CARL NIELSEN STUDIES

VOLUME VII · 2026

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VOLUME VII · 2026

Edited by David Fanning and Michael Fjeldsøe

Copenhagen 2026
Carl Nielsen Centre, Museum Odense

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

CARL NIELSEN'S DREAMSCAPES

By Daniel M. Grimley

In a letter to his wife, Anne Marie, dated 27 August 1892, written while staying in the coastal suburb of Skovshoved north of Copenhagen, Nielsen recounted a late summer night he had spent restlessly trying to sleep:

> I went to bed at 10 o'clock and lay reading the Bible until 12. Then I turned off the light and thought of you and what I had read, got into a sweat and then fell half asleep with eerie dreams, then was wide awake. At that same moment, the wind started to sough in the trees – then everything fell silent again, so strangely. I lay for a while. Suddenly I started up, almost in terror. A large gadfly began to hum. It sounded to my ears like eternity and infinity. Exactly, infinity. And then came thoughts of death, all in black. They kind of strode along indomitably and eternally, silently and straight ahead. Then, in the middle of all that, came sensual feelings. So I grabbed the Bible again, and read and read. I came to think of the strange vision you had seen. It looks like a letter C – my name. Was I never to see you again? Is that what it meant? I was about to run out into the night.[1]

1 I am deeply grateful to Michael Fjeldsøe, Katarina Smitt Engberg, Peter Hauge and Bjarke Moe for their kind assistance with this essay, and to the staff of Museum Odense for their assistance consulting items in Carl Nielsen's library. All translations of letters are from carlnielsencorrespondance.dk, translations of other texts by the author unless otherwise stated.

Sidste Nat var underlig uhyggelig. Jeg gik iseng Kl 10, lagde mig til at læse i Biblen til Kl 12. Saa slukkede jeg Lyset og tænkte paa Dig og det jeg havde læst, kom i Sved derved og henfaldt saa i en Halvslummer med uhyggelige Drømme, vaagnede saa atter helt[.] I det samme Øjeblik begyndte det at suse i Træerne – saa blev det atter tyst, saa underligt. Jeg laa i nogen Tid. Pludselig for jeg sammen, næsten i Skræk. En Stor Bremse begyndte at summe. Den Lyd var for mit Øre som Evigheden og Uendeligheden. Netop Uendelighed. Og saa kom der Dødstanker, alle i sort. De ligesom skred ubetvingelige og evindelige, stille og lige frem. Saa kom der sandselige Fornemmelser, midt i al det. Jeg greb saa atter til Biblen og læste og læste. Jeg kom til at tænke paa det sære Syn Du havde sèt. Det ligner et C, mit navn. Skulde jeg aldrig se Dig mere? Betød det det? Jeg var lige ved at løbe ud i Natten. Letter from Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 27.8.1892, CNB 1:344; CNL 59.

Though Nielsen apparently never finished nor sent the letter, it is nevertheless a revealing document on several counts. Most immediately, his dream expresses the acute fear of abandonment which would later become a recurrent trope throughout much of his marriage with Anne Marie, especially when the two partners were living apart for longer periods because of the professional demands of their work and other domestic challenges (including Nielsen's infidelities). It also reflects Nielsen's struggles with religion and spirituality, presumably in the wake of his conversations with George Brandes and his circle in Copenhagen[2] – searching the Bible for deliverance or salvation, but instead finding merely a further cipher, mystery or sign (the letter 'C'). In a revised version of the letter, apparently drafted the following day, Nielsen remembered the famous opening lines of St John's Gospel, writing: 'Don't you think it's wonderfully deep and mystical? Just the first verses. I especially like: "And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not." But overall there's a special kind of muted mysticism throughout the whole thing.'[3]

The Bible may ultimately have failed to inspire any formal religious conviction on Nielsen's part, but it nonetheless provided the framework for a more basic binary ontology which pervaded much of his later work: light and obscurity, life and death. Nielsen's letter also attests to his acute acoustic levels of perception. The ambient sound of the rustling trees outside his bedroom window becomes the buzz of a horsefly, which then begins to assume a more existential significance, the sound of 'eternity and infinity'. Nielsen maintained a powerful sense for sound's material quality throughout his life – from delight in crackling paper to the noise of tram cars on the street. All sound for Nielsen became a potential creative resource or a phenomenological trace: the vital sign of a living world in motion. At the same time, Nielsen's letter is also striking for its preoccupation with the seemingly permeable boundaries between wakefulness, sleep, and semi-consciousness, and with the hallucinatory dreams, fantasies or visions that emerge between. Turning at the end of his note to Botticelli's famous *Primavera*, which he had only recently seen with Anne Marie while on their honeymoon at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, he wrote of how the dream sequence had reminded him of the painting's figures: 'The trees are half human, half plants, and when they talk to one another it sounds like a mixture of rustling and human voices.'[4]

2 Katarina Smitt Engberg, 'Carl Nielsen og århundredeskiftekulturen i København' (PhD Dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2021), ch. 6, 'Det radikale og intellektuelle miljø', 96–136.

3 *Synes Du ikke det er forunderlig dybt og mystisk? Blot de første Vers. Især synes jeg om det: Og Lyset skinnede i Mørket[.] Mørket begreb det ikke. Men der er i det Hele taget en sær dæmpet Mystik over det {det} Altsammen.* Letter from Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 27.8.1892, CNB 1:345; CNL 60.

4 *Træerne ere halvt Mennesker halvt Planter og naar de taler samme lyder det som en Blanding af Susen og Menneskerøster. Ibid.*

Dream seemingly unlocked a new world of voice, tone, hybridity and affective emotion which he felt able, at particular moments, to draw into his creative process.

