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REFLECTIONS ON NIELSEN AS A EUROPEAN COMPOSER *

By Michael Fjeldsøe, Katarina Smitt Engberg, Bjarke Moe

The fascinating thing about Carl Nielsen is that he was never satisfied with what he had achieved. Throughout his life he was constantly developing, looking for new directions and trying out new ideas. He never settled into a particular style or followed a particular path. It is unusual for a composer approaching sixty to still be more interested in experimenting than in adhering to the style that made him famous.

It is also fascinating that his output spanned so many different genres and with such different expressions. The fact that he looked at each task individually and found a solution that suited the task at hand is a common thread running through all of his music. What binds it all together is not a personal style, but an approach to composing music that suits the purpose. The greatest beauty, he says, comes when the object is completely suited to its function.¹

The approach of this book is to try to understand Carl Nielsen as a whole. This involves exploring Nielsen's significance as a musician, composer and cultural figure in the context of the society and time in which he lived. The book offers a picture of what he meant in and for his time and what it meant to him. The point of departure is to examine all the activities in which he was involved. Thus, the book considers all genres and areas of working as valuable and relevant to the experience he brought to his work.

* At the 'Carl Nielsen Studies Conference 2021' in Newcastle, Michael Fjeldsøe gave a keynote, 'Reflections on Nielsen as a European Composer', presenting the considerations on how to handle key issues in the then ongoing work on a new Nielsen biography as part of the research project at the University of Copenhagen, 'Carl Nielsen – European Composer'. The current contribution presents the results of those reflections, in the form of a reprint of the Introduction chapter for the biography, which is now available in print in English and Danish, cf. Michael Fjeldsøe, Katarina Smitt Engberg and Bjarke Moe, *Carl Nielsen. A Cultural Biography* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2025). Reprint with kind permission from Aarhus University Press.

1 *Samtid*, 263.

The book is a gateway to learning more about Nielsen and his music, which is still of great importance in the musical culture of today. Many know, hear or sing his music and it matters to them. Yet it is also a book that, by studying Nielsen, allows us to look at the cultural and social life of the time and makes us all more aware of the roots of the musical culture we know today.

People and Culture

This book is a cultural biography in that it describes a specific person, Carl Nielsen, but it is equally an introduction to the European musical culture of which Nielsen was a part and in which he was an active participant. A subject cannot be understood without its context.

Since the subject is Nielsen and his music, we define 'life and work' as an entity that needs to be understood in its cultural context. Context, though, is not just what surrounds us; it is not a passive term for the environment in which a person has been raised. A person is not only *part of* an environment, but also an individual *who actively participates* in it: he or she acts and so does everyone else in the environment. Thus a cultural environment is a group of social actors who act and react to each other in the creation, maintenance and development of the culture of which they are a part.

Employing this concept of culture as a basis, the relationship between individuals and the culture in which they operate becomes dynamic. We do not believe that individuals simply reflect or are the result of the culture around them. Nor do we believe that history, or the history of music, comes from the creative power of a single individual – even a particularly gifted one. Nielsen does not change music and music culture, but he contributes to their transformation and changes with them.

The central question, then, is how Nielsen is embedded in the surrounding musical culture and how he leaves his mark in terms of the means by which he approaches the tasks he is given or chooses to solve. In other words, it is the musical culture that offers the composer and the musician assignments to fulfil, not necessarily in the form of a specific commission for a musical work intended for a given purpose. It can also take the form of an existing need, such as the renewal of the *lieder* repertoire. The musical world has needs that a composer can help to meet. On the other hand, by solving the task in a certain way, composers are able to leave their mark on the development. The new solutions contribute to musical culture and, if successful, can steer it in a certain direction.

So our strategy is often to pose the question: how did he approach the task? Composing an opera, a hymn or a piano piece was not just a matter of conceiving an idea, a text or a theme. It was a piece of musical craftsmanship that had to be exe-

culated, and functioned in dialogue with the expectations of those who would hear, sing or play the music.

Viewed in that light, the sharp distinction between functional music or commissioned works on the one hand, and free creative expression on the other, vanishes. There is a need in the world of music for the occasional new symphony that can encourage a renewal of concert life and perhaps change the perception of what a symphony can be. Similarly, short piano pieces that become popular in piano tuition can change children's understanding of what music is. New songs can change the way we sing and the way we understand the communal aspect of singing. And when Nielsen provides music for an important event, a large group of people will have the same sonic reference that they associate with what the event represents. A composer can, for instance, modify the sound of modernity or the sound of what is perceived as Danish.

Our cultural-historical approach meant that it was important to collect and process a large amount of material that, at first sight, has no direct connection with Nielsen. Instead, it has been possible to reconstruct some of the musical, social and cultural environments that were important to him. And it was crucial that the cultural-historical material should not be seen merely as background or as a way of understanding Nielsen: what did it mean to him? Nielsen also serves as a prism through which the reader can gain insight into the cultural history of a time that we no longer have direct experience of. Even if we knew the world and culture in which Nielsen lived, not many of us today have lived in Nielsen's time, from 1865 to 1931.

