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**Graphic design** Kontrapunkt A/S, Copenhagen  
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# N I E L S E N   A N D   G A D E

## Landmarks of Musical Denmark

By Karsten Eskildsen

Where did it all come from? This is a fair question not only in relation to Nielsen but also to most artists. So where did Nielsen collect all his skills, ideas and ambitions? For decades, Danish musical tradition has had it that young Nielsen was a country lad who through his own will, professional musicianship at the military band in Odense, and three years at Copenhagen Conservatoire was able in his maturity to transform the folk music experience of his childhood into mastery and universal art. This narrative relies partly on readings of Nielsen's justly renowned autobiography<sup>1</sup>. This is a highly personal account of his youth, and not surprisingly it leaves out many details that have been unfolded in recent years through archival research. For instance, we now understand the full extent of the support he was given by the retired Odense-merchant, Jens Georg Nielsen, and his wife, Marie.<sup>2</sup> We also know that Nielsen already in his Odense years, 1879-1883, when playing in the military orchestra, was musically very ambitious: he managed to buy a piano, he took violin lessons, and he wrote his own music, including an entire string quartet, which he brought with him to Copenhagen sometime in 1883 and showed to Niels W. Gade, Denmark's internationally renowned composer and director of the Conservatoire. This was a quartet he was quite proud of in later life, although he recognised that it was a juvenile work, noting that there was 'no originality there, but it's fresh and alive'.<sup>3</sup> The work was important enough for him to keep throughout his life, and it is included in the complete edition of his works.<sup>4</sup>

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1 'Min fynske Barndom' (hereafter MfB), orig. pub. Copenhagen 1927; Eng. trans. as 'My Childhood', London 1953.

2 Nielsen himself mentioned the fact in a newspaper interview as early as 9 November 1905 – see *Samtid*, 59 – and it was first published in Gerhard Lyngge, *Danske Komponister i det 20. Aarhundredes Begyndelse*, Copenhagen 1917, 214.

3 MfB, Martins Forlag, 15th edition, Copenhagen 1976, 183.

4 CNU IV/1, 59-77.

What was Nielsen's inspiration, and what kind of role models did he have? There is a string of important people that he met on his musical path in his youth: his father and his fellow country musicians, including the fiddler and schoolteacher, Christian Larsen, who had some professional training experience, some of his own colleagues in the military orchestra in Odense, and the organist and cantor at St. Knud's Church, Carl Larsen. But arriving in Copenhagen was quite another matter. And Nielsen of course knew this beforehand, because 'this other matter' was the very reason he made the transition.

Of course, there are many threads of background, inspiration, personal relations, finance, teaching, and playing music that must be picked up and identified in order to see how they all merged together in the mind of the young Nielsen. This article proposes to follow just one of them: his encounter and experiences from meeting – and having as a teacher – the most important Danish composer at the time of his musical education and earliest professional years: Niels W. Gade.

### Nielsen and the Copenhagen Conservatoire

First and foremost, we know of Nielsen's first encounter with Gade from his own accounts, in MfB and elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> but also on this matter Nielsen's recollections are not precisely accurate. In MfB he states that without anyone knowing, apart from his superior officer, Captain Jacobsen, and his very important Funen benefactor, the member of parliament (and future prime minister) Klaus Berntsen,<sup>6</sup> he went to Copenhagen in May 1883 in order to meet the director of the Conservatoire, Niels W. Gade, and also its leading violin teacher, Valdemar Tofte. In Nielsen's account in a letter from March 1895,<sup>7</sup> however, he states that in fact *nobody* knew about his Copenhagen trip except for his superior officer. The reason was that even though the Funen and Odense benefactors had encouraged him to apply for the Conservatoire, they were also uncertain as to the young man's real talent. Therefore, he simply went to present himself to Gade and to Tofte. Even in a letter to Berntsen from 1905,<sup>8</sup> Nielsen claims that nobody knew about it, but according to his accounts in 'Recollections of Gade'

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5 As in further autobiographical sketches, such as the manuscript for a biographical account in Lynge *Danske Komponister*; a short autobiographical account on receiving a royal knighthood 1913; a remark in an interview in *Berlingske Tidende*, 26 November 1927; and Nielsen's contribution to William Behrend (ed.), *Recollections of Niels W. Gade*, Copenhagen 1930. All four accounts in *Samtid*, 49-50; 168; 456; 536 respectively.

6 Berntsen himself describes the matter in his autobiography, where he argues that he in fact persuaded Gade to meet Nielsen – see Klaus Berntsen, *Erindringer*, Copenhagen 1923, vol. 2, 142-44.

7 Letter of 11 March 1895 to William Behrend, CNB I, 407.

8 Letter of 3 March 1905 to Klaus Berntsen, CNB II, 480.

and quite convincingly in MfB, Berntsen was part of the plan, enabling Nielsen with a letter of introduction, and during their meeting, Gade also referred to a previous conversation with Berntsen in Copenhagen.

In the two published and rather late accounts, MfB (1927) and ‘Recollections of Gade’ (1930), of this first encounter with Gade, Nielsen set the chronology to May 1883. Thus, he became quite persistent, even though he was obviously mistaken! He may have been somewhat uncertain as to the chronology, because in a much earlier letter from November 1901,<sup>9</sup> and in this letter alone, the time is set as ‘the autumn’ of 1884 [sic!]. We do not know of any military records of his leave, but Nielsen’s vivid account in MfB (and ‘Recollections of Gade’) of his first encounter with the city of Copenhagen quite clearly define the trip to sometime between September and October 1883. He describes in some detail the hurdy-gurdy in the streets because of the visit of the Emperor of Russia, Tsar Alexander III.<sup>10</sup> The tsar and his Danish born empress, Maria Feodorovna, daughter of King Christian IX,<sup>11</sup> were crowned and anointed on 27 May 1883, and the already by then imperial couple had no chance for a quick excursion to Denmark. Probably the journey to Denmark later that year may already have been planned, because a cruise across the Baltic was no easy day trip: the Emperor and his Empress arrived in Copenhagen on Thursday 30 August onboard the imperial yacht *Derzhava*, with a crew of more than 200 men, including a musical band of 50,<sup>12</sup> and stayed at the Danish royal castle in Fredensborg<sup>13</sup> for six weeks before returning to St. Petersburg on Thursday 11 October. During the stay, the imperial couple passed through downtown Copenhagen on several occasions, including the days of arrival and departure and at least Tuesday 11 September, Tuesday 18 September, and Thursday 4 October.<sup>14</sup> So, Nielsen’s personal recollection of the events must refer to one these five dates.

