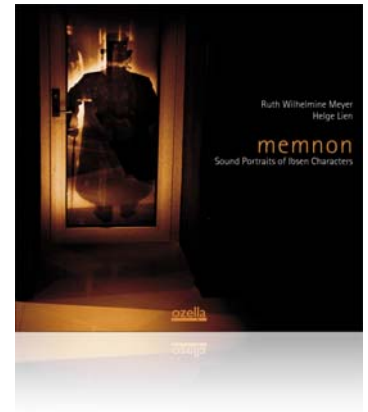


Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer - Helge Lien
Memnon - Sound Portraits of Ibsen Characters**The Precision of Sound****Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer and Helge Lien as painters of musical portraits**

In his native Norway, Henrik Ibsen is an integral part of the country's cultural heritage. Regarded as the founder of a new, realistic branch of theatre with a critical perspective on society, his pieces are still regularly performed all across the world today. Mostly, however, they are either staged rather conservatively as theatre productions or as literary readings. Until now, that is: For *Memnon*, their first album as a duo, vocalist Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer and pianist Helge Lien have approached Ibsen from an entirely new angle.

Psychological dramas – sonic psychograms

When, in 2011, representatives of the Oslo-based Ibsen-Museum approached Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer about a project involving Ibsen, she immediately began thinking about coming up with something different: *"I quickly realised that I did not want to simply set his lyrics to music"*, she remembers, *"Although I did want to use my voice, I was looking for possibilities of expressing myself in a non-verbal way."* Since Meyer has always considered her five-octave voice as a timbrally flexible instrument, the choice was less surprising than it might have initially seemed. Reliably avoiding the predictable in her career, Meyer has worked with Inuit singers and been inspired by shamanic chant from Siberia. Both experiences have left their traces in her vocal technique: *"After working with sounds intensively over many years of experience, I've come to the conclusion that a sound can be more precise than a word ever could. Sonic portraits have always fascinated me, so why not create them using Ibsen characters as points of departure?"* How hard was choosing from Ibsen's extensive list of characters for her? *"It wasn't that difficult, actually"*, she recollects with a laugh, *"As a Norwegian, I was intimately familiar with Ibsen's work and his characters. Some of them will inevitably touch you more than others. So I instantly knew which ones were right for me."*

In the end she opted for Hedvig Ekdal (from *The Wild Duck*), Ellida Wangel (*The Lady from the Sea*), Hedda Gabler, various characters from Peer Gynt as well as Nora Helmer

from *A Doll's House* – turning the characters of Ibsen's psychological dramas into musical psychograms.

As exciting as a thriller – as clear as the starry sky

As 19th century German poet Joseph von Eichendorff once put it, there *"sleeps a song in things abounding"*. If he was right, a lot more had to be sleeping in the character traits of Ibsen's theatrical roles, all decisively influenced by his own life: *"I merely had to dig up these songs and uncover the feelings transported by the sounds"*, as Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer puts it, *"And so I started painting with distilled sounds."* To her, it was clear that there was only one artist capable of joining her on her mission: Pianist Helge Lien, a musician blessed with the gift of great flow and a talent for shaping discrete developments. Once they'd found each other, the two immediately started exploring their self-created sound cosmos. *"I didn't actually work my way through Ibsen's texts"*, as Lien explains, *"Rather, Ruth was a mediator for me, channeling the sentiments encapsulated within the sounds. And her expressions were as clear as the starry sky."* Listening to their improvisations on *Memnon*, the monumental dimensions of sound quickly become apparent. Ibsen's characters are awarded a depth neither actors, nor readers have access to. It has taken the duo to the darkest corners of their soul and to the pinnacles of human thought. While Helge Lien is delineating the contours of these musical psychograms on his piano with clear black-and-white brushstrokes, Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer is filling in the basic shapes with rich, intense colors. Both artists are tapping deeply into their personal sound worlds in an effort of making these characters shine as brightly as possible. Listening to them draft, express, re-phrase and finalise their ideas is as exciting as a thriller, with the plot unfolding in the act of listening.

Radical solutions – purest music

But how, one might ask, can sound possibly be so clear and unambiguous? To Meyer, the answer is simple: *"Ibsen may be finding radical solutions for his characters. And yet, to him, radicalness always implies extreme exactitude as well. In offering this exactitude, he significantly limits your interpretive freedom."* It is here that her conviction that nonverbal expressions can be more exact than words came into play and directly influenced the form that the songs would take. *"I based my chords directly on her sonic impressions"*, Lien elucidates, *"And then we simply allowed the pieces to grow."* And grow they did, albeit rarely in predictable directions. At one point, Lien's notes sound out peacefully, only to serve as a departure point for fluttering vocal lines by Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer, depicting Hedda Gabler's contrasting emotions. A similarly three-dimensional world of affective suspense and relief is built up in depicting Nora Helmer's inner turbulences, which eventually lead her from being a child-like person to a pensive woman. Every step of her way is accompanied by steps on the piano, while Meyer's voice is reflecting on her metamorphosis.

But what about those unfamiliar with Ibsen's work and personalities? *"We've thought about them, too"*, Meyer stresses, *"These sonic portraits are archetypal, which means that they're reflections of fundamental human emotion and imagination buried in the collective subconscious. It is precisely because Ibsen tends to conceptualise his characters so radically, that they are turning into archetypes."* *Memnon* is accordingly built around an equally simple and striking ambition: Keeping the music as pure as possible. Relying on nothing but voice and piano, Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer and Helge Lien are eliminating the delay between the moment of creation and an emotional response in the listener. The very moment their music is released into the world, it is immediately perceptible as a tangible physical sensation. Could music possibly aspire to a higher goal?