# CARL NIELSEN STUDIES

VOLUME VII · 2026

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# NIELSEN, BEETHOVEN AND REPEATED NOTES

By David Fanning

For all their charm, clarity and directness, Nielsen's writings can occasionally be perplexing. He himself sometimes struggled to articulate precisely what he had in mind, as may be seen from his numerous attempts to arrive at the motto: 'Music *is* Life, and like it, Inextinguishable'.[1] Sometimes his words, though apparently unambiguous, are hard to reconcile with his musical practice. He was no stranger to self-contradiction and paradox, and he was fully conscious of the limitation of words to explain the fundamentals of musical meaning, as his observation in his January 1909 essay 'Words, Music and Programme Music' testifies: 'If one were to ask a composer what he meant by a particular chord or succession of notes, the only answer he could really give would be to play or sing the passage. All other explanation is nonsense.'[2] This was a statement to which he evidently gave some careful thought, because he changed it significantly in between his draft of the article and the published version.

And yet his writings reveal him as one of the most eloquent and inveterate explainers of his own music, and they certainly prompt thought when it comes to understanding his musical practice.

Two relatively well-known, puzzling statements provide the starting-point for this article. The first expresses Nielsen's surprising ambivalence towards Beethoven: surprising, because his music is cleared deeply indebted to Beethoven at many levels. The other is his observation on the ethical quality of musical intervals: puzzling, because it invites, and yet defies, use as an interpretative tool.

This article will offer further thoughts on how these statements might be understood. But it will then divert away from any more definite conclusions towards using using those statements as the basis for identifying an aspect of Nielsen's compositional tool-kit that has not previously been isolated for discussion.

1 See, for example, Raymond Knapp, 'Music as Life: Authority and Meaning in Nielsen's Fourth Symphony', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 5 (2012), 148–163.

2 'Words, Music and Programme Music', *Living Music*, London 1953, 29, *Samtid* 129, and 767 (fn. 5) for the draft original.

## Nielsen and Beethoven

In December 1890 Nielsen was in Berlin, in the middle of a year's sabbatical on his Ancker scholarship, travelling through Europe, composing, visiting art galleries and going to concerts. On the first day of the month he wrote in his diary:

> I'm coming to the conclusion that Weber will be forgotten in a hundred years. There's something jelly-like about much of his music, which won't stand the test of time. After all it's a fact that he who brandishes the hardest fist will be remembered the longest. Beethoven, Michelangelo, Bach, Berlioz, Rembrandt, Shakespeare, Goethe, Henrik Ibsen and the like have all given their times a black eye.[3]

He had just been to see Weber's *Oberon*, and the experience evidently confirmed a negative view he had formed several years previously.[4] As for Beethoven, Nielsen's diaries and letters were by this time already full of enthusiasm and exhortations to friends and followers to heed the master's example. Two years prior to the diary entry just cited, he had composed a string quartet movement along the lines of Beethoven's Op. 18, No. 1, first movement (CNW52, CNU IV/1. Add.11), probably at the instigation of his own teacher, Orla Rosenhoff. In 1897 he recommended precisely the same exercise to his Swedish composer-friend Bror Beckman.[5]

It is startling, then, to scroll to the last decade of Nielsen's and read the following, in his December 1923 essay on Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: 'Who would deny that Beethoven, the man and the musician, was highly subjective?'[6] This view had been adumbrated in one of his earliest published essays, 'Mozart and our Time', in March 1906: 'When the wheel of time has turned a few more cycles, the best of Mozart's symphonies will remain standing while most of Beethoven's will fall, for the simple reason that, in Mozart's art, the lyrical – the subjective and the epic-artistic – are more evenly balanced than in Beethoven's works.'[7]

There are any number of paths one could take in an attempt to understand this attitude. For one thing, 'subjective' and 'objective' can mean different things to different people, and their usage varies both between cultures and between discourses within any one of those cultures. But instead of forensically examining why Nielsen apparently preferred Mozart to Beethoven, or what he meant by subjective

3 Diary entry for 1 December 1890, CNL 33; CNB 1:147.
4 Letter to Orla Rosenhoff of 24 November 1890; CNL 30; CNB 1:139.
5 Letter to Bror Beckman of 23 May 1897, CNL 127; CNB 1:633.
6 *Living Music*, 62, *Samtid*, 297.
7 *Living Music, 21*, *Samtid*, 84.

and objective, this article will set value judgment to one side and single out one aspect of what Beethoven seems to have meant to him, musically. To prepare for that, here are two further statements from Nielsen's writings. First another diary entry, from exactly a month before the one cited above:

> Have begun to learn the C minor [i.e. Symphony No. 5] by heart, to the extent that I can write it down from memory; whether this will be possible for me, I don't know, but I want to try. The more one studies the Symphony, the greater it becomes. You would think that the score had fallen from heaven.[8]

Sure enough, a manuscript survives of the opening of this full score in Nielsen's hand (CNS403). It is not very extensive – just three folios – and it does not score highly for accuracy. But that is enough to confirm that Nielsen indeed attempted to notate the entire musical texture from memory.

Keeping in mind one of the best-known facts about Beethoven's Fifth – that it is extremely resourceful in its derivations from the opening repeated-note motif – here now is one of Nielsen's famous aphorisms, from what is arguably his most important essay, 'Musical Problems', of August 1922:

> The glutted must be taught to regard a melodic third as a gift of God, a fourth as an experience, and a fifth as the supreme bliss. Reckless gorging undermines the health. We thus see how necessary it is to preserve contact with the simple original. [...] we must first reverence and respect the simple intervals; dwell on them, listen to them, learn from them, and love them.[9]

Clearly, Nielsen was speaking figuratively. And at first glance it seems impossible to reconcile his comments about the 'simple original' (*det oprindelige* in the Danish – the English rendition avoids any potential ambiguity) and the ethical quality of intervals, with the richness and diversity of his music. Should we, then, perhaps file the comment away, alongside Plato's concerning the ethical qualities of various modes, and leave it at that?

Yet the temptation to use that statement as an explanatory tool remains. Take Nielsen's Fifth Symphony, whose first movement is dominated by melodic and harmonic thirds, as much as its second movement is by melodic and harmonic fourths. After all, the essay in question was drafted only a few months after the completion

8 Diary entry for 1 November 1890, CNL 33, n. 85; CNB 1:111.

9 *Living Music*, 42, *Samtid*, 265–66,

of that symphony. More generally, perhaps there is something in the thirds idea – especially the space between the fifth and flattened seventh degrees, both melodically and harmonically – that seems especially personal to Nielsen. 'Gift of God' or not, it would be possible to cite any number of instances where melodic or harmonic thirds convey a sense of wellbeing. This is obviously true not only for Nielsen, but also more widely, but it is something that has been observed as a personal trait by Nielsen commentators since the 1940s.[10]

Nor is there any denying that the conflictual drama at the heart of the finale of *The Inextinguishable* is heightened by the alternation between diminished and perfect fifths, the latter certainly registering as euphoric, whether or not they may be more extravagantly characterised as 'supreme bliss'.

But any search for consistent semantic correlations between intervals and Nielsen's music practice soon gets bogged down. Not that this should be surprising. How would we differentiate between a 'gift of God', an 'experience', and 'supreme bliss' in their musical incarnations? Deryck Cooke's 1959 book *The Language of Music*, which was on UK student reading lists back in the 1960s and 70s, made high claims for the existence of semantic connections, in quite differentiated terms and with plenty of concrete examples. But that hardly helps, partly because Cooke was citing short motifs rather than intervals, and partly because he missed, or at least understated, the point that the environment in which intervals (or motifs) operate is as crucial as the intervals themselves. Understandably, his book has proved far less influential in the long term than the theory of 'Topics', which would start to emerge around 1980.[11] Topic theory was, and remains, less concerned with intervals or even motifs as semantic units than with rhythms and textures.

Even so, in the main body of this article I want to give some further thought to the interval question, and specifically to an interval not included in Nielsen's list: the humble unison or prime. Horizontally, this 'interval' is synonymous with repeated notes and thus brings us into the realms of rhythm and gestures of reinforcement. In fact, the following discussion is conducted in something like the same spirit that drove Nielsen himself to discuss rests and pauses as crucial components in musical momentum.[12] I shall concentrate on Nielsen's six symphonies, as a body of repertoire

10 See Ludvig Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen: en Musikografi*, Odense 1949, 18ff. and *passim*. For a modern interpretation, see Daniel M. Grimley, 'Horn calls and flattened sevenths: Nielsen and Danish musical style', in Harry White and Michael Murphy (eds), *Musical Constructions of Nationalism: Essays on the History and Ideology of European Musical Culture*, Cork 2001, 123–41.

11 Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*, New York 1980.

12 In the 1922 essay 'Musical Problems', *Living Music*, 38–49, here 46–48, *Samtid*, 269–171.

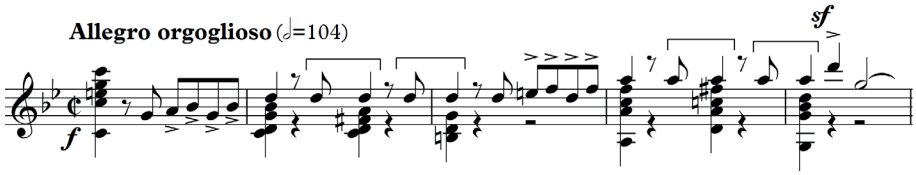
that also serves admirably to show his artistic development in whichever dimension one chooses to focus on.

### Nielsen, Beethoven and the repeated note

Back, then, to Beethoven's Fifth. What is the first thing that strikes everyone about the piece? Presumably the prevalence of the opening four-note motif with its repeated-note upbeats. And the second thing? That this motif is not only a call to attention but also invites semantic interpretation. Though debunked in academe, 'Fate knocking at the door', as dubiously ascribed by Anton Schindler to Beethoven himself, has stuck, and it certainly chimes more strongly than Czerny's ascription to the call of the yellowhammer. Not susceptible to debunking is the observation that the motif is fundamental not only to the momentum and overall drama of the first movement but also to important phases of the other movements, especially the scherzo and its spooky return in the finale. It may not quite qualify as a Berliozian *idée fixe*, but it certainly appears frequently enough to be cited in the historical development of inter-movement unity.

And what traces of this opening gambit, if any, might we find in Nielsen?

In his February 2008 *New Yorker* essay on Nielsen, Alex Ross observed, in connection with Nielsen's First, Third and Fifth symphonies, that: 'With these bolt-from the blue beginnings, Nielsen was undoubtedly modelling himself on the ultimate symphonic forebear, the Beethoven of the "Eroica" and the Fifth. Nielsen's music seldom resembles Beethoven's directly, but it weighs in with the same brute strength.'[13] Or with the same brandished fist, Ross might have said. Considering that Nielsen's First Symphony was begun only a few months after his diary entry concerning Beethoven's Fifth, it may be worth getting out the magnifying glass, starting with the opening of Nielsen's work (Example 1).

