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SETTING THE SCENE?

Genre, Form and Duality in Nielsen's *Pan and Syrinx*

By Owen Burton

Though relatively few in number, Carl Nielsen's tone poems comprise an important part of his wider orchestral output and demonstrate some of his most original gestures. Yet, they have received little detailed scholarly attention compared to his larger-scale orchestral works. *Pan og Syrinx – Naturscene for Orkester (Pan and Syrinx – Pastoral Scene for Orchestra)*, Op. 49, holds a unique and significant place in his output. While previous commentators have remarked on its novel uses of instrumentation and timbre, the striking effects of musical form, temporality and space have not been considered. Much of the significance of this lesser-known work comes from the way it sets a short scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and brings a consciously anti-climactic conclusion based on irreconcilable opposites. Understanding the impact of this in the broader context of Nielsen's orchestral music means re-considering his well-known ambivalence towards programmes, not least as the role of programmatic and stage music must be balanced alongside that of more abstract, larger-scale orchestral pieces.

A related question here is whether *Pan and Syrinx* 'sets the scene' in a different sense – as a precursor to the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies which followed. As the only stand-alone orchestral work to fall between Symphonies No. 4 and 5, it was well-placed as an outlet for smaller-scale experimentation for these more abstract forms. Indeed, David Fanning highlights the 'exotic harmonies and timbres' which both *Pan and Syrinx* and the incidental music composed for *Aladdin* (1918–19) supplied for more 'abstract, large-scale' settings such as the Fifth Symphony.[1] It is understandable that the tone poems should be compared with the symphonies. A particularly strong statement in this regard comes from Robert Simpson who, in the chapter 'Lesser Orchestral Works', says: 'As an orchestral composer, Nielsen's claim to greatness rests squarely on the symphonies, and most of the works that can be called "miscellaneous" are

1 David Fanning, 'Carl Nielsen', *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, accessed 2 February 2023, https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000019930?rskey=AUcjWN&result=2.

not important, though they often show striking characteristics.'[2] By closely examining one such piece, this discussion argues that *Pan and Syrinx* enacts a particular set of aims, knowledge of which deepens understanding of his wider orchestral output. After introducing Nielsen's relationship with the tone poem genre, it identifies salient programmatic and theatrical aspects of this piece, alongside those features which align with more abstract interpretations. Following this, it then advances a reading of its dualistic form, one which brings together existing literature addressing issues of decay, irony and collapse in Nielsen's music, alongside theories of 'two-dimensional' form and semiotic perspectives. In doing so, it argues for a particular understanding of 'space' in musical terms.

Nielsen and the tone poem

Nielsen had an intriguing relationship with the tone poem genre. He sought to distance himself from programmatic music, despite often including the tone poems *Pan and Syrinx* and *Saga-Drøm* (1907–08) together in performances he conducted.[3] In his programme note for the Rhapsodic Overture *En Fantasirejse til Færøerne* (1927), he wrote: 'After all, it's an occasional work, a sort of craftsmanship … but I have personally been happy working with it and I think it has come to sound very good.'[4] He had also stated, as part of the essay 'Words, Music, and Programme Music' written in 1909, that 'Music neither can nor will bind itself to concrete ideas.'[5] Such contradictory perspectives make Nielsen's relationship with a genre so clearly connected to programmatic intention worthy of more consideration. Part of the identity of the genre hinges on aesthetic issues relating to its romantic origins, which affected its status in the twentieth century. Hugh Macdonald observes how its relative decline at this time 'may be attributed to the rejection of Romantic ideas and their replacement by notions of the abstraction and independence of music.'[6] But its prioritisation of an instrumental, usually single-movement, form and its concern with extra-musical subject matter meant the tone poem formed an alternative to the symphony and opera. While having traits in common with both – to some extent bridging a gap between

2 Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist* (London, 1952), 136.

3 Peter Hauge states this in the preface to the Carl Nielsen Edition, CNU II/8, xxiii.

4 This quotation, a translation of part of an interview Nielsen gave in *Politiken*, is found in Niels Bo Foltmann's preface to the work. See CNU II/8, xxvii.

5 Quoted in Jack Lawson, *Carl Nielsen* (London, 1997), 119.

6 Hugh Macdonald, 'The Symphonic Poem', *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, accessed 24 February 2023, https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000027250?rskey=pPApNc&result=1.

the two – it also had its own status. There is no doubt that it continued to be a creative vessel for individuals working in early-twentieth-century art music.

At first glance, the tone poem does not seem to have been as significant for Nielsen as his Nordic contemporary, Jean Sibelius. Direct comparisons between these two individuals should note that they did not know each other well beyond some correspondence and the fact that Nielsen had conducted some of Sibelius's works.[7] They did, however, meet in Copenhagen in 1926 for the Scandinavian Music Festival, where they discussed Nielsen's programmatic *En Fantasirejse til Færøerne*. The work had been compared in the press to Sibelius's music and Sibelius is reported to have said – Jack Lawson says 'most generously' in light of their unbalanced world reputation – that 'I don't even reach your ankles.'[8] For Sibelius, the tone poem not only expressed themes of Finnish folklore but also, as Daniel M. Grimley observes,[9] more abstract, musical realisations of landscape. National themes are less prominent in Nielsen's tone poems – although *Saga-Drøm* engages with Nordic subject matter, specifically the Icelandic *Njáls Saga* and the dream sequence of Gunnar. But there was also a reciprocal relationship between symphonies and tone poems in the Sibelian context. Tim Howell states that the latter are 'crucial in any understanding of Sibelius the symphonist.'[10] As Nielsen's tone poems have also been compared to his symphonies, questions arise concerning their place in his output. Robert Simpson's earlier-quoted comment that Nielsen's greatness 'rests squarely on the symphonies' probably says more about his positive admiration for his larger-scale symphonic legacy, than a disregard for these shorter works. Discussing *Pan and Syrinx* specifically, he suggests that it would make an effective interlude in the first half of a concert and stresses the 'exceptional quality' of the work which, at the same time, 'offers no difficulties to the ordinary listener.'[11] But without detailed consideration, it is easy for these works to be considered more trivial by virtue of being less substantial and less obviously concerned with musical processes themselves.

Such aesthetic issues are relevant to understanding Nielsen's programmatic music if genre and occasion can shape perceptions of artistic value. While Nielsen's

7 For example, Nielsen mentions in a letter to Ove Jørgensen on 9 March 1920 that his programme of Nordic music in a concert in Amsterdam had included Sibelius's *Finlandia*, among his own works. See CNB 6:357; CNL 437.

8 Lawson, *op. cit.*, 203–4.

9 Daniel M. Grimley, 'The tone poems: genre, landscape and structural perspective', in Daniel M. Grimley (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius* (Cambridge, 2004), 107–8.

10 Tim Howell, *Jean Sibelius: Progressive Techniques in the Symphonie and Tone Poems* (New York, 1989), 188.

11 Simpson, *op. cit.*, 138.

comments seek to distance himself from the programme concept, they need to be taken with a pinch of salt, especially when programmatic and absolute features intersect. The answer might lie in considering what attracted Nielsen to features characteristic of the tone poem. Certain traits connect Nielsen's smaller orchestral works. They share the same approximate timespan (around 8–12 minutes in duration), while being cast in a single movement means musical time itself becomes an important mode of expression. The sense of containment is also crucial. There is a concentrated timescale in which to reconcile contrasting states of musical energy, bringing a keen awareness of space in musical terms – one typically articulated through the dynamic arc away from, and return to, a quiet, resting state. These musical conclusions contrast with the symphonies, all of which end loudly. A useful illustration of these issues is the overture *Helios* (1903). Composed during Nielsen's stay in Athens, the work takes inspiration from the passing of a day (the rising of the sun over the mountains, its brilliant midday zenith, and its setting over the Aegean Sea[12]) in a southerly climate. The timescale of the work draws on the human perception of rapid ascension, partly communicated through the tonal trajectory sharpwards from C major to E major, and an intense wash of life-affirming sunlight.

