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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  
The Royal Library

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Translation or linguistic amendment of texts  
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carried out by David Fanning, Marie-Louise Zervides,  
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**Graphic design** Kontrapunkt A/S, Copenhagen  
**Layout and formatting** Hans Mathiasen  
**Text set in** Swift

**ISSN** 1603-3663

**Sponsored by** The Carl Nielsen and Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen Foundation

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## REVIEW

*Carl Nielsen: Selected Letters and Diaries*, selected, translated and annotated by David Fanning and Michelle Assay, *Danish Humanist Texts and Studies*, v. 57, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2017, 832pp.

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This beautifully produced book contains fascinating material no matter what your interest, and is eminently readable cover to cover. You do not have to be a musician to find it meaningful, but a student interested in history at the fin de siècle perhaps, or someone who simply enjoys an engrossing true-life story about two famous artists, trying to make their way in the world together. As someone who has studied Nielsen's vocal music for years, I find that this source draws together all of the impressions of him I have accumulated in the process of my research. Though there has been a flurry of publications of Nielsen's writings in recent years – notably *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid* and the *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven*, both edited by John Fellow – they are in Danish, limiting their usefulness beyond the borders of Denmark. For the first time since the English-language publication of *My Childhood on Funen* and *Living Music* (in 1953), it is possible for non-

Danish speakers to get a sense of Nielsen the person, in his own voice; reading these letters and diary excerpts, you come to know him more intimately than through any other single source.

Though this volume (whose publication was supported by the Royal Library) is substantial, it is but a sliver of the complete correspondence (6000 letters in all, both to and from Nielsen) published in twelve volumes over ten years (2005-2015). It would be a futile exercise indeed for a non-native speaker to attempt to read through the whole set with dictionary in hand. Therefore, a huge debt of gratitude is owed David Fanning and Michelle Assay who in 2013, with Niels Krabbe's help, undertook the Herculean task of selecting, translating, and publishing some of the letters in English. They first had to read all twelve volumes and then begin the painstaking process of determining which letters should be included in translation when most, obviously, had to be excluded. That they did this is in some respects more valuable than had they translated all twelve volumes; the most vital information about Nielsen is concentrated here so that the chosen letters and diary entries tell a highly compelling story. In their annotations, Fanning

and Assay provide context when what was left out informed what was left in, and clarify references outside the text, so the reader effectively has a companion in the footnotes guiding their journey, answering questions the moment they arise. Translating the meaning is one thing, but conveying it in a second language as expressively and genuinely as in the original is quite another, yet Fanning and Assay have succeeded admirably in this. As someone who has translated a number of Nielsen's letters, I can vouch for their fidelity to the original Danish. Finally, Fanning and Assay carefully edited the letters, breaking up Nielsen's run-on sentences, and adding punctuation to his wife Anne Marie's stream-of-conscious writing, where necessary, to facilitate reading and intelligibility.

The ancillary material Fanning and Assay provide is also helpful, including an introduction to Nielsen's life and works, a brief description of the letters and diaries, as well as how this edition builds on the crucial primary research materials published in the 1990s and beyond, and a basic chronology of Nielsen's life and works. This preliminary grounding is balanced at the end of the book by the indices of compositions and names, and a letter concordance. The index, especially, is invaluable if one wishes to look up a particular composition or to follow a particular correspondence thread. Finally, photographs are peppered throughout the letters and diary entries, some of which have never been

presented elsewhere (e.g., Nielsen and Anne Marie with Irmelin's mother-in-law, Frederikke Møller, p. 670).

The non-native speaker encountering Nielsen for the first time may be surprised to discover that the voice of Denmark's most famous composer is not sober and aloof, but instead charmingly down-to-earth and often wry, as in this analogy (No. 598):

[My] feeling [is] that a radio broadcast will never replace a 'real' performance. It's as though the vitamins have got lost in their journey through the air; it tastes like preserved fruit.

Or in this description of reading Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in English (No. 599):

It's very witty, and a joy for me, because I can already read it almost without a dictionary. Wilde has an unbelievable lightness; like a mosquito's dance.