Nielsen was preoccupied with dreams for much of his career, from his early Jacobsen setting 'I Drømmenes Land' ('In the Land of Dreams'), written the year before his letter to Anne Marie but which he later withheld from publication (apparently because he felt it was overly influenced by Wagner),[5] to the suggestion, at the end of his essay 'The Song of Funen', that 'even the trees dream and talk in their sleep with a Fynsk accent'.[6] Likewise, he described Wilhelm Stenhammar's performance of the Andante from Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto as 'profoundly dream-like' ('dybt drømmende'),[7] and in an interview in *Politiken* following a performance of his Fifth Symphony in Stockholm that created a critical scandal, he referred to a dream in which Stenhammar performed a symphony 'in *D flat major*' (original emphasis) in a glass pavilion, and spoke of how, looking out upon a 'wonderful prospect with lakes and undulating hills', the music somehow came into 'complete accord with the landscape – something I would otherwise never have believed.'[8] Despite this weight of evidence, however, scholars have generally not taken Nielsen's dreams very seriously. The reason is perhaps because of dream's obviously subjective and transitory character – Nielsen's accounts of his dreams often seem disconcertingly naïve, figurative, or playful, and so hardly the basis for more sustained reflection. But such critical reticence may be also because the idea of Nielsen as a dreamer sits uneasily with the more familiar image of the composer as a forward-looking, progressive artist, promulgated by writers such as Schandorf-Petersen or Robert Simpson: a restlessly active creative agent who resisted any 'symbolist nonsense'[9] and sought to do away with the 'softness' of contemporary Danish music.[10]

5 On Carl Nielsen's reservations over 'I Drømmenes Land', see Niels Bo Foltmann, Peter Hauge, Elly Bruunshuus Petersen, and Kirsten Flensborg Petersen, editorial commentary, *Carl Nielsen: Songs. Editorial Texts*. CNU III/7, 25.

6 *og selv Træerne drømmer og taler i Søvne det fynske Maal.* Carl Nielsen, 'Den fynske sang', *Levende Musik* (Copenhagen: Martins Forlag, 1925 [1944]), 90; *Samtid*, 346.

7 Letter from Nielsen to Wilhelm Stenhammar, 24.11.1918, quoted in *Carl Nielsens Breve i Udvalg og med Kommentarer ved Irmelin Eggert Møller og Torben Meyer* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1954), 180, CNB 6:152; CNL 420.

8 *et vidunderligt Landskab med Søer og bugtede Bakkelinier, og Symfonien, der var i* Des-dur, *var i fuld Overenstemmelse med Landskabet – noget, jeg ellers ikke har troet paa.* '5. Symfoni Skandalen i Stockholm', interview by 'Frib.', *Politiken*, 23 January 1924; *Samtid*, 308.

9 Carl Nielsen referred dismissively to *det Symbolistvrøvl* in a letter to Gustav Wied, 18.4.1897, CNB 1:622; CNL 126.

10 Nielsen famously spoke disparagingly about *dette danske, bløde, udglidende, udjevnende* ('this Danish softness, smooth-flowing, equalizing') in an interview in *Verdens Gang*, 5 December 1908, in connection with the Second Symphony; *Samtid*, 124.

This essay offers some outline thoughts on the role of dreams in Carl Nielsen's music and the literary work of his Danish colleagues, J.P. Jacobsen, Johannes Jørgensen, and Jeppe Aakjær. Much attention has been paid to the importance of dreams more widely in early twentieth-century thought, not least in the wake of Sigmund Freud's ground-breaking 1900 volume *Die Traumdeutung* ('The Interpretation of Dreams') and its concern with the unconscious and erotic desire. Nielsen spent a formative period in Vienna in 1894, at a time when Freud was first formulating his theories of the dreamwork. Freud's writings were in circulation in Danish translation well before the Second World War. Understanding this phenomenon in Nielsen's work solely through a Freudian lens, however, does not entirely capture the impact of dream on his music. Focusing in the first instance on two works in which dreams play a crucial role – his 1903 cantata *Søvnen*, with a text by Jørgensen, and the tone poem *Saga-Drøm*, based on a passage from Njál's Saga – the essay begins to explore the ways in which dream might shed fresh light on familiar themes and processes in his music. En route, I will argue that an equally valuable model for understanding Nielsen's interest in dream might be found in the work of another significant continental European thinker, Henri Bergson, associated with a second fin-de-siècle metropolis where the composer spent time at a crucial moment of his early career: Paris, rather than the Austrian capital. I will also suggest that Nielsen's concern with dream might correspond with one of the critical musical categories the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno identified in the work of his contemporary, Gustav Mahler.

Just three months before suffering the restless August night that he reported to Anne Marie, Carl Nielsen was in correspondence with the poet Johannes Jørgensen. Although Jørgensen later claimed that he only met Nielsen for the first time in Rome in 1900, the fact that the two men were in contact earlier suggests more than a passing relationship, one that culminated in their collaboration on the cantata *Søvnen* almost a decade later in 1903. Jørgensen had initially been part of Brandes's circle in Copenhagen, but through a series of articles in the journal *Taarnet*, which he edited for two years from 1893, Jørgensen moved increasingly away from Brandes's literary realism and embraced a more symbolist aesthetic, inspired by the work of contemporary French authors including Huysmans, Mallarmé and Verlaine, and which led towards his decision to join the Catholic church in 1896.[11] What attracted Jørgensen to such continental writers was their desire for what he called a 'spiritual revolt. A revolt in that word's most actual meaning: a conversion. They turn away from the world, from the outer life. And they seek solace and peace in the realm of eternal

11 Henrik Wivel, 'Kredsen omkring *Taarnet*', in *Dansk litteraturs historie, vol. 3: 1870–1920* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2009), 265–311, esp. 321–29 (on Jørgensen).

beauty and on the coast of an immortal dream.'[12] Nielsen's earliest sketches for the design of what became *Søvnen* date from 1901, and already suggest an alluring juxtaposition of antique dreamlike imagery, of the kind he had identified in Botticelli's *Primavera*, with a more apocalyptic vision of violence and upheaval:

> Sleep's sons, the Dreams, and their sisters, the Dream Sisters, rise up drowsily one by one. They are chained under the crown of a balsam tree where lazily at first then attentively raise their heads and gaze forward. ...
>
> The whole world shakes and everything seems it will explode. Some shout for murder and blood
>
> [notated on same sheet:] depth of feeling, power of thought and clarity in execution, then one will reach the high level of the Extraordinary.[13]

Nielsen did not work up these ideas further for two more years, and then he initially approached his friend Julius Lehmann to draft the text before eventually turning to Jørgensen. The full development of the libretto has been described in detail by Elly Bruunhuus Petersen, following the discovery of Nielsen's correspondence with Jørgensen, who argues that the composer's renewed interest in the project may have been stimulated by his recent work on the Overture *Helios*.[14] Nielsen had travelled to Athens to join Anne Marie, who was working on a research trip funded by the Anckerske Legat, and he suggested that *Søvnen* followed a mirror trajectory to *Helios*: starting at the point, at the Overture's end, where the sun falls behind the mountains in the west and sets into the Aegean. Nielsen's preliminary thoughts for the libretto, outlined in a letter to Anne Marie dated 12 May and then elaborated in correspondence with Jørgensen on 25 July, captured the colour palette he associated with the Athenian landscape, and which had made such a powerful impression on his Overture:

12 *en aandelig Revolte. En Revolte i dette Ords egentligste Forstand: en Omvendelse. De bortvender sig fra Verden, fra det ydre Liv. Og de søger Frelse og Fred i en evig Skønheds Riger og paa Kysterne af en udødelig Drøm.* Johannes Jørgensen, 'En Ny Digtning', *Tilskueren* 10 (1893), 376.

