
CARL NIELSEN STUDIES

VOLUME VI · 2020



C A R L N I E L S E N S T U D I E S

V O L U M E V I • 2 0 2 0

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Copenhagen 2020
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Graphic design Kontrapunkt A/S, Copenhagen
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Text set in Swift

ISSN 1603-3663

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NIELSEN'S SAUL AND DAVID AND ITALIAN OPERA¹

By Paolo Muntoni

The popular image of Carl Nielsen is more strongly associated with his symphonies and songs than with the theatre, even though he wrote two operas that are among the finest Danish examples of their kind. If *Maskarade* has always been regarded as a success, and has recently begun to attract international reappraisal, *Saul and David* by contrast has remained in the shadow of its younger sister. The 'strange and serious stuff' that Nielsen chose as the basis for his work became an overwhelmingly difficult and absorbing task.² And yet, he later stated that he would not wish to change anything in his first opera, unlike his other compositions (including *Maskarade*):

Isn't it strange that when *Maskarade*, my later opera, recently came forward again, I would have thought of various passages differently and concede to both displacements and cuts, but so as *Saul and David* is concerned, I basically wouldn't like to change anything at all. And the reason must be that when you are merry, you don't take it so neatly, but when it is about the tragic and elevated – as it is the case here – you must have thought a big deal about it before.³

The destiny of *Saul and David* was in fact similar to that of many other operas from the period that were not based upon a realistic subject. After winning favour in France

1 The present essay was first published in the 41st issue of *Danish Yearbook of Musicology* (2017) – used by kind permission of the editors.

2 'This great, strange material ... captivated me and pursued me, so that for long periods I was totally unable to be free of it', CNU, I/4, xiv. The full interview, 'Før Slaget', with Hugo Seligmann, for *Politiken* (26 February 1929) may be found in *Samtid*, 519-20.

3 *Er det ... ikke mærkeligt, at mens jeg, da Mascarade, min senere Opera, for nylig kom frem igen, udmærket godt kunde tænke mig adskilligt anderledes og gaa med til baade Forskydninger og Forkortninger, saa kan jeg i Grunden slet ikke tænke mig nogen son helst Forandring i Saul og David. Og det ligger vel i, at naar man er lystig, saa tager man det ikke saa nøje, men naar det som her drejer sig om det tragisk-ophøjede, saa har man tænkt sig om og set sig før*, *ibid.* 519. All translations are by the author, unless otherwise stated.

and later Italy, *verismo* marked the final phase of the non-naturalistic operatic genre, which had been in crisis across the whole continent. The situation was particularly critical in Italy, where the long tradition of Italian opera, predominant for three centuries, was in its twilight, forcing composers to look elsewhere for suitable models. It is therefore surprising that Nielsen chose to work in Italy while composing part of *Saul and David*. Applying for a sabbatical in Rome, he claimed:

It is my intention, in the case I am awarded such a major travel grant, to take one year's residency in Italy, partly in order to study the art of singing, partly, at the same time, in order to plan and compose an opera, *Saul and David*, for which Mr. Einar Christiansen has provided me with the text.⁴

In this essay, I focus on the music-cultural context in which *Saul and David* was composed, as Nielsen approached opera for the first time. This will cast new light on his independence and originality, but also offer the possibility for some seemingly unlikely comparisons, revealing that the work is more tightly integrated with Nielsen's broader European musical experience than has previously seemed – especially as an alternative to naturalism. I will therefore consider the Italian context before, during and after the rise of *verismo*, focusing particularly on the anti-naturalism debate, to which *Saul and David* also belongs. Nielsen's work follows a path that parallels the shift from the so-called noir dramas of the 1880s, which will be briefly presented later, to the work of Ildebrando Pizzetti, via the almost completely unknown operas of Antonio Smareglia. Unusual as it may be, I believe that this comparison will support the idea of a composer who, while working in the genre of musical drama, was in constant dialogue with his European contemporaries.

I will start by presenting the challenges faced by composers in writing an opera in the late nineteenth century, and then reflect upon the musical and dramatic quality of *Saul and David*. I will argue that Nielsen was able to enhance his drama by providing it with a highly original musical characterisation and by alternating moments of stasis with moments of action. The most important element in this respect was his use of the chorus, which led some commentators to suggest similarities with oratorio. This fact, together with Nielsen's interest in Renaissance polyphony, suggests a comparison with Italian contemporary composer Lorenzo Perosi (1872-1956), whom Nielsen met while in Rome. Subsequently, by viewing *Saul and David* as an anti-naturalistic tragedy,⁵

4 Letter from Nielsen to the Ministry of Church and Education, dated 29 March 1899, in CNB II, 100-01.

5 Anne-Marie Reynolds, 'Nielsen's *Saul and David* as a tragedy – The Dialectics of Fate and Freedom in Drama and Music', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 5 (2012), 236-57.

I will discuss how it anticipates some future tendencies of Italian opera, as expressed first by Busoni, who saw the necessity for a new anti-naturalistic musical theatre, and then by the composers of the so-called 'generation of the 1880s'. One of them in particular, Ildebrando Pizzetti, may be compared to Nielsen in terms of aesthetic principles. Finally, I will reflect on the similarities based on the choice of topic and in the shape of the drama between *Saul and David* and Pizzetti's *Débora e Jaèle*, the only Biblical opera written by an Italian composer in the first part of the twentieth century.

With these comparisons, I do not presume to suggest any direct influence on Nielsen's work, or any issuing from it. I simply suggest some similarities of a musical, dramatic, and structural nature, in order to reflect on two aspects: the broad common currency of operatic language at the turn of the century, and Nielsen's versatility and receptivity toward his cultural and musical environment. The fact that *Saul and David* is in many respects an unusual and peculiar work that reveals very little trace of influence or derivation, does not mean that it should be regarded as an isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, I believe that considering it within its contemporary cultural context can only enrich our understanding of the work, as well as enhancing our appreciation of Nielsen's ability to capture and synthesise diverse aesthetic impulses, ultimately producing something highly personal. It is this eclecticism that, allied with his deeply individual poetics, became one of the most characteristic elements of the composer's mature work from the Fourth Symphony onward.

1880s and 1890s Italian opera between anti-naturalism and *verismo*

Previous commentators have generally placed *Saul and David* far from either Wagner or Italian opera, even though echoes of both worlds can be identified.⁶ We know of

6 Balzer compares Iago's monologue in Verdi's *Otello* to Saul's defiance of God in the first act of Nielsen's opera, see Jürgen Balzer, 'Den dramatiske musik', in Jürgen Balzer (ed.), *Carl Nielsen i hundredåret for hans fødsel (1865-1965)*, Copenhagen 1965), 77-78. Saul's monologue is again called Iago-like in Reynolds, 'Nielsen's *Saul and David* as a tragedy', 253-54, as well as in Roger Noel Clegg, 'The writing of Carl Nielsen's *Saul and David*', (MA thesis, University of Leeds, 1989), 10-13. Recently, Patrick McCreless has also reflected on the 'unlikely' match of Nielsen and Wagner – see McCreless, 'Strange Bedfellows. The Hebrew Bible and Wagner in "Saul and David"', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 107-44, while Nielsen's use of the half diminished chord (also known as Tristan chord, and as such the bearer of associations with the Wagnerian musical world) has also been examined in Reynolds, 'Nielsen's *Saul and David* as a Tragedy', 244-53. Even though Nielsen scarcely mentioned Verdi, at least in the available written sources, *Otello* was performed in Copenhagen while the composer was a member of the second violins in the Royal Theatre Orchestra. According to Clegg's list of the operas that were performed at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen between 1883 and 1903, *Otello* was premiered in Denmark on 20 April 1898 and was also repeated in the following season 1899-1900, Clegg, 'The writing of Carl Nielsen's *Saul of David*', 135-36. See also Balzer, 'Den dramatiske musik', 74.

very few statements about Italian opera from Nielsen himself,⁷ but the fact that he chose to work in Italy during the composition of *Saul and David* can arguably be seen as an indirect reflection of his attitude towards Wagner. Nielsen may have been indifferent towards Italian music theatre, but he had pretty strong opinions about Wagnerian music drama.⁸ Italy allowed him to distance himself from Wagner, not least since Danish composers traditionally gravitated to Germany because of geographical and cultural proximity.

