



PAUL OKKENHAUG  
(1908 – 1975)

*“Composer, musician and farmer”*

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(Final work in the subject “Research and writing skills”,  
The Sibelius Academy, October 2009)

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## *Prelude*

Just like most persons from Middle Norway, I was brought up with the well-known music that Paul Okkenhaug composed for “The Saint Olav Drama” on Stiklestad in 1954. Almost every summer we went to watch the play and every time the opening fanfare sounded from the stage, I was filled with a feeling of greatness. I was fascinated with the story of the old vikings and the great change they went through, moving from their old beliefs in northern mythology to Christianity in 1030. I was totally spellbound by the music and I looked more forward to hearing the music than to see the actual play, because I never really understood the drama until I got older - but the music told me everything I needed to know and feel. It was like opening a door to ancient, pagan times. I had never heard music like that and it was not until several years later, when I started to study music myself, that I got to understand the old scales and the other musical effects Paul had used to make this music sound primal and medieval. To me Paul Okkenhaug was as famous and grand as Grieg and Beethoven – I thought everyone in Norway knew who he was, but it appeared that they did not.

The story of Paul Okkenhaug was quite unknown to me until I started writing this paper. He was my grandmother's brother and the pride of our family and I never really understood why he was not mentioned in the music history books along with Grieg, for instance. His music was so great, that I thought it must have had belonged to a great man. But he was not. He was a great composer and a great musician, but in private, Paul was very humble and kind, and he suffered from low self-esteem. He was never really accepted as a serious musician, because he was also a farmer, which limited his possibilities to study and work professionally. Paul was the oldest son on their family farm, which meant that he was brought up to be a farmer. Being a farmer is not easy and neither is being a musician, and it was even harder in the 1930s and 1940s than today. Trying to combine these two professions seems impossible, and it almost was, too. Paul wrote a lot of music, but did not have the capacity to write enough to achieve the greatness he deserved. He did his best running the farm, but he was not enough of a farmer to keep the farm well-run. His destiny was to be dragged between the world of great art and the hard everyday farm-life. It must have been harder than anyone could understand.

## *Background*

Paul Okkenhaug was born on June 30<sup>th</sup> 1908 on Øvre Okkenhaug (Upper Okkenhaug), a farm situated close to Levanger city in Nord-Trøndelag county in Middle Norway. His mother, Sigrun, was a well-known author and his father, Fredrik, was the owner of Øvre Okkenhaug farm. They had 11 children and Paul was the eldest, which meant that he was brought up to take over the farm when the time was due for his father to retire.

His father had a great interest in music and learned to play the fiddle quite well, and so he became one of the most important influences when Paul started to find his own interest for music at an early age. As mentioned, Paul's mother was an author, so he was born into an artistic and cultural family, even though they were also hard-working farmers.

There was a piano on the farm and as soon as he got some time off from work, Paul sat down and played it. From an early age he started to improvise and to play with the music, shaping nice, little tunes. But at that point he did not know how to write down his compositions, so most of his early works are lost for that reason. His first preserved composition "Koral" was written in 1920, when Paul was 12 years old. It is a beautiful, little melody in c-minor with broad chords. He often returned to this tune in later works.

In those days, it was very rare to hear the music of great composers being performed, and even more rarely to hear them live. Paul was over 15 years old before he got to hear his first concert.



*Paul with his mother, Sigrun.*

## *Duty vs. dreams*

The 1920s and 1930s were very rough in Norway, because of the extremely challenging economic situation and high unemployment in the years after the first world war. Everybody was struggling to keep themselves alive with minimal resources and this was unfortunately the time when Paul Okkenhaug had to make a decision for his career.

As mentioned, it was expected that he was going to take over the farm, and he had many responses with the daily work there. On the other side, his interest for playing and composing music grew stronger, and he was dreaming of being able to study composing and organ playing in Oslo. When he was working on the farm, he was never really present, because he was composing melodies in his head and longed to sit by the piano. But when he was playing, he also felt guilty, because of all the work that needed to be done on the farm. This ambivalence between his two worlds was going to be a burden for him his whole life, but it was also this contrast that made his music so interesting. One can clearly hear elements of Norwegian traditional folk music in his works and the strong presence of nature can be heard in all of his music and also be seen in the lyrics he chose for his works.