13 *Søvnens Sønner Drømmene og deres Søstre, Drømmesøstre rejse sig tungt søvndrukne En for En. Lænkede er de under Kronen af Balsamtræet hvor dovent først og siden lyttende Hovedet hæve og fremad de skue. ...*
... Hele Verden ryster og alt synes at skulle sprænges. Nogle raabe paa Mord og Blod Dybde i Følelsen, Kraft i Tanken og Klarhed i Udførelsen, da naar man op imod det Overordentlige. Samtid, 722.

14 Elly Bruunshuus Petersen, 'Carl Nielsen, *Søvnen*, opus 18: en musiktekst bliver til', *Fund og Forskning* 43 (2004), 405–22.

[I]	
Rolig, drømmende gaar Skyen bort i Vesten.	Calmly, dreaming the cloud drifts westward.
Dunblød ruller den ned bag Jordens dunkle Kreds.	Down-soft it rolls behind the earth's dark orbit.
Og Solens sidste mørkerøde Lysning	And the sun's last glowing light
kysser – mellem lange dvælende Skygger –	Kisses – between long lingering shadows –
det grønne Mos paa store Træer og Stene.	The green moss upon great trees and stones.
Og alting aabner sig og aander langt	And everything opens itself and draws a long
og tungt i mat, smilende Kamp	Deep breath in weak, smiling struggle
om Alverdens Balsam og Manna og Salighed.	For the world's balsam and manna and bliss.
II	
Men ude i en fjern Horizont	But out upon the far horizon
Komme ...	comes ...
... de salige Drømme	... the blessed Dreams
... de onde ...	... the evil ...
... forfærdende ...	... terrifying ...
... Hjælp!	... help!
III	
Store spørgende Menneskeøjne	Great questioning human eyes
sænker atter to og to	Sink again, two by two
de matte bløde tunge Laag	They close their weak, heavy lids
og lukker sig som blundende Blomsterbægre	Like slumbering flowerheads
der har drukket af Solens røde Purpurstrøm	That have drunk from the sun's purple rays
en Drømmedag	One dreamlike day
Og Søvnens store milde Vande	And sleep's great gentle waters
rinder ud over den ganske Verden.	Flow out across the whole world.[15]

Nielsen was swift to downplay the literary quality of his proposed scenario to Jørgensen, suggesting instead that he was offering merely 'raw ingredients' ('raa Ingredienser') for musical-poetic treatment. But he alluded also to the famous sequence in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in which play's eponymous lead, haunted by the memory of having killed Duncan, is taunted by a voice which calls, 'Sleep no more. / Macbeth does murder sleep'.[16] Although Nielsen may have referenced an early modern author in his letter to Jørgensen, the asymmetrical metre and design of his draft in fact suggest another, more recent, author: Jens Peter Jacobsen. Jacobsen's poetry often draws on dream imagery and the exotic, and on the boundary between night and day, and is likewise concerned with ghostly visions and revenants. Nielsen had been powerfully drawn to Jacobsen's work as a young man, including his setting of 'I Drømmenes Land' and the other texts which formed the basis of his Jacobsen-songs, Op. 4, and the fantastical landscape of his draft for *Søvnen* strongly resembles that aspect of Jacob-

15 Letter from Nielsen to Johannes Jørgensen, 25.7.1903, CNB 2:302, trans. by the author; CNL 166; cf. CNB 2:294.

16 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 2.2, 35.

sen's work. The heavy-lidded eyes that sink, 'to og to' like slumbering flowerheads in the third stanza recall the desiccated leaves of the thorn bush in winter that scatter, 'et for et', in the final verse of Jacobsen's *En Arabesk*, one of Jacobsen's most erotically charged poems and a text that inspired Nielsen's early eponymous piano work, from his set of *Klaverstykker*, Op. 3. At the very least, then, it seems plausible to suggest that Nielsen's early designs for *Søvnen* were his own form of 'Arabesk', a symbolic dream-fantasy that interleaved elements of the natural world – clouds, stones, trees, moss, and drooping blooms – with a state of psychological excitement and anxiety.

In his correspondence with Jørgensen, Nielsen initially claimed that the text would not require very many lines and simply needed '1. Some words which give sleep's blessing; 2. some which disturb it; 3. the first mood but with an allusion to death'.[17] In the event, he rejected Jørgensen's first effort, and the final text was significantly reshaped according to the musical demands of Nielsen's score. *Søvnen* falls into the three broad sections Nielsen had originally outlined: the outer sections form a more-or-less symmetrical frame, characterised by the tightly organised structure of Jørgensen's text, Fig. 1. A pair of quatrains in trochaic tetrameter in the first section, with rhyming fifth-line refrains, is expanded into three quatrains in the third section, suggesting a lengthening or drawing-out (in contrast with Nielsen's reprise, which is musically compressed). The middle section, meanwhile, is based on a text

Jørgensen/Nielsen text	Tonal reference
[I] Milde Søvn, du store Moder, [fromme Moder] ved hvis Bryst vi Hvile finder, som ved store, stille Floder, der i Fred og Mørke rinder. Milde Søvn, vor Moder.	E flat/C minor
[I.ii] Dagen lang mod dig vi stunder, blide Hjem, hvortil vi stræber. Salig er den Mand, som blunder, som har lukket sine Læber! Salig er den Mand, som blunder!	V/E flat; V/C ↓ C major!

Fig. 1. Søvnen*, Op. 18. Musical-dramatic outline.*

17 *I. nogle Ord der giver Søvnens Salighed / II. noget som forstyrrer den / III. den første Stemning maaske med en Allusion til Døden.* CNB 2:302, trans. by the author; CNL 166.