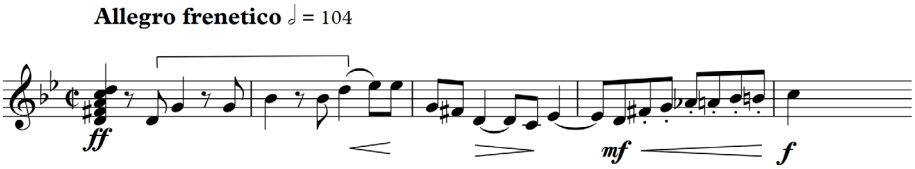



*Ex. 1. Nielsen, Symphony No. 1, first movement, bb. 1–5.*

A more extended version of this example can be found in my article 'Nielsen under the Influence' in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 3, where I pointed to the striking number of features these bars share with the opening of the 'Orgy of the Brigands' finale of

13 Alex Ross, 'Inextinguishable: The Fiery Rhythms of Carl Nielsen', *The New Yorker*, 17 February 2008.

Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* Symphony.[14] The unisons and the iambic rhythms highlighted on Example 1 are also present in the Berlioz opening, though not in precisely the same configuration (Example 2):

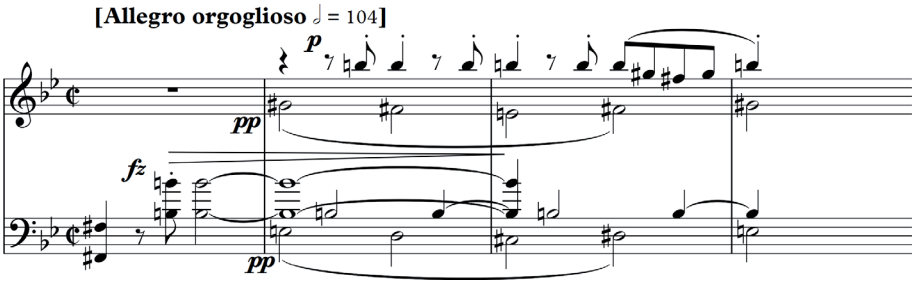



*Ex. 2. Berlioz, Harold in Italy, finale 'Orgy of the Brigands', bb. 1–5.*

Nor is either configuration by any means identical to the opening of Beethoven's Fifth. So any suggestion of a direct link from Beethoven to Nielsen, or Beethoven via Berlioz to Nielsen, specifically as regards repeated notes, would rest on the wobbly plank of stylistic affinity: the likelihood that both Berlioz and Nielsen derived their ideas from turns of phrase that were characteristic of Beethoven and that had passed into common usage in intervening years. The seminal opening bars of the Op. 106 *Hammerklavier* Sonata first movement, for instance, would rank at least equal to those of the Fifth Symphony as a source for iambic rhythmic motifs and repeated notes.

My 'Influence' article did not single out the repeated-note aspect for comment, because I was more concerned with identifying other potential godparents for the principal musical ideas in Nielsen's First Symphony. I did not point out, for instance, how the repeated notes in the opening paragraph interact with the rising motif stated in the first bar of the piece, shifting from theme to accompaniment and mutating into octaves and triplet upbeats, whose three-repeated-note triplet-crotchet anacruses present the most obvious similarity with Beethoven's Fifth (this time the Trio section of the third movement). I could have followed this line of thought through to Nielsen's recapitulation, which recasts the theme harmonically and which makes a much bigger issue of repeated notes, both in the first subject space and in the second, allowing second subject and transition to interact. Example 3 gives a snapshot of that process, showing how a version of the first subject's iambic rhythms, highlighting the repeated notes, appears in the recapitulation: in the second subject space and after the *forzando* interruption gesture that previously heralded that theme but which is now also recast in the form of thematically generative, iambic repeated notes.

14 David Fanning, 'Carl Nielsen under the Influence: Some New Sources for the First Symphony', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 3 (2008), 9–27, here 13–14.

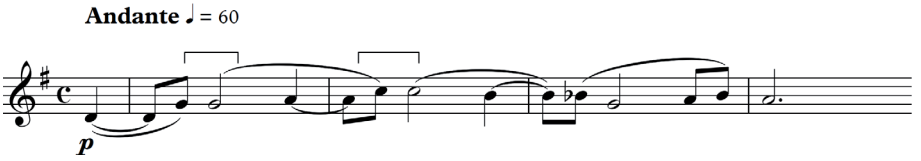



*Ex. 3. Nielsen, Symphony No. 1, first movement, bb. 239–243.*

So it seems that repeated-note ideas, apart from serving a surface-level function of reinforcement of whatever idea they are attached to, are liable to mutate in Nielsen's thematic melting-pot and to interact with other, non-repeated-note, ideas, as a natural by-product of their energy-generating potential. The development section and the coda of this movement are no less affected by the growing influence of the repeated notes, this time manifested mainly in re-animation of the accompanying texture.

It seems, then, that even if the opening of Nielsen's first movement is not conspicuously indebted to Beethoven Fifth, it is certainly the case that a fixation on repeated-note upbeats – whether as iambs or in extended anacrusic forms – works under the surface as the movement proceeds.[15]

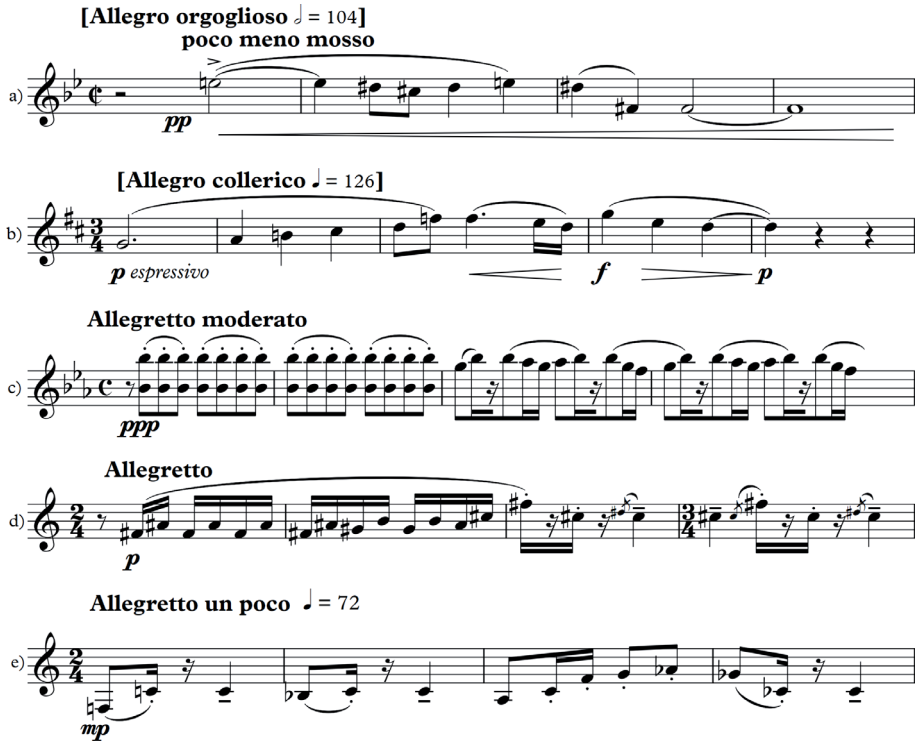
In my 'Influence' article I noted a characteristic variant of the iambic repeated-note upbeat in the second movement, positing it as another, more heavily disguised, derivative from Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* finale (Example 4, cf. Example 2).




*Ex. 4. Nielsen, Symphony No. 1, second movement, bb. 1–4.*

15 In Latin scansion, properly speaking iambs and trochees denote short-long and long-short, respectively, rather than weak-strong and strong-weak, but I am following widespread practice in using them either way. This may seem like an over-fastidious observation. But Nielsen himself used the Latin scansion syllables in his 'Musical Problems' article; they were quite needlessly purged from the English translation in the 1953 edition of *Living Music*, 44, cf. *Samtid*, 267.

The iamb slurred from a preceding note – more often lower than higher – becomes one of Nielsen's favourite germ-cell intonations, in particular for pastoral or playful themes, some of which are shown here, beginning with the extension of the First Symphony, first movement second subject transition section (Example 5).




*Ex. 5. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 1, first movement, bb. 55–58; b) Symphony No. 2, first movement, second subject, bb. 64–69, c) Masquerade, Act 3, bb. 184–187, d) Symphony No. 6, second movement, bb. 68–73, e) Clarinet Concerto, opening.*

As Examples 5c) and 5e) suggest, the graciousness of this gesture is sometimes enhanced by a 'lift', in the shape of a notated rest between the repeated notes. There is ample precedent for this gesture, with or without the rest, and the slur is an important part of the 'lifting' impression. We could recall, for instance, the opening of the slow movement of Beethoven's First Symphony.

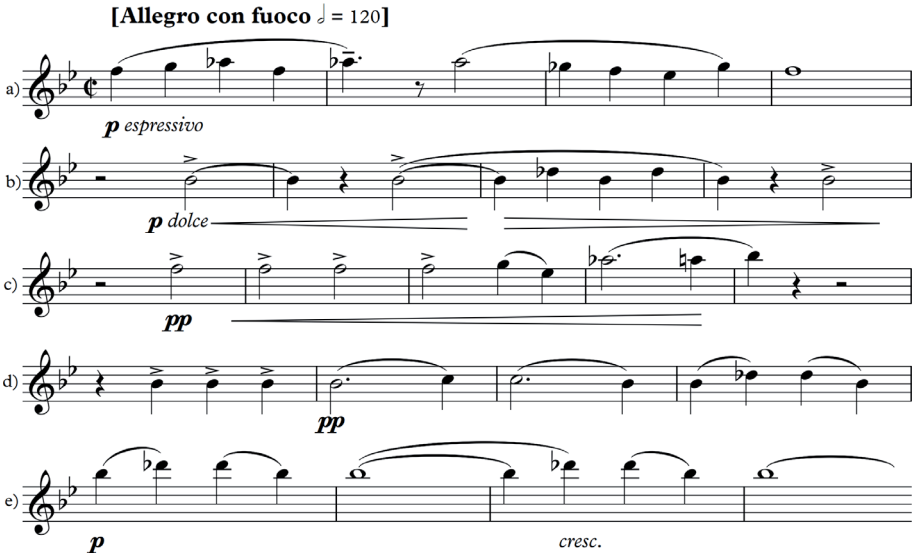
It might seem tedious to run through all 22 of Nielsen's symphonic movements hunting down repeated notes. But in the interests of highlighting the salience of the gesture, that is roughly what the rest of this article is going to do. The exam-

ples will be selective rather than comprehensive, chosen on grounds of salience, and they will be accompanied by attempts at semantic interpretation, which will become increasingly prominent as the survey progresses. My argument, in a nutshell, is that repeated-note motifs gradually acquire not just thematic but semantic force in Nielsen's symphonies. In other words, while they may first appear as more or less abstract agents of energy, transformation and the forging of relationships, they gradually take on more or less dramatic roles, inviting more florid adjectival and dramaturgical description. Not that they do this in a vacuum, independently of other musical parameters. But they do draw progressively more attention to themselves and at the same time help to maintain a sense of identity within ever more ambitious and polarised symphonic scenarios. They serve to reinforce the sense that a 'personality' is present in the music, experiencing the psychological journey it is taking us on. This is the personality with which we can identify: roughly the 'subjectivity' that Nielsen found excessive in Beethoven.

The process of taking on ever greater dramatic significance already advances a step in the third and fourth movements of the First Symphony. Example 6 singles out a passage from the recapitulation of the third movement, where we encounter anacruses of five repeated notes, which at one obvious level are a logical extension from the one- and three-note versions previously presented. This is a vaguely disturbing moment, placed as it is in a foreign key, suggesting slight anxiety, and perhaps even describable as a warning against complacency. It would be possible to suggest 'poco misterioso ed esitando' to an orchestra at this point, without misrepresenting the character. The association with 'warning' is worth noting.