Paul was a very kind and sensitive man, who tried to avoid conflicts and wanted to make sure everybody around him were happy. He came from a very warm and caring family and therefore he wanted to do his best, so that Øvre Okkenhaug was run properly. He knew his ancestors had been working very hard for generations to make the farm well kept. His parents had trust upon him the great responsibility of one day running the farm, and he did not want to let them down. Therefore it was never an option for Paul to give away the responsibility of Øvre Okkenhaug to somebody else.

After 20 years being both a farmer and a musician, Paul Okkenhaug said the following in an interview in 1959:

“ - So, you are not especially interested in agriculture?  
- No, not in itself. But I am of course very interested that my home farm is being maintained and run properly. But if I could make an independent choice, I would not have become a farmer, but thrown myself over the music. But I shall not complain. It is not only disadvantageous to be both farmer and musician at the same time.” (Source: Husmoen's MA-work 1980:24)



*Working on the farm with his brother in-law, Fridtjof Stormo.*

### *Early music studies (1924-1928)*

Paul's family had for a long time been aware of his exceptional musical talent. When he was 16, his grandfather bought him a new piano, which gave him inspiration to start taking piano lessons. Here he got to know amongst others Bach and Grieg and this was like an adventure to him;

*“I was spellbound, yes obsessed, by Grieg, the harmonies, the chords and also by Beethoven. And I still believe that we as children experience things like that more right, more congruently covering the composers’ intentions than later in life. The immediate is precious.”*

*(Quote from an interview with Paul Okkenhaug in the local newspaper “Verdalingen”.)*

Paul spent a year in a music boarding school in 1924/25, where he got great, new musical impulses. After this year, he returned to work on the farm, because he could not afford to take his studies further. But he kept on dreaming of studying music in Oslo and his family understood how important it was for this young man to be able to continue with his studies. In 1926, at the age of 18, he moved to Oslo and started his organ studies at the Music Conservatory there. This was normally a 4-5 years study, but since he could not afford to study for so long, he was aiming on finishing in only 1 year. There were almost no possibilities to get scholarships in those days and the only money he had, were the money he humbly asked his parents for. The letters to and from Paul and his parents are preserved and in them we can read about a young man struggling with tough studies and who misses home and his family. He also had a really hard time financially and it was difficult for him to ask for money to for instance buy the choral book and other organ scores. But his parents sent him money as often as they could and the comforting tone in the letters from his mother probably helped him to cope with all worries. To earn a bit of money, he worked as an accompanist for a jazz-musician and kept on trying to get organ students. He was a stand-in for the organist in “Hauges Minde”, a chapel in Oslo, where he could practice as much as he wanted to.

Although it was a struggle, the year in Oslo was also like coming to heaven for a young musician and composer, hungry for music and knowledge he did not have the possibilities to access in the countryside. He went to all the concerts he could afford and had some really good teachers in the conservatory. He also got to meet fellow musicians who inspired him and made him more comfortable with his identity as a musician. Two of his composer-friends from those days were David Monrad Johansen and Geirr Tveitt, who are both recognized Norwegian composers.



*A young Paul Okkenhaug*

At the age of 19 he completed his organ exam at the conservatory after only 1 year of studies. This shows how extremely talented he was, but also how hard-working and serious Paul Okkenhaug was.

In a letter from his mother, Sigrun, which was sent before his organ exam, we can feel the warmth and support he got from home:

*“Remember to let the nerves calm down properly when you are seated by the organ – before you start to play. Try to think about something small. Think about the Salthammerbusta and all the wonderful green plains there and the calm and peace that is resting over the mountain. Think about the Rein lake, blank and calm and the mountain air, cold and clear. Do not think about the exam or good marks. Take a real grip of your own mind, and think what gives you peace. And remember that “God is standing by” all of those who wants progress. No matters how it goes, we at home know that you are always doing your best. And very good luck with that day, too, Paul!”*

He returned to Okkenhaug and worked at the farm after his exam, but returned to Oslo in 1928 to continue his studies. He had to quit, though, due to a combination of bad economy and a lack of self-confidence. Paul never believed in his own skills, and a lot of his work is lost, because he threw away piles of music, thinking it was not good enough and that he did not keep the same level as his fellow composers.

### *Starting a career and making a family (1930-)*



*Magnhild and Paul with their children  
Sigrid, Ragna, Eli and Fredrik  
(Håvard not born yet)*



*The Nidaros Cathedral*

In 1930 Paul Okkenhaug got a dream job, when he got to be the stand-in for the organist in the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim. The old cathedral was finished in about 1300 and has two organs – a Wagner-organ built in 1741 and a Steinmeyer-organ, which was built in 1930 – the year Paul got his job there. 1930 must have been a good year for Paul all in all, because he got engaged to Magnhild Buran (1908-2008), who from that day stayed by his side for the rest of his life. They got married in 1935 and had five children together. Magnhild gave him love and support and in 1938 when they took over the farm, she learned how to run it, so that Paul could spend more time composing and playing.