The ambiguity concerning Nielsen's intentions with the tone poem is also reflected in the lack of consistency in scholarship regarding which of his works fall under the genre in the first place. Jan Maegaard applies the term symphonic poem[13] only to *Pan and Syrinx* on the grounds that he feels *Helios* and *Saga-Drøm* are not related to literary models.[14] His exclusion of *Saga-Drøm* rests on the focus in the work on Gunnar's dreams themselves, rather than literary events – this amounts to a technicality, given that Nielsen had been inspired by reading *Njáls Saga* and there seems no reason not to view *Saga-Drøm* as a work which continues a tradition of responding to literary inspiration. Maegaard's comments also indicate how *Pan and Syrinx* is something of an outlier, stating that the piece marks a deviation in Nielsen's 'seemingly stable line of development'.[15] For Povl Hamburger, *Saga-Drøm* belongs 'more obviously' to the tone poem genre than *Helios* and the Second Symphony 'The Four Temperaments' (1901–02) – he does not address the label of 'symphony' in the latter. Hamburger also states that Nielsen did not feel 'greatly attracted' to the tone poem genre

12 Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism* (Woodbridge, 2010), 66.

13 For the purposes of this discussion, the term 'tone poem' is used. Even though there are elements in Nielsen's works that might fall under the label 'symphonic, 'tone poem' allows a non-symphonic consideration which becomes useful for later parts of this discussion.

14 Jan Maegaard, '1923 – The Critical Year of Modern Music', in Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion* (London, 1994), 105–106.

15 *Ibid*.

which, he says, 'cultivated in only two later works: in the semi-impressionistic experiment "Pan og Syrinx" and the occasional work: "En Fantasirejse til Færøerne".'[16]

Pan and Syrinx as programme music

Pan and Syrinx is a representative case study to set against these contextual issues. Part of its significance lies in understanding it as programme music, as it draws clear inspiration from an extra-musical narrative. At the same time, the way it handles competing dualities on a more abstract level brings it into dialogue with the symphonies. Beginning with the first of these perspectives, some of the most memorable moments of the work align clearly with the written programme, an extract from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

> The goat-footed sylvan deity Pan happens to spy the nymph Syrinx among the satyrs and the dryads in the hilly Arcadian forests; he persecutes her with his dances and bleating homage. She, terrified by this fierce wooer, flees to the edge of a forest lake. From here there is no escape left for her, and the gods, taking pity on her, transform her into a reed.[17]

There may have been a connection between the accessibility of this literary-visual episode and the positive reaction to its experimentalism following the premiere in 1918, as Danish critics commented favourably on Nielsen's striking use of timbre.[18] The way *Pan and Syrinx* sets this scene reveals some of its novel aspects. Commentators felt the striking conclusion (Example 1) depicted the moment in which (or just after) Syrinx turns into a reed.[19] The violins ascend through their upper registers, while a cello *glissando* works its way downwards. Dissonance in the high violins therefore take on a timbral – rather than harmonic – function thanks to the relative extremity in pitch and the use of harmonics (Violin 2, Viola). An 'airy' quality is achieved as the sound of the bow on the strings (not just the note) becomes more audible.[20] The instrumental spacing, with its absence of inner triadic register, produces a 'hollow' quality matching the dejected image in the concluding line of the tale.

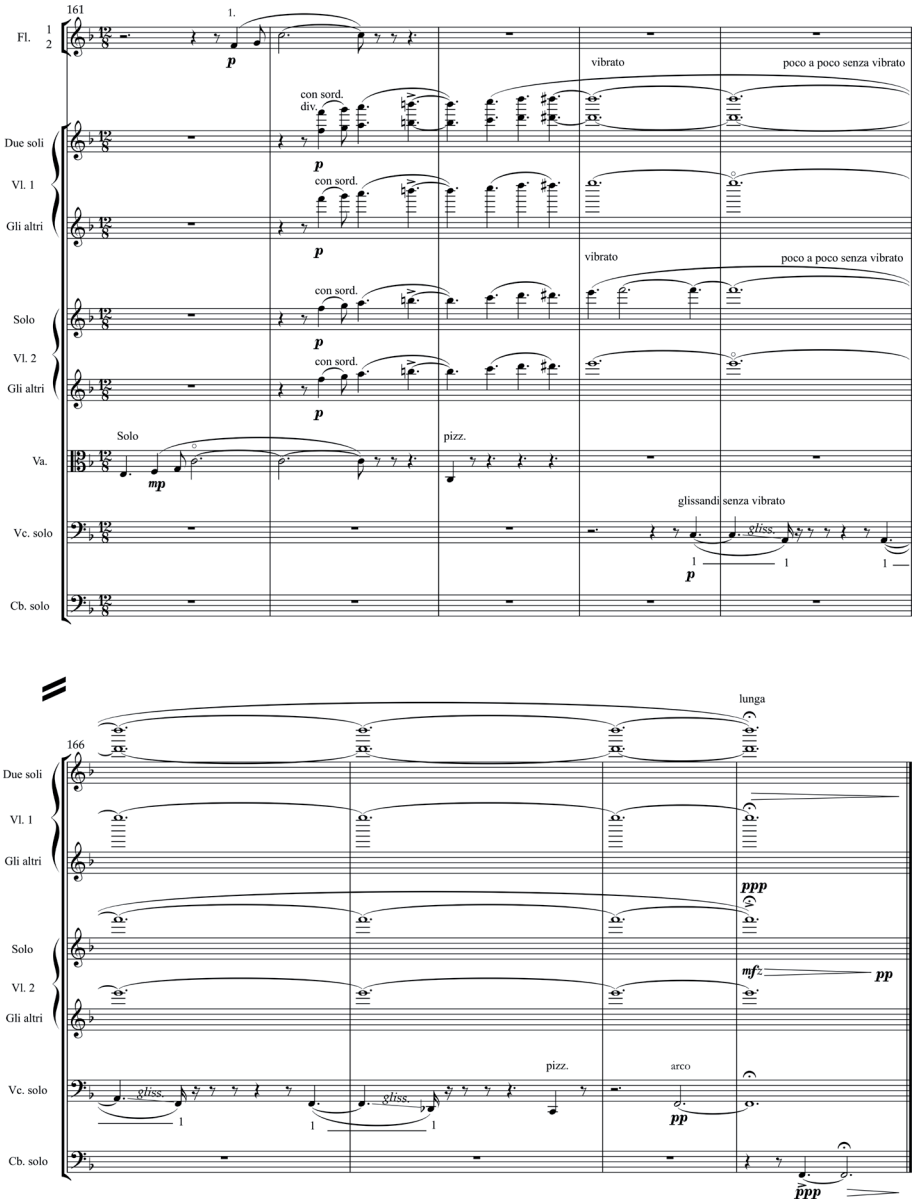
16 Povl Hamburger, 'Orchestral Works and Chamber Music', in Jürgen Balzer (ed.), *Carl Nielsen: Centenary Essays* (London, 1965), 32.

17 Translation in Simpson, *op. cit.*, 137.

18 For a detailed summary of the Danish reception, see Peter Hauge's comments in the preface to CNU II/8, xxii–xxiii.

19 CNU II/8, xxiii.

20 It is striking to observe the use of similar timbral techniques (and dissonance) in much later Nordic works with 'aerial', 'spacious' themes, in which timbre and texture are primary means for achieving a non-linear musical experience, an example being Anna Thorvaldsdottir's *Aeriality* (2010–11). The point lends an interesting perspective on a particular kind of modernity in *Pan and Syrinx*.