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- 7 The only evidence of Nielsen attending a performance of a local opera in Italy can be found in his correspondence from the 1891 trip: 'Have heard [Mascagni's opera] *Cavalleria Rusticana*: no trace of anything new in the music, but well put together' [*Har hørt "Cavaliere Rusticana" [sic]; ikke Spor af Nyt i den Musik, men godt tillavet!*], letter to Hother Ploug of 22 May 1891, CNL, 90, CNB I, 229-30. That Nielsen did not appreciate Verdi's operas from his 'middle period' is evident from these words: 'The dominating Italian opera style was organised first of all with the purpose of giving the singers an occasion to shine with all the possible singing techniques, no matter if they were appropriate to the dramatic situation or not. You will still be able to experience rehearsals of this insane nonsense when you go to the Royal Theatre for *Trovatore* or *Traviata*.' [*Den herskende italienske Operastil var saaledes beskaffet at det først og fremmest kom an paa at give Sangerne Lejlighed til at brilliere med alle Slags Sangkunster, ligemeget om det passede til den dramatiske situation eller ikke. De vil naar de går hen i det kgl. Teater til "Troubadoren" og "Traviata" endnu kunne høre Prøver på dette vanvittige Nonsens*], in 'Gluck, Haydn og Mozart', talk by Carl Nielsen in the society for 'Liberal Youth', in *Samtid*, 65. On the other hand, the composer praised Verdi's last work, *Falstaff*, as reported by his son-in-law, Emil Telmányi: 'We were captivated by a brilliant performance with amazing displays of singing ... Nielsen was so taken by the first two acts that he poked me. He eventually wanted to greet the maestro [Toscanini]' [*Vi blev fængslet af en strålende skuespilkunst med prægtige sangpræstationer ... Carl Nielsen blev så betaget af de to første akter, at han puffedede til mig. Han ville nu alligevel op og hilse på maestroen [Toscanini]*], Emil Telmányi, *Af en musikers billedbog*, Copenhagen 1978, 175.
- 8 After an initial infatuation during his Grand Tour to Germany in 1890, Nielsen started to get tired (after only a few days, as Clegg observes), of Wagner and especially of his use of the leitmotif technique: 'I admire Wagner and find that him the greatest spirit of our century; but can't stand the way he spoon-feeds his listeners. Every time a name is mentioned, even of someone who's been dead and buried many years ago, the respective leitmotif pops its head out. I find it highly naïve and it makes an almost comic impression on me', diary entry of 15 September 1890, in CNL, 59, CNB I, 117. Four years later, after a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, Nielsen wrote in high praise of the first act and the first part of the second one, nevertheless adding these words: 'As a whole I'm still as far as ever from being a Wagner enthusiast; there's such a mass of poor taste and empty effect in this as in almost all his operas – perhaps with exception of *Meistersinger* – that I can't do otherwise than take offence at it', diary entry of 9 November 1893, CNL, 129, CNB, vol. 1, 383. This is not the place to discuss Nielsen's relationship with Wagner, however. The topic is covered exhaustively in McCreless, 'Strange bedfellows'.

There is no reason to doubt Nielsen's claims that he had much to learn from the Italian tradition, especially regarding vocal scoring and technique, even though the presence of his wife Anne Marie in Rome must have contributed to his application.⁹ What is unclear is whether he was referring to an older or a newer tradition, especially given his inclination towards Palestrina and his fondness for polyphonic passages, particularly in choral writing. Moreover, this was exactly the period when Palestrina had become an almost mythical figure in the history of counterpoint, a topic to which we will return later in the essay.

At the same time, however, contemporary Italian opera was struggling. Though the sudden success of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and the rising popularity of Puccini would assure a prominent place for Italian opera in Europe and beyond for decades, there is little evidence of a distinctively Italian approach to the genre in the work of the 'Giovine Scuola'.¹⁰ In other words, it was much easier for Nielsen to rely on a highly established tradition – polyphonic vocal writing from the Renaissance – and to reinterpret it within his own musical world, than to approach the very eclectic and uncertain field of Italian contemporary opera.

Verdi's mature works, which had already incorporated elements from other traditions, especially French Grand Opera,¹¹ suggest an unprecedented balance between vocal and orchestral textures, as well as the almost entire abolition of closed forms, even though lyrical singing is still present. This was a consequence of the rising popularity of Wagnerian music drama, with its complete synthesis of music and dramatic action. Before becoming influential in matters of musical character, however, Wagner gained popularity among a group of intellectuals, artists and writers known as the 'Scapigliati', literally meaning 'dishevelled'. One of the artists who was associated with the 'Scapigliatura' was Arrigo Boito, composer and poet, author of the

9 Anne Marie had already been granted a scholarship and the possibility to study with one of the leading French sculptors of his generation, Victor Ségoffin, at that time based in Rome.

10 Sometimes the adjective 'verista' is added at the end, so that musicians such as Pietro Mascagni, Ruggiero Leoncavallo, Umberto Giordano, Francesco Cilea and, though with some caveats, Giacomo Puccini – and to a lesser extent Antonio Smareglia, Alfredo Catalani and Lorenzo Perosi, sometimes joined by Franco Alfano – are said to belong to the 'giovine scuola verista'. But it would be appropriate to avoid the adjective 'verista': firstly because some of these composers were only remotely influenced by *verismo*; secondly because even composers such as Mascagni experimented with a variety of subjects, which sometimes brought them far from the realistic world that the most famous of their operas depicted.

11 Guido Salvetti, 'Dal Verdi della maturità a Giacomo Puccini', in Alberto Basso (ed.) *Musica in scena – Storia dello spettacolo musicale*, vol. 2, Gli italiani all'estero – L'opera in Italia e in Francia, Turin 1996, 385.

opera *Mefistofele*.¹² The movement influenced many opera composers especially during the 1880s, with its post-romantic propensity for the fantastic and the supernatural, and its predilection for the magic element, especially black magic: this decade's operatic plots and librettos are often set in Nordic environments or taken from the realm of myth and legend. The musical theatre that was later called 'melodramma nero'¹³ is exemplified by works such as *La Fata del Nord* (1884) by Guglielmo Zuelli, Puccini's first two operas, *Le Villi* (1884) and *Edgar* (1889), *Flora Mirabilis* (1886) by Spiros Samara, *Asrael* by Alberto Franchetti (1888), and Alfredo Catalani's *Loreley* (1890), a revision of his earlier *Elda* (1880).