[II] En Kval, en Tynge, vé mig, er jeg vaagen? jeg trues, jages, bag mig følger nogen, jeg véd ej hvem, jeg véd ej hvem! jeg véd ej Vejen frem! Ak, mørke Huler hænger lavt og haardt ned over mig, Jeg vilde gerne bort, gerne bort! Men jeg er fangen, bunden, Foden gliper. Ak, skal jeg dø blandt disse slumme Klipper?	[Unstable] [V/C minor?]
[II.ii] Vanden siver ned, det drypper, tungt i Dybet Jeg snubler, styrter, glider ud paa Krybet. Er jeg en Levende paa Gravens Bunde, Og skal i denne Grav jeg gaa til Grunde? Hjælp mig! Jeg kvæles! En Døds angst vil knuse mig! Jeg synker, Almægtige, O, frels mig! Jeg dør! Drømme svinder, syner falme, Blændværk blegner hen.	[Unstable] *Schreckensfanfare!* A major
[III.i] Fromme Søvn, vor milde Moder, giv mig atter Fred og Hvil, Lad mig, ved dit Hjerte finder Nye Kræfter, nye Smil.	E flat
[III.ii] Søvn vor Moder, søvn vor Søster, med det milde Glemsels Bæger, hil dig, du, som lindrer, kvæger, du, som trøster. Dagen lang, mod dig vi stunder, Blide hjem, hvortil vi stræber. Salig er den Mand som blunder Som har lukket sine Læber. Salig er den Mand som blunder!	C major E flat E flat

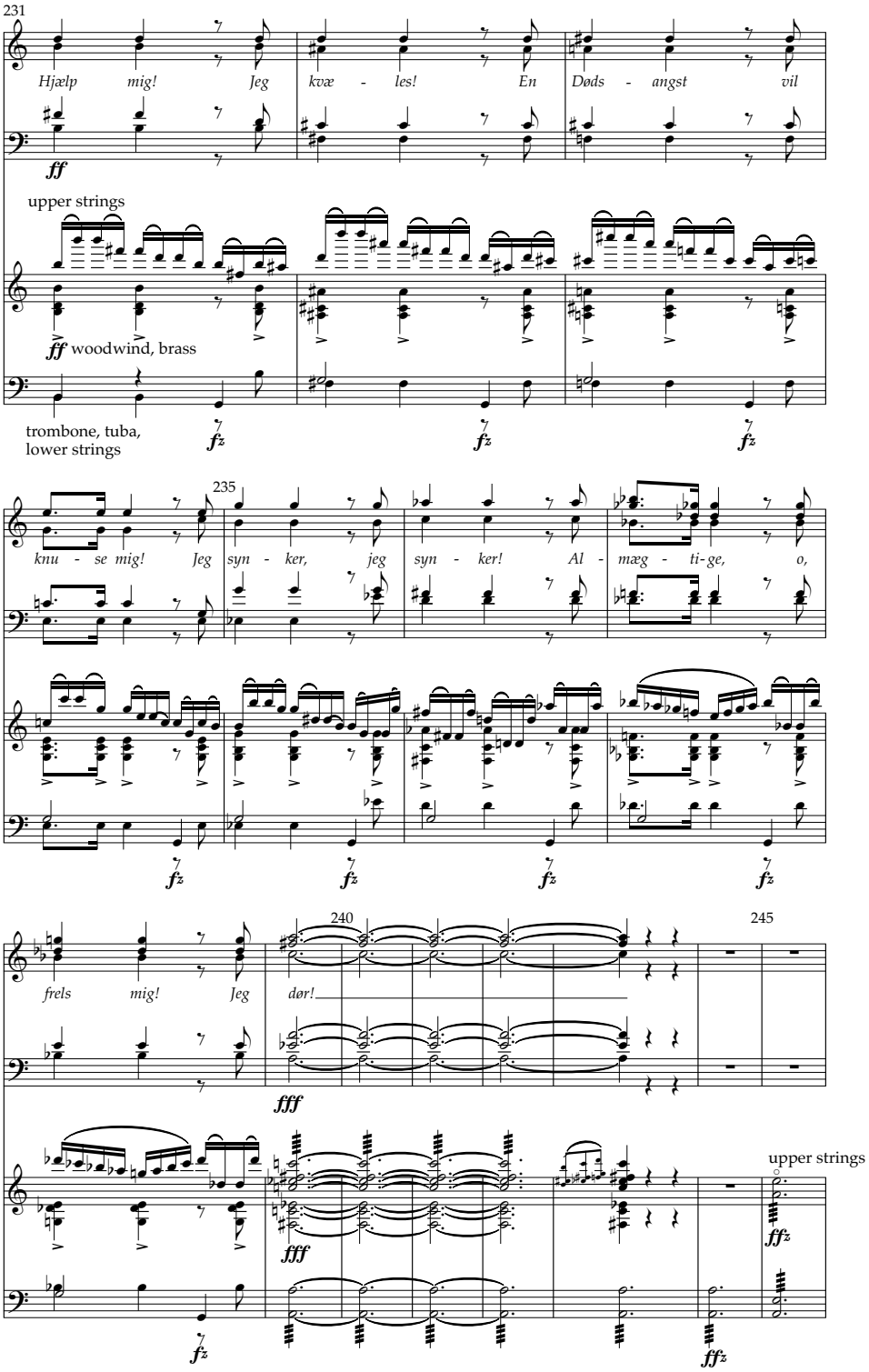
Fig. 1. (continued).

in which Nielsen's took a much freer hand, and the poetic metre is likewise much more irregular and unpredictable, though it retains elements of the outer section's verse structure. This tripartite plan is also supported by the cantata's tonal and motivic organisation. The work opens reverentially in E flat major, the same key which Nielsen later employed for the unmasking sequence in the third act of *Maskarade* and of the slow movement (likewise Andante) of the *Sinfonia Espansiva*.[18] But as the passage proceeds, the opening section of *Søvnen* spends as much time in C as in E flat, so that the work might profitably be understood as a double (or paired)-tonic complex in which modal mixture plays a significant role. By late nineteenth-century standards, the tonal organisation is remarkably direct and conventional: the start of the second stanza, 'Dagen lang mod dig vi stunder', is marked musically by the beginning of a new formal point of imitation on the secondary dominant, V of B flat (i.e. of V of E flat) in b. 63, which is then repeated fourteen bars later on the dominant of G (V of C, b. 77), reinforcing the tonic pairing of the opening paragraph. The section then finishes in C in b. 90, so that the whole phrase is structurally open. A similar subdivision takes place at the corresponding point in the third section but is tonally reversed, reinforcing the design's strong structural symmetry: 'Søvn vor Moder' begins on V/C in b. 294, and then regains E flat, appropriately enough, at the words 'blide Hjem' ('gentle home'), in b. 308, after which the music closes in a glowing postlude. The middle section, in contrast, is tonally unstable throughout, and convulsed by music which echoes the opening *Allegro collerico* from *De fire Temperamenter*. The climax is the dramatic *Schreckensfanfare*[19] reached at the desperate words 'Jeg dør!': little more than a diminished seventh, in practice, but a sonority that brings the cantata's double-tonic centres (E flat and C) into direct collision, Example 1. To these are added a third element (A natural), plus a fourth, F sharp, which is prefigured as early as b. 15 in enharmonic form as a characteristic modal shading to the music's first cadence and frequently referenced elsewhere as the middle section proceeds. The music emerges out of this relative point of crisis into a shining A major – another key centre strongly associated with tonal symbolism elsewhere in Nielsen's work[20] – before slipping back into E flat the start of the third section. This large-scale tonal structure is under-