Ex. 1. Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx, bb. 161–69.

In a more abstract sense, the tone poem features the meeting, and clashing, of opposed forces – a vital element in Nielsen's music more generally. The explicit programme is allegorical of forces found in the symphonies but is expressed within a much more concentrated timespan. The intersections of absolute and programmatic

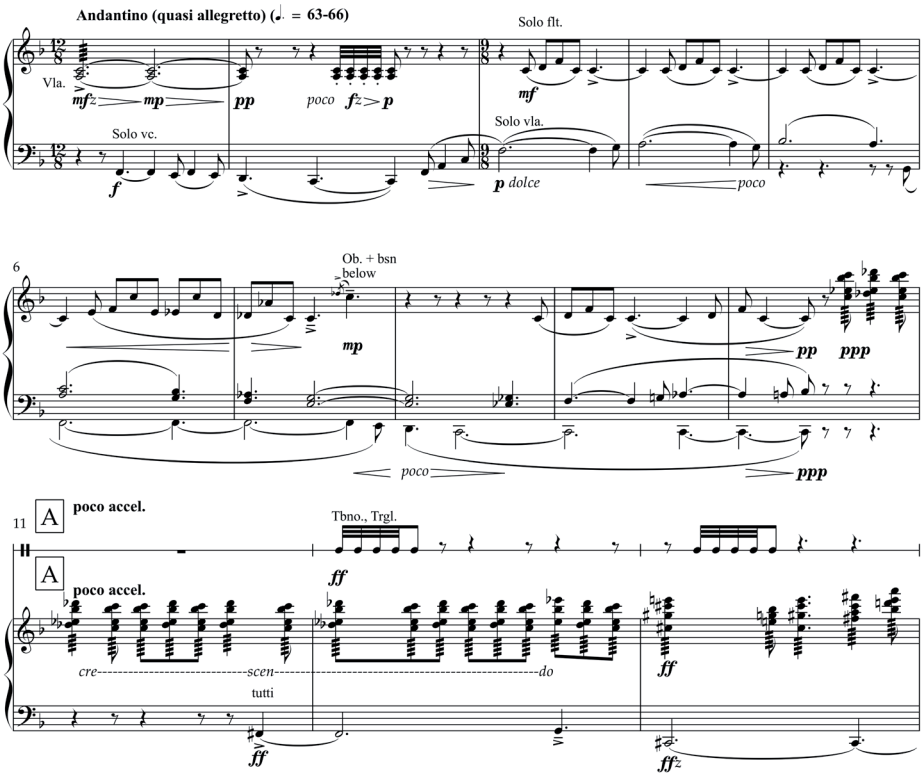
here recalls Simpson's observation that, for this composer, 'all music is in a sense programmatic in that it is a reflection of life.'[21] *Pan and Syrinx*, then, is another outlet for the dramatic vitalism of Nielsen's orchestral style. Previous authors have observed the importance of opposed forces in his vitalism. Michael Fjeldsøe identifies the 'discourse of vitalist aesthetics'[22] within Nielsen's descriptions of the Fourth Symphony (*The Inextinguishable*), quoting from the programme for the first performance: 'Life is indomitable and inextinguishable; the struggle, the wrestling, the generation and the wasting away go on today as yesterday, tomorrow as today, and everything returns'.[23] Meanwhile, for Christopher Tarrant, Nielsen's vitalism is 'not simply a life-affirming aesthetic but one that assembles forces in a precarious balance.'[24] It is this broader sense of musical instability which aligns *Pan and Syrinx* with more absolute and larger-scale music. Crucially, Nielsen's vitalism is often understood as being within the music itself, rather than being representational. Fjeldsøe observes this distinction between Nielsen's draft and final versions of the programme note to the Fourth Symphony, where the tone moves from 'depicting' life to 'being' life.[25] Meanwhile, referring to a famous statement by Nielsen, Tarrant emphasises that such vitalism is not mimetic, stating: '"Music *is* life" is the epigraph, not 'music is mimetic of life'.[26] Bearing these distinctions in mind, *Pan and Syrinx* is poised intriguingly between interpretations based on the music itself and a more explicitly programmatic understanding, one which looks to extra-musical imagery, narrative, character and action.

Setting the pastoral

Another layer of meaning is found in the way *Pan and Syrinx* engages with the pastoral and depictions of the god Pan specifically. The outer sections feature elements relating to the pastoral topic, as identified by Raymond Monelle.[27] These include compound time signatures (12/8 and 9/8) which achieve a lilting, resting quality, a slow tempo, as well as pedal points (based on F and C, over bars 6–10) – see Example 2. The viola tremolo in bar 2 also imitates nature, in this case suggesting the 'shivering' quality of wind passing through reeds. A central signifier of 'Pan' music, as Monelle

21 Simpson, *op. cit.*, 136.
22 Michael Fjeldsøe, 'Carl Nielsen and the Current of Vitalism in Art', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 35.
23 Quoted in *ibid.*, 37.
24 Christopher Tarrant, 'Carl Nielsen's Musical Vitalism', in Paul Fleet (ed.), *Musics With and After Tonality: Mining the Gap* (London, 2022), 89.
25 Fjeldsøe, 'Vitalisme i Carl Nielsens musik', *Danish Musicology Online* 1 (2010), 44–45.
26 Tarrant, *op. cit.*, 92.
27 Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington, 2006), 229.

identifies in baroque music, is woodwind.[28] Naturally, this features prominently in *Pan and Syrinx*, although in this sense the closing moments become even more remarkable when considering the decision *not* to include any woodwind at all here (ironically, the prolonged sonority in the conclusion calls for instruments which do not require wind to produce their sound). A relatively static and gentle opening in F major, which gives way to a solo flute melody, resembles Sibelius's *Pan and Echo* (1906) – a considerably shorter Dance Intermezzo drawing on a similar narrative. The key of F is used ambiguously in Nielsen's case – the solo flute soon unfolds a chromatically descending line. The structure of Sibelius's piece is based on two roughly equal halves, each broadly matching one of the characters. Grimley notes how the two works differ in their approach: Sibelius does not include the kinds of altercations that pervade *Pan and Syrinx* (such as Example 2, Letter A), although the final section of *Pan and Echo* captures a sense of increased panic.[29]



Ex. 2. Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx, bb. 1–13.

28 *Ibid.*, 230.

29 Grimley, 'The tone poems', 102–103.

The first performance of *Pan and Syrinx* also prompted comparison with Debussy's music, with commentators identifying 'impressionistic' characteristics;[30] as mentioned earlier, Hamburger later referred to it as a 'semi-impressionistic experiment'.[31] Such comparisons were surely triggered by the subject matter, the instrumentation (especially the symbolism of the flute and its connection to the faun), and the use of timbre. The use of sinuous, chromatically descending flute melodies which bring a languorous quality, bears comparison with Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, which Nielsen conducted in 1913,[32] and the solo flute work *Syrinx*. The overall character of Nielsen's work is very different, however. Central to his Arcadian pastoral scene is a sense of volatility and unpredictability, offering a particular response to the otherworldly nature of Ovid's tale. Monelle regards this fantasy aspect – a kind of ancient 'other' – as a draw for depictions of the syrinx as an instrument generally: 'the popularity of the syrinx in Renaissance and modern iconography is probably a reflection of its being played, in ancient painting and statuary, by satyrs and fauns. There is an air of the supernatural, a gust of the nature-spirit, about the syrinx.'[33]

Setting the scene

Even if the listener is not expected to match every musical utterance to the story of Pan and Syrinx, they often correlate with those in the programme. There are intimate and dualistic interactions of musical character, temperament, and intentions – indeed, David Fanning and Michelle Assay observe how oppositions between wind instruments broadly personify the two eponymous characters.[34] The use of solo instruments differs subtly from the heroic subject positioning in a landscape which Grimley identifies in Sibelius's *Pohjola's Daughter* (1905–06), observing that such performative gestures are a 'familiar convention in nineteenth-century music, and are used to generate a powerful sense of mythic or supernatural space.'[35] The landscape in Nielsen's case – the 'hilly Arcadian forests' – instead forms a backdrop for centralised character interaction. There is a clear dramatic function which invites comparison to music written for the stage. At the same time, a sense of scale is carefully controlled, articulated through sharp juxtapositions between intimate writing for solo instrumentalists and frenzied, louder sections involving the whole orchestra. The latter achieve a 'zooming out' effect, articulating action happening *in* space (the following section will consider these ideas more fully).