The first anti-naturalistic phase of Italian opera, however, proved to be very short: Mascagni's great success with *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890) imposed *verismo* as the new dominant genre and prompted many turn-of-the-century-composers to choose realistic subjects in order to achieve a similar fortune. Some of the works that followed *Cavalleria* have actually little to do with the *verista* paradigm, as they are set in urban environments, while the origin of *verismo*, as a literary movement, was rural. Historical dramas, *Traviata*-like love stories and vernacular tales imbued with exoticism are unified only by the common naturalistic frame. For this reason many scholars prefer the term 'urban naturalism' for most of the works of the 'Giovine Scuola', leaving the *verista* label only to dramas set in the countryside. Besides being justified by its broad spectrum, the variety of the subjects within the naturalistic genre hides an anxiety, which is evident in composers' ceaseless search for suitable subjects. Whether we use the terms *verismo* or urban naturalism, the choice of a realistic plot was in fact no guarantee of success. Among the composers usually associated with the 'Giovine Scuola', only Puccini managed to achieve lasting, prosperous fortune, while Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and to a lesser extent Umberto Giordano and Francesco Cilea, only experienced real, enduring success with one opera each.¹⁴

This desperate search for a suitable subject, combined with the fear of failure, also haunted those composers who did not work best in naturalistic dramas (such as Catalani and Smareglia) but who nevertheless tried their hand in the genre. It is these composers who presented a valid alternative to *verismo* in the twenty years

12 Boito was particularly influential in Italy, while abroad he was probably best known for writing the libretto for Verdi's *Otello*. His first opera, *Mefistofele*, had a curious history: its premiere in 1868 was a failure. After two revisions (first in 1875 and then again in 1876), however, the work gained a fair amount of success, leading opera composers to new paths in terms of choice of subject matter.

13 Rodolfo Celletti, *Storia dell'opera italiana*, Milan 2000, 521.

14 Respectively with *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), *I Pagliacci* (1892), *Andrea Chénier* (1896), and *Adriana Lecouvreur* (1902). The rest of the four composers' works are hardly ever staged nowadays.

around the turn of the century. The realistic frame that surrounds the story in *La Wally*, for example, cannot be compared to that of other *verista* composers, which justifies the claim that the opera ‘creates a balance between dream and reality’.¹⁵ Even less naturalistic are some of Smareglia’s operas, particularly *La Falena* (1897), *Oceána* (1903) and *Abisso* (1914), which represent the products of the collaboration between the composer and the poet Silvio Benco. Particularly significant in this respect is *La Falena*, which, despite its evident Wagnerian influence in the musical language, anticipates some of the future tendencies of anti-naturalistic theatre, while the element of black magic is reminiscent of the noir dramas of the 1880s. The opera’s thin plot (not much more than a parable), undefined settings, and evanescent characters (not much more than allegories) are all elements that define it as a part of the symbolist world that can be connected to Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863-1938), one of the main representatives of European ‘decadence’. The author of influential literary works as well as of several opera librettos, D’Annunzio would become a constant reference point for Italian composers of tragic operas in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a point we will come back to later in the essay.

The legend created by Benco in *La Falena*, which by his own admission can be summarised as ‘an idyll overturned into tragedy’,¹⁶ also stands out for another reason, notably its absence of lightness or irony. This is even more striking in relation to the dominating trends dictated by *verismo* composers, who merged high and low, elevated and plebeian, tragic and comic registers, according to a recipe that was reminiscent of early 1800s opera semiseria. Even in the most tragic of the *verista* operas there is place for light and cheerful moments, as in the first acts of *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*.¹⁷ These characteristics make *La Falena* the linking point between melodramma nero and decadent tragedy, which would gradually distance itself from the Wagnerian influence to acquire a more specific musical identity, particularly with the works of Zandonai and Pizzetti. At the same time and despite the substantial aesthetic differences between the two composers, we can identify some similarities between Smareglia’s opera and *Saul and David*. The thoroughly tragic sense, the element of black magic (limited to a few scenes in Nielsen’s opera,¹⁸ more pervasive in

15 Salvetti, ‘Dal Verdi della maturità a Giacomo Puccini’, 401.

16 See, for example, Guido Salvetti, *La nascita del Novecento*, Turin 1991, 243.

17 In both operas the germs of an imminent tragedy manifested themselves at the end of the first act, while the beginning of it is occupied by more trivial matters. The second act unveils the tragedy and the third brings it to a dramatic climax.

18 *Saul and David*, though far from this symbolist realm, maintains a loose relationship with the narrative devices of noir dramas, both in the king’s curse operated by Samuel, which is responsible for Saul’s mind being controlled by an evil spirit, and especially in the last act’s opening’s scene, when the spirit of the prophet is evoked by the witch of Endor.

La Falena), and the sense of indefiniteness and atemporality are connected to the out-of-this-world-quality both works express.

Musical characters and dramatic choruses: Nielsen's individual touch

The 'globalisation' of opera at the turn of the century was responsible for important changes, and its consequence was the gradual abandonment of the principles that had characterised Italian opera during the eighteenth century, namely the use of closed numbers (and the separation between action and reflection); the supremacy of vocal melody; and the social and musical distinction between opera buffa and opera seria (and between high and low genres).¹⁹ As a result of this, the need to maintain dramatic cohesion without giving up lyrical singing became a problem of major importance for opera composers. In order to do so, the transition from recitative to closed numbers had to become smoother; hence the more frequent use of the recitativo arioso. Another major preoccupation was to avoid unnecessary pauses in the action; for this reason, closed numbers were placed either at the beginning or at the end of the act, or, in some cases, took the form of musical episodes of a diegetic character.

In *Saul and David* Nielsen makes extensive use of some of these devices. The most striking example of music perceived diegetically occurs at the beginning of the second act, after the prelude, when David sings for the sick King Saul.²⁰ The episode is notable because of the clarity with which Nielsen outlines two musical planes: David's performance is accompanied by the harp, an instrument strongly associated with the act of singing, while the orchestra, representing the plane of the dramatic action, interrupts his song and eventually stops it. Later in the act David sings again and is once more interrupted. But even in the first act, he is associated with singing as a therapeutic means of soothing Saul's troubled mind. Although we do not hear the harp initially, the stage indications reveal that David is actually singing and is accompanied by the instrument,²¹ while Saul's reactions to the young man's appearance also point to his song.²² The end of the first act is also a perfect example of Nielsen exploiting a natural break in the action in order to create a musical opportunity. The love duet between

19 Although there are many examples of opera semiseria, where both tragic and comic elements and characters from high and low classes were mixed, the distinction between opera buffa and opera seria stands until *verismo*.

20 The 'meta-musical' quality in David is also noted by McCreless, with a reference to 'what Carolyn Abbate calls "phenomenal performance" – music that the onstage audience can hear as music' – see McCreless, 'Strange bedfellows', 131.

21 '[David] steps forward a bit and sings to the harp' [*gaar lidt frem og synger til Harpen*], CNU I/4, 101. The harp is silent, though, until b. 40, when David intones a psalm – *ibid.*, 107. He will be doing the same, again accompanied by the harp, in the already mentioned episode at the beginning of the second act.

22 Saul: 'Who's there? Who's singing there?' [*Hvad nu? Hvo synger her?*], *ibid.* 103; Saul: 'Sing on! Sing on! Now all is peace and quiet!' [*Ja, syng! Ja, syng! Nu blev her lyst og stille*], *ibid.* 106.

David and Mikal takes place immediately after everybody has been called to war. A similar device is used to situate the duet between brother and sister, Jonathan and Mikal, at the beginning of Act 3, in a way that does not interfere with the rest of the action.

While the elements presented above show Nielsen operating in a way that is in line with most of his contemporaries, there are aspects of his musical and dramatic shaping of the work that justify the independence of thought and originality for which *Saul and David* has so often been praised. An example of this can be found in the second act, where Nielsen incorporated the song of a thrush he heard in the garden of Villa Medici in the orchestral score of *Saul and David*.²³ What had the potential to become an impressionistic touch – a common practice in many works of the period – was handled by Nielsen in a totally different manner. Had he been a *verista* composer, he might have reproduced the song more literally, to add a touch of reality to his work. Instead, he incorporates it into the score in a way that makes it almost impossible to recognise the original melody. Similarly, he brings into the musical discourse elements from musical traditions other than the operatic, such as popular song and Renaissance sacred polyphony.

