with some of you reading this. It was Björn Ross who effectively matchmade us, knowing that she’d be interested to meet a fellow medieval geek. It was immediately clear to me that we were musically and personally very compatible. I loved her sarcastic sense of humour and multiple stories of bonkers travel she’d done, like the time she was on a cycling holiday on her own in Orkney and got a little drunk and nearly fell off a cliff in the mist, or the mad bus ride in Thailand where everyone laughed at her and Sören being unable to eat the curry that was on offer during a break in the journey because it was so unbelievably, ridiculously, impossibly spicy, or the wonderful crazy time she had with Sören in Sicily drinking delicious wine and chatting to locals. Her clothing style was wacky combinations that were just so cool and bohemian in my eyes. Equally, dining chez Christensen Floderus was a mix of whatever was on offer in local supermarkets, no matter what those things were (falafel with fresh pasta and salmon seemed weird to me, but it was tasty nevertheless!!) To be honest, the more important thing was the excellent company. I am so grateful that her entire family welcomed me into their home, which became a real haven for me. Their flat is truly a wonderful place that they always generously shared with guests of all descriptions who stayed for longer and shorter periods: harpsichordists, dancers, the children of friends and family, guinea pigs. I loved the guinea pigs and their cute noises almost as much as they loved Agnethe. I think they died of grief when she left them at home and went on a working holiday with the family one Christmas. You’ll have to ask Sören about their final fate...

In the short time I was working with her, from 2012-2022, we put together and performed nine separate programmes mixing medieval music with folk ballads, Renaissance polyphony and even Baroque songs, hymns from Victorian England or in the wildly altered forms of chorale singing developed in the Faroes, and Swedish outposts in the Ukraine and Estonia. No musical period was ever totally off the menu as long as we could fit it into the theme and accompany it with our string instruments. I loved her continual creativity – in fact only two of those eight programmes were really my concept, the rest sprang from her deep bubbling well of ideas. Our music making was always the result of joyous research and experimentation that we both undertook though, and I like to think that we provided inspiration for each other on an equal footing. Many a happy hour I spent in her music room on my trusty laptop searching out music ideas to fit into the chosen theme, making editions so we could try things out, listening to her singing the melody of another ballad to work out what I’d play on my harp or struggling a bit to get my mouth round the next medieval Swedish or Danish ballad refrain that she wanted us to perform!

I got in touch with a few friends and colleagues when I was tasked with this to ask them for their memories, obviously not everyone so I'm sorry if you were missed out. Raho Langsepp sent me a link to a transcript of an amazing and detailed interview that he'd done with Agnethe around 20 years ago and thanks to the wonders of internet translation I was able to read the Estonian! That gave me some interesting insight into her early career as a singer that I was able to include in the official obituary. But he also shared a memory of something Agnethe did that had obviously moved him. Back in October 2013, we were at Raho's festival, Orient and Occident, in the beautiful university town of Tartu in Estonia. The thing that stood out for Raho was how, in the middle of the last night carousing in the basement with everyone jamming together and drinking, Agnethe stood up and got everyone's attention. She wanted to point out that the incredibly rich mix of top quality musicians, in particular that year the final concert had seen two fantastic musicians from India and an incredible Chinese flautist play, that this wasn't happening in London, Paris or New York, but in Tartu. Her genuine warmth, generosity and joy at someone else's achievements shone through to create a lasting impression at that moment. "Agnethe has also always been happy to participate in such improvised musical meetings many times with wonderful results, the last time being the final concert of last year's [2023 Orient and Occident] festival in Tallinn with Iranian musicians and Persian Classical music. Many audience members described it to me afterwards in similar terms, saying they could never have imagined such an incredibly wonderful combination was possible."

I shared the stage with Elizabeth Gaver and Agnethe on several occasions. She and Agnethe had worked together for a long time in the ensemble *Sequentia* in a theatrical production of texts from the Edda, Nordic stories from 13th century Iceland. On the night that Lena-Susanne Norin and Agnethe sang Swedish medieval ballads and folk hymns together after a performance at the Montalbane Festival in Germany, Elizabeth joined in and a wonderful new group was formed: *Ulv*. I absolutely treasure this folk-medieval trio's utterly haunting CDs. She told me how impossible it would be to really describe her musical adventures with Agnethe, but it was clear to me what a beautiful melding of musical minds they had, both such caring and thoughtful people, brimming with innovative musical ideas that they not only came up with, but also executed in performance together brilliantly.

I chatted with Poul Høxbro about the time he had spent working with Agnethe. He told me that they did literally hundreds of concerts in the years 1992-97 together with Helen Davies and later with Miriam Andersén in the ensemble *Alba*. And they were still working together in 2012 – I stayed at Agnethe's flat for the first time that year and did a solo performance in the *Koncertkirk* when it was still rather church-like, but she couldn't come because she was doing a duo concert with Poul! He characterised Agnethe as incredibly open and fearless. Like me, he really appreciated that Agnethe enjoyed rehearsing, that slow drawn out process of living with musical sounds created together until it feels like it belongs to both of you together. He said: "she was so special, so tough, so resilient, so trustworthy, like an old time Land Rover! I thought that was normal. She could just keep on performing, she never doubted her ability to perform. We have been standing in clouds of mosquitos, performing outdoor concerts during hot afternoons in a venue near the arctic circle, or playing in minus 7 degrees at midnight in Tartu and everything in between. There was never a moment of doubt or anxiety, she'd just say 'Of course we can do that!'...No matter if it was completely

puerile or high class chamber music, she always used engagement and charisma – no one could resist the power of this voice and her artistic strength.”

This down-to-earth confidence was incredibly liberating for me too, freeing me up to be the musician I am, rather than having to shore up flagging courage in the other musicians on stage. There was always a sense that we could grow and develop as a musical team without the need for criticism of each other; whatever needed to improve would improve. She (and I) trusted in that process as so few musicians seem able to. Her respect for me was an amazing gift that keeps on giving. I will never forget how, when she came to London to help celebrate on my wedding day, she sang for us in one of the gaps between dancing with such genuine joy and unstinting open-heartedness. I can honestly say that working with her changed my life, making me a better musician and a better person. Her belief in me and unerring support, which I saw her give to many others too, were transfiguring. I owe her a great deal.

My projects with Agnethe:

2013 Oluf Strangesøns Dystridt/Joust

2014 Book of Hours

2016 A Non-Silent Tradition

2016 Sankt Staffan (with Elizabeth Gaver)

2017 Johannisklang (with Clare Salaman (1967-2022)/Elizabeth Gaver)

2017 The Secret Life of Lutheran Chorales

2019 Maria går sig åt källeflod – Mary Magdalene through music

2020 Dances with elves (with Gilbert Martinez)

2022 Änglarim (with Elizabeth Gaver)