Nielsen is also humble, as in this 1922 response to Victor Bendix, who had lambasted Nielsen's Fifth Symphony in no uncertain terms (No. 482). Rather than putting Bendix in his place – as he arguably deserved – Nielsen wrote:

So what else should I do then? Of course I can give up. I can easily give up; there is nothing in me of what

they call 'high-minded striving', 'great ideas' or any other ethical-artistic conviction or duty to marshal my gifts. I don't feel that at all; but for that reason there may well be inside a person's soul, behind all the mumbling, tumbling, obscurity and selfishness, some fine threads, which were spun in youth and childhood and which now nonetheless lie there pulling him in the so-called 'right direction.' (No. 483)

Like Charles Ives, he valued the ordinary person's experience over the privileged upper crust, as in a 1918 letter to a member of Parliament, A.C. Meyer (No. 404):

[I] do agree with you that if anything is to be done it must first and foremost be for the people and not for a few hundred epicures. I'm the son of a poor man of the soil, I've experienced much, and I know how the ordinary man thinks and feels. I know that there are all sorts of possibilities for future development here. And where else should we find them? It's all well and good with royal personages, but I believe the matter is healthier without them; there are so many snobs who can always mess up a good thing.

In fact, Nielsen's expressive, homespun letters and diaries often read like Ives' *Memos* in that the words conjure up the person behind them.

Perusing this volume from beginning to end, one gets to follow the progress of Nielsen's development: to watch him grow from a brash, spirited youth from the country, full of optimism and potential as he seeks to make a unique mark in the big city steeped in tradition, to a young husband and father of three (four, if you count the illegitimate child he was supporting), with all of the attendant responsibilities too soon. The reader then accompanies him through years of hardship, frustration and disappointment, until Nielsen finally matures into a seasoned composer of considerable stature, sure of his abilities and yet somehow still flummoxed by his ultimate success. Fame, by the time he had achieved it, seemed not to give him the satisfaction one might imagine; by his own admission, this was largely due to the eight-year estrangement from Anne Marie, which shook him to his core. Writing to her in 1919 (No. 431), Nielsen notes the irony that when he is finally showered with the accolades he craved twenty years earlier, he cannot enjoy them, because he feels like a charlatan for having wronged her:

I'm alive even though I should be dead and tortured by the things that could have been my joy; like my work here now, which is on the one hand a kind of recognition but which on the other pains me when I see people believing in me and applying that to my personality, so that I feel

the urge to shout out: 'Don't believe in what I'm doing; it can't be right. Because I've deceived my best, my only friend in the world and I can't accept your trust and loyalty before this is dealt with and you know all about it.'

The consequence was that his celebrated status did not make him arrogant. At heart he was still the boy with a twinkle in his eyes clowning for the camera (photo, p. 42), aiming to please but constantly in need of reassurance, who loved to be silly – as when he sends a funny poem about a pig-dealer, replete with grunting pigs and farting horses, and teases his son-in-law Emil by switching into broken English so he will not realise he is writing about his birthday present (No. 601) – or to get down on all fours to play with children after a fancy dinner – as in the only extant film footage of Nielsen. Yet he was also the boy who once contemplated suicide (in 1889) and the older man who complained about having squandered his life on the 'tragic obsession' of an artistic career, even as he was being feted nationally for turning sixty (*Politiken* interview from 1925, *Samtid*, 360). No single source draws out the contradictions of Nielsen's character and the extremes of his life experiences more pointedly than this single volume of selected letters and diary entries.

The reader learns as well that Nielsen had wide-ranging interests in art, architecture, literature and science,

and frequently made parallels to music. In a 1922 letter to Wilhelm Stenhammar (No. 489), for example, he wrote:

I believe that it's to music's great advantage that it can't express anything definitively. Poetry, painting and sculpture, which seek to show us the real world, can be vulgar precisely because of this. Music (and architecture) can only be vulgar, ignoble and shoddy by departing from itself, by offending against its own innermost being, or by a stupid and brutal shattering of its own laws. Am I right? Music and architecture cannot – it's just impossible – depict anything that by its plot or its content offends us from an ethical, religious, moral or human standpoint. Therefore these two arts are the only truly elevated ones.

Nielsen said little directly about his compositional process, but one can infer his aims from various oblique comments, as in the 1917 letter to Hortense Panum (No. 397):

Perhaps unconsciously you touch on the question of whether it is possible to unify the old, legitimate counterpoint with more modern sounds and colours in instrumentation and modulation. This is precisely what seems to me still to be the ideal, and which I can't stop searching for.