The Russian visit was of course carefully planned, and the logistics involved considerably more than sailing on the *Derzhava*. During the stay, royalty from the United Kingdom and Greece also came to Fredensborg, including the Prince of Wales, who had married another of King Christian IX’s daughters, Alexandra, and King George of Greece, who was the second son of the Danish king. The background for all this goes beyond the scope of this article, but these weeks in the early autumn

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9 Letter of 6 November 1901 to Angul Hammerich, CNB II, 226.

10 MfB, 184.

11 Born as Princess Dagmar of Denmark, 26 November 1847.

12 Some sources mention 65 musicians and 15 choir singers, but according to the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* from 8 September 1883, a collection of 50 musicians entertained guests at Fredensborg Castle.

13 C. 40 km north of Copenhagen.

14 According to accounts in more Danish newspapers, such as *Berlingske Tidende*.

of 1883 have become known in Danish history as ‘the Fredensborg Days’, hosted by ‘the father-in-law of Europe’, King Christian IX. Along with the principal guests, these days brought with them a number of royalties – from the Russian court alone six grand dukes and duchesses – the total royal group consisting of 32 individuals, as depicted on Laurits Tuxen’s colossal Fredensborg painting.<sup>15</sup> It may have been a somewhat informal gathering, but it also included political meetings, e.g. with the British prime minister William Gladstone, who made a holiday cruise to Copenhagen and met both the Tsar and the Russian ambassador to the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Nielsen’s first meeting with Gade took place during these historic days. Nielsen’s accounts are well known from MfB, and it is very understandable that in his personal retrospect they are more occupied with impressions of Gade than with the royal events that mostly went on outside Copenhagen. It is also no surprise that these accounts vary, leaving behind the essence that Gade turned the pages of the *Andante* of the young Nielsen’s D-minor quartet and finished the visit by complimenting Nielsen’s sense of form. However, it is interesting how Gade reacted to Nielsen’s outspoken wish to enter the Conservatoire. In most of Nielsen’s accounts, Gade concluded that the young man could enrol provided that Valdemar Tofte accepted his violin playing. The accounts vary on the matter of which of the two Nielsen visited first. In the late accounts, MfB and ‘Recollections’, he had already played to Tofte<sup>17</sup> before visiting Gade, whereas in earlier – and shorter – ones, he only stated that Gade asked him to go and play to Tofte.<sup>18</sup> The chronology of the two visits may not be important, but there is a striking parallel between Nielsen’s memory of the two men’s evaluation; both seem to have told him that he had the necessary qualifications for entering the conservatory, and that he would be accepted, provided only the other agreed.

In MfB and ‘Recollections’, Nielsen felt ‘confident’ about his acceptance, and in an interview about the forthcoming publication of MfB he even stated that Tofte ‘promised’ him to this effect.<sup>19</sup> It is only fair to wonder why Nielsen in these accounts never hinted at the two men mentioning the Conservatoire’s formal audition, tradi-

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15 The Royal Reception Rooms, Christiansborg Palace, Copenhagen (5 x 7 m, 1883-1886).

16 Gladstone and his wife made the virgin voyage of the vessel ‘Pembroke Castle’, accompanied by its owner (and liberal MP) Sir Donald Currie, and the poet laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson – a voyage allegedly much to the displeasure of Queen Victoria.

17 Valdemar Tofte’s address is given in *Kraks Vejviser* 1884 as Rigensgade 21, København, but we do not know whether Nielsen played to him at his home or elsewhere.

18 Letter to Berntsen – see n. 8.

19 Interview in *Berlingske Tidende* 26 November 1927, *Samtid*, 456.

tionally held in early December. In a letter to William Behrend from 1895,<sup>20</sup> Nielsen stated that having been reassured concerning his entrance into the Conservatory, he went back to Funen, left the military, passed the audition and began his studies ‘soon after’. Also, at the very end of MfB, he briefly interpolated the audition in December between the intensely described father-son showdown and the visionary summing up of his childhood in Funen.<sup>21</sup>

There was indeed an audition on 2 December 1883 for free places at the conservatory for the following year, but evidence of Nielsen’s participation cannot be verified. From 1 January 1884, the Conservatoire was granted a yearly state subsidy of DKK 10,000, including DKK 6,000 in principle financing no fewer than 27 non-paying students, each with a yearly budget of DKK 224.<sup>22</sup> The institution formerly having a little under 40 students, this would obviously have been too burdensome an expansion, and from January 1884, the beginning of Nielsen’s education, a total of 50 students in all three year groups were enrolled.<sup>23</sup> According to the institution’s records,<sup>24</sup> 23 applied for free scholarships, of whom eleven actually began their education after New Year 1884. The audition register identifies the teachers present as Mr. Frederik Rung, Mr. Bondesen, and P.J. Paulli, but the results of the auditions are not systematically recorded, accompanied only occasionally by a written remark by Gade himself (who obviously was also present, but not entered in the register), for instance recommending that a particular applicant should be ‘asked to apply again in six months’. But the records of this audition in December 1883 are without any trace of Nielsen.

However, Nielsen is mentioned in another Conservatoire register: ‘Student entrance 2 January 1884’,<sup>25</sup> alongside another six students actually enrolled for the year 1884. It is unclear whether a special or alternative audition was made for these students, but probably there was not, because two students on the same list were already listed for the audition in December. Furthermore, another three students appear

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20 See n. 7.