This book is also about music history. Much of the knowledge presented here tells us details about Nielsen's contemporary colleagues at home and abroad, and about the music-historical reality he encountered in the form of traditions and discussions in musical life. Much of the exchange of ideas about the direction in which music should develop draws its arguments from different parts of the musical past. Similarly, many of the traditions of musical craftsmanship central to the professional composer are based on historical models. The history of music presents composers and musicians with choices to which they are bound to relate.

The European and the National

Culture exists at many levels. To grow up in Denmark, or with Danish culture, is to grow up as part of a Danish 'we'. This 'we' is created by the notion that there is a Danish national culture and that those who live in it share it and are part of it. At the same time, people who have been born and raised elsewhere or in other cultures have been brought up to look at this 'we' from the outside. In both cases, the assumption is that the national culture is the interpretive framework that is applied almost

naturally to a subject such as 'Nielsen and his music'. It is a framework of understanding that became widespread in the 1830s and 1840s and has been maintained, furthered and changed in several waves of historical development. The very fact that it has evolved historically shows that it is not eternal and unchanging.

Our approach is different. We see Nielsen as a European composer who lived and worked in a highly integrated northern European musical culture, which was a cultural reality during Nielsen's lifetime. Repertoires, musical education, musical cultural norms and forms were widely shared across national borders, despite local variations. To interpret Nielsen and his music solely on the basis of national frameworks would be far too narrow and, like all national histories, would overemphasise differences at the expense of commonalities. The way that much music history traditionally has been written, pretending that Danish composers learned most things from other Danish composers, is essentially a distortion of history.

This is not to say that Nielsen was not a Danish composer. He was, but it is important to recognise that he was not born a Danish national composer. He became one around the time of the First World War, when reviews and music literature began to attribute national characteristics to his music. Another point is that Denmark and Europe should not be seen as opposites. Europe is not abroad. If we see Nielsen as a European composer, it is because we see Danish culture as part of a wider European culture. In other words, Nielsen does not have to travel to Germany or France to be in Europe – he is already there. Therefore, it is not recognition abroad that determines whether he can be considered a European composer. He already is.

By placing Nielsen in a wider context, the present book seeks to counter-balance the national perspective that has characterised some Danish scholarship on the subject. At the same time, it provides a vantage point from which to analyse and relate how Nielsen's status as a great Danish composer is established and evolves over time. Nielsen's path to becoming a national composer is thus one of the themes of the book.

Our aim is to present a nuanced picture of Nielsen, so that we can gain a deeper understanding of the prerequisites for the culture of our own time. Precisely because Nielsen and his music have become part of the Danish cultural heritage, an understanding of Nielsen is also highly relevant to how we understand ourselves as part of that culture. The same is true when we look at the culture as outsiders.

That our approach to Nielsen's status as a national composer is analytical rather than normative stems from our interpretation that he became a national composer as the result of a collective social process in which he was given an increasingly high status by society. We interpret this process as a reception-historical reality that combines a gradual canonisation of his oeuvre with an identification of his music as

Danish. This does not mean that we accept the premise that he should therefore be interpreted from a national perspective – nor does it mean that we see it as the purpose of the book to confirm that he should have this status. The book is not a hagiographic portrayal of Nielsen.

However, this should not prevent us from highlighting the qualities of Nielsen's music and the specific features of his abilities as a composer. To do otherwise would be to leave the readers to their own devices. Rather, we would like to invite the reader to experience the qualities we have identified, while maintaining a critical and analytical perspective.

Modernism and the Modern

Concepts of modernism and the modern play an important role in this book, and were hotly debated in Nielsen's time. Readers should bear in mind that these are also concepts that change over time. In the book we distinguish between turn-of-the-century modern music, which is the music that was considered modern in the 1890s and around 1900, and the music that was labelled modernism after the First World War. Nielsen undoubtedly belongs to the turn-of-the-century modern, and he is part of a group of younger composers who, in their own way, are identified with innovation, modernity and youth. At the time, modernism was stylistically open, and Nielsen shared the view that the moderns were those who had left Wagner and Brahms behind.

Around 1900, the movement that followed in Wagner's footsteps was labelled modern. Nielsen now distanced himself from the term, positioning himself as someone who wanted renewal based on classical ideals. After the First World War there was another shift, as younger, radical composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky took over the position as the most modern and were labelled modernists. Again, Nielsen does not identify with the word modern, but he shares the efforts of the time to create 'new music', even in radical ways.

Literature and Sources

This book is part of a new tendency that has dominated international Nielsen research since the 1990s. It includes the Danish contributions that view Nielsen as a European composer among other European composers, each participating in their own way in European musical culture. This literature discusses the composer's relationship to the national as part of the research field, but does not assume that the national is the obvious framework of understanding.