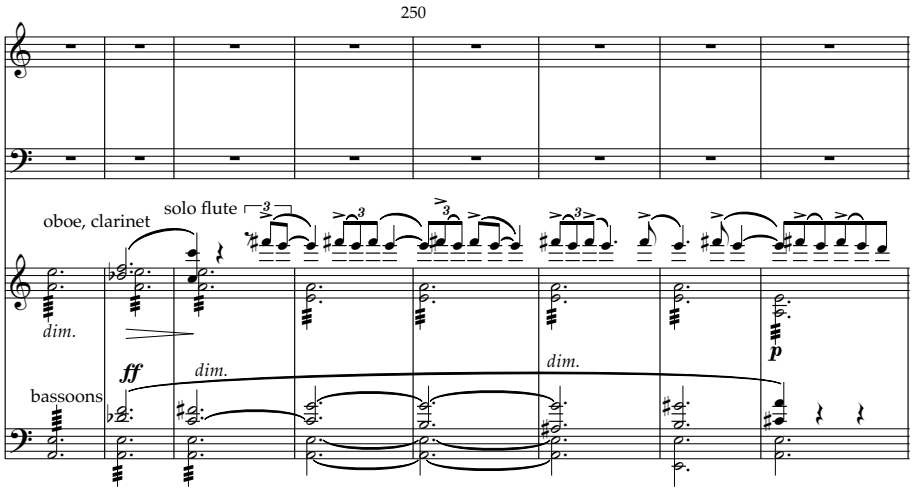
18 Daniel M. Grimley, 'Carl Nielsen's Carnival: Time, Space, and the Politics of Identity in *Maskarade*', in *Art and Ideology in European Opera, Essays in Honour of Julian Rushton*, ed. Rachel Cowgill, David Cooper, and Clive Brown (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 241–63.

19 The term 'Schreckensfanfare' refers to the dissonant outburst at the opening of the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, whose dissonance prompts the baritone soloist's urgent first entry: 'O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!'

20 On A major's significance among Nielsen's wider interest in tonal symbolism (including E flat), see Anne-Marie Reynolds, *Carl Nielsen's Voice: his Songs in Context* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010), 307–27.



Ex. 1. Nielsen, Søvnen, bb. 231–253.



Ex. 1. (continued).

pinned throughout by Nielsen's tight motivic counterpoint: of particular note is the way in which the restful phrase with which the cantata opens, with its neighbour note motion and falling triplet, is reordered and transformed at the start of the middle section, where it assumes a far greater urgency.

The role of this turbulent middle section, with its seemingly irresistible chromatic 'death-drive' toward the *Schreckensfanfare* at b. 239, is key to interpreting the dream that lies at the heart of *Søvnen*. In one sense, Jørgensen's strongly allegorical text might be read as the Danish equivalent of another dream vision of the human encounter with the Divine: John Henry Newman's celebrated poem *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865). Both Newman and Jørgensen trace the final journey of a mortal soul who accepts death with equanimity, but who cries out for salvation and atonement in fear of judgement for their earthly sin. Whereas for Newman the soul's journey is facilitated by the Angel of the Agony, who intercedes on Gerontius's behalf, for Jørgensen the journey is undertaken alone, and the pain of the middle section of *Søvnen* attempts to capture that feeling of suffering and despair. The opening of Nielsen's setting is not as obviously eschatological as that of Edward Elgar's famous oratorio (1899), just as the symbolism of Jørgensen's text is hazier and less explicitly foregrounded as a rite of passage than Newman's. But the religious overtones of the repeated phrase 'salig' (translated as 'blissful' in the Carl Nielsen Udgave, but also meaning 'blessed') are reinforced by the unmistakable intertextual reference to the setting of the phrase 'Selig' which opens (and also concludes) Johannes Brahms's *Ein Deutsches Requiem, Op. 45*: a work written in precisely the same years as Newman's poem, and which was clearly one of the other formative influences on Nielsen's

score. *Søvnen*, in that sense, is likewise a prayer for deliverance and peace, but one that invokes its own individual terror and wrath. The nightmare of the middle section hence becomes a moment of judgement which threatens complete bodily and psychological collapse.

There are other ways, however, of conceiving the dream in *Søvnen*. One of Nielsen's other preoccupations – that aforementioned concern with the material quality of physical sounds (such as the buzz of the horsefly or rustling paper) – is no less prescient at pivotal moments in the work's unfolding drama. Two details exemplify this more empirically based response. The first is the word painting in the upper wind and campanelli which precedes the phrase 'Vand siver ned, det drypper' ('water seeps down, it drips') in b. 146. Emerging at the end of the first wave of fear which propels the middle section, the figure initially seems little more than a cadential drop of colour. It is only in retrospect that its significance becomes clear – as the drops of water that play into the ear and mind of the disturbed dreamer and trigger the work's existential crisis. It is equally only with hindsight that the figure's tonal reference also gains greater significance. As in Mahler's work, bells are frequently a marked timbral signal in Nielsen's music, and here the percussion highlights the reference to the tonal centre of the outer sections, E flat, amid the middle section's chromatic upheaval.[21] The bells return to strike the same note, to very different affect, in the cantata's closing passage at b. 316, as though to lay to rest the ghost of previous torments and the horror of the night's turmoil.

