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## C A R L N I E L S E N

### and Early Twentieth-Century Musical/Aesthetic Theory

By David Fanning

In music I sense a powerful force, through which the creative spirit of man gives form to that which is most mysterious and hidden (but not in a mystical sense) – that which can only be expressed in art: the incomprehensible essence of life itself, its growth, its dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

And we almost expect the next sentence to be: ‘Music is life, and like it inextinguishable’.<sup>2</sup> But those introductory words were written not by Nielsen at all, but by Boris Asafyev in 1922. Asafyev was 38 at the time and the leading critic and musicologist in Petrograd (the city known as St Petersburg until 1914, Leningrad from 1924 and again St Petersburg from 1991). Asafyev’s writings did much to set the agenda for serious thinking about music in the Soviet Union, at least until Socialist Realism came onto the scene in the early 1930s. Of his numerous books, three have been translated into English: one on nineteenth-century Russian music (1930, translated 1953), one about Stravinsky, less than memorably entitled *A Book about Stravinsky* (1929, translated

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1 Boris Asafyev, letter of 1922, cited in David Haas, ‘Boris Asafyev and Soviet Symphonic Theory’, *The Musical Quarterly*, 76/3 (1992), 413-14.

2 Compare Nielsen’s letter to his wife of 3 May 1914: ‘I have an idea for a new work, which has no programme but which should express what we understand by the life-urge or life-manifestation; that’s to say: everything that moves, that craves life, that can be called neither good nor evil, neither high nor low, neither great nor small, but simply: “That which is life” or “That which craves life” – I mean, no definite idea about anything “grandiose” or “fine and delicate” or about warm or cold (powerful maybe) but simply Life and Movement, but varied, very varied, but holding together, and as though always flowing, in one large movement, in a single stream. I need a word or a short title to say it all.’ (og jeg har en Idé til et nyt Arbejde, som intet Program har, men som skal udtrykke det vi forstaar ved Livstrang eller Livsytringer, altsaa: alt hvad der rører sig, hvad der vil Liv, hvad der ikke kan kaldes, hverken ondt eller godt højt eller lavt, stort eller smaat men blot: ‘Det der er Liv’ eller ‘Det der vil Liv’ – Forstaar Du: ingen bestemt Idé om noget ‘storslaaet’ eller noget ‘fint og sart’ eller varmt og koldt (voldsomt maaske) men bare Liv og Bevægelse, dog forskelligt, meget forskelligt, men i en Sammenhæng, og ligesom bestandigt rindende, i en stor Sats i en Strøm) Torben Schousboe (ed.), *Carl Nielsen: Dagbøger og brevveksling med Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen* [Carl Nielsen: Diaries and Correspondence with Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen], Copenhagen 1983, 385.

1982), and the often mentioned though seldom read treatise, *Musical Form as Process* (1930-47, translated 1976), whose title implies understanding form as freely evolving process rather than as static, predetermined scheme.

To be frank, Asafyev was a windbag. He rarely used one word when ten would do, and it is hard to distil the main lines of his thought from the masses of redundant verbiage. The statement at the head of this essay is actually one of his more concise formulations. Yet time and again Asafyev expresses himself in terms that we could imagine drawing Nielsen's approval, at least in principle: for instance, the 'sensation of an unbroken musical current ... an unbroken stream of musical consciousness',<sup>3</sup> recalling not only Nielsen's first thoughts regarding *The Inextinguishable* (see note 2) but also his famous remark: 'If my music has any value at all, then it's in one thing, that it has a certain current, a certain motion.'<sup>4</sup> Of course metaphors of stream, current and motion are hardly exclusive to Nielsen and Asafyev, any more than is the concept of form as process. But their prioritization of these metaphors, elevating them to articles of faith, outweighing the more common considerations of style or technique, and allying them to socio-aesthetic principles of freedom, is nevertheless striking.

It is fairly certain that Asafyev did not have Nielsen in mind when he formulated his musical aesthetics – in fact there is no evidence that he or any of his Russian contemporaries heard a note of Nielsen's music, which was neither played, discussed nor mentioned (other than in dictionary entries) in the Soviet Union before 1960. And the same goes *vice versa*: not only do we have no evidence for Nielsen's awareness of Asafyev, but we can say little about his knowledge of contemporary musical theory in general. Nevertheless it is a fair bet that both men arrived at their overlapping viewpoints by way of engagement with aesthetic questions that were debated in late nineteenth-century Europe in all artistic milieus. Whether or not these ideas show up in the written record, Nielsen almost certainly encountered them in his travels and conversations in his formative years. Their roots are chiefly in German philosophy, notably in the thoughts of Schopenhauer on Beethoven's symphonies – in particular concerning the relationship of order and chaos, conflict and harmony – which are summed up in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* by the Latin phrase *rerum concordia discors* – the discordant concord of things. That line of thought is acknowledged by Asafyev.<sup>5</sup> Unacknowledged by him, but arguably just as relevant, are the ruminations of Hegel about music as a co-

3 Asafyev, 'Puti v budushcheye' [Paths to the Future], in *Melos: knigi o muzike* [Melos: Books about Music], cited in Haas, *op.cit.*, 416.