21 The short statement about the audition and the entrance at the Conservatoire is in Nielsen’s manuscript for MfB, followed by personal thoughts of what it all came to mean for his life. These lines were erased in the published book – see the annotated edition of MfB, Odense 2015, 150.

22 The value is hard to assess in modern currencies, but DKK 224 was until 1884 the yearly tuition fee. A careful estimate corresponds to c. DKK 60,000 (Euro 8,000).

23 Calculated by counting listed students in Angul Hammerich: *Kjøbenhavns Musikkonservatorium 1867-1892* (cop. 1892), statistic listings made by J.D. Bondesen, composer and teacher at the Conservatoire 1883-1901.

24 In Rigsarkivet (National Archives), Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium, Students/curriculum, Register of admittance (1884-1950) 6: 1884-1894.

25 In Rigsarkivet (National Archives) Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium, Students/curriculum, Student entrance (1866-1885) 382: 1866-1885.



during the curriculum records for 1884 without being listed in either register. One may easily get the impression that the management of the Conservatoire was not exactly streamlined, and we look in vain for any published curriculum, in contrast to most Danish grammar schools at the time, not to mention the Copenhagen University. But the Conservatoire was not authorised by law, and despite stately subsidies, it remained in principle a private institution until 1949.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, in 1883-1884, Gade was still the supreme head of the institution, having held that position since its foundation in 1867, probably organising matters more or less as they had been since then. A small piece of evidence for this management may be seen in the Conservatoire's Prospectus<sup>27</sup>, a sheet with short, but nice outlines of disciplines, subjects, levels and teachers. But the Prospectus was printed in 1870, and according to the archives, it was still in use – with handwritten updates – at least until 1881, apparently without need for a new edition.

We cannot finally conclude whether the young Nielsen in fact attended any audition, but he most probably did not. And from all the evidence that Nielsen himself has given us of his meetings with Gade and Tofte during his short stay in Copenhagen in September-October, he was no doubt at the same time offered a place at the Conservatoire on the basis of the two men's mutual agreement. It was as a fact and by tradition in their power to do so. Therefore, any audition in December would have been a pure formality and moreover a waste of time for somebody Gade wanted to welcome at the Conservatoire and who would have had to spend time and money for another two-day (at least) trip to Copenhagen. The register of 'Student entrance 2 January 1884' not only mentions Nielsen, but also states that 'C.A. Nielsen is 18 and a half years old, comes from Odense, has learned the violin from cantor Larsen for one year, and taught himself the piano', adding 'Violin. Son of housepainter Nielsen near Odense'. Whether these remarks testify to a kind of audition or rather to an interview on arrival, we do not know. In any case, nowhere is there to be found the word 'accepted' or something similar.

Sometime during Nielsen's first year at the Conservatoire, all students were evaluated by their teachers (this year not including Gade), and besides the overall nice reviews: violin (Tofte) 'now progressing well'; piano (Matthison-Hansen)<sup>28</sup> 'hard-working, progressing well', and in music theory (Rosenhoff)<sup>29</sup> 'skilful, hard-working', at the

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26 Henrik Engelbrecht: *Musik og uddannelse: Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium i 150 år*, Copenhagen 2017, 15.

27 Rigsarkivet (National Archives), Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium, Arkivserie: Almindelige korrespondancesager, Løbenummer 4, Indhold 1866-1919.

28 Gottfred Matthison-Hansen (1832-1909), composer, organist, piano teacher at the Conservatoire 1867-1905, and director 1900-1906.

29 Orla Rosenhoff (1844-1905), teacher of harmony and counterpoint at the Conservatoire 1881-1892.

top of the same page in the same hand as ‘Mr. C.A. Nielsen’ is noted ‘Violin (Leonard)’. For this first year evaluation, Nielsen played an Etude by Fiorillo, so the indication of Leonard may very well be hinting at a piece by Hubert Léonard, which according to MfB<sup>30</sup> Nielsen played to Tofte on their first meeting in 1883. The actual meaning remains unclear, but it may have been recorded as a kind of ‘point of departure’ for the first year of study. In any case, whoever made this comment had evidently heard the piece before, so no doubt it was written by Tofte, referring to a previous performance, either privately in September-October or repeated at an informal audition.

### Becoming Carl Nielsen

Nielsen himself stated that he did not see much of Gade during the first two years at the Conservatoire, which would be quite in line with the Prospectus that made Gade responsible for teaching music theory to third year students only. In Nielsen’s accounts of these classes, the 69-year old Gade did not seem very ambitious as a teacher, and the students did not receive much exact learning. The lessons appeared to be strangely unorganised and inconsistent, and in Nielsen’s memory, Gade often looked at his ‘beautiful gold watch’, indicating that he may have had more important matters to attend to, which – one might add – is not exactly conducive to any kind of tuition. According to the Prospectus, music theory at the third year included musical form and analysis, composition,<sup>31</sup> word-setting in vocal music, instrumentation, and playing from score.<sup>32</sup> But according to Nielsen, Gade seems to have been more interested in presenting European cultural history including the great personalities and important historical facts.<sup>33</sup> However, at some point, Nielsen must presumably have had the opportunity to present some of his own work to Gade, as Gade must have taken time to look at it.

At least we know that Gade was fully aware of Nielsen’s studies, for not only was he the head of a rather small institution, he was also present at all Nielsen’s three annual examinations. Although Gade’s handwriting cannot be identified in the register for the first examination in 1884, he certainly witnessed the other teachers’ evaluations that year, as mentioned above. For the second year, Gade himself inserted in the examination register at least one remark concerning Nielsen: ‘Very good and hard-working’,<sup>34</sup> and to the fine general assessment of his

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30 This piece may indeed have been by Léonard, even if Nielsen in MfB remembers the title incorrectly: ‘Souvenir de Boulogne’ for violin solo is not by Léonard but by Charles de Bériot (1802-1870).