30 CNU II/8, xxii–xxiii.
31 Hamburger, *op. cit.*, 32.
32 Lawson, *op. cit.*, 158.
33 Monelle, *op. cit.*, 208.
34 Fanning and Assay, 'Nielsen, Shakespeare and the Flute Concerto: From Character to Archetype', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 6 (2020), 89.
35 Grimley, 'The tone poems', 106.

All this powerfully conveys an encounter, or a scene, playing out in musical time. This view does not detract from the identity of the work as a tone poem, but there are potential overlaps with music written for theatrical contexts, especially as scores for *Prologue to the Shakespeare Memorial Celebrations* (1916) and *Aladdin* (1918–19) came around this time, while the opera *Saul og David* was completed in 1901. Intriguingly, the events described in the programme for *Pan and Syrinx* could believably be acted out to the music in real time (in the form of dance, perhaps). This perspective reveals another similarity with Debussy's *Prélude*. Originally written as a tone poem, the music was used for Diaghilev's Ballet Russes in Paris in 1912.[36] Again, the intimate focus on these supernatural characters, and their relationship to *musical* character, have visual and gestural significance. It is also relevant to remember the original theatrical context of Debussy's *Syrinx*, with its stage directions (including dance) as part of Gabriel Mourey's play *Psyché* in 1913.[37] There is a clear musical similarity between the slow, solo woodwind sections in *Pan and Syrinx* and Julie McQuinn's reading of the erotic significance of the syrinx in Debussy's music, with its 'inward curling, its ornamental stasis, fluid lines leading nowhere, suspended in the air'.[38]

If choreographic potential is found through characterisation, then this would affect the musical structure. Another relevant French example is Ravel's ballet *Daphnis et Chloé*, in which the title characters mime the story of Pan and Syrinx (this occurs in Act 3 of the ballet and the music is reproduced in the second orchestral suite). The narrative action during this story-within-a-story correlates precisely with musical events. The intimate character narrative is well-suited to the episodic, sectional structure of the ballet, in which changes in mood and texture regularly occur. Nielsen, too, makes significant use of precisely paced local-level contrast. At the same time, though, large-scale structural relationships are significant, and as the following section argues, these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive in Nielsen's case. Howell also comments on some of the ambiguities between tone poem and theatre music in relation to the 'highly theatrical' and episodic tone poem *Pan* (1924) by the Finnish composer Aarre Merikanto, the reception of which, in contrast to Nielsen's own musical portrayal of the god – comparable in duration – was less positive.[39]

One striking dramatic gesture in Nielsen's work recalls the violent use of Stravinsky's 'Petrushka' chord, as heard in the second tableau of his ballet *Petrushka* (see Examples 3a and 3b) – the ballet had been commended to Nielsen by his daughter Irmelin in

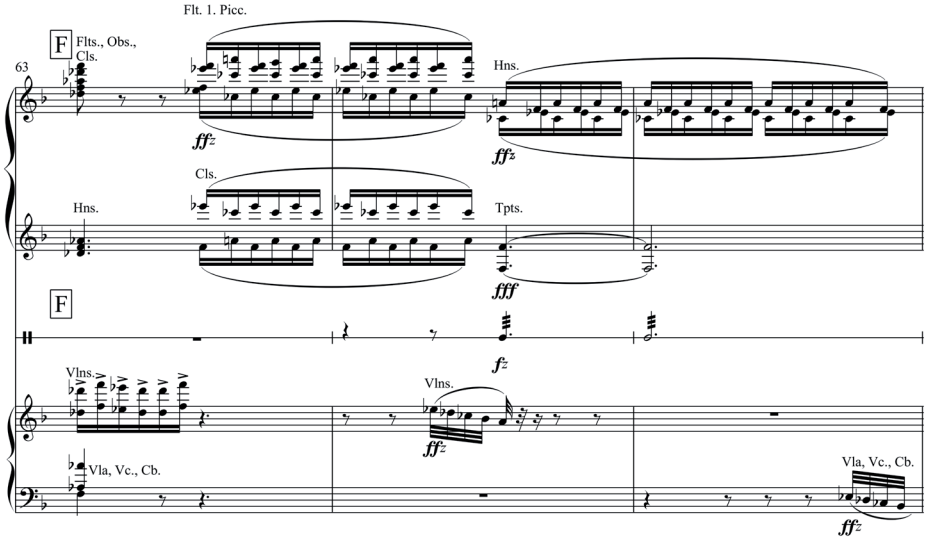
36 Timothy B. Cochran, 'Adapting Debussy: Dislocation and Crisis in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*', *19th-Century Music* 39, no. 1 (2015), 35.

37 Julie McQuinn, 'Exploring the Erotic in Debussy's Music', in Simon Trezise (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Cambridge 2011, 126.

38 *Ibid.*, 126.

39 Howell, *After Sibelius*, 39.

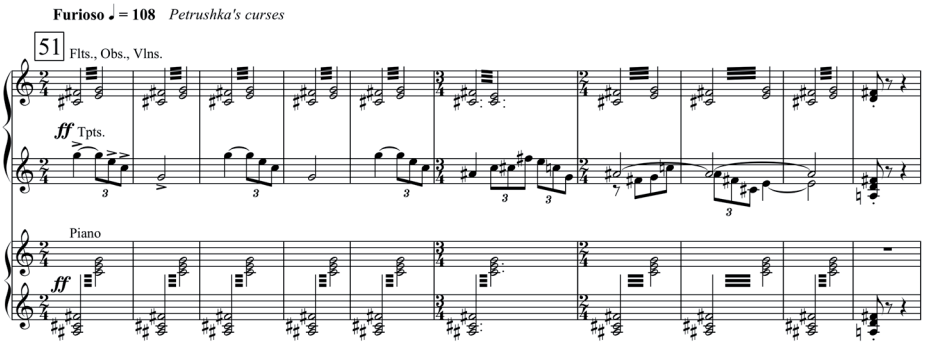
1917.[40] Nielsen uses a French-Sixth harmony (bb. 63–64) – this is a similar pitch collection to Stravinsky's chord, but it is the instrumentation, scoring and dynamics here that count. In Stravinsky's ballet the alarming use of the chord is unequivocally connected to Petrushka's curses. In *Pan and Syrinx*, the French-Sixth moment (most potent from the second half of bar 64) has a similarly troubling and surprising effect which conveys an almost claustrophobic sense of desperation, even though it appears as the culmination of a more extended sequence. This moment could be connected broadly to Syrinx's panic and Pan's frustration, given its use of double *forzando* and the general directionless quality at this point – there is no harmonic resolution, only repetitions of the chord in the woodwind and a *diminuendo*. Silence is another dramatic tool here. The impression of escalating physical activity is enhanced by its sudden dissipation. The silence which follows the French-Sixth harmony, much like Stravinsky's ballet, brings a keen awareness to the drama of the moment, on what is about to happen. Such fragmentation brings a different experience to other single-movement orchestral works such as *Helios* and the experimental *Saga-Drøm*. For Tarrant, these two works are the main examples of the stand-alone orchestral pieces that 'were in the concert overture tradition of Mendelssohn and Brahms'.[41] *Pan and Syrinx* differs in its rejection of a slow, regenerative principle culminating in a transformed, positively articulated version of opening themes in the recapitulatory section. These considerations of character, gesture and dramatic function will inform a more detailed understanding of musical form.



