THE MODERN BREAKTHROUGH IN SWEDISH AND
SCANDINAVIAN ART MUSIC

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The 1920s are often considered the decade of the modern breakthrough in music. This is an era in which artists in search of the ‘new’ turned away, somewhat sceptically, from the stylistic expressions and aesthetics of the earlier decade. Hermann Danuser sees a connection between the disasters of the previous decade and the emerging modern sound. “After the catastrophe of the first world war, the need for a fundamental dissociation from the aesthetic premises of romantic music was widely felt.” (Danuser 1984: 152). Robert P. Morgan emphasises the need felt to “reject the past in favour of everything new and up-to-date”. (Morgan 1991: 220).

In continental Europe the new age was marked by the rise of atonality and expressionism developed by Arnold Schönberg and his students Anton Webern and Alban Berg, who together constituted the second Vienna School. Together with the “primitivism” of Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók, their work is generally considered the earliest incarnation of modernist music. The search for new sound, however, is also evident in the popular music and jazz of the time. A new generation of composers, the foremost being the so-called Les Six in France (Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, etc) and Paul Hindemith in Germany, regardless of differences in aesthetics, compositional style and output, shared a certain interest in popular music and the different functions that art music could have, thereby dismissing the romantic view of music and the idea of l’art pour l’art.

In the history of the avant-garde, the 1910s and 1920s are gener-
ally considered the “breakthrough” years. However, this view is mainly based on developments in art and literature and is much less obvious when one considers the music scene. Today Luigi Russolo’s futurist manifesto on “The Art of Noises” from 1913 as well as his noise machines, intonarumori, appear rather as an early manifestation of the ideas of sound art or “sound in the arts” (see for example Kahn 1999 and Motte-Haber 1999). There were certainly several achievements during these years, on technological as well as on theoretical/aesthetic levels, which expanded the concepts of music, for instance experiments on new electronic instruments like the theremin, or artistic manifestos like Ferruccio Busoni’s “Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music” from 1907, in which a music going beyond chromaticism, and also open to micro-intervals, is suggested. But in music history it is seldom a matter of modern music “versus” the avant-garde. This does not really become a topic until the 1950s. To speak about music from the 1920s in terms of its relation to the concept of avant-garde would thus be anachronistic.

But the 1920s is also the decade of the institutionalisation of art music. This also brings tensions between the “new music” and older aesthetics, the new being represented by partly international networks and organisations, and the old by older generations of composers and critics. In terms of stylistic features, one can easily claim that this new music was modernist. However, the relation to the institution of art music differs considerably in different locations, and is therefore worth consideration in the Nordic context. The reactions among writers and critics against romantic music indicate a shared belief that a new era had emerged, or was about to emerge. Questioning of pre-war values was also a way of exercising a self-reflective critique of the institution of art music (See Broman 2000: 58ff).

In Scandinavia, the 1920s are also considered as the decade marking the general breakthrough of the new era. In this respect, there are many similarities with the new tendencies on the continent, although ideas emanating directly from Continental Europe appeared somewhat later. Jazz and popular music also had an impact and were a subject of discussion and critique, although Scandinavian composers – unlike their continental contemporaries – did not see these musical forms as offering an alternative aesthetic. Official music, marked by an increasing internationalisation, flourished in 1920s’ Scandinavia