31 Composition only in this year of the curriculum.

32 *Formlære og Analyse. – Compositionsopgaver. – Textbehandling i vocale Compositioner. – Instrumentation. – Partiturspil.*

33 ‘Recollections’, in *Samtid*, 538.

34 Danish: ‘Udmærket] flittig’.

violin-playing: ‘Progressing well in all respects – fine tone, beautiful trills, purity, and nice bow’; the addition of ‘beautiful execution’ is probably also made by Gade. At the final exam in the late 1886, Nielsen was highly praised for his violin playing:<sup>35</sup> ‘Extremely clever and bright. Full tone. Nice staccato. Musical understanding. Musically gifted.’<sup>36</sup> And this time Gade, being the current teacher of music theory, went so far as to state ‘Musical talent. Has composed a string quartet, revealing no small composing ability (NWG)’.<sup>37</sup>

Even though he did not recall learning much from the master, the young and bright Nielsen no doubt took a keen interest in Gade’s interpretation of European culture, adding to the foundation of his lifelong focus on European history, philosophy and cultural traditions. Admittedly he never made a connection between these early impressions and his own occupation with the ‘classics’ of art and literature – and even with Greek philosophy – but it may hardly be an exaggeration to conclude, that Nielsen carried ideas with him from the time spent with Gade. In order to unfold his artistic ambitions, no-one represented European culture in Denmark more than Gade. In the following works Nielsen did not so much interpret the actual contents of Gade’s lessons, but he surely benefitted from them in the unfolding his own ideas within a Classical framework:

- *Hymnus Amoris* (1896) was allegedly inspired by Titian and deliberately used the Latin language to carry the content, although Axel Olrik’s original text was in Danish
- *Saul and David*, opera (1902) took its plot of youth meeting old power from the Old Testament
- *Helios*, Overture for orchestra (1903) takes its idea from the god-like representation of the Sun in Greek mythology

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35 Nielsen played the first movement of Bernard Molique’s Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 5 in A minor, Op. 21. At the final exam sometime late 1886 (dates not recorded), he played Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto, first movement, and received similar positive comments, only shorter.

36 *Særdeles flink og opvakt. Fuld tone. Godt staccato. Musikalsk opfattelse. Musikalsk begavet.*

37 The identity of this string quartet is unknown. It may be connected to the *Andante tranquillo e scherzo*, first performed in September 1887 or to the two movements from a Quartet in F major, printed in CNU IV, add. 9-10. But if these movements are connected to Nielsen’s remark in a letter to Emilie 24-25 December 1887 about a quartet that he had ‘recently completed’ (CNB I/56; CNL, 29), they do not match Gade’s statement about a quartet eighteen months earlier. If in fact related to any known fragment, this quartet from 1886 may be associated to the student-like (and Beethoven-based) movement, CNU IV, add. 11.

- *Saga Dream* (1908) is based on the Icelandic epos, *The Saga of Njal*, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century
- *Pan and Syrinx* (1918): another Greek theme
- *Concerto for Flute and Orchestra* (1926) – its inspiration can hardly be understood without including the idea of ‘Arcadia’, the classical tradition of an unspoiled Utopia – in the Renaissance and later abstractly located in Tuscany

In addition, especially in the last fifteen years of his life Nielsen often relied stylistically on the (pre-)classical tradition of musical forms such as above all the principle of variations (*Theme with Variations* as the *for* Finale of *Symphony No. 6*, and *Prelude, Theme and Variations* for Violin Solo, CNW 46) and towards the very end of his life the *Three Motets* and *Commotio* for organ.

Nielsen’s inspiration from the main European traditions is rather more obvious than with most of his Danish contemporaries, who to a higher degree and quite in line with contemporary national romanticism tended to find subjects and ideas in Danish cultural traditions, national history and legends, Nordic mythology, and the fairy tale world of Hans Christian Andersen – for instance Louis Glass’ *Koldinghus, Elverhøj* and *Skjoldungeæt*, Fini Henriques’ *Vølund Smed*<sup>38</sup> and *The Little Mermaid* (ballet music), and August Enna’s nowadays best-known music, the opera *The Little Match Girl*.

After Nielsen left the Conservatoire at the end of 1886, Gade would for the remaining four years of his life still have been aware of his talented student. He could not have known how far the young man would progress, but as we will see, Nielsen did his utmost to keep Gade’s attention. Not only to Nielsen, but to most musicians and musical audiences, Gade was still a landmark not only of musical Denmark, but also of the nation. After the devastating defeat against Germany on 1864, and after the death in 1875 of the celebrated Hans Christian Andersen, Denmark did not have much claim to fame and glory. Therefore, even though Gade did not travel abroad after 1882, his international reputation was widely respected at home. Whenever his music was performed or his management of concerts in the Copenhagen Music Society was commented on by the critics, there was a ‘golden thread’ of respect and overall sympathy – despite some specific criticism concerning both some of his own compositions and his responsibility for the repertoire in the Music Society as well as at the Conservatoire.<sup>39</sup> There are many examples, but one instance from 1886 may illustrate the musical atmosphere in Copenhagen. The Music Society’s fourth subscription concert

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38 ‘Kolding Castle’, ‘The Elves’ Hill’, ‘Heirs of King Skjold’, and ‘Vølund, the Blacksmith’, the last two being based on prehistoric Danish legends.

39 See Inger Sørensen, *Niels W. Gade, et dansk verdensnavn*, Copenhagen 2002, 262ff.

on 11 February 1886 included Brahms's Symphony No. 3 and Gade's *Frühlings-Fantasie*. Angul Hammerich was a renowned and respected critic of the *Nationaltidende*, and his writings were and remain worth reading; yet he stated that Brahms's symphony did not have 'much impact on the audience', whereas Gade's vocal work 'swept people off their feet', and on his own behalf he made it clear that this music 'represents the divine power of inspiration – universal and for ever valid'.<sup>40</sup> Nielsen was of course aware of other people's criticisms, but Gade was still too important a person in Danish musical organisations to be ignored, and Nielsen certainly did not do that.