The second key acoustic detail occurs at the abrupt transition from the peaceful end of the first section in b. 90 to the beginning of the nightmare. By bar 90, the cantata appears to be drifting seamlessly into an utterly calm and stable tonal realm (recalling the restful C major music with which *Helios* opens), but the somnolent mood is disrupted by the violin tremolo on E natural, recaptured an octave higher and then expanded outwards to a major ninth as the chorus returns. Although E is not itself a dissonant pitch here, given the prevailing tonal context, the *sul ponticello* marking, *forzando* attack and open strings of the entry, plus the addition of the ninth, means that the sound is characterised by a much higher level of non-harmonic frequencies, or ambient noise, than the immediately preceding music. This unnaturally bright, edgy timbre neatly captures the buzzing sound of the protagonist's nervous system, suggesting a sudden increase in perceptual awareness and cognitive function consistent with the feverish beginning of the nightmare. It is the seemingly involuntary nature of this response that is most disturbing, akin to the way in which the

21 Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992 [1971]), 47.

rustling trees in Nielsen's restless August dream became the nagging sound of the horsefly, a noise which then seemingly prompted thoughts of infinity and death. Significantly, this sound recurs later at b. 205, at the beginning of the final build-up to the *Schreckensfanfare* thirty bars later, before it is finally washed out in the languorous cadential elaboration of the passage which brings the middle section to a close: the very same pitches (E and F sharp) harmonically recontextualised and melodically inverted first by the principal flute and then the solo violin so that they signal relaxed acceptance rather than panic, friction and anxiety.

The precise role and affect of these two particular acoustic details in *Søvnen* raise different questions about Carl Nielsen's understanding of dream. From a Freudian perspective, it is tempting to search for ideas, symbols or scenarios that might indicate the manifestation of some latent biographical episode or neurosis, whether associated with mourning, loss, guilt, or repressed desire. Yet Nielsen's interest in Freud's ideas significantly postdates his work on *Søvnen*: the volumes in his library indicate that he only began to consult Freud's writings after the breakdown of his marriage in 1916, presumably in response to the acute sense of crisis which that event prompted.[22] A more closely chronological model might instead be found in the work of Henri Bergson, whose ideas were widely discussed throughout European intellectual circles in the early twentieth century, and whose short essay on dream was first published in the *Revue scientifique* in 1901, directly contemporary with the composition of *Søvnen*. Bergson's approach was concerned with the mechanism by which dreams appear and take shape rather than with their significance *per se*. 'I perceive objects and there is nothing there', Bergson argues in the introduction to his essay; 'It is all *as if* real things and real persons were there, then on waking all has disappeared, both persons and things. How does this happen?' The answer, Bergson suggests, lies in thinking more carefully about what is actually involved in the somatic process of dreaming. 'Is it true', he claims, 'that there is nothing there? I mean, is

22 Nielsen's library, now held in the collection of the Carl Nielsen Museum of Museum Odense, includes four separate volumes of Freud's writings: *Vorlesung zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, 2 vols (Leipzig/Wien: Hugo Heller, 1916); *Det Ubevidste. Om Psykoanalyse – om Drømmen,* trans. Otto Gelsted (København: Martins Forlag, 1920); *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1923), in paper and hardback editions; and *Kleine Beiträge zur Traumlehre* (Leipzig Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1925). He appears to have underlined or marked passages throughout the two volumes of the *Vorlesung* (coincidentally also the earliest of the books in question and exactly contemporary with the breakdown of his marriage), but not the other volumes. In the final section of the second volume of the *Vorlesung* (pp. 169–270), the pages are uncut, and it is not clear when the volumes were read and annotated.

there not presented a certain sense material to our eyes, to our ears, to our touch, etc., during sleep as well as during waking?'[23] The crucial difference between Bergson and Freud's conception is that whereas Freud sought to interpret dream objects or events as displaced or in some cases disturbed versions of the things that they allegorically represent, Bergson was instead concerned with a more immediate relationship between materiality and affect. This front-loaded approach is one of the reasons why Bergson was more explicitly interested in sound than Freud. Writing in greater detail about dream and auditory perception, his description begins to resemble the account in Nielsen's 1892 letter to Anne Marie of that restless summer night at Skovshoved:

> First, the ear has also its internal sensations, sensations of buzzing, of tinkling, of whistling, difficult to isolate and to perceive while awake, but which are clearly distinguished in sleep. Besides that we continue, when once asleep, to hear external sounds. The creaking of furniture, the crackling of the fire, the rain beating against the window, the wind playing its chromatic scale in the chimney, such are the sounds which come to the ear of the sleeper and which the dream converts, according to circumstances, into conversation, singing, cries, music, etc.[24]

It is the involuntary nature of such perception which is important for Bergson, just as it is for Nielsen, alongside the individualised identification of particular sounds according to their timbral character. Indeed, it is precisely the material quality of the sound object, Bergson implies, which enables it to become marked, and which the dream then transforms into some form of meaningful human utterance (including conversation or music). But this process of identification is itself inherently temporal. 'The power which converts into precise, determined objects the vague and indistinct sensations that the dreamer receives from his eyes, his ears, and the whole surface and interior of his body,' Bergson argues, 'is the memory'. Dream, in other words, creates its own *durée*: the notion, both retrospective and prospective, according to which immediate material perception is shaped, coloured and transformed by prior experience. Hence the nightmarish quality of some dreams, which Bergson compares to opening a trapdoor: 'they rise, they move, they perform in the night of unconsciousness a great *danse macabre*. They rush together to the door which has been left ajar. They all want to get through. But they cannot; there are too many of them.'[25]

23 Bergson, *Dreams*, trans. Edwin E. Slosson (New York: Huebsch, 1914), 15–16. Bergson's article was first published in *La Revue scientifique*, 8 June 1901.

24 *Ibid*., 21–22.

25 *Ibid*., 34.