Another original feature of Nielsen's musical discourse in the opera is the prevalence of the diatonic element over the chromatic. While both the anti-naturalist and the *verismo* composers shared a post-romantic aesthetic, inclined towards the chromatic regions, Nielsen, in contrast, preferred a personal and idiosyncratic diatonicism, which is sometimes pushed to an extreme, when the independence of the single voices results in dissonances that in a way resemble Busoni's concept of a fully developed polyphony.²⁴ Nielsen does employ chromaticism in the opera, but its function is more illustrative of the action or of a particular character (notably Saul), which is to say that chromaticism is used in a manner close to that in pre-classical music, where it was the bearer of a specific extra-musical meaning.

If Saul's at times chromatic singing is a key to understand him as a character, it is not an isolated attempt of musical characterisation. On the contrary, the creation of musical types revealing a perfect cohesion with their respective dramatic role is one of the most notable features in *Saul and David*.²⁵ Being the motor of the opera's plot, Saul is given an aria that forms the dramatic climax of the first act; almost all of its musical weight, however, is carried in the orchestra, with no extended lyrical

23 See Torben Meyer and Frede Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen – Kunstneren og Mennesket: En biografi*, Copenhagen, 1947-1948, 177, and CNB II, 183. Both sources reproduce a facsimile from Nielsen's diary, dated Villa Medici, 18 April 1900, 5:30am.

24 Michael Fjeldsøe, *Den fortrængte modernisme – den ny musik i dansk musikliv (1920-1940)*, Copenhagen 1999, 143-47.

25 The use of musical characters in *Saul and David* is also discussed in Ludvig Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen – En musikografi*, Odense 1949, 72-73.

passages for the singer. The traditional balance of the aria is hence transformed into something new.²⁶ The rest of Saul's arioso passages are similarly brief, including the first section of the two-part aria before his suicide. Such type-casting, however, is not limited to Saul alone. David is a warrior, a shepherd and a king-in-waiting, but he is first of all a musician, hence offering the composer the perfect opportunity for lyrical expansiveness. His first appearance in the opera is perfectly in line with this characterisation: his aria di sortita is cleverly disguised as a song (as we have seen when speaking of diegetic musical episodes), of the same kind as in Mascagni's *Cavalleria*, where Lola's first lines are the verses of a Sicilian stornello (Examples 1 and 2). Having established himself this way, David retains his role even when he is not singing diegetically, as in his love duet with Mikal. Nielsen thus intensifies the first of the symbolic contrasts upon which the opera is built: Saul as the personification of drama, and David as the personification of music.

640 **Quasi allegretto** (♩ = 69) (gaar lidt frem og synger til Harpen)
(steps forward a bit and sings to the harp)

DAVID

644

DAVID

kom - mer fra Beth-le-hems Da - le, hvor Faa - re - ne græs-se ved Vand-bæk-kens
 come out of Beth-le-hem's val - leys, where shep-herds are feed-ing their flocks by the

vi.

p *grazioso*

26 Even more than in Iago's monologue with which the Israelite King's has so often been compared. In the passage from *Otello* Verdi does provide the orchestra with a prominent role, but Iago's vocal part maintains a typical Verdian melodic quality.

Example 1 continued

647

DAVID

Bred, jeg brin - ger dig Fug - le - nes Ta - le og al - le Blom - ster - nes
 spring, from flow - ers that fill the green pas - tures, and songs of birds on the

f *dim.* *mp*

Example 1: Nielsen, Saul and David, David's entrance, Act 1, bb. 640-65.

(troncando nel sentire avvicinarsi Lola) (♩) STORNELLO di LOLA.

8 mi - - - a (♩ = 72)

LOLA (♩) (dentro alla scena)

Fior di giag - giò - - lo

(troncando)

11 - si - - - a (♩ = 72)

pp

1 gli an - ge - li bel - li stanno a mil - le in cie - - lo

sempre pp e stacc.

Example 2 continued

(avvicinandosi sempre)

ma bel-li co-me lui ce n'è u-no so-lo Fior di giag-

-gio-lo gli ange-li bel-li stan-no a mil-le in

pp dolciss.

Example 2: Pietro Mascagni, *Cavalleria rusticana*, 'Stornello di Lola', piano reduction (Sonzogno 1891), pp. 91-92.

This characterisation by musical types is supported by the other characters: Abner rarely abandons dry recitative, being almost constantly accompanied by militaristic trumpets; Samuel's alternation of declamation and psalmody, which by no means lacks lyricism, is neatly aligned with his dramatic role as the servant of God (and, as Patrick McCreless observes, as his deputy).

One role in particular illustrates both Nielsen's approach to characterisation and also why he may have referred to a specific Italian vocalicity when he applied to study in the country. The fiery quality of characters such as Turiddu in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Canio in *Pagliacci*, Michele in *Tabarro*, and Tosca, all reflect archetypal, sometimes even stereotypical, representations of an 'Italian temperament'.

This idea of a fiery personality also describes Mikal, Saul's daughter, who, according to Torben Schousboe, demands a typically Italian vocal style.²⁷ And it is true that her music is more passionate than lyrical, exhibiting some of the traits

²⁷ See Torben Schousboe's introductory commentary to the recordings of *Maskarade* and *Saul and David*, Danacord DACO357-359, as well as Jürgen Balzer's statement, 'Mikal reveals already in the duet some substantial traits of her temperament', Balzer, 'Den dramatiske musik', 81.

that characterise *verista* vocal writing, especially wide intervals, passages when she sings in a quasi-declamato style, and her sudden changes of dynamic (Examples 3a and 3b). These are evident both in the second act, where and her maids are awaiting news from the battle between David and Goliath, and in the third, when she openly stands in the way of her father, defending David and then escaping with him. But already in the first act's love duet it is clear that it is David, not Mikal, who will be responsible for the scene's lyricism, with his lover instead displaying strong and even martial traits. Her temperament is announced even in the first measures by a change in tempo (marked *agitato*), while later, imagining David as a victorious warrior, she is accompanied by trumpets, an instrument that in *Saul and David* always recalls war. The trumpet motif is then taken over by the oboe, which represents David's pastoral nature and introduces a new lyrical phase, once again for the male character.

883

MIKAL

Da tænk - te jeg i Skjul ved mig
Then in my heart this thought came to

886

MIKAL

selv: Stolt, om han stod un - der
me: Proud would I be if his

889

MIKAL

Ban-ner mod Fjen-den fra Gath.
ban-ners were fac-ing the foe.

Example 3a: *Saul and David*, Mikal's vocal line, Act 1, bb. 884-96.

61 *Allegro* (♩ = 120)
(rejses sig i Uro)
(rising anxiously)

MIKAL

molto accel.

Hvor fær-des min El - sker vel
Where is my be-lov - ed to -

molto accel.

f

63 *Allegro non troppo* (♩ = 112)

MIKAL

nu?
night?

Hvor er det Træ, hvor han
Where is the tree where he

ob.

fp

66

MIKAL

bin - der sin Hest?
teth - ers his horse?

Hvor fær - des min
Where is my be -

cor. ingl.

fp

Example 3b: *Saul and David*, Mikal's vocal line, Act 3, bb. 61–79.

Nielsen most probably wrote the scene from the second act during his stay in Italy, whereas there are contradictory statements regarding the composition of the love duet in the first.²⁸ The nocturne that opens the third act, one of the most poetic moments in the score, was written in Denmark, but is still perfectly in line with Mikal's character. Here it is Jonathan, rather than she, who sings lyrically, while her part is notable for its sudden changes of tempo and dynamics as she worries about David's whereabouts. A sudden dynamic change (*molto accelerando*) from Andante con moto to Allegro and then Allegro non troppo introduces her singing, while her vocal line is fragmented and more notable for its dramatic quality than for its melody.