*Ex. 6. Nielsen, Symphony 1, third movement, bb. 162–167.*

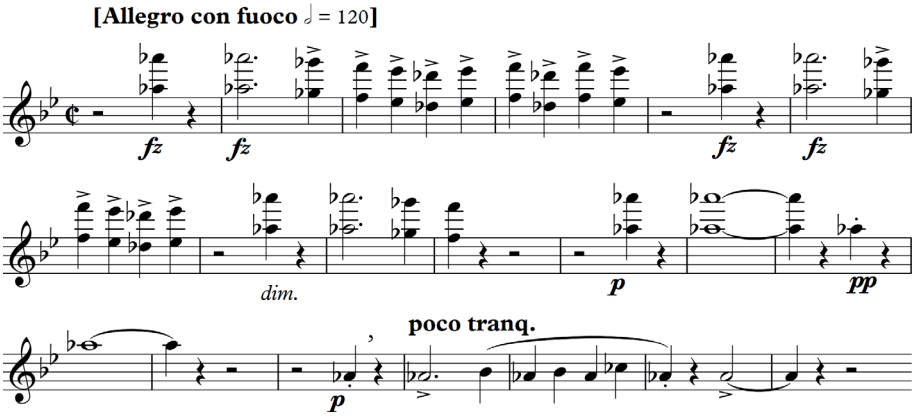
Then in the finale, with repeated notes in mind, it is not hard to see how the main theme revisits the issues of its counterpart in the first movement. But just as interesting is the way the half-dozen mini-themes that make up the second subject draw more and more on repeated-note anacruses, as does the opening theme of the development section that grows out of them. Most of these are marked with accents, and all are ***p*** or ***pp***, as though quietly exalting in the power of inventive transformation as a factor of human nature, to be celebrated in its own right (Example 7):




*Ex. 7. a) Nielsen, Symphony 1, fourth movement, bb. 53–56, b) bb. 65–68, c) bb. 73–77, d) bb. 80–83, e) bb. 97–100.*

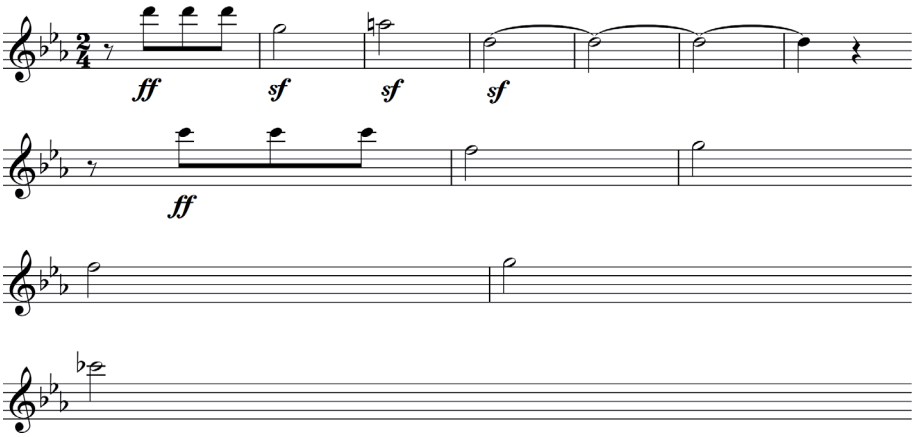
So, it seems that almost from the start, agency within processes of evolution or transformation is one potential virtue of repeated notes for Nielsen. As already suggested, the technique is here formed in the abstract, but it will take on ever more specific, even drastic, semantic associations in his succeeding symphonies.

Most striking of all, perhaps, in the First Symphony is the way the finale's development section strips down its thematic content to pure repeated notes (Example 8), in a process akin to Schoenbergian 'liquidation':




*Ex. 8. Nielsen, Symphony No. 1, fourth movement, bb. 215–234.*

This is striking not only in itself, but also because it chimes with the development section of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony first movement, presented in Example 9 in the form in which it appears in Olivier Messiaen's unfinished *Traité de rhythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie*.




*Ex. 9. Beethoven, Symphony No. 5, development section.*[16]

Messiaen labelled this passage, presumably also in his analysis classes, as 'development by elimination' in a purely technical sense, but also figuratively speaking as a 'death and resurrection'. This semantic interpretation is very much one couched in Messiaen's own terms, but it is not too bad a fit with Beethoven and certainly shows imaginative empathy. I make this reference because it indicates a direction of travel for the rest of my article. In Nielsen's First Symphony, admittedly, any semantic interpretation would need to be less colourful, more generalised, than Messiaen's of Beethoven. Nielsen may have marked his first movement Orgoglioso, but it seems he was not unduly wedded to the description, given that he discarded it for the programme of at least one performance.[17] Be that as it may, the way repeated-note anacruses run through the entire work does keep the Beethovenian model in play. And bearing the above examples in mind, the trumpet's repeated-note tattoos and the hammering horn and woodwind crotchets in the finale's 12/4 coda are not merely tokens of localised excitement; rather, they are the culmination of a sustained musical process focused on repeated notes – a process, which, in its spread across all four movements, relates to Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony as much as it does to his Fifth.

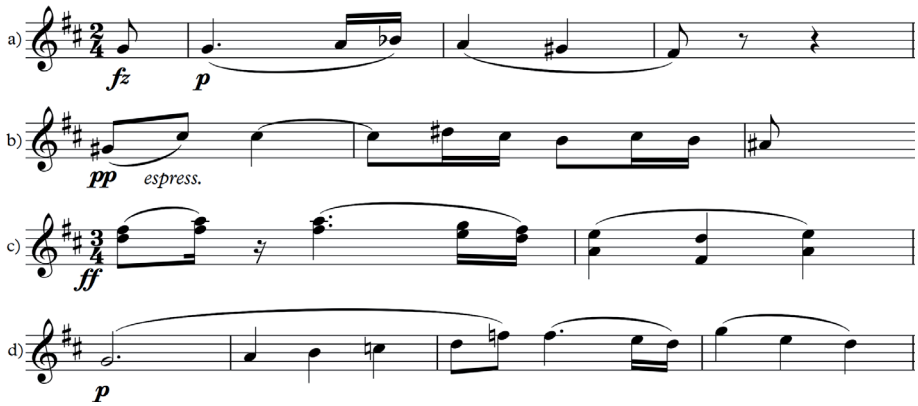
16 Cited in this form in Gareth Healey, 'Messiaen and the Concept of "Personnages"', *Tempo* 58 (230), October 2004, 10–19, here 12.

17 See CNU II/1, xix.

From the First Symphony, then, I propose to take forward the idea that repeated notes may be associated with energy generation, transformation, and quasi-cyclic unification, and additionally with semantic correlations adumbrated but not explicitly specified: all of which suggest a deep-seated kinship with the example of Beethoven's Fifth.

With Nielsen's Second Symphony, the titles of each of the Four Temperaments offer convenient semantic labels for the respective movements, and the composer's own programme note is available for putting more flesh on those labels. But in approaching the surface level of musical invention, and keeping the phenomenon of repeated notes to the fore, once again the musical environment is as crucial as the gesture itself. And once again the abstract function of repeated notes – whether as agents of continuity, transformation or bonding within and across movements – is as important as any more specific semantic value that might be attached to them.

I have given one powerful instance of abstract function in my 'Progressive Thematicism' article, where the following example showed how in the exposition of the 'Choleric Temperament' Nielsen bridges the gap stage-by-stage between thematic areas that are apparently drastically self-contained in different metres. This example also serves to remind us of how the repeated-note motif already presented in Example 5 above – the one with the 'lift' – grows out of the iambic rhythms of the symphony's opening bars, showing the same kind of mutability to which I drew attention in the finale of the First Symphony and its associated Example 7 (Example 10):

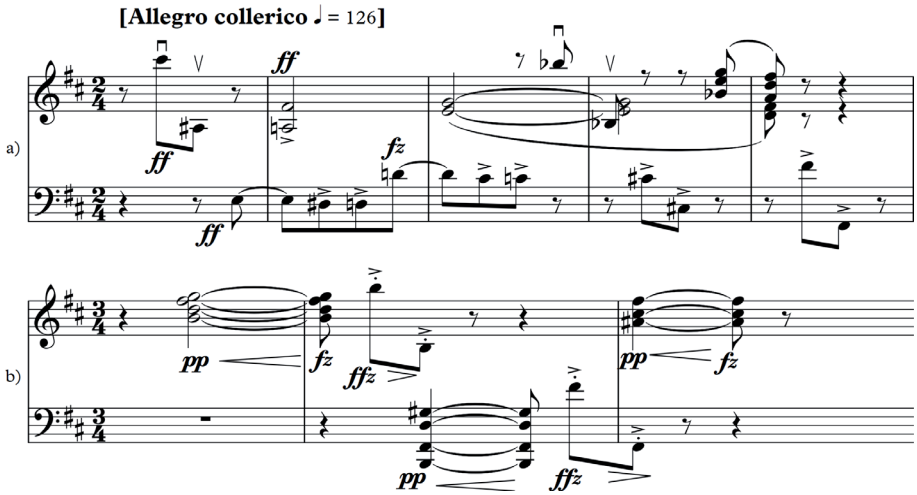



*Ex. 10. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 2, first movement, bb. 34–37, b) bb. 41–43, c) bb. 57–58, d) bb. 65–68.*

To trace the evolution of these variants is to understand, musically, how the Choleric temperament in all its excess, together with the way it 'regrets its irascibility' – to para-

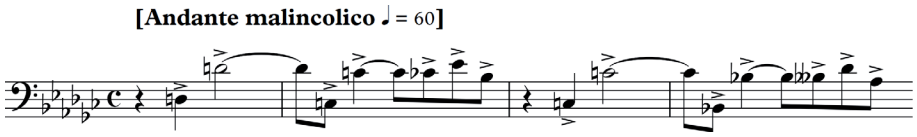
phrase the composer's own words – are two sides of the same coin. The mutability of repeated notes is now serving, or at least co-existing with, a larger-scale dramatic purpose than in the First Symphony by helping to co-ordinate wider contrasts of character within the bounds of a unified, evolving structure: it represents the disguised containing – which is to say centripetal – force, maintaining a tense balance with the increasingly overt centrifugal force embodied in longer, harder-driven musical paragraphs.

The octave leaps already encountered in the main themes of the First Symphony's outer movements – honorary repeated notes, we might say – are also gaining greater semantic force, in that they maximalise an element of pure musical energy into an emblem of characteristic, or temperamental, excess. Those leaps appear most strikingly in the retransition and the coda, no longer just as octaves but as double octaves, carrying an emotional charge irrespective of their environment, indeed almost as if challenging that very environment (Example 11):



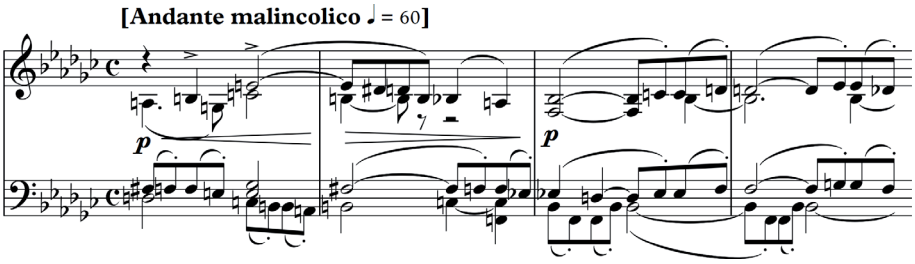

*Ex. 11. Nielsen, Symphony No. 2, first movement, bb. 240–244, b) bb. 384–386.*

This maximalised gesture is echoed in the climax of the third movement, the Melancholic Temperament, where the main motif of the movement, yet again iambic, is augmented into imposing, ascending octaves (Example 12):



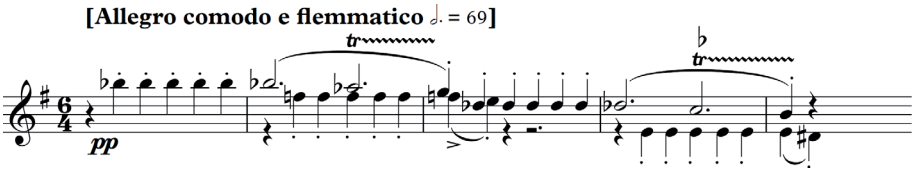

*Ex. 12. Nielsen, Symphony No. 2, third movement, bb. 118–121.*

Repeated-note figures in the slurred form illustrated in Example 5 also grow out of the main paragraph of the Melancholic Temperament to become a pacifying, resolving feature in the coda (Example 13).



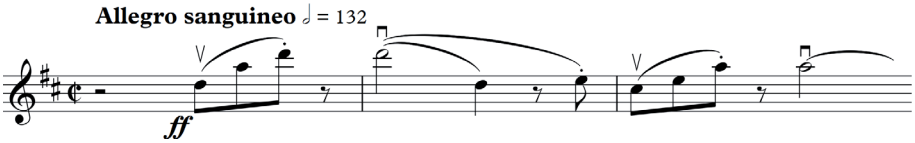

*Ex. 13. Nielsen, Symphony No. 2, third movement, bb. 132–136.*

As for the second movement, the maximal point of phlegmaticism is represented by a five-repeated-note anacrusis figure (Example 14). At the ending of the movement those repeated notes will recur with even less forward momentum.