Or, from this 1930 letter to Jørgen Bentzon (No. 713), which reflects the sort of dialectic paradigm so often observed in Nielsen's music:

What is this thing we call strength? Isn't it the essence, or interplay, of something conflictual, which arises when one has strained at the tether, no matter when and with what; only strongly at the tether[?]

Occasionally he is more specific, as when discussing his opera, *Saul and David*, in a 1930 letter to Gunnar Jeanson (No. 712):

Mozart had proved that music was the first thing in opera; he never got bogged down in the lyrical quality of the words, nor in the pictorial quality of scenes, beyond what – *as if purely coincidentally* – corresponded to the musical element. Therefore I saw how correct it was that the music first and foremost should unfold itself according to its own nature and its own laws, and I strove in every situation to create a certain symphonic-musical form for the various scenes, without too many breaks, even if the text was tempting me to invent new musical motifs. I considered that the dramatic element in music should be sought in the development of simple themes and not in a naturalistic illustration of the individual verses or scenes on stage.

There is also advice offered to his composition students that tells you as much about Nielsen's own music, as in the 1910 letter to Knud Harder (No. 260):

I find that you have made great progress in the area of compositional technique, but I still miss content in your works. By content of course I don't mean depth, portentous or inscrutable harmonies, but soul pictures, style, unity, experiences or whatever. Lightness if you want, freedom and grace if you can, heaviness and darkness if you dare; just something that leaves a definite impression. Yes, that's it: [do] whatever you want, provided something remains for one to feel afterwards. I don't say something to remember! That's not necessary! But something to feel again, to re-experience as a total impression. What do I *remember* after a dangerous voyage or a sweet rest under blossoming almond trees? But the state of that world I've just left – *that* I can clearly recall. That's what I demand of art. Put me in a state of being outside of the one I know. Give me a drink I have never dreamt of. Take me and swing me round so that my senses are cleaned and purified. In short: let me have an experience! I miss that in your music.

Even though many of Nielsen's most profound musical revelations have appeared in other sources before (e.g., the



conviction that 'Music is Life', and his childhood realisation about intervals being a by-product of two contrapuntal lines, both stated in a 1920 letter to Julius Rabe, No. 445), it is instructive to come upon them within this detailed chronological context. Letters having to do with musical matters appear more frequently towards the end of the volume, because, as Nielsen's reputation and influence grew, he had a broader range of contacts, more performances in the offing, people consulting with him about performance issues and reviews of his music, and composers asking for advice about their own.

What one learns a great deal about is Nielsen's relationship with Anne Marie, and the difficulties they encountered in what was a very modern marriage for the time. Due to the frequent strained, work-related separations, the couple corresponded back and forth, providing us with a window into how they felt and communicated on a number of private issues. When in 1914 Anne Marie discovers that Nielsen's long-term affair has happened under her own roof, it makes for excruciating reading. Without question, by twenty-first century standards, Nielsen was a complete scoundrel. But love is complicated at any point in history, and there is a poignancy to their relationship that you cannot help but be touched and at times even moved by, and whose nuances you can only appreciate by following the dramatic progression from beginning to end. The characters are flawed, but relatable. Nielsen is noth-

ing if not human, and in this respect, one is reminded of his hero Mozart.

Put simply, the conflict in their marriage was because Anne Marie wanted Nielsen to be something he was not, and Nielsen was his own worst enemy, hurting the people he cared most about. His best qualities – spontaneity, charm, and childlike effervescence – were also his greatest weakness, because on the flip side they meant that he was also impulsive and self-indulgent, which got him into trouble time and again. Anne Marie accused him of being a coward (No. 486), but in 1922, after being worn down his relentless pleading for reconciliation, she conceded, in a letter to their friend Ove Jørgensen (No. 490), that Nielsen was actually the stronger one, unwilling to give up on their relationship even after so much time apart:

By these few words I want to tell you, dear Ove, that Carl has been unable to do without me, and that I will try to draw a line under the past. I fervently hope that I shall succeed, and that I will be able to be more forgiving. ... I did hope to be able to break free completely, ... [b]ut Carl was so unwilling, and now it seems he has been the stronger one.