### Nielsen's musical life, 1887-1889

All in all, we do not know very much about Nielsen's life from the end of MfB and his settling in Copenhagen 1883/1884 until he obtained his position as violinist with the Royal Orchestra in 1889 and the following year left for his grand European tour, including meeting his future wife, Anne Marie, in Paris. Luckily, however, since around 2000 we have gained much more insight into his life in the years 1887-1889, due to the edition of Nielsen's letters<sup>41</sup> and especially their unveiling of his romance with Emilie Demant Hansen. Several of his letters to her include vital sources also for his relations with Gade. However, when meeting Emilie in the summer of 1887, she was 14 and he was 22, and she lived in the northern part of Jutland, a whole day's journey from Copenhagen. Nielsen's professional life therefore went on in Copenhagen, however little we may know of it. From the beginning of 1887, Nielsen was a trained musician and had to make a living from it. Besides still having the financial backup of Jens and Marie Nielsen, we know that he was occasionally paid by amateur pianists to play chamber music with them.<sup>42</sup> And from the famous first performance of his Suite for Strings in 1888, we know that he was at least occasionally employed at Tivoli's concert hall orchestra, conducted and organised since 1873 by Balduin Dahl.<sup>43</sup> The Music Society's orchestra should have been another place to work for a young talented violinist, especially given that its conductor, Niels W. Gade, had been aware of him since the early days at the Conservatoire. But only one single instance of Nielsen playing with this orchestra is documented: according to Nielsen, Gade one day pulled

40 [Musikken] repræsenterer Inspirationens guddommelige Magt, den algyldige og evige. *Nationaltidende*, 12 February 1886.

41 CNB I includes 19 letters from Nielsen to Emilie Demant, written between 17 September 1887 and 26 March 1890. See also CNL, 23-77. Emilie was born Emilie Demant Hansen and in 1911 married as Emilie Demant Hatt.

42 CNB, I, 44. The letter only mentions one instance, but this occupation was widespread, and no doubt Nielsen had more jobs like it.

43 See Knud Ketting, 'Carl Nielsen and Tivoli', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 1 (2003), 83. Nielsen had supposedly deputised in the orchestra since 1886, though no documentary evidence survives.

him aside during an orchestra rehearsal to tell him that he had not been awarded that year's Ancker Travel Grant but at the same time promising him the following year's grant.<sup>44</sup>

This rehearsal was of course no isolated single incident, and it is sufficiently documented that Gade really took an interest in Nielsen and as a matter of course employed him on more orchestral occasions. On a professional level, they met more times, including when Nielsen was working on his Suite for Strings in 1888. As has been comprehensively documented, Nielsen made decisive alterations in the Suite's last movement after consulting Gade, who had seen the music and blamed Nielsen for making 'too much a mess!'<sup>45</sup> When Nielsen in fact received the Ancker Travel Grant for 1890, he, preparing for his departure, went to visit Gade on 2 September, the day before he embarked for Berlin. This visit made a profound impact on the young composer. We know of this last encounter with Gade from a short entry the very same day in Nielsen's diary and from the more extensive account in 'Recollections' in 1930. Nielsen went to see Gade at his summer residence in Fredensborg north of Copenhagen and in Nielsen's own words (1930), it turned out to be an 'unforgettable experience'. Gade invited Nielsen to lunch with him, his wife, and his mother-in-law, the awe-inspiring Madam Erslev. After lunch, the two men took a long walk in Fredensborg Gardens, and on Nielsen's departure Gade presented him with introductory letters to major musical personalities in Germany. Furthermore, Madam Erslev gave him a rose as a souvenir of this special day. Of course, it would have been wonderful to know what the two composers were discussing during their walk in the gardens, but Nielsen only noted that this day signified a 'certain tone' to him, because it turned out to be the last day he spent with this 'rare man'.<sup>46</sup>

We know much more of another similar meeting in January 1889, where Nielsen paid Gade a visit after his first application for the Ancker Travel Grant. Nielsen simply wanted to plead his cause and discuss the matter with Gade, who was on the board of the grant. This at least testifies to Nielsen's ambitions, and even more so because he later actually managed to include his String Quintet in the programme of the Chamber Music Society on 13 February primarily in order to give Gade the

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44 In an interview in *Ekstrabladet* published 9 November 1905, see *Samtid*, 59. The rehearsals in question were most likely for a concert on 14 March 1889 (the grant's decision was made public on 17 March) – even though Nielsen remembers that they were rehearsing 'a Schumann symphony'. In fact Schumann was not on the March programme, and at the previous concert, on 13 December 1888 Schumann was indeed programmed, but represented by the Manfred Overture. Nielsen only applied for the 1889 grant on 20 December 1888.

45 Peter Hauge, 'Carl Niensens første opus', *Fund og Forskning*, 35 (1996), 223-237. 46 CNB I, 112, and 'Recollections...' in *Samtid*, 539.

opportunity to hear it.<sup>47</sup> It also testifies to Gade's importance in the eyes of Nielsen: he tried solely to influence Gade, though the chairman of the Ancker (music) board was the by then 84-year old composer Hartmann.<sup>48</sup> To Nielsen, Gade was the one who mattered, and quite simply the one he knew better. Nielsen writes extensively about the meeting in a letter from 17 January 1889 to Emilie, and it is in many ways a description of both composers at the time, pointing forwards to Nielsen's future ambitions as a composer, and retrospectively describing Gade's self-perception as an artist over the previous more than 40 years:

Yesterday I was at Gade's place. He was having lunch when I arrived, and so I had the chance to look around his room; it's a real artist's apartment, with reproductions of Raphael and Rembrandt,<sup>49</sup> and drawings and sketches by famous artists living and dead. On his writing desk there was the opening of a work for chorus and orchestra, and around it lay loose leaves with little sketches and isolated melodies. Finally Gade came in, clearing his throat loudly, as is his wont. I told him that I had sent in an application for the Scholarship and was there to ask the professor to take an interest in me in connection with the decision. First he began to get hot under the collar; he said that everybody these days wants to be a composer and that it would be much better if one were to take on the task of working for the dissemination of classical works to the general public; but instead everyone nowadays wants to make their mark and put themselves and their shoddy produce on display. So I said that it wasn't ambition that drove me to compose, and that the proof of this was that I wrote exclusively large works of a serious nature, which no publisher could profit by publishing for the time being, and that I could not therefore garner honour and glory from the public at large. He liked that and said: 'Yes, yes! You seem to have really serious ambitions. One should always occupy oneself with big projects; any dilettante or fool these days can write songs and little piano pieces.' Then we spoke for a long time about music and art, and it was so interesting. He also got around to religion, and he asked whether I had any interest in the modern faith; to which I answered that I couldn't deny it. Then you should have heard him. He rushed up and down in the room and fumed. [According to him] it was all accursed filth, and I, as a

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47 Whether Gade in fact was present at the concert, we do not know, even though it is stated as a fact in Meyer and Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen I*, 74.

48 Claus Røllum-Larsen, 'Det Anckerske Legats rejsestipendier for komponister 1861-1915', *Danish Yearbook of Musicology*, 30 (2002), 75-87.

49 Raphael (Rafaelo Santi, 1483-1520), Italian painter and architect; Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669), Dutch painter and graphic artist.

composer, should damned well know that there was something divine, something spiritual within us, which could not die. I had to draw in my horns and said that it was possibly just a phase that everyone has in their youth. Then he calmed down. He showed me several sketches for new works, which I was obviously happy to see./ Finally he had to go. I helped him on with his frock coat and then we went downstairs together. ... Then we went together into town, and I can't deny that I got a strong and lasting impression of him. I have never been especially enthusiastic about Gade as a person, but now I realized that he is a great and original mind and immensely interesting.<sup>50</sup>

This account is almost an outline of the two Danish composers' place in history, and altogether it is like a crystal prism of the two composers' previous and future careers. The beginning is more or less a follow-up to Nielsen's account of the lessons in music history at the Conservatoire; like Gade's teaching, so his study is also filled with the great personalities of European culture. In the following, and in Nielsen's words, Gade shows off his patriarchal prejudice towards contemporary music, almost beforehand including the young composer. However, Nielsen easily evades the indirect rebuke, stating that he only writes music that no publisher dares to publish, thus declaring that he is not 'in it for the money'! And we may only wonder how Nielsen carried Gade's following remark with him – after the meeting and far beyond: 'You should always engage in big tasks'! At least for the following c.25 years, this became Nielsen's identity as a composer, in his own mind as well in the eyes of the public. Until 1915, he primarily wrote symphonies, a violin concerto, string quartets, choral works, music for the theatre, and other orchestral works – all music on a large scale except for two early collections of piano pieces, four collections of songs (of which several are quite demanding), and very rarely, small pieces (really only the *Phantasy Pieces*, Op. 2, and the *Festive Prelude*). The extensive production from 1915 and beyond of popular songs may actually not be contradictory to this, if we simply regard them as together constituting a cohesive and totally new project. But that is a discussion beyond the scope of this article.

### **Gade the international composer**

Maybe not surprisingly, the 72-year old Gade was not too keen on the music of contemporary composers: he found the musical milieu filled with unimportant songs and small piano pieces. In other words, music in Denmark was not what he hoped it would be. And he could hardly think of anyone but himself who for 40 years had worked as much to develop the musical life of his native country, especially in his

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50 CNL, 41-44.



capacity of musical organiser and conductor, but also – as will be discussed below – as a composer. However, there is really no evidence to support the idea of Gade being a disappointed old man. Though not having conducted abroad for seven years, in 1889 he kept up many duties and was still principal of the Conservatoire, head of the Music Society, organist at the Church of Holmen, and engaged in all sorts of tasks, such as being on the board of the Ancker Grant, corresponding extensively and internationally, planning new editions with Breitkopf and Härtel, and – as we have seen – still meeting and counselling young musicians.

All in all, Gade was and may also have quite rightly regarded himself as above the everyday competition, gossip, and envy of the Copenhagen musical life. This is also a decisive difference between him and Nielsen, who precisely at this time now had to forge for himself a place in this very same musical environment as well as being a composer in his own right. An important part of Gade's significance in Denmark during the last decades of his life rested on his well-known international reputation, founded in his Leipzig years, 1843-1848. Back in Denmark in the 1850s, this short, but important period of his career became an integral part of consolidating his national position, for instance in developing the Music Society. Apart from his personal tragedy of losing his young wife and soon after also a small daughter,<sup>51</sup> the 1850s became a decade of complete success – including a new marriage and more children – in which his music was repeatedly performed without delay, whether premiered at home or abroad. Moreover, his reputation abroad as well as in Denmark still went back to the profile of his impressive breakthrough in Leipzig: as a classic romantic with a Danish/Nordic tone to it. In other words, in Denmark he had the accepted role of defining Denmark in musical terms, while in Germany he was still seen as the young master of original and authentic music from the North. Producing a large number of piano pieces and songs – occasionally in collaboration with his good friend, Hans Christian Andersen – intended for private use, he quickly became a household name throughout middle- and upper-class Denmark, thus like Andersen being a cultural bridge between Danish identity and the cultural world of Europe.