*Ex. 14. Nielsen, Symphony No. 2, second movement, bb. 55–59.*

In the last movement, it is the repeated note figure with 'lift' that signs in the Sanguine character, now completely energised and extravert, with octave leaps once again serving to maximalise the characterisation (Example 15).



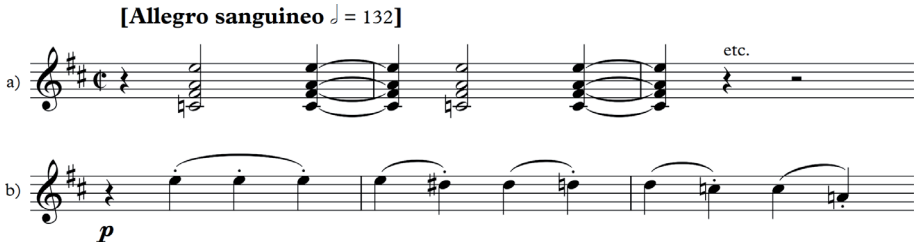

*Ex. 15. Nielsen, Symphony No. 2, fourth movement, opening.*

When the Allegro Sanguineo finale first runs from its headlong energy into elements of doubt, once again repeated-note anacruses signify the new temperamental trajectory, specifically the notion that over-confidence and self-doubt may be two sides of the same human coin. The anacruses return together with a new variant in the pre-coda episode, to betoken that thoughtfulness may help to resolve self-doubt, or if not

to resolve it then at least to acknowledge that this process is a part of life that the Sanguine temperament can accept and move on from. All this is in line with Nielsen's famous programme-note for the piece:

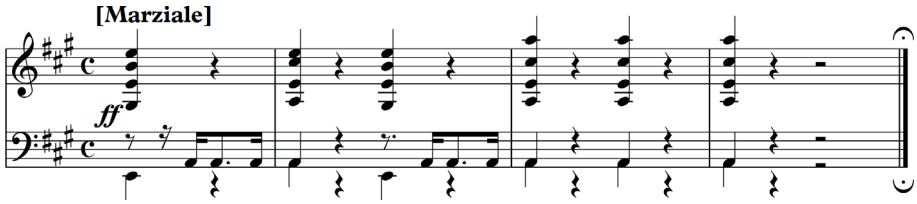
> Just once, though, it seems that he [the Sanguine person] has encountered something really serious; at least he meditates over something that is alien to his own nature ([rehearsal] No. 14), and it seems to affect him, so that while the final march may be happy and bright, it is still more dignified and not as silly and smug as some of his previous bursts of activity (No. 15).[18]

The point here is not in any way to challenge existing semantic interpretations, but rather to show an aspect of how the semantic manifests itself technically (Example 16).




*Ex. 16. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 2, fourth movement, bb. 71–72, b) bb. 246–248.*

Even the obstinate tonic pedal on the last page of the Second Symphony, grinding against the V-I cadence, shows how repeated notes can take a multiplicity of forms: in the service both of musical empathy (the heedless nature of the Sanguine Temperament) and of making conventional gestures the composer's own (Example 17).

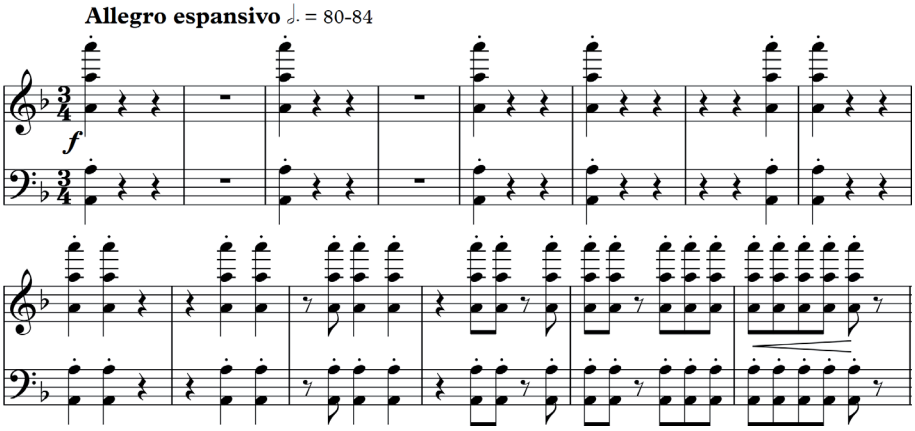



*Ex. 17. Nielsen, Symphony No. 2, fourth movement, 309–312.*

18 CNU II/2, xviii.

From the Second Symphony, then, by contrast with the First, I carry forward the idea that repeated-note ideas may conspire with tokens of maximalisation, such as octave leaps, to reinforce semantic specificity. Nielsen's symphonic instincts have progressed, it seems, from generalised energy into a conflictual engagement with and eventual mastery of excess: from generalised calming into the potential of apathy, from generalised uncertainty into existential hesitancy and self-doubt. As his aesthetic horizons have expanded and become more charged with humanistic values, so his technical means have risen to the challenge of symphonising those values, at the same time as helping to preserve a sense of identity: both the composer's own musical identity and the musically embodied subject to which the listener is invited to relate. Repeated-note ideas are playing their own significant part in that process, and they will play an ever more significant role in his remaining symphonies.

Of course symphonies are only one part of the story, and there are two operas and much other music between Symphonies Nos. 2 and 3 that could be brought into the argument. But if we were to hear the opening of the *Espansiva* straight after the end of the *Four Temperaments* we surely could not help but wonder whether Nielsen was aware of an element of continuity across the intervening nine years or so. The opening bars of the *Espansiva* are his famous maximalisation of the *Eroica* opening, and like that source they seem to contain the entire potential rhythmic energy for the first movement (Example 18, cf. Example 17).



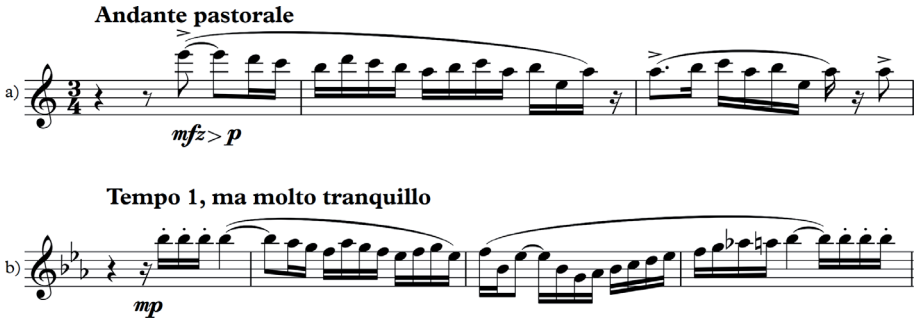

*Ex. 18. Nielsen, Symphony No. 3, first movement, opening.*

This opening gambit by no means holds the record, however, for repeated-note introductions to main themes. The first movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, for instance, features no fewer than 60 repeated dominant Es before launching its first

subject, in this case, too, putting actual and potential rhythmic energy on the table before defining it thematically. That symphony is if anything even more saturated with repeated-note ideas than Beethoven's Fifth (this is much less the case with his even-numbered symphonies, incidentally).

Nielsen's magnificent first-subject paragraph gradually integrates repeated-note figures into its otherwise centrifugal unfolding, ending with unadorned upbeat patterns that both close the frame with the quasi-*Eroica* opening and prepare for the waltz-like lilt that animates the second and third themes (see also Svend Hvidtfelt Nielsen's article in this journal). The dual function of integration (or re-integration) and punctuation is in itself clearly a maximalisation of the processes already seen in the first two symphonies.

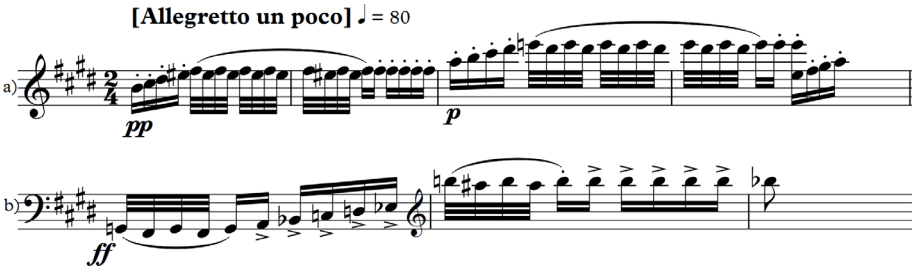
The same goes – at the opposite extreme of musical character – for the idyllic second theme in the Andante pastorale second movement, which belongs to the family of themes illustrated in Example 5, with the 'lift' now an ultra-*grazioso* gesture. The reprise of this movement, apart from the unmistakably idyllic soprano and baritone vocalises, features an expansion of this lyricism with the repeated notes transferred to the beginning and without the *grazioso* lift (Example 19). This is the precise point where Nielsen marked in his draft score, 'I am lying beneath the sun: all thoughts have vanished away'. The three-, five- or seven-or-more repeated-note anacrusis, usually articulated staccato or semi-staccato, and almost always starting on an off-beat, has become not just a highly characteristic Nielsen-esque fingerprint but also one that by virtue of its potential for maximalisation can pivot semantically in the direction either of idyllic euphoria or apathetic dysphoria.




*Ex. 19. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 3, second movement, bb. 32–34, b) bb. 98–101.*

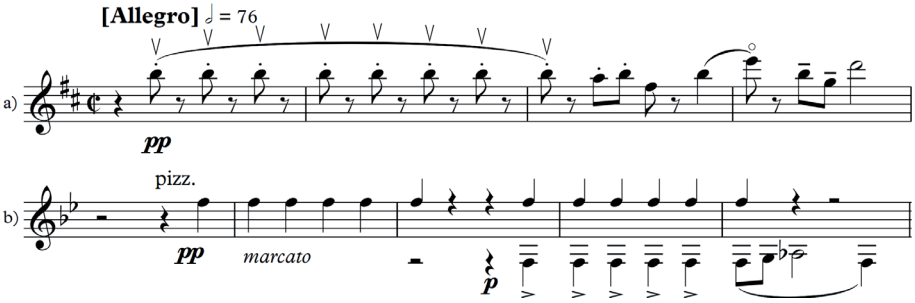
The third movement begins with repeated open fifths on four horns, as if to energise the opening gesture of the Andante pastorale and to recall the opening of the Allegro espansivo itself. Thereafter repeated-note figures serve to convey playfulness and

vigour, or, when amplified, challenge. Nielsen himself made various rather evasive comments about this movement. Towards the end of his life, perhaps viewing it with the hindsight of his last three symphonies, he characterised it as 'a thing that cannot really be described, because both evil and good are manifested without any real settling of the issue'.[19] Whether or not we agree with that evasive yet simultaneously over-determined description, in the context of the present argument it does seem worth observing that repeated-note themes are here again helping to keep a balance and to give surface contrasts a sense of over-arching identity (Example 20):




*Ex. 20. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 3, third movement, bb. 19–22, b) bb. 23–24.*

Similarly, if there is anything at all to Nielsen's comment about 'evil and good [being] manifested' in the third movement, it could lead on to a proposal that the finale resolves the polarity not so much by dealing with it as by balancing it out across the symphony as a whole. This it does by the straightforward quality (as Nielsen put it, *lige ud ad Landveyen*) of the material, and in particular by the long, static B-flat major section that brings to a premature halt what might have been developed into a 'dealing-with' fugato along the lines of those in the first movement. This long paragraph, too, is based on repeated-note anacruses (Example 21):

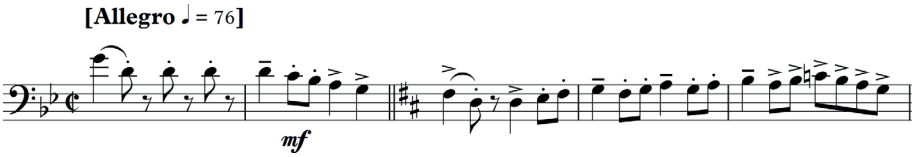



*Ex. 21. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 3, fourth movement, bb. 206–209, b) bb. 227–231.*

19 CNU II/3, xx.

This is the section Nielsen famously told the Concertgebouw Orchestra to play 'boringly', subsequently, at the return to D major, downing tools and stretching lazily, whereupon the orchestra followed suit, to everyone's amusement.[20]

After this episode, Nielsen does give us a more fully realised fugato – yet again built on repeated notes – which really does seem determined to settle the matter (Example 22), albeit only the matter of the finale, not of the symphony as a whole.