Ex. 3a. Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx, bb. 63–65.

40 Comment in CNL, p. 595; cf. CNB 5:477.

41 Tarrant, 'Structural Acceleration in Nielsen's *Sinfonia Espansiva*', *Music Analysis* 38, no. 3 (2019), 361.



Ex. 3b. Stravinsky, Petrushka, Fig. 51.

Form, duality, space and motion

In the pictorial representation of Pan and Syrinx by Pierre Mignard[42] (Figure 1), Syrinx is fleeing Pan, inches from his clutches. As a snapshot of sheer panic, this image conveys a powerful duality between motion and stasis. It has a striking dynamic quality: not only are both characters mid-motion, but this movement is also frenzied and chaotic. However, this is also the moment in which Syrinx reaches the water's edge – a point of entrapment. From this perspective, it precipitates a sudden ceasing of activity, either through her capture or metamorphosis into a reed after receiving help from the gods (in Mignard's painting she is protected by the river god Ladon).

This duality has a clear parallel with the musical processes in Nielsen's tone poem; the work brings together contrasting states of energy that can be appreciated both on programmatic and more exclusively musical terms. The volatility of the scene is crucial to Nielsen's style: in a moment, tranquillity can turn to flight, and energetic activity can turn to hollow emptiness. Issues of temporality, space, motion, force, musical agency and energy are all at work. While these elements are also present in the symphonies – reflecting an older relationship between symphony and tone poem – here they are uniquely applied within one of Nielsen's more overtly programmatic settings. Even though there is a recapitulation and some motivic development, the formal structure articulates a *degeneration* of material, rather than a regeneration. This would relate the work to Grimley's reading of the closing bars of Nielsen's earlier Second Violin Sonata as a depiction of 'structural decay', where 'the arrival on C (bar 221) is achieved with such little sense of transformation or triumph that it carries virtually no closural momentum whatsoever.'[43] Comparisons with later

42 Pierre Mignard, *Pan and Syrinx*, 1685–1690, oil on canvas, 113 x 89 cm, Louvre, Paris. https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010065660.

43 Grimley, 'Organicism, Form and Structural Decay: Nielsen's Second Violin Sonata', *Music Analysis* 21, No. 2 (2002), 199.

Fig. 1. Pan and Syrinx by Pierre Mignard, © 2024 GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) / Mathieu Rabeau.

works such as the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies are also instructive. The importance of musical obstruction and contrast recalls Nielsen's famous comment regarding what he felt was the only thing that music can express in the context of his symphonies –

'resting forces in contrast to active ones'.[44] Furthermore, the 'reconstruction' processes which Fanning identifies in the Fifth Symphony, and which orientate towards 'positive life assertion',[45] seem to be counteracted by the thwarting of reconstruction in *Pan and Syrinx*, in which the acceptance of irreconcilable musical impulses articulates an altogether different sense of closure. This interpretation suggests a relationship with the Sixth Symphony (*Sinfonia semplice*, 1924–25), which Jonathan Kramer finds to be representative of the way Nielsen 'did not unquestioningly accept an aesthetic that requires a composer – or a composition – to pull every possible shred of meaning out of an opening gesture, to derive the subsequent music from the conflicts or "problems" inherent in that opening, or eventually to resolve those tensions completely and unequivocally.'[46] Relatedly, Tarrant applies Adorno's notion of 'collapse' to *Sinfonia semplice*, stating in relation to the first movement specifically: 'Rather than breaking out into a new, more fulfilling and emancipatory musical form, the collapse disables the movement from attaining its proper tonal goal.'[47] Furthermore, the non-linearity of *Pan and Syrinx* recalls Colin Roth's discussion of the Sixth Symphony, in which he says that 'linear models are jettisoned in favour of a multi-dimensional model which recognises stasis and energy as opposing forces which rule the motivic, tonal and structural pitch.'[48] Such connections help in understanding the conscious and ironic emphasis placed in *Pan and Syrinx* on reversing the *per aspera ad astra* narrative. The musical form reflects the doomed meeting of two independent wills.

Interactions between opposing musical forces permeate the work across different structural levels. Figure 2 shows some of the dualities that can be appreciated when experiencing the piece. Many of these contrasts are evident in the opening bars (shown earlier in Example 2), where the shift in atmosphere at bar 11 is suggestive of the troubling appearance of Pan, as also stated by Simpson.[49] Duality is shown in the larger structure too: there are two principal sections ('Statement' and 'Counterstatement' in Figure 3), separated by a pause in bar 75, each containing their own struggle based on their respective sets of musical material. Meanwhile, the brief return of the opening theme (Theme 1 in Figure 3) at the end of the piece (bar 153) brings a sense of symmetry, returning – as all Nielsen's tone poems do – to a quiet, resting state.

44 Interview with Axel Kjerulf quoted in Fanning, *Nielsen: Symphony No. 5* (Cambridge, 1997), 97.

45 Fanning, 'Nielsen, Carl'.

46 Jonathan Kramer, 'Unity and Disunity in Carl Nielsen's Sixth Symphony', in Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion* (London, 1994), 322.

47 Tarrant, 'Breakthrough and Collapse in Carl Nielsen's Sinfonia Semplice', *Danish Yearbook of Musicology* 41 (2017), 37.

48 Colin Roth, 'Stasis and Energy: Danish Paradox or European Issue?', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 1 (2003), 161–62.

49 Simpson, *op. cit.*, 138.

Character/ representation	Pan/ Syrinx
	Earth/ Air
	Doing/ Being
	Panic/ Calm
Process	Progress/ Collapse
	Change/ Repetition
	Action/ Space
State	Energetic/ Languorous
	Restless/ Restful
	Unstable/ Stable
	Dynamic/ Static
	Fast/ Slow
	Low/ High
	Sharp/ Flat
	Chromatic/ Diatonic

Fig. 2. Opposing elements in Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx, arranged by category.

Section	STATEMENT				COUNTERSTATEMENT	RESTATEMENT
Bars	1–10	10–21	22–29	30–75	76–152	153–169
Thematic material	Theme 1			Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 1
Features	Introduces cello/ flute melody, moving chromatically downwards. Slow and static texture.	Texture changes. Tremolo strings, plus *fortissimo* percussion and fast chromatic runs on clarinet	Restatement of opening melody, now in G major with oboe replacing flute. Ends *pianissimo.*	*Scherzo.* Introduces new theme and develops a repeated-note idea introduced during bb. 22–29. Imitative texture and dynamic harmonies. Culminates in *fortissimo* C dom.7 chord followed by unresolved "French-Sixth".	New *cor anglais* theme with glockenspiel accompaniment. Solo clarinet cadenza (recalling the character of bars 10–21) develops in dialogue with new theme. Culminates in *fortissimo* passage in full orchestra (*Allegro agitato e fluente*) with fast harmonic rhythm, arriving on a G dom.7 chord which dies away. Concludes with brief *pianissimo* restatement of *cor anglais* theme.	Cello/ flute melody returns in original key. Melody ascends upwards in the upper strings; cello moves in downwards *glissando*. Static texture: extreme gap in pitch between high and low instruments; sustained harmonics in violins.
Sustained Key	F major		G major		B♭ minor → C major → B♭ minor	F major

Fig. 3. Formal summary of Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx.