All three passages (where Mikal has a major role) were added by Christiansen and Nielsen to give the opera's leading female character greater prominence than she has in the Biblical account, where her importance is limited to the act of saving David once. Although Nielsen and Christiansen maintain her alliance with David, they also allow her to defy Saul openly at the end of the third act. The editors of the Carl Nielsen Edition agree that 'the biggest departure from the Bible story is the character of Mikal'.²⁹ They also suggest in the preface to the score the possibility of Christiansen knowing a libretto by Hans Christian Andersen:

It is difficult to imagine that Einar Christiansen knew nothing of Hans Christians Andersen's opera libretto *King Saul* when he wrote his libretto for Carl Nielsen's opera. Einar Christiansen's plot, the selection of episodes from the Old Testament and a number of the respects in which the text differs from the Biblical account very accurately reflect Andersen's text.³⁰

28 Art historian Vilhelm Wanscher, one of Nielsen's friends, states that he was composing part of the first act while in Rome: 'the old-fashioned traffic in the street did not bother the composer, who worked on the first act of his opera "Saul and David" ... He thought only of David and Michal', Vilhelm Wanscher, 'Erindringer om Carl Nielsen', *Politiken*, 8 June 1935, quoted in CNU I/4, xiv-xv. According to the editors of the Carl Nielsen Edition, Nielsen 'composed large parts of Act Two in Italy', *ibid.*, xv. Meyer, on the other hand, states that only the celebration scene after David's victory was composed in Italy – see Meyer and Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen*, 175-77. It is tempting to believe that from the end of the first act to the celebration scene (the part of the opera where Mikal is almost constantly on stage) the opera was in fact composed in Italy. If we accept this hypothesis we would have to contradict Meyer, but we could accept both Wanscher's and the CNU's claims.

29 *The Carl Nielsen Edition*, I/4, xxv.

30 *Ibid.*, xiii.

But there are also evident similarities with the 1784 tragedy *Saul* by the Italian poet Vittorio Alfieri. In this work Mikal (here called Micol) is similarly provided with a significant role and also appears together with Jonathan (Giònata in the Italian), where brother and sister are awake during the night and Mikal wonders about David, in a scene comparable with the opening of Nielsen's third act.³¹

It is not possible to verify whether Nielsen was influenced by Italian vocality when he wrote Mikal's part, in the absence of any explicit commentary from him on *verista* operas. It is nevertheless true that she is the closest character to the Italian soprano drammatico that dominated the musical scene of early twentieth-century Italy, which supports Nielsen's statement that 'especially as regards singing and vocal scoring there is much to be learnt here'.³²

The use of the choir is the element with which Nielsen most definitely departs from the paradigm of contemporary Italian opera. This has less to do with the fact that Italian fin-de-siècle opera never provided the choir with such a leading role as in *Saul and David*,³³ than with the position of the choruses within the structure of the work and with their musical character. The most striking thing about the choral parts in Nielsen's opera is their musical significance. Each act has at least one big chorus: the two-part offertory scene in the first (divided into male and female choir); another two-part chorus ('Hallelujah' followed by 'Frydesang Paukesang'), preceded by a scene where Mikal sings with a choir of maids in the second; the third act has

31 The nocturne scene in the Italian tragedy can be found in the third scene from the first act of Vittorio Alfieri's *Saul*, Turin 1954, 23-24. It is not possible to verify that Christiansen knew the play, but it the similarities are indeed compelling. The character of David is, as in the opera, depicted without the flaws described in the Biblical account, which gives him less dramatic weight and concentrates the attention on Saul. Alfieri was also conscious of the musicality of the subject; in the fourth scene of his third act, David is provided with an interlude, where the actor is instructed to either recite or sing the verses with an unspecified musical accompaniment (*ibid.*, 52-58). It is also interesting that, as in the opera, David's singing is preceded by Giònata's words: 'move your voice so he can calmly recompose himself, o brother. In sweet obedience already many times you brought him such celestial chants' [*la tua voce, a ricomporlo in calma, muovi, o fratello. In dolce oblio l'hai ratto già tante volte coi celesti carmi*], *ibid.* 52. These words are quite similar to Jonathan's in *Saul and David*: 'Sing to him, David, often your singing has conformed me' [*Leg paa din Harpe; trøst ham som ofte du trøstede mig*], CNU, vol. I/4, 100; and 'So take your harp and sing him to rest', [*Tag Harpen frem og syng ham til Ro*], *ibid.*, 320.

32 From Nielsen's application to extend his Roman residency, letter from Carl Nielsen to the Ministry of Church and Education, dated 9 March 1900, in CNB II, 172.

33 Maybe with the exception of Mascagni's *Iris*, whose highlight is the initial Hymn to the Sun.

only one chorus, but it is the most majestic in the whole opera and probably its highlight; the fourth also has a single chorus, but it is similarly of large proportions, and it has the responsibility of closing the work. Patrick McCreless has reflected on the role the choir as an ensemble in *Saul and David*, where it embodies the community of the Israelites, and he argues that this is one of the reasons why the opera should not be confused with an oratorio, where the chorus serves a contemplative or illustrating function rather than a dramatic one.³⁴ In this respect Nielsen's work can be compared with Verdi's *Nabucco*, another opera where the Israelites' destiny was at stake, and where the People's actions and perspective are reflected in the choruses.

The position of the choruses is often significant. As we have seen Nielsen was careful to place the opera's 'closed' numbers either at the end or at the beginning of the acts, in order to allow the action to flow freely (Saul's monologue is only a partial exception because it does not have the characteristics of a traditional aria). The choruses in the second and third acts, however, are precisely in the middle of each section, and although they are dramatic (celebrating David's victory in Act 2, and Saul and David's reconciliation in Act 3), their weight and length is such that the action is stopped. Moreover, with its strict contrapuntal writing, 'Herren er vidne' draws attention to itself as a musical rather than a dramatic number. The only reason Nielsen would have wanted to create a pause in the action was for dramatic purposes, and the temporary break accentuates the sudden turning point both in the second act (when Saul's illness returns and he tries to pierce David with a spear) and in the third (when the appearance of Samuel turns out to be the real crux in the second part of the opera).

For this reason, we find ourselves in front of a musical drama that is more based on the contrast between action and stasis than on a sense of continuity. The fluidity of action that Nielsen is perfectly capable of creating is deliberately interrupted. The opera has on various occasions been criticised precisely because of this, commentators regarding the lengthy choruses as an unnecessary moment of stasis. And it is interesting that *Saul and David* can be perceived as lacking in drama, while several of Nielsen's orchestral work (particularly his last three symphonies and the two concertos for flute and clarinet) are often praised for their dramatic quality. It appears, however, that in *Saul and David* the way he animates his drama is consistent with one of the most important elements in his music, namely the conflict – or contrast – between two opposed forces. The dualism between stasis and action can be added to many others in the opera: the characters of Saul and David, with their contrasting temperaments and personifications of drama and music; Saul and God (as proposed by McCreless); David and Mikal (as lyrical character versus passionate), and so forth.

34 McCreless, 'Strange bedfellows', 113-15.

For this reason it is clear that in *Saul and David* Nielsen was already working along a path he would pursue throughout his whole career.