## *“Tørkhuset” becomes a popular studio for artists and musicians (1933-)*



*“Tørkhuset” painted by Louis Kvalstad*

Magnhild and Paul had a great interest in other people's art, both music, painting and poetry and they often traveled around Norway to visit other artists. Two of their good artist friends were the twin-brothers Louis (1905-1952) and Elliot Kvalstad (1905-1938) from Namdalen in Norway. They lived in extreme poverty and needed a place to live. On Øvre Okkenhaug there are several buildings for different use, and one of them is “Tørkhuset” which can be translated into “The drying house”. It is located beautifully on a mound near the main farm. This was a house that in the old days were used to dry grain, but in the 1930s it was dilapidated and in poor condition. The Kvalstad brothers were offered to live in “Tørkhuset” for free if they renovated it, which they gladly did, and in 1933 it was done. Elliot was a painter, who unfortunately passed away far too early, and Louis was both a poet and a painter, who wrote poetry in the night and painted in the daytime. From the farm, the artists had a beautiful view over the Frol Mountains, where they could find great inspiration in the beautiful nature.

After the brothers moved out of “Tørkhuset”, several artists used it as a studio, such as Jacob Weidemann (painter) Arne Eggen, Edvard Bræin and his son Edvard Fliflet Bræin (composers) and Aslaug Vaa (writer). Paul also used it himself and composed several of his works on the grand piano that he had moved out there. Øvre Okkenhaug soon became a cultural center, where artists from all over Norway and Scandinavia came to find inspiration. Many also came there to escape from the worries of the hard everyday-life of struggling artists, because on the farm Magnhild and Paul gave them food and took care of them all, even though they had limited resources themselves. Magnhild kept notes in a book called “Boka mi” (My Book), where one can find precise information about all who has visited the farm from the day she moved there. It is quite an impressive list of names. Paul and Magnhild’s grandson, Paul Anders Okkenhaug, now owns the farm and every now and then “Tørkhuset” is opened for visitors and artists.



*Paul by the grand piano in “Tørkhuset”*

## *Composing his first major work - "The Levanger cantata" (1936)*

In 1936 Levanger city was celebrating its 100. anniversary and 27 years old Paul Okkenhaug got the mission of composing a cantata for the jubilee, which was going to be performed in Levanger Church on May 18<sup>th</sup> 1926. Agathe Strømsøe Wibe wrote the lyrics. Paul had a hard time finding inspiration to compose the music. First of all he did not feel that he was skillful enough to handle the task and secondly he did not like the text at all. But luckily he got great support from the man who was going to conduct the work, Torstein Brekke. He helped him change the text and often came to Okkenhaug to cheer Paul up and to play through the music with him. Paul later said he found inspiration in the music of other Norwegian composers such as Edvard Grieg, David Monrad Johansen and Christian Sinding, as the music is a mix between Norwegian folk music, national romantic impulses and impressionism.

In the index of the cantata, the following is written:

“Cantata to Levanger city ( to the 100 years anniversary in 1936).

For soloists, recitation, choir and orchestra.

Text: Agathe Strømsøe Wibe

Arr. For orchestra: Karl Amundsen.

1. Maestoso, choir and orchestra

2. Allegro, orchestra.

Andante, alto solo and orchestra.

3. Allegretto, “Jamtskreia”, choir and orchestra

4. Allegro con fuoco, “Streng kår”, recitation, baritone solo and orchestra.

Elegy, cello solo and orchestra.

5. (Ved sundet) (Barcarole) Fjordidyll, orchestra.

6. Vivace e energico “Finale”, orchestra.

Allegro non troppo, choir and orchestra.

Tranquillo, alto solo and orchestra.

Molto vivace et energico, orchestra and choir.

Maestoso, choir and orchestra.”

(As we can see, he had someone else do the orchestrations for him. At this point, he had no formal education in composing and felt that his knowledge about the different instruments in the orchestra was limited.)

The cantata became a great success and it was also broadcast live on Norwegian radio. It became the beginning of a breakthrough in Norway for Paul Okkenhaug as a composer, and people now encouraged him to continue with his composition studies. We can tell he started to take himself more seriously as a composer, as he now became a member of The Norwegian Composers' Society and TONO (a Norwegian association which takes care of the composer's rights when it comes to performing and recording their works).