The privileging of contrast over continuity complicates the identity of the work as a single-movement, continuous tone poem. There are elements here of the 'two-dimensional' concept of form as theorised by Steven Vande Moortele. For Moortele, in such forms, 'the different movements of a sonata cycle are combined within one single-movement sonata form.'[50] While the piece – with its content-driven influences – looks beyond sonata models, this does not mean that they are not referential. This broad 'double-function' perspective, for example, helps make sense of the way such a diverse (and contrasting) set of musical material hangs together as one short scene. Contrasting *Scherzo* material begins suddenly in bar 30, while the arrival of a new cor anglais theme (Theme 3 in Figure 3) in bar 76 is suggestive of a slow movement within a larger movement.[51] This theme gradually becomes much more frenzied and *scherzo*-like and leads into some of the most violent and rupturing parts of the piece. It must, therefore, also be seen as part of a larger process. Sonata practice is also broadly suggested with motivic development. Bars 30–75 develop a repeated-note figure from the previous section (the effects of which are discussed below), while the clarinet cadenza in bars 76–152 recall the character of the virtuosic clarinet figurations in bars 10–21. Both passages emulate a more general characteristic of a Development section in the way they increase musical tension, despite being comprised mostly of new material. Overall, though, the work uses an anti-teleological narrative. Surface-level signifiers of panic are ultimately never recovered from, such as those virtuosic clarinet 'skirls', which Fanning identifies as a source of 'panic' in both *Pan and Syrinx* and the Fifth Symphony.[52] In the latter, those disturbances are quashed.

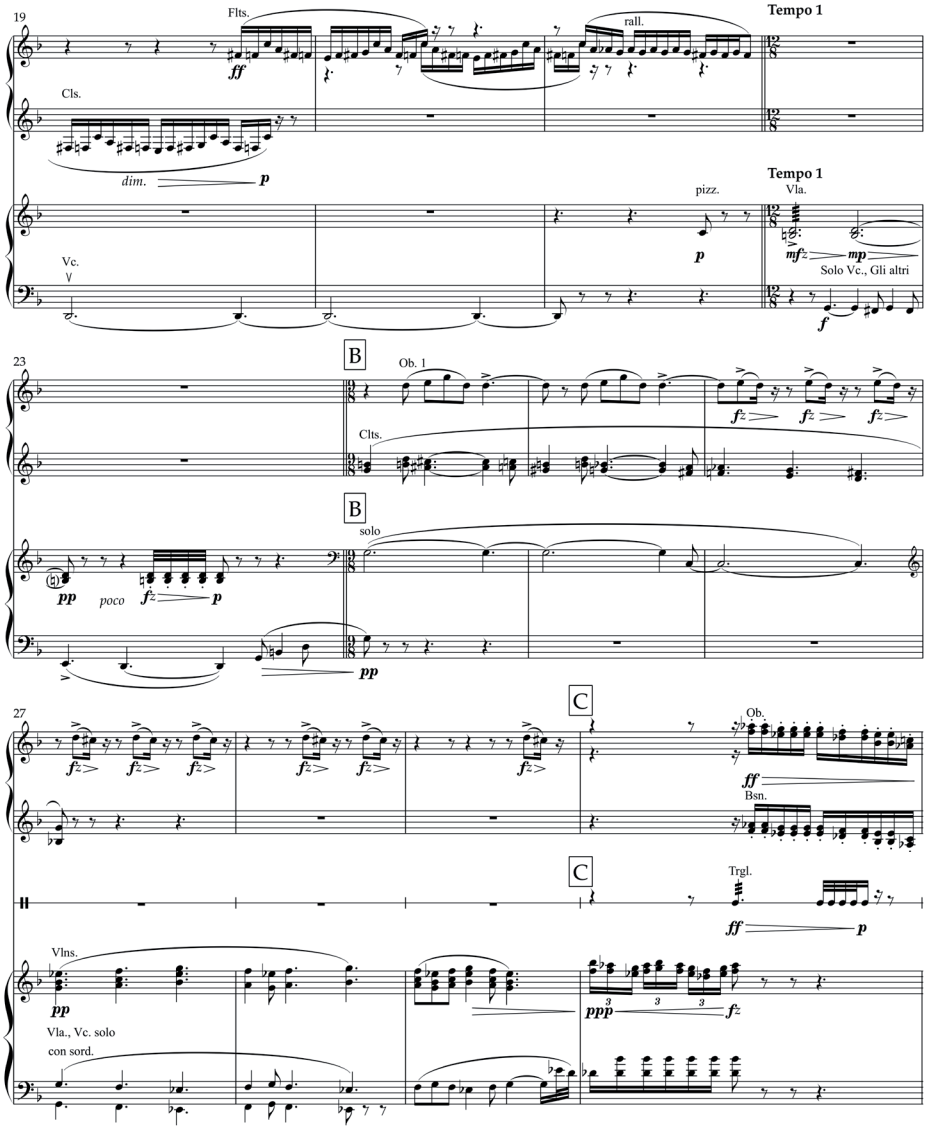
On a more local level, much of the drama of the work is found in conflicting impressions of continuity, which further express the 'two-dimensional' experience. The transition into the *scherzo* material at bar 30, for example, has elements of both continuity and a break, a process in which Nielsen's characteristic use of repeated notes plays a pivotal part. Continuity is found in the whole-tone harmonic motion down from G to D flat over bars 27–30. Beginning innocuously at bar 26, there is the first, gentle instance of a fundamental device: an insistent, repeating two-note motif which precedes some significant energetic shift. In Example 4, the insistent

50 Steven Vande Moortele, *Two-Dimensional Sonata Form: Form and Cycle in Single-Movement Instrumental Works by Liszt, Schoenberg and Zemlinsky* (Leuven, 2009), 1.

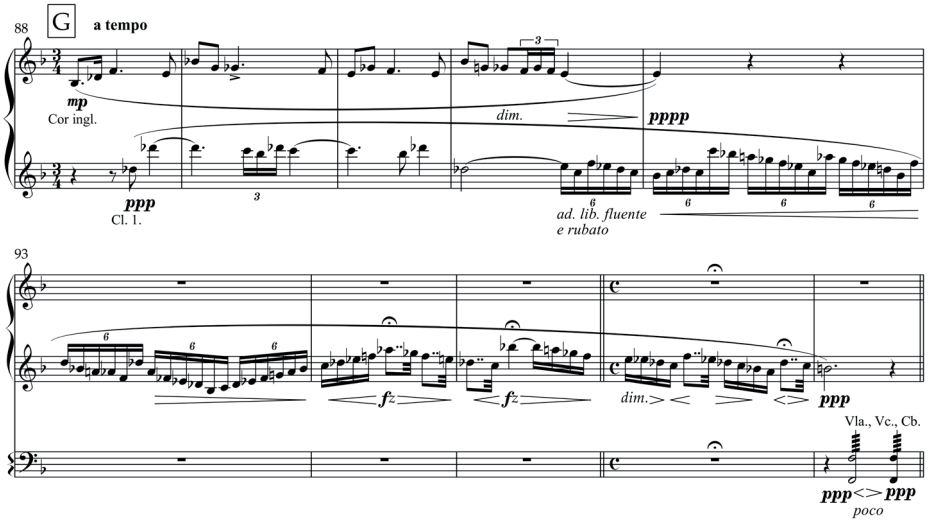
51 The effects of a 'two-dimensional' perspective also seems to be evident to wider listeners. For an example of a public-facing online discussion of this piece which understands it as having 'two internal movements', see David Goza, 'A Birthday Greeting from Carl Nielsen and the Atheist Codger: Nielsen's Pan & Syrinx, Op. 49', YouTube video, 1608, posted by 'David Goza,' Jan 7, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEDADSUoQ-Q&t=427s.