Indeed, one of the first books to deal in depth with Nielsen as a participant in European cultural currents was Jørgen I. Jensen's book, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren*

(The Dane). Jensen takes the culture of Symbolism as the starting point for his interpretation and treats it as a European phenomenon. More recent Anglo-American scholarship has also taken it for granted that Nielsen must be seen in a European context. Scholars such as Anne-Marie Reynolds and Daniel M. Grimley, as well as the many contributions to the journal *Carl Nielsen Studies*, have made the European framework a common approach.

During the same period, research on Nielsen has progressed with a number of major publications and research projects. The *Carl Nielsen Edition* (CNU) has published all of Nielsen's works in scholarly, critical editions. The *Catalogue of Carl Nielsen's Works* (CNW) has gathered all works in a systematic list with unique work numbers and extensive references to sources and literature. The electronic, updated and freely accessible online edition is an invaluable tool. All of Nielsen's published texts and interviews are collected in *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid* (Nielsen to his Contemporaries; abbr. *Samtid*), and 5,960 letters and 1,912 diary entries have been published in *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven* (CNB), which is also available as a searchable e-book. A selection of the letters has been translated into English in *Carl Nielsen. Selected Letters and Diaries* (CNL), and projects are in progress to translate the entire *Samtid* and CNB into English. In addition, a large body of secondary literature has been published, which we have, of course, drawn upon, even when we make extensive use of primary sources.

It has been a great advantage in studying Nielsen that virtually all the primary sources are now available in reliable and scholarly editions, and that they are largely searchable and linked through the CNW catalogue. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that it is possible to arrange the sources in a sequence and then write a book on the subject. As well as reading the sources critically, it is important to recognise that published (that is, edited) sources do not tell the whole story. The editions of the works naturally focus on Nielsen's compositions, and thus also narrowly on his role as a composer. Nielsen was more than that: he was also a musician, cultural personality, child, opinion leader, etc. In addition, it often appears that Nielsen wrote letters when he was not composing. There are periods when he is concentrating on writing music, when he is travelling, when he is too young, or simply when no immediate sources have survived. Finally, it is important to distinguish between what he says and what he does: his music is a form of expression, and what he says in words is not necessarily consistent – and may indeed not even be true. And then there are all the other things he just does without saying anything about it. In fact, some of the most surprising insights have emerged where there were no obvious sources directly linked to Nielsen, so the authors had to find other and new ways of unravelling what had happened in certain environments or situations.

The book is in five parts. The first four form a chronological framework of periods in Nielsen's life, each covering about fifteen years of musical activity. The first part describes an extensive formative process leading up to his emergence as an independent composer in the early 1890s. The second part examines Nielsen as a member of the group of young composers who shaped musical life as part of the culture at the turn of the century. The third part of the book deals with the period when his ideas about life as a vital force really came to fruition in his music, and the fourth part deals with the 1920s, when the urge for constant renewal combined with his great efforts to raise the level of general musical education. In addition, some of the chapters summarising a particular activity cut across the chronological structure. In the fifth part of the book, the perspective shifts to show how Nielsen became the figure that has been handed down to posterity, and how he himself contributed to this process. Occasionally, the reader will come across short, reflective chapters dealing with a specific theme or principle that is not tied to a specific point in time.

The focus of the book is on Nielsen as a professional. It is therefore natural that the emphasis shifts from the biographical to the musical as his work as a composer becomes more and more central. The biographical still plays a role, and some of the chapters that cover a long period also provide a framework for understanding the later years of his life. At the same time, as the book progresses, it becomes increasingly important to answer questions about his compositional processes.

In addition to the general chronology, there are a number of thematic threads running through the book. One is his musicianship, which was crucial to his approach to music, from his childhood experiences playing with his father, through his training as a military band musician and as a professionally trained violinist, to his work as a chamber musician, a Royal Musician, Kapellmeister and conductor. A second thread is Nielsen's work as a composer, covering a wide range of areas, all interesting: music for events, symphonic music, chamber music, incidental music, lieder, songs and hymns, as well as music for specific instruments.

A third thread is the cultural and musical milieux of which Nielsen was a part, in Odense, Copenhagen, Leipzig, Berlin and Paris, and the trends in which he was involved, from the freethinkers in the Copenhagen of the Modern Breakthrough to Symbolism, Vitalism and the cultivation of modern currents seeking innovation from a fundamental level. A fourth thread is his lifelong interest in pedagogical projects, from his own teaching career to the great popular education projects with the renewal of Danish song culture and his contribution to new and contemporary educational music. Finally, the book is concerned with his work as a cultural figure of his time. Nielsen was a person with whom even people outside the circle of professional musicians could identify.

Each chapter is structured around a specific period, activity or theme, which is presented in a comprehensive form, inviting the reader to explore the chapters individually and not necessarily in the order in which they appear. Similarly, because of the chronology and the integrated threads, there are of course stories that are pursued across the chapters. Taken as a whole, the forty-three chapters form a jigsaw puzzle that eventually reveals a picture of the whole Nielsen: the musician, the composer and the cultural personality. We have tried to do justice to what Nielsen does in music: to create good stories.