### ***Getting serious with his composing (1937)***

In 1937 Paul Okkenhaug started taking composing classes in Oslo with Bjarne Brustad, David Monrad Johansen and later Geirr Tveitt. He also got his big breakthrough as a composer this year, as he won a composing competition held by the Norwegian Television Broadcast (NRK) and The Norwegian Composers' Society, with his work *Lyrisk dans*, for orchestra. The doors were now open for Paul to really be taken seriously as a composer, but his destiny was decided to be a different one.



*"Paul" painted by Jacob Weidemann*

### ***Taking over Øvre Okkenhaug (1938)***

In 1938 Paul and Magnhild took over Øvre Okkenhaug, as Paul's father retired. As he took over the farm, Paul knew that his dream about becoming a full-time musician, was impossible.

*"He happened to take over the farm in a very difficult time, and during the first years, the farm demanded everything from him. For him personally this was tough. The need for artistic expression was strong within him, and this time that need was difficult to combine with being a farmer. But my mother was strong enough to take over more and more of the daily responsibilities for the farm, and together with steady help from workers it went so well after a while, that my father could work more with the music."*

*(Quote from Husmoen's interview with Paul and Magnhild's son, Fredrik.)  
(Husmoen 1980:23)*

If Paul had not had Magnhild by his side, he would probably never have had the opportunity to continue seriously with his music. Magnhild's helping hand with running the farm, for instance gave Paul the opportunity to go to Oslo for three weeks in April 1939 to take a music teacher's exam. He got several organ- and piano students and was a very popular teacher because of his warm personality and great musical skills.

## ***Finding inspiration in Copenhagen, Denmark (1945)***

Paul's brother, Knut Okkenhaug, was working in Copenhagen in 1945 and one of his friends there, Karen Aase Bruun, was a music teacher and pianist. Knut introduced Paul to her and she became a very important contact to him, because she made him familiar with the musicians and the music life in Copenhagen. This again led to great joy and inspiration for Paul, bringing him closer to the music life in Europe. One of the persons Karen introduced him to, became a very important person in Paul's life – this was Dagmar Borup, who was Karen's music teacher and a very well-known music pedagogue in Scandinavia. In 1946 Dagmar invited Paul to visit her in Copenhagen and a new era started in Paul's life. Now he got feedback on his musicality – he had a perfect pitch - and was promised a bright future as a musician and composer. Dagmar provided Paul with all the tickets he needed for concerts, operas and theater performances. Home on Øvre Okkenhaug they were thrilled to read the letters Paul sent from Copenhagen – he was so happy and filled with inspiration!

*“ I visit Dagmar Borup every day to have lessons. She is so excited about my musical ear – and I have the impression that she is calling all of her friends and acquaintances “gossiping” about the Norwegian composer who was able to write down this or that chord progression or dictation without asking to get the chords repeated one single time on the piano. The dictation exercises I get now are the same that two Danish composers get, who she has been teaching for two years, for instance. My perfect pitch helps me enormously – although it is not really that important for my own sake. However, the rhythm exercises are more important to me. With those I am still far behind.”*

Paul and Magnhild kept in touch with Dagmar Borup for several years, writing letters.



*Paul Okkenhaug by the organ in Levanger Church*

## ***Getting the job as an organist in Levanger Church (1949-1975)***

From 1949 Paul Okkenhaug worked as an organist in Levanger Church. The pay was so low that it was impossible to make a living of it. He was often bitter and sad about the church not valuating his work. They probably had no idea about how great a musician they had in the church – it seems as if they took it for granted, the fact that they had one of Norway's greatest organ improvisors playing for the congregation every Sunday morning. Several people from the region have later told that they visited the church just to listen to the fantastic organist. He always improvised very well, made up new introductions to the hymns and adjusted the music so that it would fit the text in the best way. He got his composer friends Per Hjort Albertsen and Ludvig Nielsen to help him apply for a higher salary, but it did not help. A local accountant once said that even the errand boys got more money for their job than Paul. But in spite of the bad salary, Paul

enjoyed his job. In the church he could be in his own musical world, far away from the duties on the farm. He could freely compose, improvise, teach his students and also make arrangements and compositions for Levanger Church Choir, which he founded in 1970. Now Paul was not any longer alone as a music worker up on the gallery. He really enjoyed having the little choir of 15-20 persons to work with that could help him create the red, musical line through the service, which he always tried to make.