The intimate perceptual relationship between dream, memory, and human experience sensed by Bergson was hugely influential for a generation of modernist artists and writers, both in France and beyond, and finds numerous echoes in early twentieth-century Danish poetry. Jeppe Aakjær's poem 'Imellem to mørke Høje', dedicated to Carl Nielsen and published in the volume *Muld og Malm* (1909), for example, merges memories of his childhood in West Jutland into a glittering haze and dream, where his youthful impulses ('Barndomslængslerne') quiver like a reed in the deep stream and where, in the final stanza, the old familiar tracks lead back to eternal rest 'in holy grounds of home' ('i Hjemmets hellige Jord').[26]

Nielsen greatly admired Aakjær's work for its earthy localism, and its literary impact can be felt powerfully in his own autobiography, *Min fynske Barndom*. But the idea of dream as a memory space – that is, as a pattern of mental behaviour that links individual material stimuli to specific memories of past encounters or events – was to prove no less significant for his musical work. If *Søvnen*, then, can be interpreted as study of dream as affective disturbance or disruption, the search for solace in the wake of extreme nervous agitation, a more distanced but equally Bergsonian response to memory and material perception can be identified in his tone-poem *Saga-Drøm*. Based on chapter 62 of *Njál's Saga*, a late thirteenth-century Icelandic epic, *Saga-Drøm* focuses on the vision of Gunnar of Hlidarendi, one of the saga's principal protagonists, the night before he goes into battle. Nielsen described Gunnar as a 'marvellous character ... who plundered and slaughtered, but who was nevertheless made of finer stuff and was ahead of his time',[27] implicitly aligning him with other figures of generational change in his music such as the young David in his eponymous opera *Saul og David* or the smart social boundary-breaking valet Henrik in *Maskarade*. In the Saga text, Gunnar's dream is a nightmarish premonition of pursuit and bloody violence, in keeping with the brutal nature of much of the rest of the tale. But Nielsen's tone poem presents a radically different account of Gunnar's story: a man who dreams, Nielsen claims, 'of a brighter and better future for humanity' ('en lysere og bedre Fremtid for Menneskene'). The tone poem's formal outline is characteristically clear and unambiguous (Fig. 2). Opening in a mood of hushed solemnity and then proceeding via a restrained if tonally unorthodox fugal exposition to a dignified chorale, the music suggests order and contemplative reflection rather than the seemingly chaotic blood-letting and vengeance of the Icelandic

26 Letter from Jeppe Aakjær to Nielsen, 17.1.1909, CNB 3:625; CNL 248.

27 *denne pragtfulde Skikkelse ... der plyndrede og slog ihjel, men alligevel var gjort af et finere Stof og var forud for sin Tid.* 'Carl Nielsens Symfoni-Koncert', interview by Axel Kjerulf, *Politiken*, 27.11.1917, in *Samtid*, 219–20, at 220. The concert, which took place at Concert Palæet's store Sal on 29 November 1917, included the Second Symphony, the *Theme and Variations* for piano (with Alexander Stoffregen), *Saga-Drøm*, and excerpts from *Saul og David*.

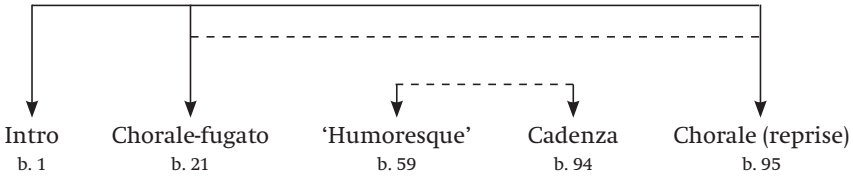


Fig. 2. Carl Nielsen, Saga-Drøm: *formal schematic.*

source. At the end of the first play-over of the chorale, the tempo picks up slightly and suggests a more playful and harmonically free-ranging humoresque, but this texture rapidly gives way to an entirely unmeasured modal cadenza for solo winds and violins which is timbrally marked by the first entry of the percussion (cymbal and bells). This unusual combination of instruments, playing independently in their own time and place – underpinned by a horn drone but otherwise without any firm bass foundation – can easily be heard as an exoticised archaic device, anticipating his music for 'The Beautiful Square in Isfahan' from his incidental score for Adam Oehlenschläger's *Aladdin*, composed a decade later. Removing the tone poem figuratively from normative Classical frames of reference by resisting familiar notions of metrical time or textural balance, Nielsen accomplishes a similar sense of affective relocation as in his *Aladdin* music, transporting the listener to a completely different time and place. Nielsen suggested that the passage sought to evoke the 'curious thoughts' ('sære Tanker') in Gunnar's dream, 'like four streams of thought, which each go their own way – differently and randomly in every performance – until they gather in a single point of rest, as though flowing into a sluice and converging there'.[28] This metaphor unconsciously reversed the image of the four streams at the top of the St Gotthard pass, 'which have their source in the same place, and seek their own way so that they do not come into conflict with each other' that Nielsen had poetically invoked in the opening paragraph of his essay 'Danske Sange' (originally published as the review of a new volume of songs by Thomas Laub, and subsequently republished in *Living Music*).[29]

The innovative quality of the cadenza at the heart of *Saga-Drøm* evidently prompted a mixed reception from critics at the time of its first performance, not so much because it bore such little outward resemblance to its literary source but

28 *Det er ligesom fire Tankestrømme, der hver gaar sin Vej – forskelligt og tilfældigt for hver Opførelse – indtil de samles i et Hvilepunkt, ligesom flyder ind i en Sluse og forenes dér. Ibid*., 220.

29 *der har deres Udspring fra dette Sted, suger hver sin Vej, saa det nytter ikke at stritte imod.* 'Nye Sange', review of Thomas Laub, *Tolv Viser og Sange af danske Digtere* (1920), *Politiken*, 10.4.1921, in *Samtid*, 248–53.

simply because it seemed so difficult to comprehend. The reviewer in *Kristeligt Dagblad*, for example, wrote of an '"intermezzo" of a kind that can hardly be described in terms of sound; it sounded like when the orchestra tunes up before a concert',[30] and even the more affirmatory report by Robert Henriques in *Vort Land* claimed that Nielsen had sought 'to paint the confusion that seizes us when one idea after another rushes through our heads' and that its impact 'does not easily find the straight path to the listener's immediate understanding'.[31] But, as in *Søvnen*, paying closer attention to the passage as a dream sequence makes more sense of its role and significance within the tone poem's overall trajectory and affect. It is a coincidence, surely, that the cadenza rests on the same pitch, E, which initiated the nightmare at the heart of *Søvnen*, but it is more striking that bells once again play a significant timbral role. And, as in *Søvnen*, what makes Gunnar's dream so uncanny is that it seems at once strange and familiar: the woodwind figures are essentially the same as those of their colloquy in the preceding humoresque, and their staggered entries echo the imitative points of the fugato that prefaces the Chorale (which Robert Henriques heard as a clash between 'the reality of life' and a 'life hereafter'). The only genuinely new elements in the dream sequence are the wooshing slide on the first violins – more of an acoustic effect than a melodic figure – and the *Aladdin*-like percussion, which, as in *Søvnen*, suggest a heightened state of auditory awareness and nervous agitation.