Nielsen, Perosi, Busoni and Pizzetti

The choruses are in fact the key to fully understanding the originality of Nielsen's opera. Their counterpoint – in a 1900 opera – was something of a sensation, revealing at the same time the composer's interest in Italy's polyphonic tradition, especially Palestrina. Nielsen had previously been inspired by Palestrina's style in *Hymnus Amoris*, his first great choral piece. According to Torben Meyer, the Dane studied the Italian master's technique during the work's gestation,³⁵ something he would return to later in his life during the composition of the *Three Motets*, Op. 55. The choice of Palestrina as a model is not surprising, given his almost legendary status in the nineteenth century. The rise of the Cecilian movement in several parts of Europe, beginning with Germany,³⁶ had emphasised the need for clarity and simplicity in music, principles that Nielsen himself held dear.

During his stay in Rome Nielsen and his friend Thomas Laub, who had similar aesthetic beliefs and with whom he would later work on Danish popular song, met Lorenzo Perosi, the composer who was then hailed as the new Palestrina³⁷. The author of many masses and much other sacred music, Perosi became a real phenomenon in the final years of the nineteenth century, and his oratorios enjoyed particular success both

35 Meyer and Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen*, I, 132.

36 The Cecilian movement was an attempt to renew church music, by pursuing values such as objectivity, intelligibility of the sacred word, collectivity against individualism, sobriety and simplicity. As a means to purify church music, it addressed its attention towards the need for composers to look back to the music of the past, especially that of the great polyphonic masters from 1500. The movement was initiated by the German composers based in Regensburg, especially Haberl and Haller – see Arcangelo Paglialunga, *Lorenzo Perosi*, Rome 1952, 25; 53. In Denmark a Cecilian association was founded in 1851 by Henrik Rung – see Niels Martin Jensen, 'Denmark', in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 7, London 2001, 207.

37 Adelmo Damerini writes that Perosi can be viewed as 'a re-enactor of the great Italian musical spirit' [*come un rievocatore della grande anima musicale italiana*], in contrast to other contemporary composers who were more inspired by German music; in his music it is possible to hear the voices of Palestrina, Frescobaldi, Gabrieli, Carissimi – Adelmo Damerini, *Lorenzo Perosi*, Milan 1953, 11. In Arcangelo Paglialunga's biography of Lorenzo Perosi, which contained several excerpts from contemporary sources about the composer, we can read that 'In Perosi our classic Italian history has remained; Palestrina is revived in him', article quoted from the newspaper *La Difesa*, 8 January 1897, anonymous writer – see Paglialunga, *Lorenzo Perosi*, Rome 1952, 97. In the same work, Paglialunga also reports the point of view of the French music critic and composer Alfred Bruneau, who also finds in Perosi's music the 'direct influence of Palestrina' (*ibid.*, 243).

in Italy and abroad. Perosi's works, according to the most positive reviews, revealed genuine emotion and affinity with the sacred word, while at the same time maintaining a stylistic balance of modern tonal techniques, modality and Gregorian chant.³⁸

In reality, his oratorios use Palestrina only as a reference, instead adopting a musical language that was entirely post-Romantic, in line with contemporary operatic trends. Even though he never composed an opera, Perosi was often associated with the 'Giovine Scuola', because of the highly affective and often dramatic quality of his works; the comparison was often meant as a criticism, alongside the sentimental tendency of *verismo* operas.³⁹ This was also Laub's opinion, who attended a performance of one of Perosi's works and found it deeply irritating.⁴⁰ It is not clear whether this happened before or after his meeting with the composer in Rome, but it is clear that he was unenthusiastic. We do not know of Nielsen's opinion, but it is hard to imagine that Perosi's blend of mysticism and devotion would have appealed to the much worldlier Dane. The only point where the two composers converged was in their use of Palestrina, a model that in both cases was filtered through their own musical personalities: Perosi owed much to Wagner, whereas Nielsen sought liberation in objectivity, simplicity and clarity.

After his sudden success, Perosi became a rather obscure figure; in retrospect, his importance for early twentieth-century Italian music lay in drawing attention to vocal music of the pre-classical era.⁴¹ This element proved crucial for later composers such as Pizzetti, Respighi, Malipiero, Casella and Zandonai. That is not to regard Perosi as a precursor to the so-called 'generation of the 1880s', to which all the composers named above are affiliated. Unified not only by similar stylistic traits and aesthetic beliefs, but also by the common intent of liberating contemporary music from Romanticism, they had a real spiritual father in Ferruccio Busoni, rather than in Perosi.

38 This point of view can be found particularly in the already mentioned works by Damerini and Paglialunga.

39 Paglialunga, *Lorenzo Perosi*, 198.

40 'An oratorio of the new Italian Lorenzo Perosi, "of whom it is said that he resurrected ancient music" irritated him strongly: "modern cheap effects mixed together with some quite pretty, very old-fashioned, not exceptional things" [Et Oratorium af den nye Italiener Lorenzo Perosi, 'der siges at have genfødt den gamle musik', misagede ham stærkt: 'moderne knaldeffekt rodet sammen med enkelte ganske kønne, stærkt gammeldags, ikke udprægede ting'] – Povl Hamburger, *Thomas Laub – Hans Liv og Gerning*, Copenhagen 1942, 75.

41 'Perosi can in this sense be considered as the joining link between the golden Italian polyphonic tradition and the modern revival of the Pizzettian choir' [*Perosi può considerarsi in questo senso l'anello di congiunzione fra l'aurea tradizione polifonica italiana e la ripresa moderna del coro pizzettiano*], Damerini, *Lorenzo Perosi*, 54.

Only one year younger than Nielsen, Busoni grew up, like the Dane, in the Romantic era. In Nielsen's early compositions the post-Romantic influence is obvious, and only later, convincingly and steadily, did he begin to distance himself from Romanticism. Busoni, meanwhile, immediately reacted against it and developed the concept of *Junge Klassizität*, whose chief characteristics have several parallels with Nielsen's aesthetics:

With Young Classicism I include the definite departure from what is thematic and the return to melody again as the ruler of all voices and all emotions (not in the sense of a pleasing motif) and as the bearer of the idea and the begetter of harmony, in short, the most highly developed (not the most complicated) polyphony.⁴²

The influence Busoni was able to exercise upon Italian composers was limited both because of his decision to live and work outside Italy and also because of his choice of German for his opera librettos (with the exception of *Arlecchino*). But inevitably works such as his satirical musical comedy *Arlecchino* and his musical fable *Turandot* (both premiered in 1917) anticipate the new wave of anti-naturalistic operas that would characterise Italian music in the 1910s and 1920s.

Besides comedy and musical fable, the other important genre at the beginning of the twentieth century was decadent tragedy, represented by operas such as Franchetti's *La figlia di Iorio* (1906), Mascagni's *Parisina* (1913), Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini* (1914), Pizzetti's *Fedra* (1915), and Italo Montenezzi's *La nave* (1918). Their librettos were all written by D'Annunzio. These works, which, as we have seen, had a precedent in Smareglia's *La Falena* (it was no coincidence that the librettist of *La Falena*, Silvio Benco, was a great admirer of D'Annunzio), aspired to literary richness, and evoked atemporality or temporal remoteness (notably the ancient or medieval world).