### ***Composing his major work “The Saint Olav Drama” (1954)***

In 1954 Paul Okkenhaug got a small scholarship, which he spent, on a stay at *Schaeffergården* in Denmark, an old hunting castle from 1775, which from the early 1950s was run by the Norwegian-Danish Society. This was a place where young artists, priests, authors and students could come to work in calm, beautiful surroundings in the Danish countryside. Paul was going to write the music to a new play about Saint Olav, which was going to be performed for the first time in Stiklestad 29. July 1954. Olav Gullvåg wrote the text.

“The drama depicts the struggles surrounding the battle at Stiklestad in 1030 – an event which is considered the most important in the establishment of Christianity in Norway. It was here that Olav The Great was made a saint.”

*(Quote from the cd-cover of “The Saint Olav Drama” 1997)*



*Paul Okkenhaug and actor Gisle Straume*

Paul stayed at *Schaeffergården* together with actor Gisle Straume and director Bjarne Andersen and they all worked together with giving life to the new, grand drama. Again Paul started doubting his own skills, feeling the task was too big for him and that he did not have the talent the job required. He was several times really close to giving up on the whole project, but luckily he did not. “*The Saint Olav drama*” is now one of Norway’s largest outdoor plays and attracts around 20.000 people every July and since 1960, it has been performed every year. The music has become one of the greatest trademarks for the play with its beautiful, national romantic and impressionistic influences along with a most successful combination between church- and folk music. It consists of 14 songs and was recorded on CD in 1997. It was conducted by Ole Kristian Ruud, who has worked hard to make Paul Okkenhaug better known in Norway’s modern music life.

### *The last years*

Paul Okkenhaug kept on working as an organist and a music teacher until he became too ill to work in 1975. He kept on creating the most fantastic improvisations for the congregation in Levanger Church and he composed and arranged hundreds of songs for singing, piano, organ and choir. He also wrote some more orchestral music - the most famous work in this category is the rhapsody "Tonar frå Trøndelag" (Sounds from Trøndelag) from 1957. Paul was the editor of the publication "Norsk Tonesamling" (Norwegian melody collection), which was published in 1964. In this publication, Paul Okkenhaug and his colleagues Ludvig Nielsen and Per Hjort Albertsen arranged over 600 Norwegian melodies for piano. The idea was to make a publication that would be easy to play for amateur pianists, so that it could be used in schools, churches, etc.

In 1975 the doctors discovered a brain tumor in Paul Okkenhaug's head and he was operated in April. He died on November 30<sup>th</sup> 1975. Before he died, he was awarded with The King's Medal for Merit in silver and Levanger municipality's artist's scholarship.



*Paul Okkenhaug*

## *Postlude*

I can relate to Paul in many ways. I have also suffered with low self-esteem and felt that everybody else was more qualified to do this than I, both in singing and composing. But I have had the opportunity to focus on my music studies for 11 years. I have seen that every musician and composer have their periods with ups and downs, and I have learned to deal with it and not let it stop me from succeeding. If Paul had not had the farm to be concerned about, I am sure he would have become one of the greatest Norwegian composers after Grieg. But to get such a name, one has to be able to produce a lot of music and to work nationally and internationally, and Paul never could do this. He was stuck on the farm, except from some shorter periods of studies in Oslo and Copenhagen. His destiny seems very unfair and it has been quite heartbreaking at times to get to know Paul's story. Maybe it was a good thing that he did not know how good he was or how great he could have been – maybe his humbleness and shyness was his greatest help when it came to dealing with reality. I do not know.

What I *do* know, is that more and more people are now discovering Paul Okkenhaug and his music. His granddaughter, Mari Lunnan, amongst others, was one of the initiators to collect and publish some of his music in the book “Paul Okkenhaug – fra koral til barcarole” (from choral to barcarole), which was published by Norges Musikkforlag in 2000. This publication includes several of his choir works, piano music and solo songs. Mari Lunnan is also in the committee who is arranging the Paul Okkenhaug days in Levanger, a festival with concerts, lectures and performances all in the honour of Paul Okkenhaug and his music. The “St Olav Drama” is still being performed to about 20.000 people every summer, thrilling its audience with Paul’s fantastic music, so Paul Okkenhaug's name and music is being taken well care of. Finally.

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- Pictures from [www.paul-okkenhaug.no](http://www.paul-okkenhaug.no) (used with the permission of Erling Okkenhaug, editor)  
and private collections.