52 Fanning, *Nielsen: Symphony No. 5*, 62.

repetition of the C sharp beginning in bar 27 (oboe) foreshadows its enharmonically re-spelled function as the third of the B flat minor chord on the first note of bar 30. This repetitive device develops later in the piece into moments of significant rupture. While a small sense of resistance is heard through the stasis of the repeated notes and the mobility of the harmony, there is no major disruption at this stage, however the sense of a forced break into something new is crucially established here.



Ex. 4. Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx, bb. 19–30.



Ex. 5. Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx, bb. 88–97.

These various tensions between continuity and discontinuity prompt a metaphorical understanding of 'space', in which motion, varying energetic states and contrasting musical characterisations come together. The slow cor anglais and clarinet solo melodies in the second half of the piece evoke a particular notion of 'spatiality' as discussed by Eero Tarasti.[53] In addition to his view that 'orchestration includes, as one of its aims, the creation of spatial effects in concrete outer space', Tarasti also observes the presence of 'center and periphery', that a 'musical event, say, a theme (musical actor), pushes itself to the fore, while the rest of the texture "surrounds" or envelopes it.'[54] Dynamics also play a part here. In bar 97 (Example 5), a quiet rustling in the low strings creates a sense of distance which is contrasted with the foregrounded soloists in other parts of this passage (the same effect is achieved with the 'shivering' viola tremolo in bar 2, mentioned earlier). Musical characterisation is important too – Simpson refers to Pan's 'soft cajoling',[55] a trait found in the solo lines for cor anglais and clarinet in Example 5. This cajoling, 'exotic'[56] theme begins with a relatively static, meditative quality, while its increased tonal unpredictability confirms a sense of dan-

53 Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (Bloomington, 1994).

54 Tarasti, *op. cit.*, 79–80.

55 Simpson, *op. cit.*, 138.

56 The passage described has several features of 'orientalism' in Western Classical music, as discussed by Derek B. Scott, including sinuous chromaticism, melismatic phrases and the use of reed instruments. For a more detailed discussion of these features and their contexts, see Derek B. Scott, 'Orientalism and Musical Style', *The Musical Quarterly* 82, No. 2 (1998), 327.

ger as the clarinet becomes increasingly wild and chaotic. Further, pauses prompt spatial listening: they turn the attention to what the next sound is going to be and where it is going to come from, helping achieve a predatorial effect. Awareness of these features, over which instrumentalists have some temporal control, contributes significantly to a performance of *Pan and Syrinx*, especially considering the possibilities for interaction and interplay between soloists within their larger ensemble setting.

An understanding of 'space' in music is often framed in relation to 'tonal space'. This informs Roger Scruton's discussion around 'phenomenal' understandings of musical structure as 'an experience of movement, life, and gesture, reaching through the imagined space of music.'[57] Similarly, in his application of narrative theory from A. J. Greimas, Tarasti uses the terms 'spatiality', 'temporality' and 'actoriality'. He aligns these respectively with tonality and register; metre and duration, as well as thematic and motivic processes.[58] These categorisations form the second part of a larger analytical framework. The first identifies isotopies – narrative units which, as Russell Millard says in his analysis of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, can be crudely conceived as 'plot points'.[59] Millard highlights how isotopies are characterised either in terms of stasis or dynamism.[60] The third stage for Tarasti sees fluctuations between different 'modalities',[61] broadly understood as relative states of *being* versus *doing*,[62] allowing listeners to make sense of isotopies. A perceived motion through tonal space – and its impact on musical process – helps in understanding a work based on altercations, especially bearing in mind Tarasti's larger objective in discussing "musical actors" to 'depict *was es eigentlich gewesen ist* in music – the alternation between Being and Doing, tension and rest, dissonance and consonance in the broadest sense of these terms'.[63] Such ideas resonate with the dualities and programmatic features outlined in this discussion. Central to a spatial-dynamic view of *Pan and Syrinx* is the disjunct relationship between a higher-level tonal scheme (from and returning to F major), which might otherwise imply unity, and the moment-to-moment experienc-

57 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford, 1999), 333.

58 Tarasti, *op. cit.*, 48–49.

59 Russell Millard, 'Narrating Masculinity in the Dance Contest from Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*', *Music Analysis* 40, No. 1 (2021), 43.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Tom Pankhurst applies these 'modalities' used by Tarasti as part of a multi-perspective discussion of tonal processes in Nielsen's Third Symphony. See Pankhurst, 'Different Names for the Same Thing...? Nielsen's Forces, Schenker's Striving, Tarasti's Modalities and Simpson's Narratives', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 1 (2003), 124–36.

62 Tarasti, *op. cit.*, 48–49.

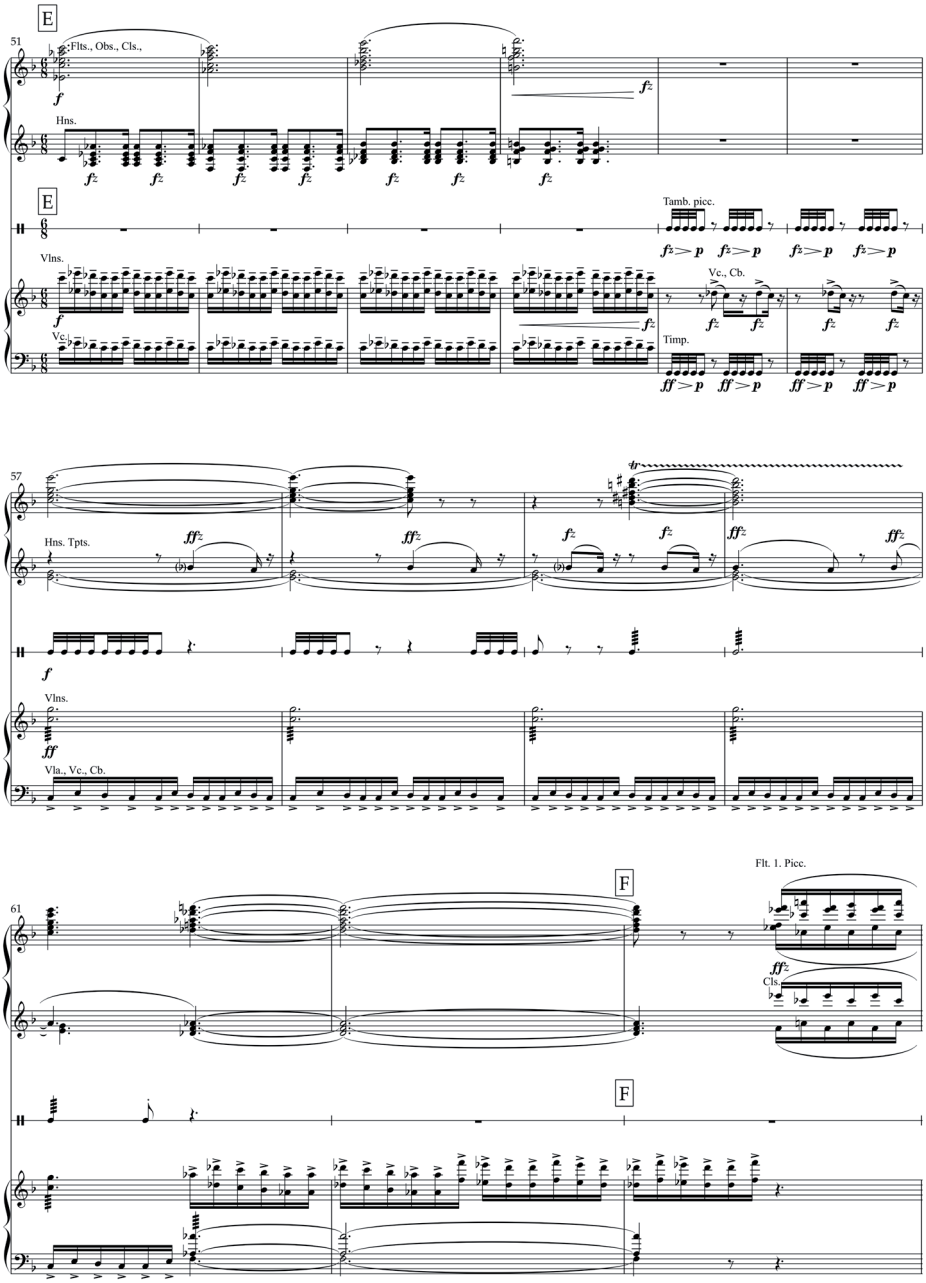
63 Tarasti, 'Beethoven's Waldstein and the Generative Course', *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991), 101–2.