Ildebrando Pizzetti's *Fedra* in particular is the work of a composer who, while embracing the refinement of decadent aesthetic and its dramatic topoi – here the reference is to Greek tragedy – did not indulge in extreme aestheticism. His writing, in contrast with the poetic text, was severe and controlled; in fact the musical restraint in *Fedra* was inversely proportional to the quality of the libretto, and was necessary in order to avoid verbosity. Already with his first opera Pizzetti demonstrated a special affinity with tragedy; this genre became for him the most powerful

⁴² Letter from Busoni to Paul Bekker, quoted from Ferruccio Busoni, *The Essence of Music and Other Papers*, translated by Rosamond Ley, New York 1957, 21.

way to express his theatrical ideas, which echo Busoni's but are also strikingly similar to some of Nielsen's thoughts about the relationship between words and music. According to Pizzetti's point of view, opera is first of all a musical drama, that is to say the representation of action, not contemplation; therefore it should avoid unnecessary lyrical pauses. Following this line, it was therefore necessary for composers to create a dramatic musical language in which words are only subject to the requirements of the drama they create, and not to any musical necessity.⁴³ Regarding the relationship between poetry and music, Pizzetti believed that the former provided ideological characterisation, while the latter was able to enhance this characterisation from a spiritual point of view, since music is able to reach the audience in a way that goes beyond the merely linguistic level. Poetry, however, has to be granted major prominence, otherwise dramatic music would risk having the appearance of a body without a skeleton.⁴⁴

The following commentary by Nielsen can also be related to this aesthetic belief, which is once again perfectly in line with Pizzetti's ideas about musical theatre:

What is the relation of music to words? We have to admit that it is a purely decorative relation; not, it is true, in the generally accepted sense of the word decorative, but in the sense of the sun's relation to things, illumining and colouring them, radiating and imparting lustre to them, besides warming and vitalizing them, so every potentiality can develop ... Hence it is nothing degrading for music to regard itself as decorative and to serve humbly.⁴⁵

Besides being inspired by the spirit of Greek tragedy, Pizzetti tried to capture it musically by studying the Greek modal scales. But his success in this field was doubtful; the precise makeup of Greek scales and modes still remains unclear, and they were even more so at the beginning of the twentieth-century, when they nevertheless constituted an object of great interest among musicians. Nielsen himself gave a talk about Greek music⁴⁶ and was a member of the 'Græsk Selskab' (founded in 1905 by himself, J.L. Heiberg, A.B. Drachmann, Harald Høffding and Georg Brandes). But Nielsen and many other composers resorted to the better-known modal language of

⁴³ Franco Abbiati, *Storia della musica - Il Novecento*, Milan 1953, 126.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁴⁵ 'Words, Music and Programme Music', in Carl Nielsen, *Living Music*, translated by Reginald Spink, London 1953, 31-32.

⁴⁶ As evident from the talk entitled 'Græsk Musik' held on 22 October 1907, *Samtid*, 99-110.

the Latin church, with the aim of achieving 'an integration between the liturgical gravity in the melodic design, the archaic harmonic colour and the personal means proper to the artist, filtered through a balanced modernity'.⁴⁷

Saul and David, Débora e Jaèle

By viewing *Saul and David* as a tragedy, as Anne Marie Reynolds has suggested,⁴⁸ it is then possible to compare it both to opera seria, with its elevated tone, and to Pizzetti's music dramas. It is clear that the elevated style and subject, and the absence of any light-hearted or comic element (which in Pizzetti's case was consistent with his choice of Gabriele D'Annunzio as a librettist) was an anti-*verista* move, which suited the aesthetic beliefs of the 1880s generation, who favoured a return to the schemes of early opera.

In this sense Nielsen's choice of subject, besides being in line with Busoni's thought,⁴⁹ is therefore more closely aligned with the future of Italian opera than with its present. The same is true of the Biblical setting, something highly unusual in fin-de-siècle opera. Verdi's two 'biblical' operas, *Nabucco* and *Aida*, for example, owe little to the Scriptures other than Old Testament atmosphere. It is therefore worth noting that the only early twentieth-century biblical opera by an Italian composer was written by Pizzetti. *Débora e Jaèle*, his second major opera (premiered in 1922), is usually recognised as his best. While maintaining the dramatic principles and musical qualities that had characterised *Fedra*, the new work reveals a renewed freedom in the relationship between text and music, caused by the fact that Pizzetti himself wrote the libretto, loosely based on Chapters 4 and 5 of the *Book of Judges*.

It is of course tempting to compare the narrative and musical strategies the two composers used in the construction of an opera based on a biblical subject, especially given their aesthetic similarities. But the operas are relatively far apart chronologically, since *Saul and David* predates *Débora e Jaèle* (composed 1917-21) by 20 years. For this reason, Pizzetti's modally coloured diatonicism is more far-reaching than Nielsen's. In the choice of topic and in the shape of the drama, however, the two works display striking similarities. In this respect it should be noted that Christiansen's plot was closer to the Scriptures than Pizzetti's. Even though he altered some

47 The comment is expressed by musicologist Cesari and reported in Abbiati, *Storia della Musica*, 125.

48 Reynolds, 'Saul and David as a Tragedy'.

49 We know of their friendship and their similarity of opinion about many musical matters from their correspondence, published in Michael Fjeldsøe, 'Ferruccio Busoni og Carl Nielsen: brevvæksling gennem tre årtier', *Musik og Forskning*, 25 (1999-2000), 18-40, and from the same author's examination in Fjeldsøe, *Den fortrængte modernisme*, 143-47.

characters, displaced some episodes, and cut other passages, the core of Christian- sen's story in *Saul and David* is faithful to the Biblical narrative: the contrast between an old and a new order, represented by Saul and David respectively, and the tension between human and divine law, represented by Saul and Samuel. Pizzetti had to work on much slenderer material both in terms of plot and characters: in the Bible, Déborah and Jaèle are both depicted as strong women, with little difference between them in terms of personality. To create a suitably dramatic work, Pizzetti therefore had to intervene more drastically, and he reinterpreted Jaèle's character from scratch. He also made Sisera, who in the Bible had a minor weight, the third main character of the drama, and invented a love story between him and Jaèle. Like her counterpart in the Bible, she eventually kills him, but does so out of mercy, in order to save him from the Israelites, and only after she has realised that her previous attempts, discovered by Débora, had been in vain.

With these changes Pizzetti created a story which, like *Saul and David*, was centred on the contrast between divine and human law, with Samuel and Débora (as prophets of God) as representative of the former, and Saul and Jaèle of the latter. The contrast is between an infallible order and one that contemplates the possibility of change, mistake, freedom, forgiveness, elements that stand in conflict with the necessity, impassiveness and immutability represented by the Prophets and divine rule. The sense of Jaèle's rebellion, prompted by love, can thus be compared to that of Saul, prompted by his freedom of will, which simply does not fit within the system. And even though Nielsen's opera is titled *Saul and David* and not 'Saul and Samuel', as McCreless notes, its real tension is between Saul and God (with Samuel as His messenger).⁵⁰ Both dramas are hence based on the interplay between three main characters: a divine representative (Samuel / Débora) and two human beings, whose relationship is doomed to failure, even in an antithetical way: David, called to be Saul's servant but who ultimately becomes his enemy, and Sisera, supposedly Jaèle's enemy, with whom she falls in love and whom she eventually kills.

If *Saul and David* is the tragedy of a single man, *Débora e Jaèle* is the tragedy of a man and a woman, victims of a rigid and severe order that does not contemplate forgiveness. Both Jaèle and Sisera express their humanity in contrast to the indifference of God. When the heroine is asked by Débora in the final moments of the opera, after she has reluctantly killed her lover: 'Have you heard the Lord's voice?', she answers: 'Not of your God, but of another you don't know'.⁵¹ Sisera, finding himself lost before he can enter Jaèle's tent, cries out: 'Invisible inimical God, I call on you, I call

50 McCreless, 'Strange bedfellows' 110.

51 Ildebrando Pizzetti, *Débora e Jaèle*, Milan, Ricordi, 1922, 463.

on you and defy you!⁵² Nielsen's character expresses similar defiance, from which he retreats both in his Act 1 monologue 'Kunde jeg rejse mig mod dig' and especially in his final words:

My Lord and my tempter, forever thou mockest in heaven! Thou hast racked me with endless disasters that thou hast prepared for my soul! Thou grim old mocker, that taunteth my afflictions! Lo, I spatter my blood on Thy heaven! Wash Thyself clean of my sin, if Thou canst!⁵³

The opening pages of the two operas are also similar: in Nielsen's work, Saul and the people await the arrival of Samuel and the King's question 'Kommer han?' ('Is he coming?') is immediately repeated by the people (Example 4). Pizzetti generates a similar feeling of anxious agitation: the Israelites await the arrival of their prophetess Débora. At first her arrival is questioned by two of the characters (the Blind Man and Scillem, Example 5a), and then is invoked by the people, who have in the meantime entered the scene (Example 5b) This emphasis on the people, whose destiny is at stake because of the war, is given appropriate musical support by the choir, who gain prominent roles in both operas.