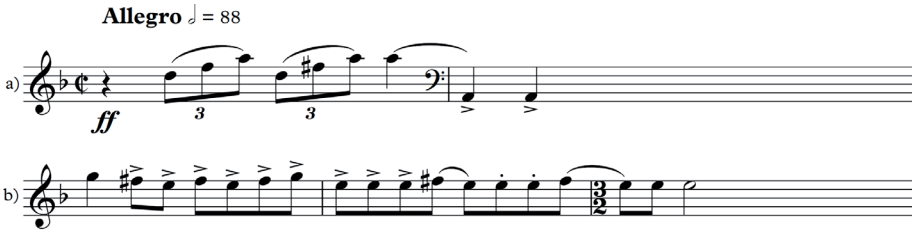



*Ex. 22. Nielsen, Symphony No. 3, fourth movement, bb. 279–283.*

To no-one's surprise by now, the coda is once again grounded by repeated notes in melody and bass.

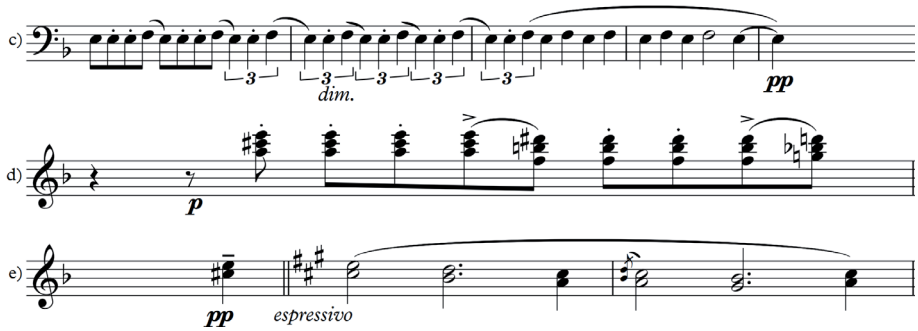
If there is one thing that does *not* develop from the First Symphony to the Second and Third, and one thing that does *not* emulate the dramaturgy of Beethoven's Fifth, it is the phenomenon of a finale that deals with the issues raised in its preceding movements. This *per ardua ad astra* trope resurfaces in the clearest possible terms in *The Inextinguishable*. First, however, a few words on aspects of the first three movements that do build on the example of its predecessors.

The thunderous timpani repeated notes and the D minor broken triad of the first movement's opening two bars were also prime features of the introduction and opening theme of the *Espansiva*. So too is the gradual incursion of repeated-note quavers to heighten the drama of the first paragraph, eventually grounding it and helping to form the transition to the second subject. All of this is a reconfiguration of the evolutionary process not only of the first paragraph of the *Espansiva* but also of the exposition of the Choleric Temperament. Example 23 presents the bare bones of this process.



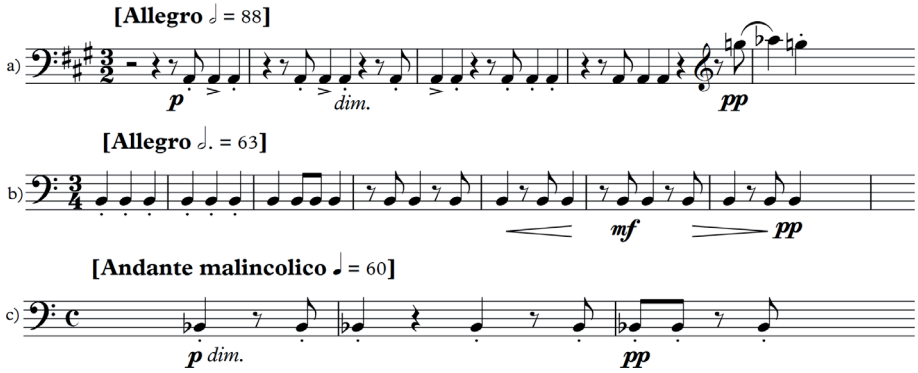

*Ex. 23. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 4, first movement, bb. 1–2, b) bb. 23–25, c) bb. 33–37, d) bb. 39–40, e) bb. 50–52.*

20 Diary entry for 26 April 1912, CNL 296; CNB 4:318.




*Ex. 23. (continued).*

Another reach-back to the Second Symphony comes as the timpani help to round off the exposition, at the same time as planting a seed for the finale (Example 24).

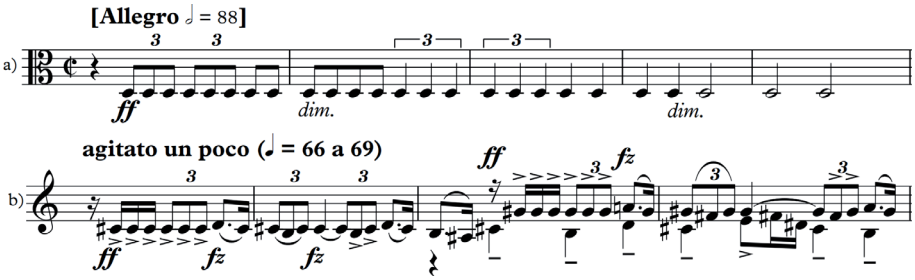



*Ex. 24. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 4, first movement, bb. 139–143, b) fourth movement, bb. 1035–1041, c) Symphony No. 2, third movement, bb. 85–87 (see also first movement, bb. 115–117).*

By far the most imposing instances of repeated-note themes in the first movement of *The Inextinguishable*, however, are the warning shots that underpin the development section and eventually return with similar import in the later stages of the third movement. The latter are admittedly more directly extracted from the third movement's long main theme, the one Torben Meyer and Frede Schandorf Petersen characterised as being 'like an eagle borne on the wind'.[21] But in terms of broader symphonic dramaturgy, the warnings remind us that serious issues such as those broached in the first movement and sidelined in the second cannot be 'dealt with' – or can only

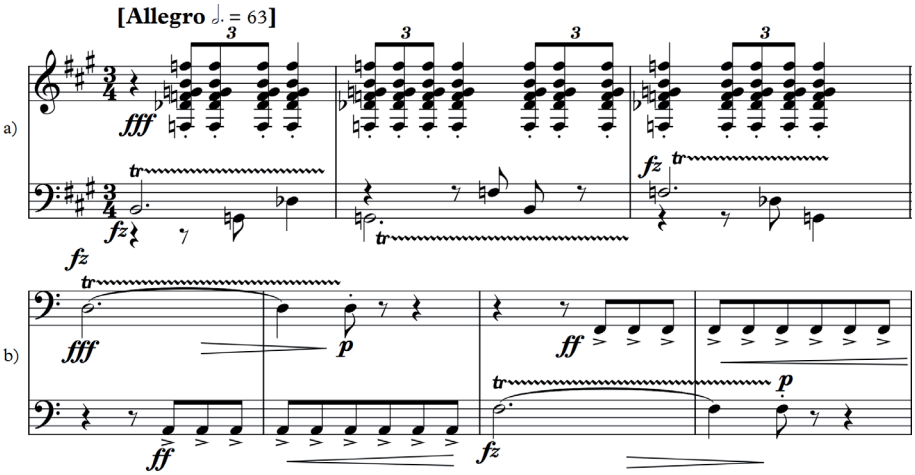
21 *som en Havørn, baaret af Stormen*, Torben Meyer and Frede Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen – Kunstneren og Mennesket: En biografi*, Copenhagen 1947–1948, Vol. 2, 127.

be partially dealt with, perhaps at best counter-balanced – by a retreat into lyricism. *The Inextinguishable* has a more ambitious agenda. When the warnings are combined with assertive fugato writing, we have the complete package of 'dealing-with' intonations (Example 25), not dissimilar to the finale of the *Espansiva*, except that this time the issues at stake are more polarised and demand to be more thoroughly worked through in the finale. At the end of the third movement, the violins and violas hold aloft repeated Es, which are eventually capped by a rat-a-tat tattoo on the timpani. This gesture, incidentally, gives the second timpanist a rare chance to enjoy the spotlight – rare at least in the days when it was still relatively unusual to have two timpani parts at all. It will be the second timpanist who gets an even more gratifying opportunity – with the last four notes of the finale.



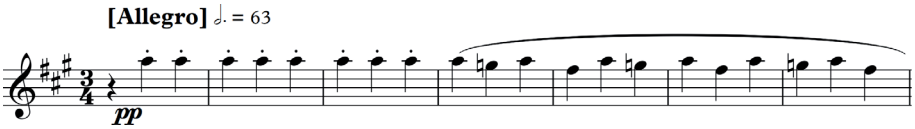

*Ex. 25. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 4, first movement, bb. 169–173, b) third movement, bb. 613–616.*

Repeated-note tattoos heighten the alarm of the first of the two famous timpani duels in the finale, the second of which will allocated give repeated notes to the timpani as a substitute for their previous tritonal oppositions (Example 26):




*Ex. 26. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 4, fourth movement, bb. 774–776, b) bb. 1059–1062.*

The opposite dramatic pole in the finale – the lull between the two storms, as it were – comes when a repeated-note theme reminds us of the 'boring' episode in the finale of the *Espansiva* (Example 27). This theme now finds itself in a hyper-conflictual environment that seems to drag us into the world of Europe's battlefields in almost as literal a fashion as Nielsen's commemoration of the *Titanic* disaster had done a couple of years previously. It is perfectly poised between opposed psychological functions: between basking in the after-glow of the *glorioso* climax that precedes it and anxiously intuiting that the psychological resources that may have been adequate for the world of the *Espansiva* may no longer be so five years on, in the middle of the Great War. Once again it appears that repeated-note anacrusic figures, starting on an off-beat, seem to have been progressively expanding in Nielsen's symphonic output – from iambs, to three-note, five-note and seven-note versions – and have now reached nine repeated notes. Their semantic potency has expanded correspondingly.




*Ex. 27. Nielsen, Symphony No. 4, fourth movement, bb. 860–806.*

Above the second timpani battle in the finale of *The Inextinguishable* we no longer have the malevolent brass tattoos but instead urgent acciaccaturas, heightened by repeated notes, reminding us of the chaos at the very opening of the first movement, and preparing for the return of the acciaccatura-laden second subject that will seal the triumph of the work as a whole. By comparison with the *Espansiva*, this conclusion is truly transformational, with no suspicion of escapism. This is Nielsen's first explicitly cyclic symphonic conclusion, emulating Beethoven's Fifth and reaffirming the *ardua ad astra* trope that was adumbrated there and in Nielsen's First.

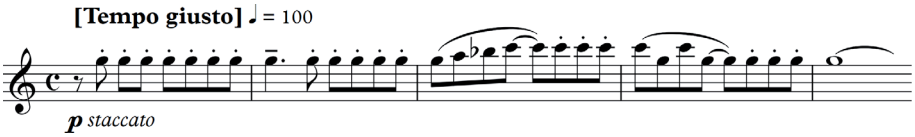
To reiterate the main hypothesis of this article: as the semantic agenda of the first four symphonies has been progressively ramping up, so Nielsen has been drawing ever more resourcefully and daringly on the potential of repeated-note ideas to help realise that agenda in musical terms.