### Gade's Danish legacy

Already in his own life-time and almost conclusively in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been widely considered that Gade so to speak lost his artistic grip after returning to Denmark and especially with *The Elf King's Daughter* (*Elverskud*) behind him. Of course, this

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51 Gade's first wife, Sophie Gade (1831-1855), was the first-born child of the composer J.P.E. Hartmann. Sophie and Niels W. Gade had twins on 20 May 1855, Felix and Emma, but sadly Emma died 24 October 1857, shortly before Gade's marriage to Mathilde Stæger (1833-1915).

is nothing more than a prejudice, and it would be futile to try to determine any loss of artistic competence or musical skills in the last symphonies or even more so in the large-scale choral works from the 1860s onwards. But from a modern 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective, Gade's part in Danish cultural history may seem to show a lack of ability to take in and make the changes of society and historically-defined ideologies a living part of his art. Everybody agrees that his output from the 1840s is in many ways an integral and musical symbol of the romantic era, even with an original sound to it (especially in terms of melodic form and development). But once established in Leipzig also as a highly skilled conductor and organiser, his later music bears no trace whatsoever of the impressions of his own rather dramatic age. He simply composed new music, and the obvious differences between, for example, his Symphonies Nos. 3 (1847) and 4 (1850) cannot to any meaningful extent be attributed to his returning to Denmark.

There is of course a striking fact around Denmark's 'hour of destiny', the catastrophic defeat of 1864. There seems to be no evidence of Gade's personal reaction either to the growing bad news from the Danish-German confrontations or to the outcome of the military defeat and political consequences. In fact, in the dramatic year of 1864, we only know of two letters from Gade: one of them to Peter Heise in February, referring to the fact that the latter's song *Genoveva* had been performed at the Music Society 'despite its German text',<sup>52</sup> and the other in the autumn to his sister-in-law commenting on the Symphony No. 7 that was the outcome of the summer of 1864:

As I know, you take an interest in what my Muse is doing, I can tell you that this summer she brought to me a new symphony; and accordingly, a happy thing: a fresh and cheerful symphony. In truth, it has to do neither with war nor peace, and even less with politics, but I am certain that it will nevertheless be interesting for you to hear it.<sup>53</sup>

The devastating war may not have been as far from Gade's mind as he claimed. At least it is not too difficult to hear what we might call 'Echoes of Dybbøl'<sup>54</sup> in the Andante, but perhaps also to hear some kind of renewed determination in the rising theme of

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52 Inger Sørensen (ed.), *Niels W. Gade og hans europæiske kredse*, vol. 2, Copenhagen 2008, 638.

53 *Ibid.*, 648 (translated by the author).

54 Dybbøl: the site of the decisive battle in the war with Prussia, 18 April 1864 – 'Echoes' refers to Gade's sensational *début* with his concert overture, *Echoes of Ossian*, 1841.

the first movement. Even so, in the letter above he ostentatiously announces that the music does not represent anything beyond the music itself. In this, Gade was far from alone: Modern music history usually defines three lines of art music from c. 1850 onwards: the ‘classical romanticism’ based on, for example, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms, the national romanticism of, amongst others Smetana, Glinka and early Gade, and ‘neoromanticism’ identified above all with Liszt and Wagner, both of whom explicitly added extra-musical content to their works: the former especially in his symphonic poems from the 1850s, and the latter of course with his operas, including the idea of German spirit in the cycle of *The Ring of the Nibelung* and after that a quest for Christian identity in *Parsifal*. In fact, these three lines were never isolated tracks, but were within reach for all composers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Brahms, for example, though apparently firmly rooted in the ‘classical’ tradition, wrote his *Triumphlied* (1871) openly paying tribute to the redefined Germany, and even Wagner seems to have intended to take up his younger ambitions of symphonic writing shortly before his sudden death at 69.<sup>55</sup>

### Gade’s mature ambitions

It can hardly be denied that Gade’s 1864 Symphony No. 7 lies within the Mendelssohnian tradition, thus – with or without ‘Echoes of Dybbøl’ – presenting exactly an alternative to Denmark’s political tragedy: in music, the healing of troubled souls can take place. Though Hans Christian Andersen in his letters and diary showed much more agony because of the war and also suffered a genuine artistic crisis, he returned to writing stories by insisting on a similar ambition: poetry and art defining an alternative to the sufferings of the world. This is the content of such stories as Andersen’s first attempt after the breakdown, *The Will-o-the-Wisps are in Town*, which defines the importance of poetry and inspiration, or the war-story *Golden Treasure*, about how art and love survive the atrocities of war.

However, despite 25 years of close association with both the classical-romantic tradition and the national romantic idea, Gade soon turned towards ‘music of ideas’ in the form of the ‘dramatic poem’. He more or less invented the genre himself,<sup>56</sup> having already used it in *Comala* (Leipzig 1846), and now returning to it for *The Crusaders* (Copenhagen 1866) and *Kalanus* (Copenhagen 1869). Probably shortly after finishing *The Crusaders*, Gade decided to make it the final part of a trilogy. We do not know if at the time he already had ideas for the next two parts, but when *The Crusaders* was published in the winter of 1866/67, he had it marked as Opus 50, leaving opus 48 and

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55 Article ‘Wagner’, in *Sohlmans musiklexikon*, Stockholm 1979, vol. 5, 728.

56 The genre before Gade is only known from a couple of forgotten works by Joseph Dreschler (*Rosa von Viterbo*, 1822) and Bernhard Klein (*Dido*, 1823).

49 for the two following – or in content rather: two preceding – works. While working on *Kalanus* in 1868, Gade finished the outline of the trilogy and explained it in a letter to his Swedish composer friend, Jacob Axel Josephson, in September: *Kalanus*, that he is just about to finish, will be the first part of the trilogy and is about ‘paganism, where the longing for the true light senses as a clue in a single individual’; the second part – in 1868 still without a name, but when composed in 1874 called *Zion* – will take its theme from the history of Jews, ‘where a people has learned about the promise’; and *The Crusaders* – in 1868, performed and published two years before – will form the trilogy’s keystone, ‘where the light has come into the world, but where suffering and perils on one side and temptations and illusions on the other often may lead from the right path until by the difficult and weary pilgrim’s path you are brought to the heavenly Jerusalem’.<sup>57</sup>

Thus *The Crusaders* became the first step in what may be interpreted as Gade’s artistic answer to his troubled times: a philosophical and epistemic build-up of ideas presenting a universal truth – no more, no less! By this, he forged a new identity as a Danish composer with an international background. Previously, he had the identity of a composer with a fine international career, thus making his outstanding position in Denmark more than legitimate. With these new ‘dramatic poems’, he set his ambitions as a composer and as a leading cultural personality in Denmark even higher. Separately, these became his largest works – only *Comala* has comparable dimensions – and with his trilogy, he had embarked on his largest project ever, vastly supplementing his Nordic identity and dismissing his Leipzig fame.