33 SAUL

SAUL

Kom-mer han? Kom - mer Pro - fe - ten?
Is he come? See ye the Proph-et?

fz *p* *pp*

52 Ibid. 386-87.

53 *Min Herre og Frister! Du evige Spotter deroppe! Du har pint mig med evige Kvaler, du selv har din skabning beredt! Du gamle Spotter, der ler ad mine Kvaler! Se, nu sprøjter mit Blod mod din Himmel! Tvæt dig da ren for min Synd, om du kan!*, CNU, I/5, 581-86.

Ex. 4 continued

38 JONATHAN

JON. *Kom-mer han?
Is he come?*

(Krigsfolket spørger videre ud til den ventende Mængde.)
(The warriors enquire of the crowd waiting outside.)

1. T. *Kom-mer han? Kom-mer han?
Is he come? Is he come?*

2. T. *Kom-mer han? Kom-mer han?
Is he come? Is he come?*

CORO

1. B. *Kom-mer han?
Is he come?*

2. B. *Kom-mer han?
Is he come?*

Ex. 4: Nielsen, Saul and David, Waiting for Samuel, Act 1, bb. 34-39.

Il Cieco di Kinnèrèth

p Scillèm... Scillèm... An-co-ra non fa

Il Cieco

gior-no? Scil-lèm!

Ex. 5a continued

Scillèm *d. = d del 4*

Laggiù, so pra lo stagnodi Me.ròm, il cir.co.lo delcie.lo si ri.
dolcemente

m. s. ppp

Scillèm
-schia - ra. Pazienta unal.tro po-co!

Il Cieco
m. d. Credi tu che

ppp e leggero m. d.

Scillèm
E co.me no?

Il Cieco
6 3 3
Dè.bo.ra vor.rà mostrarsi al po-po-lo, sta.ma - ni?

Ex. 5a: Pizzetti, *Débora e Jaèle, Waiting for Débora, the Blindman and Scillem* (vocal score, Ricordi, 1922, pp. 5-6).

Più mosso **Molto concitato**

Jèsser (ride) Ah!

noi (tendendo le braccia verso la casa di Baràk)

Barit. (2 soli) Dè - bo - ra!

Bassi o Si - gno - re!

10 *Più mosso* **Molto concitato**

Jèsser La sal - va - tri - ce!

Ten. I. (2 soli)

Ten. II. Dè - bo - ra! O Madre San - ta

(2 soli) Dè - bo - ra!

Barit. O Ma - dre!

mf p

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Ex. 5b: Pizzetti, Débora e Jaèle, *Waiting for Débora, the People's invocation* (vocal score, Ricordi, 1922, p. 16).

Similarities between the two works can also be identified in their final acts: both start with an orchestral prelude (very short in Pizzetti's opera) recalling a storm; and both close with a celebratory chorus, alternating homophonic and polyphonic textures, a characteristic that received considerable attention from their reviewers.⁵⁴

According to the available source material, Nielsen and Pizzetti never met. Their personalities were very different. Pizzetti, like his dramas, was thoroughly serious, while Nielsen had a flair for humour, evident both in his letters and his music. But at least in *Saul and David*, this lightness is totally absent, so that Nielsen here, like Smareglia in *La Falena*, anticipated what Salvetti called 'the tragic hieraticness of Ildebrando da Parma'.⁵⁵ Nielsen's initial intentions to 'learn from Italians' did not prevent him from thinking outside the box and creating a work that, without being directly influenced by local composers, parallels the line that runs from the noir dramas of the 1880s and 1890s through *La Falena*, the tragic and larger-than-life story portrayed in *Déborá e Jaèle*. And while in other respects the similarities exist only in the conception of a 'tragic drama' and the occasional use of modal colour, we can reasonably maintain that Nielsen anticipated some of the aesthetic tendencies and musical characteristics that would later be fully expressed in Pizzetti's work.

It is tempting to imagine Nielsen working on a similar opera in the 1920s, the period of his stylistic maturity. But it is difficult to believe he would have chosen another tragic subject, given the success of his comic opera, *Maskarade*, and the direction the rest of his music took from the *Wind Quintet* onwards. Most of his works from the 1920s are notable for expressing a special kind of musical humour, alternating with more 'serious episodes'. That is particularly the case in the Sixth Symphony, where the title of the third movement, 'Proposta seria' might equally well apply to the first, whereas that of the second, 'Humoreske', could also refer to the fourth. It is true that after the drama and gravitas of the Fifth Symphony, the irony expressed by the Sixth, sometimes caustic and sometimes more cheerful, led to a new type of composition in which the tragic (or better, the serious) and the comic existed side by side. The duality expressed by the Fifth-Sixth Symphony pairing is in this sense the same as that between *Saul and David* and *Maskarade*, whose comedy offers food for thought on more than one occasion.⁵⁶ It is

54 The high level of Pizzetti's choruses is also documented by Waterhouse and Gatti: 'An outstanding feature of most Pizzetti operas (and the main saving grace of some of the weaker ones) is his richly imaginative, often highly dramatic choral writing' – John C. G. Waterhouse and G. M. Gatti, 'Pizzetti, Ildebrando', in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 19, London 2001, 819.

55 Salvetti, 'Dal Verdi della maturità a Giacomo Puccini', 463.

56 See, for example, Daniel Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, Woodbridge 2010, 260-63, 280-93.

easier to imagine another opera of this kind than a larger-than-life drama such as *Saul and David*.

Looking at Nielsen's opera production, we are confronted by two totally different works, which offer the image of a composer who remained extremely receptive to his stylistic and aesthetic environment in spite of his musical independence. For this reason, different as they may be, the two works are both expressions of that eclecticism which was a substantial part of Nielsen's poetic thought, which aligned him with his contemporary European experiences in a way that goes beyond local or national traditions, and which demonstrates that even in an era of ideological nationalism, European musical language was assuming an increasingly international character. Nielsen's *Saul and David* may be seen as the first, monumental example of this utterly personal and individual musical syncretism.

A B S T R A C T

In this essay, I focus on the music-cultural context in which Carl Nielsen's *Saul and David* (1899–1901) was composed, as Nielsen approached the operatic genre for the first time. This will cast new light on his independence and originality, but also offer the possibility for some seemingly unlikely comparisons, revealing that the work is more tightly integrated with Nielsen's broader European musical experience than has previously seemed – especially as an alternative to naturalism. I therefore consider the Italian context before, during and after the rise of *verismo*, focusing particularly on the anti-naturalism debate, to which *Saul og David* also belongs. Nielsen's work follows a path that parallels the shift from the so-called noir dramas of the 1880s to the work of Ildebrando Pizzetti, via the almost completely unknown operas of Antonio Smareglia. Unusual as it may be, I believe that this comparison will support the idea of a composer who, while working in the genre of musical drama, was in constant dialogue with his European contemporaries.