Even knowing how much they both suffered, it is gratifying to witness their reconciliation, especially reading words like these, in a 1920 letter Nielsen wrote to Anne Marie (No. 446):

You listen to everyone else's words with interest and understanding, and you look at the tiniest creature with your deep watchful eyes, as if to discover what is going on inside them. So often I've been amazed and delighted when you look inquisitively at everything that lives. You have no idea what you are like, what effect you have on others, often just by your tone of voice or a sudden movement. If only I could swap; so that you could become me and I you, just for a few hours ... so that you could then see yourself and take pleasure in it. It would please you and strengthen you to encounter yourself. Many things would seem to you trivial if you could see your own abundance, observe your own humanity and listen to your own words and thoughts.

In the interim between 1914 and 1922, while Nielsen was lonely and longing for home, sometimes from across the Sound in Gothenburg, Sweden, he was paradoxically unusually productive, writing the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, *Aladdin*, the bulk of his piano music and folk-like songs, and the Wind Quintet.

The letters also illuminate the many other troubles Nielsen had to deal with, such as well-meaning colleagues like Thomas Laub, who offered him unsolicited advice and 'constructive criticism' (for example, the famous complaint that Nielsen had no business writing hymns and spiritual songs when he was not 'a

child of the house', No. 394), theatre intrigues, money concerns (he actually made less money than his wife), tax woes, problems with publishers and the press, difficulties getting music performed (for instance in the United States where his friends and family made no headway at all), health issues, and concern over care for their mentally-challenged son, Hans Børge.

A bright spot among the letters is his correspondence with his daughters and sons-in-law; he is consistently loving and supportive of Irmelin, Anne Marie (called Søs, the Danish equivalent of Sis), Emil Telmányi and Eggert Møller, all of whom he whole-heartedly respects and admires, as is evident from a 1921 letter to Søs (No. 478):

I love to talk about all the things we learn from each other. Because I maybe learn more from you two young ones than you do from me, both in art and ideas, and definitely when it comes to everything human. You have something that is new and enriching for me, something I listen to and can feel when we really sit down together and open up to one another. You two offer that so clearly, and I'm so grateful for it, because in my mind it's often as though something is in conflict and biting me in two with its teeth.

And in a letter to Emil Telmányi in 1926 (No. 496):

[T]he only thing I can say, and to continue to say, is to thank you for everything you mean and are for me, and to let you know how highly I esteem you and how much I love you. What joy to know that there is at least one person who understands me, where we only need to look at one another in order to gain understanding and sympathy.

During the lengthy separation from Anne Marie, Nielsen frequently confided in his daughters, and asked them to intercede on his behalf with their mother. Irmelin, especially, becomes a sort of proxy for Anne Marie immediately after their split.

In addition to writing to his family members, Nielsen kept up a lively correspondence with a wide range of artistic friends and acquaintances throughout his life. The extended exchanges with Swedes Bror Beckman and Wilhelm Stenhammar are especially helpful for getting a sense of his musical values, as in a 1911 letter to the latter (No. 271):

[H]ave you noticed how many young composers have approached music from the wrong end, as it were? They begin with atmosphere, poetry, perfume, the flower; the surface of art, instead of with the roots, earth, planting and propagation. In other words: they begin by expressing

moods, feelings, colours and sensations, instead of learning voice-leading, counterpoint, and so on. But I suppose I'm very old-fashioned in this respect, and I don't think I can mend my ways.

The various reminiscences and biographical sketches he wrote from time to time (e.g., No. 109 in 1895) are notable for the light they cast on how he saw himself at different points in his life and career. There are also interesting letters to well-known composers, including Brahms, Grieg and Sibelius, as well as assessments of many others (including Wagner and Strauss). The reader will wish to travel back in time when encountering historic performances, such as Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting Nielsen's Fifth Symphony at an international Festival in Frankfurt where Bartók premiered his first piano concerto the same evening (described in a 1927 letter to Anne Marie, No. 619). In conclusion, appreciation and admiration cannot be overstated for this sumptuous volume, which offers so much to Nielsen fans and researchers alike.

If Fanning and Assay have the time and energy, perhaps the next project might be a translation of the notes, lectures and reviews contained within *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid?*

Anne-Marie Reynolds