The qualities of *The Crusaders* are really beyond question, whereas *Kalanus* arguably has some drawbacks regarding the profile of the characters and perhaps also regarding the musical moods of certain parts. But still, these works could have secured Gade a unique position when offering the listeners this universal cognition, corresponding intimately with Gade’s own Christian convictions. Nor did he later waver in this, as may be seen in Nielsen’s account of their meeting in 1889. However, his ambitions were really contrary to the audience’s expectations who always were looking for ‘the old Gade’, and thus this music was not able to make his philosophical and religious standpoint convincing as an artistic answer to the challenges of time, including the reconstruction of Danish identity in the years following 1864. On top of this, only a few years later, romanticism would no longer be considered a valid basis for artistic or philosophical thinking in Denmark, and the ‘golden age’, that had produced so many artists, writers and composers, was inevitably fading. More

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57 Sørensen (ed.), *Niels W. Gade og hans europæiske kredse*, vol. 2, 740 (Gade’s underlining).

artists saw it coming, for instance Hans Christian Andersen, who still wrote stories until 1872 but published his last novel *Lucky Peer* in 1870, in fact summing up his poetics together with his life-long artistic ambitions. Like Andersen, Gade in *The Crusaders* and *Kalanus* (and *Zion* 1874) tried to overcome changing conditions by summoning all his creative skills and at the same time in the content of these works by enshrining his beliefs as a composer and as a person.

### Nielsen and modernity

It is difficult to find or to create a comprehensive outline of what happened in Denmark during these years regarding literature, philosophy, and the whole mindset of the nation. Still, it is obvious that a number of developments – the Constitution of 1849, the defeat of 1864, the liberalisation of commerce, organising new rural enterprises, the popular movements, the upcoming of new classes etc. – together contributed to a new cultural environment, one that neither Gade nor Andersen found it easy to come to terms with. This new environment may be hard to define, but it has got a name: the Modern Breakthrough. The term is associated with Georg Brandes's<sup>58</sup> university lectures in 1871, where he defined Danish literature of the past and highlighted new literary and ideological movements abroad, thereby pointing out what he saw as deficiencies in the cultural traditions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Denmark. The present age no longer needed to define literature and art as ways of transcending into the 'blue flower of poetry'; now art was rather defined as being much more realistic and attaching itself to the real world, in other words making art – and the understanding of art – dependent on its exterior conditions.

This was the environment that the young Nielsen became part of. His personal background was so to speak the embodiment of Brandes's definition of contemporary realism. Though Gade was not born into a wealthy family, Nielsen's social conditions had been far worse, with no possibility of formal musical training until he won a place in the military music in Odense. And his further musical development was the result of his professional military life combined with adequate talent and youthful ambitions (and support from at least one financial source!). His own strong mind overcame the traditional scepticism of his family, and from his arrival at the Conservatoire in 1884, and nourished by fellow students and their educated and wealthier background, he opened up to the modern thinking of the Copenhagen intelligentsia. We do not know much about the religious life in his family home, but Nielsen's childhood memories bear no trace of anything in particular. From a

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58 Georg Brandes (1842-1927), critic and scholar, theorist behind the 'Modern Breakthrough' of Danish culture.

Christmas letter to Emilie, in 1887, we learn that he was already on the ‘modern side’ in matters of religion, which in fact may be defined as being an atheist – although with an explicit respect for true believers. Discussing religion with Gade thirteen months later,<sup>59</sup> he was still a non-believer, and he stayed that way even after marrying the religiously more positive Anne Marie.

In this respect, Gade and Nielsen did not share personal values, but on the other hand, Nielsen – maybe unwittingly – lived to fulfil one of Gade’s ambitions: to make music an ideological part of people’s lives. Where *The Crusaders* and *Kalanus* did not reach the minds of the audience in time to offer a musical frame for understanding the secrets of life, Nielsen became the most important composer of his generation to interpret the big questions of his age. While a religious cantata was out of the question for young Nielsen, he turned to symbolically unfolding other big issues of life: love (the cantata *Hymnus Amoris*), the nature of man (the symphony *The Four Temperaments*), the life-giving daylight (*Helios*), and the nourishment of rest (the cantata *Sleep*).

Notwithstanding Gade and Nielsen’s seven-year acquaintance in Copenhagen, as we have seen, they in fact lived in mutually estranged ages. Even so, meeting Gade, combined with the personal acquaintance with Gade’s fame, work, and personality, still made a strong impact on Nielsen. In fact, Gade was the personification and to some extent a role model not only for an impressive musical career but also as regards what being an artist and a composer was all about. From an early age Nielsen was under the heavy influence of Gade’s legacy, as may be seen from Nielsen’s many musical tasks: besides composing, also conducting and organising, which in his eyes was the way a professional musician should be working. But above all, he carried on Gade’s ambition on behalf of the importance of the symphonic genre. Never did Nielsen neglect Gade’s encouragement to ‘always to engage in big tasks’!

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59 CNL, 41-44.

## A B S T R A C T

The article describes, examines, and to some extent interprets the relationship between Nielsen and his 48-years-old teacher and colleague, Niels W. Gade. It includes a tidying-up of previous descriptions and biographical notes – including Nielsen’s own – and highlights the professional connections between the two during the seven years they knew each other. Also, the article makes a comparison between the two with regard to their respective careers and ambitions: Gade as a romantic, and Nielsen on the brink of modernism. The article concludes that even though Nielsen dissociated himself from the Gade legacy at a young age, the older composer nevertheless became a role model with respect to artistic ambitions and to the demands of a composer with high standards.