This point deserves elaboration, before moving to the last two symphonies. A wise musicological aphorism runs: 'To make anything more itself, just add music.'[22] In the same spirit of thought-provoking generalisation, it might be proposed that for Nielsen, 'To make any musical idea more itself, just add repeated notes.' In light of the argument so far, it does seem hard to deny that Nielsen uses repeated notes to maximalise

22 Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History*, Berkeley 2002, 3–4.

characters and moods, whether that be at the positive or the negative end of the expressive spectrum. (The same might be said of his use of fugato, but that would require a differently angled investigation.) To generalise still further: as we go through the first four symphonies in turn, it is hard to miss the expansion of Nielsen's world-view, from proud (*orgoglioso*) self-assertion, to empathy (with the various Temperaments), to a quasi-socio-philosophical manifesto in the *Espansiva* (in the finale more or less explicitly affirming the work ethic of the ordinary man), to conflict between the Life Force and its destructive opposite in *The Inextinguishable*. This much is hardly in dispute and was already argued out by Robert Simpson in 1952.[23] What may have been less appreciated is the ever more drastic polarisation of musical characters this progression entails, and the ever bolder loosening of tonal bonds that helps to give such polarisation free rein. This polarisation demands a complementary element of restraint: a centripetal force, as I have termed it, to counter the centrifugal. Step in thematic processes, and step up repeated notes as at least one highly significant force within those processes.

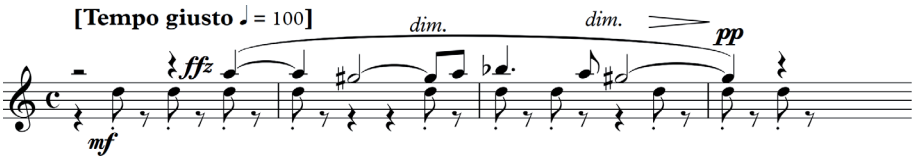
I have written extensively about thematic and other processes in the Fifth Symphony,[24] but it is also worth revisiting those processes, this time more lightly, and viewing them through the repeated-note lens. To start with, when the thematic evolution of the first movement first stutters into repeated-note figures (Example 28) – in effect making the initial state of apathy and impotence 'more itself' – it is the side drum's notorious, remorseless tattoo that will enter to fill the emotional vacuum.




*Ex. 28. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, first movement, bb. 84–87.*

Repeated-note figures then animate the flute and clarinet lines that join the side drum in conveying alarm; and repeated-note trochees on the oboe round off the first of the movement's three sections before the move to the second, underpinned by the C pedal-point (from b. 165, three bars before R7). When new themes are created in this second phase, their repeated-note initiations betoken a new determination to do something about a dire situation – in other words, to deal with it. When those repeated-note initiations become free-floating, eventually stripping away pitch altogether to become mere flickers on the tambourine, they betoken something like dire disappointment of those aims. Example 29 shows just one stage in this drawn-out process.

23 Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, London 1952, 66–67.
24 David Fanning, *Carl Nielsen: Symphony No. 5*, Cambridge 1997, *passim*.



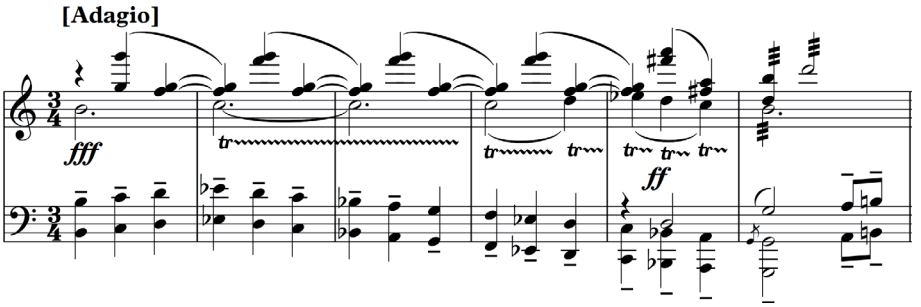

*Ex. 29. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, first movement, bb. 225–228.*

Describing such processes is open to many alternative word-choices. The words are reactions to the complex harmonic, gestural and textural environment within which repeated notes are only one part, albeit a salient one. The descriptions we may choose are also reactions to performative aspects, since various performances validate various adjectives to varying degrees, while some are (disappointingly?) more neutral in effect. But it would be a strange performance, to say the least, that did not register the side drum tattoo as an embodiment of negativity: say, an intrusion of the military on the humane, or the filling of an expressive void by a manifestation of the mechanical. It is curious that Nielsen's own programmatic explanations scarcely touched on this aspect: perhaps he felt that the effect was too obvious to need comment. But it really should not have surprised him that his friend Victor Bendix came up with the expressions '*Symphonie filmatique*' and 'dirty trenches music' to describe the mayhem that the side drum eventually provokes and participates in.[25]

As always, the musical environment is crucial. When the side drum barges in on the G major Adagio third phase of the first movement in a different tempo from the rest of the orchestra, it makes manifest the oppositional quality that was already present in the first two phases. When the trumpets blast out the same rhythm as the side drum, both affect and effect are more ambivalent. At an intonational level, the trumpets associate with the 'evil' skirling motif, as Nielsen himself termed it. But because they are in the same tempo as the manifestly humane Adagio theme (which has no trace of repeated notes other than the 'lifting' variant of Example 5), they are metaphorically on the same battlefield, an arena where they can both contest and be contested, eventually to be obliterated by the humane G major theme.

The first movement's provisional 'victory' is consummated by octave leaps, which now seem to carry an even more super-positive charge than they did in Nielsen's first two symphonies (Example 30).

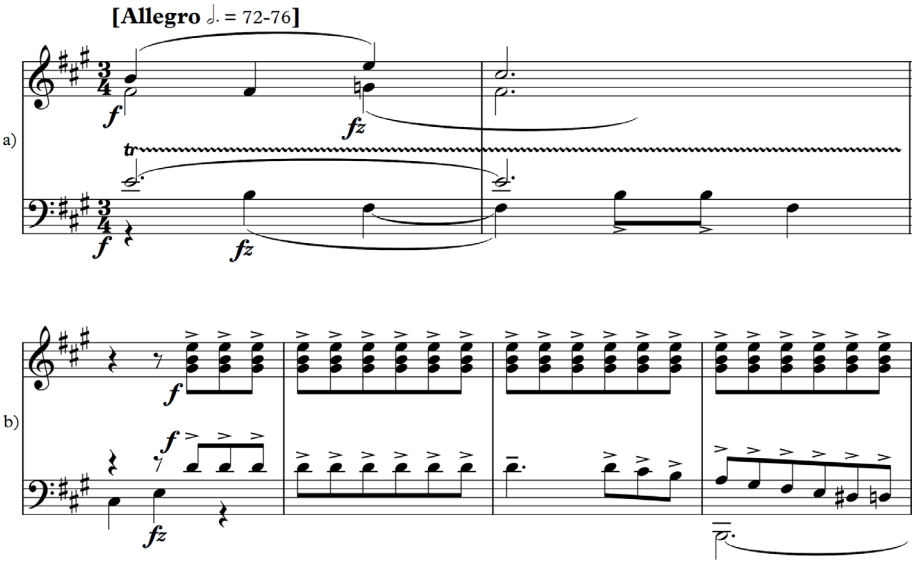
25 Letter from Bendix to Nielsen of 25 January 1922, CNL 482; CNB 7:180.



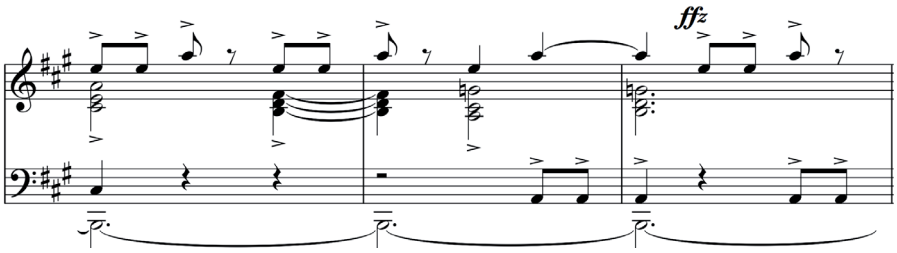

*Ex. 30. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, first movement, bb. 384–389.*

Octave leaps also contribute to the coda of the second movement and to its multi-layered excitement. This is the case both in the short term, with 66 continuous bars on horns and trumpets, and in the long term, since they are the crowning-point of a process that has been running almost from the beginning of the work (see Example 37b, below).

The Allegro second movement is launched with what seems like a renewed determination to accentuate the positive, not least in its various manifestations of repeated notes (Example 31):

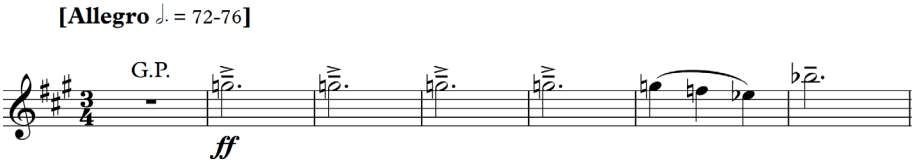



*Ex. 31. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, second movement, bb. 1–2, b) bb. 19–25.*



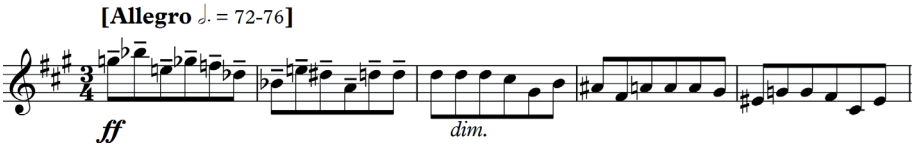

*Ex. 31. (continued).*

The following seven musical examples virtually speak from themselves, and I shall therefore keep commentary to a minimum. The first entirely positive phase of the finale of the Fifth Symphony is the G major theme, apparently an exceptional case of beginning with a metrically down-beat accentuation of rhythmically propulsive repeated notes (Example 32):



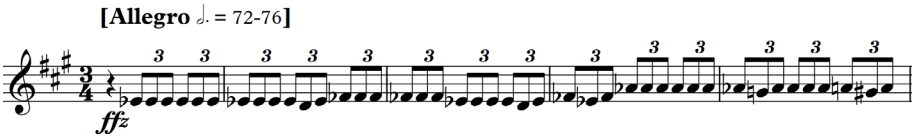

*Ex. 32. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, second movement, bb. 115–120.*

When Nielsen transfers his rushing repeated quavers into a harmonically unstable environment he initiates an undermining process, both formal and semantic, that recalls the battleground from *The Inextinguishable* finale (Example 33):



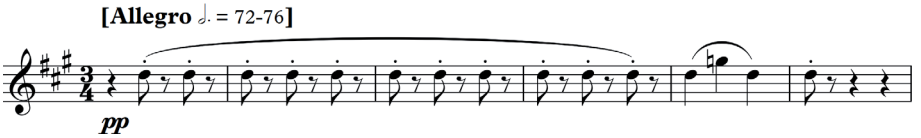

*Ex. 33. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, second movement, bb. 154–158.*

When he intensifies that texture with agitated triplets he is further propelling the tension towards crisis-point (Example 34):



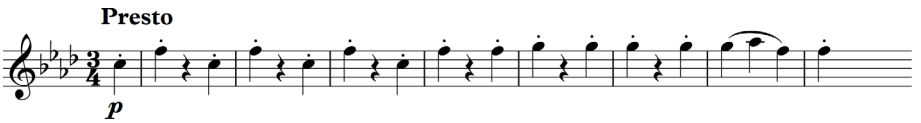

*Ex. 34. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, second movement, bb. 250–254.*

When he reins the triplets back to duplets, tweaks up the tempo, then reduces the duplets to bare staccato-crotchet repetitions, we have an even stronger echo of the 'disappointment' phase of the first movement. Example 35 shows just the last stage of this process, articulated by eleven-repeated-note anacruses:




*Ex. 35. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, second movement. bb. 350–355.*