In light of Nielsen's own comments, however, *Saga-Drøm's* dream sequence should be heard not as a nightmarish vision of existential despair, as was the case in the central section of *Søvnen* or in the troubled dreams that beset the ageing King Saul in his eponymous opera, but rather as an allegory of creative freedom and artistic independence. The way in which the four woodwind voices gently deconstruct the contrapuntal order of the preceding fugue suggests a utopian image of instrumental autonomy. If, as Robert Cook suggests, *Njál's Saga* is ultimately concerned with law and social convention, over and above its more spectacular obsession with bloodshed and extreme violence,[32] then the final third of Nielsen's tone poem, from b. 95 onwards, seeks an accommodation between the magical, enchanted music of the dream cadenza and the more prosaic, earthly realm of the chorale with which the work concludes. In that sense, *Saga-Drøm* moves gently between the binary poles – sleep and wakefulness, action and rest, social conformism and creative freedom, chaos and order – that lie at the heart of much of Nielsen's music.

30 Quoted in Peter Hauge, 'Forord', trans. James Manley, *Carl Nielsen: Saga-Drøm*, CNU II/8, xi–xvii, at xiii.

31 *Ibid*., xii–xiii.

32 Robert Cook, 'Introduction', in *Njal's Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin, 2001), vii–xxxiii, at xxiii.

The intimate perceptual relationship between dream and memory, sensed by Bergson, was influential for a generation of modernist artists and writers, and finds numerous echoes in early twentieth-century Danish poetry such as Aakjær's and that of Johannes V. Jensen. But the conjunction of structure, expression, materiality and affect in Nielsen's work particularly parallels that of his contemporary, Mahler. Despite their evident stylistic differences, Mahler's music is similarly marked by episodes that assume the character of a dream, often triggered by an unusual acoustic signal or musical device (such as the posthorn solos in the third movement of the Third Symphony, or the cowbells in the slow movement of the Sixth and the first Nachtmusik of the Seventh). Adorno described such passages as suspensions, one of the basic formal categories in his analysis of Mahler's work, and suggested that 'these are essential to him: roundabout ways that turn out retrospectively to be the direct ones.'[33] In other words, the purpose of the suspension is specifically to intercede and disrupt, and to divert the music in sudden and unexpected ways so that it arrives at its destination via a more circuitous but ultimately revealing route. In that sense, suspension is related to Adorno's more familiar category of Breakthrough (*Durchbruch*), the radical incursion of new material that has a similarly destabilising effect upon the music's progress. But if, as Adorno explains, 'breakthrough is always suspension, that of the immanent context[,] not every suspension is a breakthrough.' Suspensions work in a subtly different way in which the sense of displacement is more understated or implicit. 'The suspensions give notice to formal immanence', Adorno suggests, 'without positively asserting the presence of the Other; they are self-reflections of what is entangled in itself, no longer allegories of the absolute. Retrospectively they are caught up by the form from whose elements they are composed.'[34] The dream sequence in *Saga-Drøm* delivers something strikingly similar: disrupting the tone poem's musical and structural flow and turning suddenly inward upon itself to uncover in revelatory fashion a more basic creative truth, stimulated by a heightened attentiveness to the particularity of the sound object itself.

In this process of involution, turning musically inward upon themselves, Nielsen's dream sequences point again to his basic creative task, his underlying acoustic relationship with the world in terms of sounds, objects, and materials. Such dreams are transformative, but without the alienated or ironic frames that persistently deflect and fracture Mahler's musical visions, and they achieve their affect through Nielsen's characteristically acute attention to the acoustic quality of particular instruments or voices. It is the persistent, involuntary nature of that response that can

33 Adorno, *Mahler*, 41.
34 *Ibid*., 43.

seem nightmarish or energising: a constant and at times unsettling awareness of the world in ceaseless undying motion. And it is also what links Nielsen's own biographical experiences with historical memories and imaginative geographies of the kind that repeatedly drew him to the work of other writers, from Jørgensen and Aakjær to the Icelandic Sagas. In his later music, post-dating his first encounter with the writings of Sigmund Freud following his marital breakdown in 1916, it is precisely the seemingly unwanted recall of such strange, unexpected and suspenseful events that becomes the driving force in some of his most adventurous and challenging scores – pre-eminently, of course, the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and the two late wind concertos.[35] Dream here is surely a category that merits further analytical study and discussion, and I hope to be able to return to this topic in a later study. But even in his earlier music, from *Søvnen* to *Saga-Drøm*, it is Nielsen's characteristically playful and imaginative handling of instrumental timbre that takes its cue from such visionary moments of encounter with the everyday world and transforms them. And it is through such moment of suspension, to borrow Adorno's term – active, poised, and precipitate – that Nielsen's creative interest in dream can be understood most fully as aligned with a wider early twentieth-century artistic mission.

35 As David Fanning notes, Nielsen employed the term 'Drøm og Daad' to describe the distinction between the two parts of his Fifth Symphony (*Carl Nielsen: Symphony no. 5* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 13). In a perceptive and thoughtful later essay on dualism and symphonic thought, Fanning and Michelle Assay explore the idea of 'dream and deed' with reference to Persian philosophy, as well as its legacy for other symphonic composers from Liszt to Tippett ('"Dreams and Deeds" and Other Dualities: Nielsen and the Two-Movement Symphony', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 5 (2012), 26–48. The current essay has taken a different slant.

A B S T R A C T

In an interview in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* in 1917, Carl Nielsen described the legendary Icelandic figure, Gunnar of Hlidrande, the subject of his 1908 tone poem *Saga-Drøm*, as 'that marvellous character from *Njál's Saga*, who plundered and slaughtered, but who was nevertheless made of finer stuff and was ahead of his time.' In his score, the composer explained, he had sought to capture the 'curious thoughts' ('sære Tanker') in Gunnar's dream, 'like four streams of thought, which each go their own way—differently and randomly in every performance—until they gather in a single point of rest, as though flowing into a sluice and commingling there.'

Much attention has been paid to the importance of dreams in early twentieth-century thought, not least in the wake of Sigmund Freud's ground-breaking 1900 volume *Traumdeutung* ('The Interpretation of Dreams') and its concern with the unconscious. But Carl Nielsen is unlikely to have read Freud before 1916, and understanding the phenomenon principally through a Freudian lens fails to capture his earlier interest in dream and its impact on his creative work. This paper offers some preliminary thoughts on the role of dreams in two key works, *Søvnen* and *Saga-Drøm*, which suggest fresh ways of approaching sound and dream in Carl Nielsen's music.