es which can appear directionless or frenzied. This process is at its most intense in the two violent musical climaxes in the full orchestra (in bars 57 and 142), which precede abject breakdowns, as the music slows into inactivity. These suggest a highly energetic, but unsuccessful, chase. The French-Sixth harmony identified earlier articulates the first of these two occasions of failure – see Example 6, bar 63. The 'repeating-note' motif (bb. 55–56 and 57–60) becomes a resisting force which counters the dynamic harmonic motion over bars 51–54. The dramatic culmination on a loud C major chord (b. 57), with its incessant minor seventh repetition in the horns and trumpets, reveals that in fact the harmony has not gained much ground at all. Its implied dominant function within F major (which opens and closes the piece) expresses a more abstract sense of frustration and increased desperation. This energy prompts a 'forced' shift to a tonally distant D flat major chord in bar 61 – a clear moment of fracture which then gives way to the collapsing '*Petrushka*-like' French-Sixth collection in bar 63.

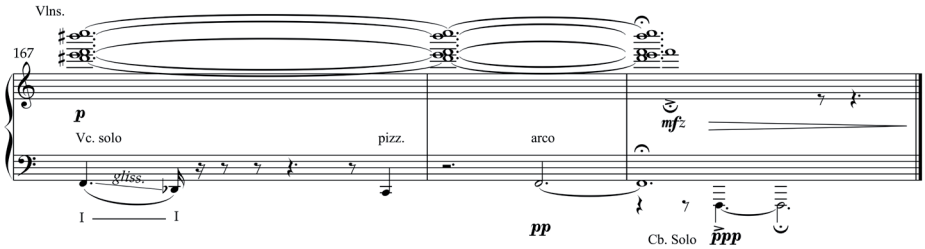
These perspectives on form, space and temporality shed light on one of the most striking and puzzling aspects of the piece. The appearance in bar 153 of an exact recapitulation of the original F major theme (shown in Example 2 earlier) has an almost jarring, fragmentary effect, coming after a brief, seemingly unfinished, statement of the cor anglais theme (shown earlier in Example 5). Unlike many sonata structures, this is no sense of affirmation; nor is it the result of a reconciliation or "working out" of past events. This effect is deliberate and could be interpreted as humorous.[64] If so, the joke would be on Pan, whose unwanted advances leave him with nothing to control but fresh air. The highly charged energies described earlier now seem impotent. True tonal resolution (however much tonal function might be suggested at times) is denied *because* of these intervening, disruptive utterances. This tonal "teasing" is continued in the last three bars (Example 7), where the solo cello *glissandi* work down to a *pizzicato* C, followed by a bowed F (bars 167–168). This otherwise unmistakable dominant-to-tonic bass progression is harmonically utterly unsupported, bringing into sharp ironic focus the image of Pan in his environment. Such an interpretation would connect with the review by Danish music critic Charles Kjerulf who, in 1918, highlighted Nielsen's 'boldly, even saucily set-up orchestral colours.'[65]

64 The hurried composition of the piece in preparation for its performance might have been an additional factor behind the decision to use this exact recapitulation. See CNU II/8, xxi–xxii.

65 Quoted in CNU II/8, xxiii.



Ex. 6. Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx, bb. 51–63.



Ex. 7. Nielsen, Pan and Syrinx, bb. 167–69.

Balanced opposites

Given the importance of duality and contrast in Nielsen's work generally, it is not surprising that a tone poem based on these classically opposed figures makes significant use of their expressive tendencies. But out of this literary inspiration has come a sense of character interaction and a control over musical space which otherwise would not have been possible. Furthermore, these are shown to be integral, previously unconsidered, products of Nielsen's experimentation in this work. The impact of this nature scene comes from a potent lack of reconciliation which, at the same time, does not deny profound structural resolution on musical and extra-musical levels. As one of Nielsen's shorter works, *Pan and Syrinx* offers something which his other, larger-scale ones cannot, owing largely to the intensity of musical interactions within a concentrated timeframe. This does not detract from the fact that the work provided stimuli and techniques that were later developed in the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. This is all evidence that the ambiguities of the tone poem genre facilitated freer approaches to musical form, shaped by the needs of the content. Each of Nielsen's programmatic orchestral works achieves something slightly different, and perhaps this is one reason why he did not keep returning to the genre, if he felt those aspirations had been fulfilled.

Interpretations choosing to focus on the programmatic or more abstract features are both possible. This balance is borne out by a diverse range of theoretical perspectives on musical form, which collectively deepen understanding. This finding encourages a dualistic perspective on Nielsen's output more broadly, building on Fanning's identification of a 'reciprocal relationship' between programmatic and symphonic works.[66] However, understanding the impact of the programme is also essential to a full appreciation of the piece. This means recognising its representational and theatrical traits as well as its identity as a single-movement instrumental work.

66 Fanning, 'Nielsen, Carl'.

Nielsen's creation of evocative, felt experiences (the hair-raising use of the glockenspiel in bar 99, as well as the alarming intention behind the tambourine and triangle in bars 12–13 and 119) emulate experiences of primal instinct within an imagined environment. Meanwhile, the brevity of Ovid's narrative (no doubt leading to numerous pictorial portrayals), its simple dualistic imagery and distance in time, inform a more abstract understanding. Looking to antiquity helped express modernity, and the uses of fragmentation, instrumental virtuosity and dissonance bring this idea into a particular focus. *Pan and Syrinx* captures something that is, in another sense, timeless: the vaporising effect of violently opposed wills. Furthermore, the explicitly programmatic impression of lost innocence in the piece complements Nielsen's wider view of Arcadia in works without a programme – in the context of the Flute Concerto (1926), for example, Ryan Ross understands Arcadia as a 'dichotomy of idyllic past versus troubled present'.[67] Nielsen's ironic take on the pastoral topic comments and builds on not only a larger tradition of musical depiction, but also the problematic character of Pan, whose identity goes far deeper – and is much more sinister – than the forlorn faun and amorous inventor of the flute.

ABSTRACT

This discussion offers the first detailed scholarly engagement with Carl Nielsen's tone poem *Pan and Syrinx – Pastoral Scene for Orchestra* (1917–18), Op. 49 – a work which, despite Nielsen's ambivalent relationship with programmes, holds a unique place in his orchestral output. Consideration of its programmatic and theatrical characteristics, alongside more abstract interpretations, reveals some of the significant ways in which Nielsen brought the tone poem genre into close dialogue with the larger-scale symphonies. Drawing on current literature on musical form in his music (particularly notions of decay, irony and collapse), my article advances a particular understanding of 'space', in which varying rates of motion, contrasting energetic states and characterisation are expressed. This perspective brings a new understanding of the work's consciously anti-climactic conclusion based on irreconcilable dualities – a counterpart to the regenerative processes in such works as the Fifth Symphony. Overall, it argues for a dualistic perspective on Nielsen's output more broadly, as overt programmatic intentions helped shape his original orchestral voice.

67 Ryan Ross, 'Nielsen's Arcadia: The Case of the Flute Concerto', in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 5 (2012), 282.