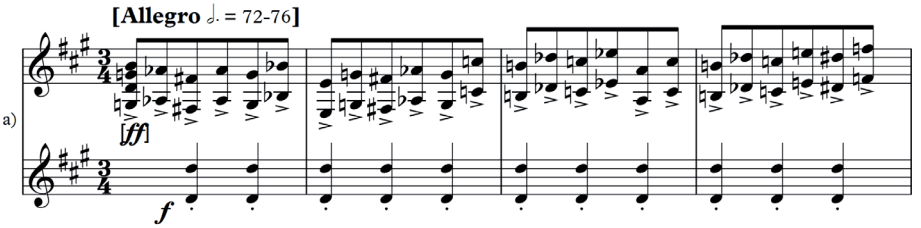
What I have elsewhere dubbed the 'mad' fugue integrates these repetitions, as if to confirm and complete the process of disintegration of personality from positive to negative (Example 36):




*Ex. 36. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, second movement, bb. 409–417.*

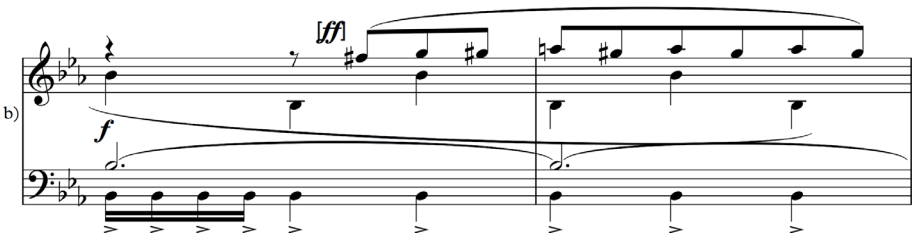
In the following Andante poco tranquillo, as with the G major theme in the first movement, the 'sane' fugue has barely a trace of repeated notes, which backs up the observation that this absence is a characteristic of Nielsen at his most lyrical and thoughtful: *sapiens* rather than *agens* or *ludens*, to invoke the terms of Mark Aranovsky in discussing symphonic archetypes.[26]

The subsequent reprise of the Allegro elides the previous indications of undermining from the first phase, then counters and elides the resultant 'disappointment' phase with octave leaps, reinforced by a dominant pedal on timpani (Example 37).



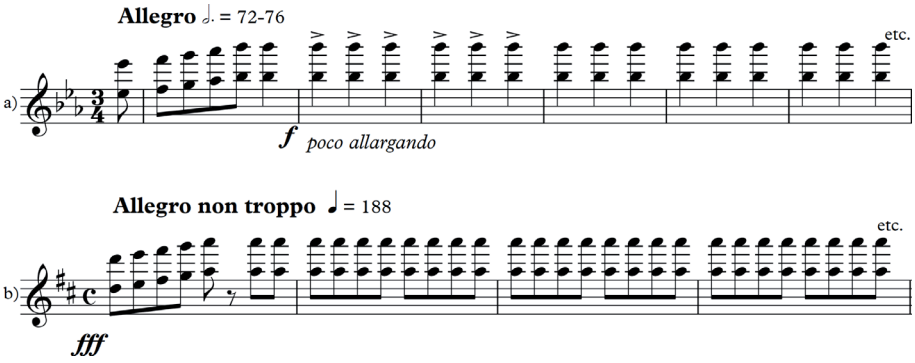

*Ex. 37. a) Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, second movement, bb. 798–804, b) Symphony No. 5, second movement, bb. 848–849.*

26 Elaborated in David Fanning, 'Carl Nielsen and Theories of Symphonism', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 9–26, here 13.




*Ex. 37. (continued).*

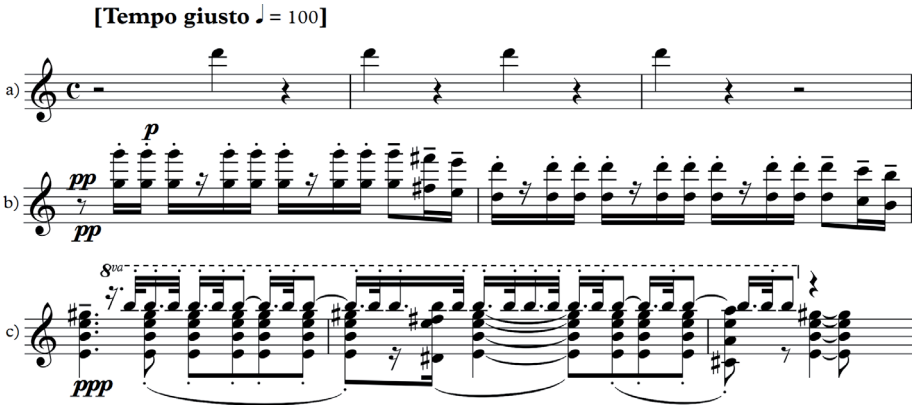
Finally, the repeated notes are held aloft for 66 continuous bars, in a coda so strikingly similar to that of Shostakovich's Fifth that it is hard to believe there is no documentable connection (Example 38):




*Ex. 38. Nielsen, Symphony No. 5, second movement, bb. 879–883; b) Shostakovich, Symphony No. 5, fourth movement, coda.*

As in the Shostakovich, the final timpani tonic pedal is not merely a conventional gesture but rather the apotheosis of an ongoing salient thematic element: in Nielsen's case repeated notes, in Shostakovich's tonic-dominant alternations.

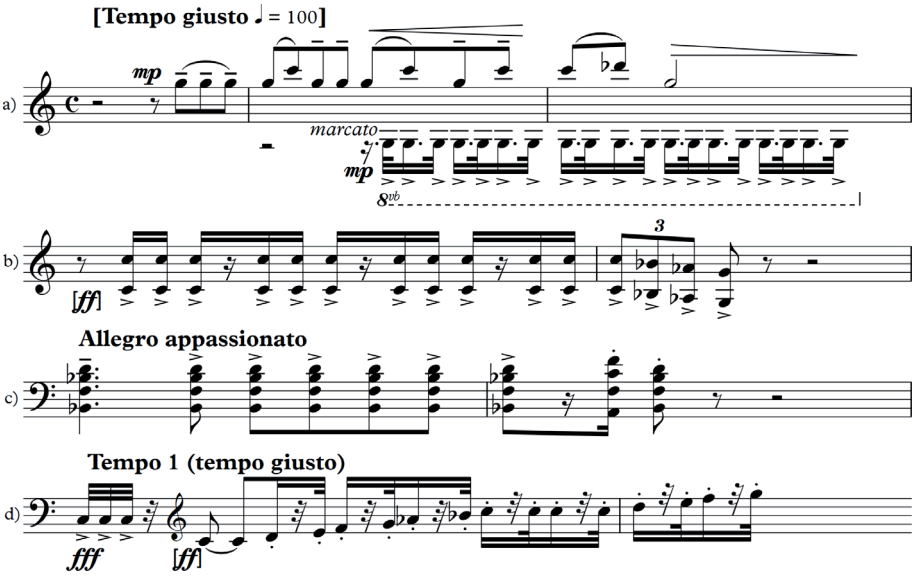
This article has made a running thread of the way each of Nielsen's symphonies takes up an active element from the previous one. With repeated-note figures in mind, it is not difficult to point to similar connections between the Fifth Symphony and the Sixth (Example 39, cf. Example 29 above). At one level, this could be understood as no more than Nielsen speaking his own language, with his own characteristic turns of phrase and intonations. Yet it is still remarkable how many themes and crucial turning-points in the Sixth Symphony feature such ideas.




*Ex. 39. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, first movement, bb. 1–3, b) bb. 8–9, c) bb. 129–131.*

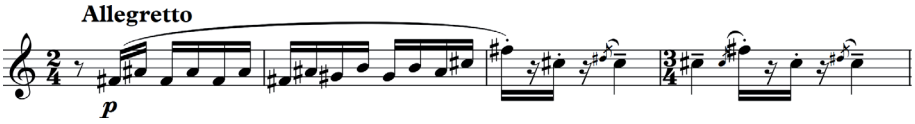
The opening bars of the *Sinfonia semplice* have no environment initially, other than expectations raised by the title. The glockenspiel here substitutes for the Fifth Symphony's celesta and violins, with the self-same tempo and metronome directions. Intertextuality with the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies continues to operate, as the next few examples show. Once again, little commentary is needed to make the point.

As before, the chief dramaturgical role of repeated notes emerges as the emotional colour darkens, especially when initially idyllic themes are, so to speak, dragged kicking and screaming into the 20th century (Example 40):



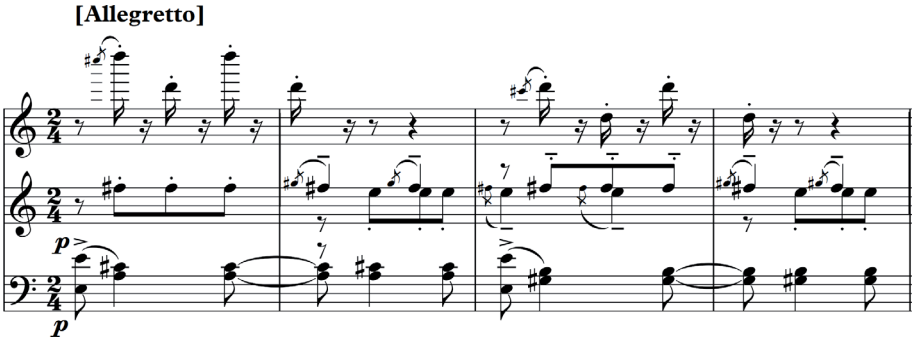

*Ex. 40. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, first movement, bb. 80–82, b) bb. 163–164, c) bb. 171–172, d) bb. 237–238.*

The potential for repeated notes to conspire with other parameters to highlight negativity is unmistakable here.[27] And it carries over into the *Humoresque* second movement, most notably into its faux-naif contrasting theme. Here the salience of percussion and trombone glissandi – not shown on the example – gives a sardonic edge to a theme that otherwise might register as a close cousin to the second movement of *The Inextinguishable* (Example 41):




*Ex. 41. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, second movement, bb. 68–73 (cf. Ex. 5).*

The truncated middle section of this paragraph is almost entirely given over to repeated-note themes and their octave-leap cousins (Example 42):

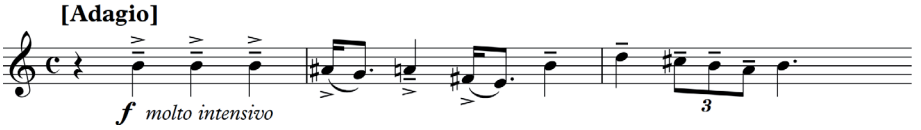



*Ex. 42. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, second movement, bb. 94–97.*

The *Proposta seria* third movement launches with the three-repeated-note anacruses that have been a signature Nielsen gesture since the finale of the Second Symphony (see Example 7d), its closest relative being the second phase of the Fifth Symphony first movement (Example 43, cf. Example 29, above). This time the environment is that of the slow fugato, which had already been a problem-solving topic in the previous two symphonies, especially the third movement of *The Inextinguishable*.[28]

27 See also David Fanning, 'Carl Nielsen and Progressive Thematicism', in Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion*, London 1994, 167–203, here 197–200.

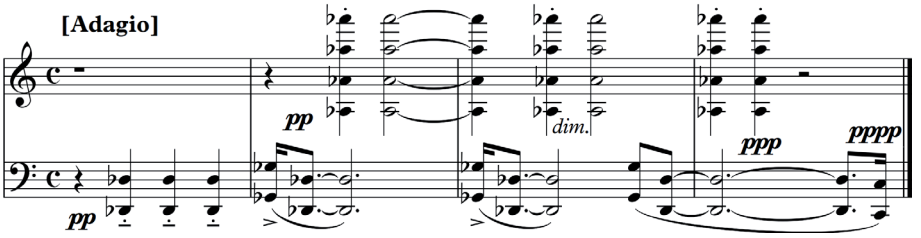
28 Note also the surely coincidental echo in Richard Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, where repeated-note anacruses are added to a citation from Beethoven's *Eroica* in order to give extra weight to its pathos.




*Ex. 43. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, third movement, bb. 1–3.*

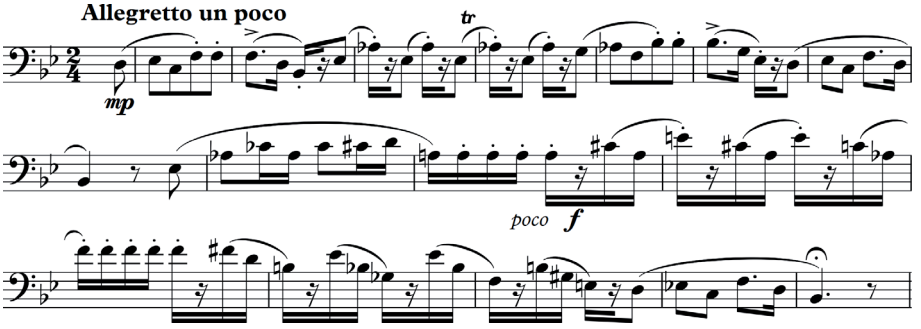
The third movement of the Sixth Symphony ends like the second, with repeated notes now disembodied (in technical terms, harmonically deracinated), as a token of painful issues that have remained unresolved, even by the force of Nielsen's characteristic will-power and empathy. At this stage in the symphony, it seems we have to settle for a stalemate between positive and negative forces.

The sceptic's view might be that Nielsen by this stage in his career had simply become over-reliant on certain of his most characteristic intonations. The aficionado, on the other hand, might prefer to hear these same intonations as reminders that the highest-level philosophical issues of the symphony's first movement have remained unresolved, since the apathetic environment has left the surface positivity of those intonations registering as disempowered and sceptical of off-the-peg humanistic solutions (Example 44):



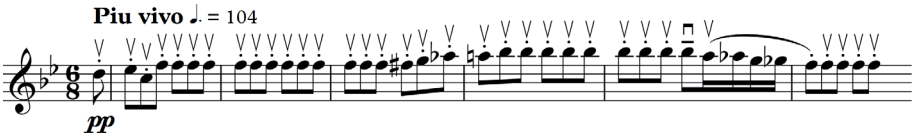

*Ex. 44. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, third movement, bb. 50–53.*

Since the theme of the finale's Theme and Variations features repeated notes throughout, it is of course highly likely that its Variations will do likewise (Example 45):



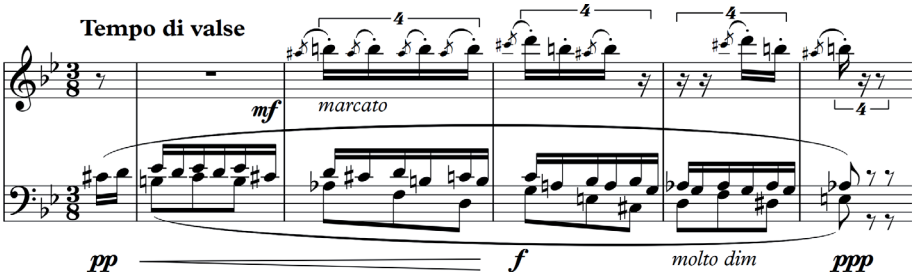

*Ex. 45. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, fourth movement, Theme.*

Sure enough, repeated notes come to the fore very early, even before the third variation launches a dystopian gigue-fugue, now with thirteen-repeated-note staccato anacruses (Example 46):



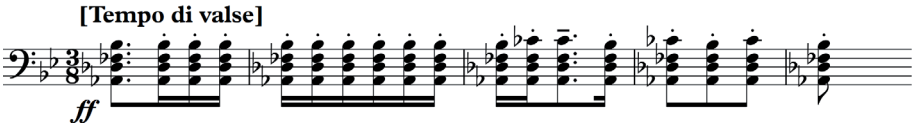

*Ex. 46. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, fourth movement, bb. 61–67.*

In general, the variations do everything they can to draw out the negative potential of repeated notes. Even when Variation 6 manages to relegate them to a conventional waltz accompaniment, they return in a cynical, *Petrushka*-fairground-like intrusion (Example 47, Nielsen's rhythmic notation adapted):




*Ex. 47. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, fourth movement, bb. 208–213.*

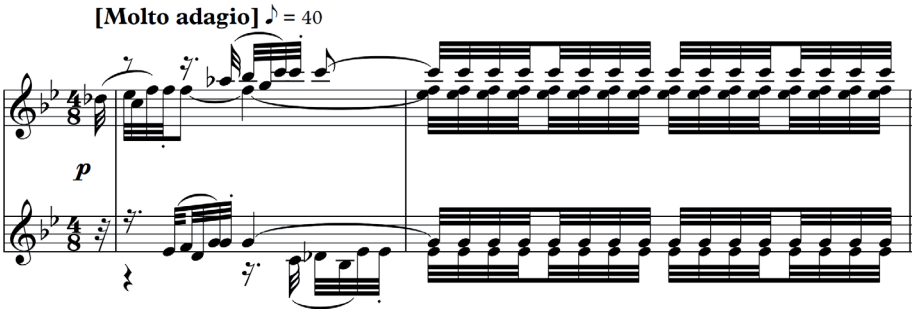
That passage links into Variation 7, which has its own dystopian repeated-note tailpiece, with shades of the brass-and-timpani tattoos of the *Inextinguishable* finale (Example 48):




*Ex. 48. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, fourth symphony, bb. 266–270.*

With that, Nielsen completes the longest narrative arc within these otherwise highly discrete variations. Or maybe not. Because the multi-section Molto adagio Variation 8 has the slow, noble, free-counterpoint texture that has become an established problem-solving topic for him, as a way of reacting to, or dealing with, negativity. Falling in with his established practice, this variation studiously avoids repeated notes

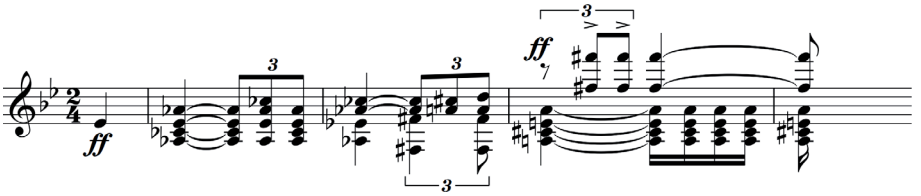
initially, then reintegrates them once a sense of spiritual equilibrium has been re-established. However, that equilibrium is almost immediately knocked sideways, as cynicism declares that it remains unbowed (Example 49):




*Ex. 49. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, fourth movement, bb. 301–303.*

With that apparently dire spiritual defeat behind it, the next variation is like a malignant pre-echo of the percussion variation from Britten's *Young Person's Guide*, with as many repeated notes as you can shake a side drum stick at.

Then there is the Fanfare: a ghastly, leering Totentanz for repeated notes, followed by failed attempts to energise recalls of the Theme, now mercilessly mocked – anything but surprisingly – by repeated notes and implacable dissonance (Example 50):




*Ex. 50. Nielsen, Symphony No. 6, fourth movement, bb. 349–353.*

Finally, along with the infamously rude bassoon B flat *in basso*, repeated notes in the timpani have their say in the concluding bar, in a signing-off that superficially recalls the timpani link to the finale of *The Inextinguishable*, only this time rendered semantically ambiguous by its environment. It is a triumph, of sorts, perhaps. But whose triumph? A finality, but what kind? An exclamation mark, but with an added question mark, perhaps.

## Claims and counter-claims

The claims of this paper, beyond pointing to the striking proliferation of repeated-note themes in Nielsen's symphonies, are not easy to state objectively. I shall therefore first exaggerate them, then underplay them, and finally attempt a sober middleground.

To put it too strongly, then: Nielsen is the most creative symphonic explorer of the repeated note since Beethoven.

To bolster such an assertion scientifically would require a monumental statistical exercise. Consider, for example, that Jan LaRue, to whose scholarly example the present article is indebted, in supporting his theory of musical topics, collected 16,558 thematic incipits from the 18th century alone.[29] Rummaging more modestly through my memory banks for examples from Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, Bruckner, Mahler, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Stravinsky and a few others, suggests that the assertion may yet hold.[30] But it remains unproven, perhaps even unprovable. Ideally one should look beyond Nielsen's time and assess the practice of rockers, minimalists and rappers, as well as composers in the 'classical' concert tradition, in order to give a sufficiently rounded picture. Equally, comparisons can be made with styles foreign to Nielsen and to the humanist symphonic tradition: twelve-note composers are virtually forced into repeated-note configurations, for example, for no other reason than the need to vary the rapidity with which rows pass before the ear. From within the humanist tradition, Shostakovich is an especially interesting case, because he clearly uses repeated-note patterns in emblematic ways: galloping dactyls as a token of alarm (as in the first movements of his Fourth and Fifth Symphonies); and beginning-accented anapaests as a rhythmic signature equivalent to his famous melodic one (DSCH), as most prominently in the third movement of the Tenth Symphony and the fourth movement of the Eighth String Quartet. That Shostakovich favours down-beat initiations is one way in which he is differs markedly from Nielsen in this area, though a glance at the middle section of the slow movement of the Fifth Symphony would reveal at least one striking instance of commonality.

Now to state this article's claim unobjectionably, but too weakly. Looking at Nielsen's symphonies through the prism of repeated-note themes, we stand to gain a fresh appreciation for his resourcefulness, for the ways in which diversity of musical imagery is held together by characteristic turns of phrase, and for the extent to

29 *A Catalogue of Eighteenth-Century Symphonies, Vol. 1 Thematic Identifier*, Bloomington 1988.

30 Coincidentally, there is a significant commonality between Nielsen and Tchaikovsky in their deployment of repeated-note themes in their respective Fourth and Fifth Symphonies.

which the evolution of small-scale imagery into large-scale dramaturgy – both within symphonic movements and from work to work – may be predicated on those self-same characteristics.

In what ways Nielsen may have been drawing on his early fascination with Beethoven in this process is again something that can never be proved, any more than could relating it to his teenage experiences as a military bandsman or, even earlier, as a co-opted village musician. This situation is in fact not a case of either/or but rather of both/and. Which is to say that Nielsen may most likely have drawn both on his classical heritage and on 'real-life' musical experiences. One further, albeit slightly flippant, possibility might be worth floating. Which orchestral players have the most extensive experience of repeated notes? Might this not be the second violins? If so, perhaps Nielsen's somewhat torturous 15-year experience as second violinist in the Royal Theatre Orchestra might have spurred him – consciously or otherwise – to find ways of turning drudgery to creative ends.

And so, finally, to a mid-way claim, albeit one still made in the spirit of keeping the argument open. Nielsen could surely have signed up to Robert Browning's dictum: 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp; else what's a heaven for?' We can find any number of corroborations for that line of thinking in the composer's own writings. At the same time as his reach extended, so did his grasp perforce become firmer. Which is to say that as his musical horizons broadened, so his technique became more focused. He was a symphonic adventurer, to be sure, yet one who prepared carefully for eventualities. He was a risk-taker, yes, yet one who took out adequate insurance in advance. On one side of the equation, the reach, adventure and risk are expressed musically by an increasingly open attitude to large-scale design and to its articulation by means of structures predicated on functional tonality. On the other side, the grasp, preparation and insurance are expressed musically by resourcefulness in thematic imagery and processes, in which respect repeated-note ideas play a significant role that merits the extended discussion afforded it in this article.

This may seem like a very long-winded way of demonstrating what Nielsen himself already said so poetically and so succinctly in his short sentences about musical intervals, quoted near the outset of this article. But I do not resent the time and energy it has taken to probe more deeply, and I can only hope that the intrepid reader may feel the same way.

**A B S T R A C T**

Arising from a re-reading of Nielsen's thoughts on Beethoven and on the ethical qualities of musical intervals, this article probes his use of repeated notes in all six of his symphonies. Initially arising from his close study of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, he became fascinated by the potential of repeated-note motifs to create a characteristic repertoire of themes, perhaps more systematically so than any other symphonist since Beethoven's time. Furthermore, these themes carry ever sharper semantic associations, heightening the impact of whichever themes they form part of.