4 See Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London 1979, 228, originally cited in Torben Meyer & Frede Schandorf Petersen (eds.), *Carl Nielsen. Kunstneren og Mennesket* [Carl Nielsen. The Artist and the Man], Copenhagen 1947-1948 vol. 1, 29: *Hvis der skulde være lidt ved min Musik, er det den ene Ting, at der er en vis Strøm, en vis Bevægelse i den, og hvis den bliver brudt, er der overhovedet intet ved den!*

5 See Haas, *op.cit.*, 415.

ordinating factor between the self and time. Like many of Asafyev's pronouncements, Hegel's generally demand slow, careful reading before their profundity hits home:

The self is in time, and time is the being of the subject himself. Now since time, and not space as such, provides the essential element in which sound gains existence in respect of its musical value, and since the time of the sound is that of the subject too, sound on this principle penetrates the self, grips it in its simplest being, and by means of temporal movement and its rhythm sets the self in motion.<sup>6</sup>

Hegel's emphasis on motion is the crucial thing here, along with his analogy between music and the self. These are the twin concepts that Nielsen and Asafyev, consciously or otherwise, took from Hegel as foundations for their aesthetic creeds. When Asafyev discusses what he calls 'symphonism' – the quality that distinguishes real symphonies from their academic *simulacra* – he concentrates on what happens to musical motion, which is to say primarily on its disruptions and rebalancings. In this he is just a nuance away from Schopenhauer's remarks on Beethoven and *rerum concordia discors*. Thanks to the analogy between musical sound and the soul, noted by Hegel, Asafyev is then able to claim that listening to these disruptions and rebalancings activates what he called 'our psychic equilibrium stemming from our life experiences'.<sup>7</sup>

Asafyev develops his thoughts on symphonism through an examination of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. When he gets into questions of musical language he notes the overriding importance of four elements: tension, intensive motivic development, avoidance of cadence and closure, and reprises fashioned according to ongoing drama. It is interesting to compare these qualities with Robert Simpson's criteria – much better known in the English-speaking world – for what he termed the 'true symphony', namely: 'the fusion of diverse elements into an organic whole', 'the continuous control of pace', 'reserves of strength ... such as to express size', 'the dynamic treatment of tonality' and the quality of being 'active in all possible ways'.<sup>8</sup> Asafyev and Simpson vary in their prescriptions, yet both are looking for what it is that marks out the essence of symphony, and both are highlighting freedom from schematicism and a concern with musical motion. Arising from all this is one of Asafyev's key propositions, penned in 1917, which could have been echoed by Simpson and probably by Nielsen too: 'Not all symphonies are symphonic'.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Hegel, *Ästhetik* (1835), cited in Enrico Fubini, *A History of Musical Aesthetics*, London 1976, 278.

7 Haas, *op.cit.*, 415.

8 Robert Simpson, *The Symphony*, Harmondsworth 1966, vol. 1, 13-14.

9 Cited in Haas, *op.cit.*, 412. Compare Nielsen's remarks on Goldmark's 'Rustic Wedding' Symphony, in Schousboe, *op.cit.*, 26-27.

Asafyev was trying to sort two things out. First and foremost he was trying to articulate our instinctive sense that some symphonies spring from deeper urges than others and satisfy deeper needs; secondly he was trying to understand how the processes of music – symphonism in particular – are analogous to the processes of the mind, of the soul, even of Life. Again, this is hardly a revelatory line of thought. But Asafyev's quest at least indicates that Nielsen was far from a loner in his aesthetic outlook. And it offers some kind of validation, or at least moral support, for close musical-analytical commentaries. At the very least these commentaries should help us to make the bridge in our minds between Nielsen's statements and the notes in his scores. But the ideal is more profound than that. When we focus on a specific passage and try to elucidate its construction, we are not just playing with a technical puzzle or appreciating some esoteric aspect of craftsmanship; rather, as Asafyev realised, we are understanding something vital about the workings of the soul.

Take the First Symphony, first movement, the transition to the second subject. Here Nielsen sets up his second subject in a semi-conventional manner, by going to the dominant of the relative major (b. 43). Then he suddenly swerves away – rather in the manner of the second subject in the first movement of Schubert's String Quintet D. 956. Having then introduced his second subject in a distant key, he gradually wends his way back to the 'right' key, i.e. B flat major (b. 85), which will eventually conclude the exposition with proper academic decorum but also with a sense of fresh discovery precisely because of the intervening excursion. In terms of Asafyev's symphonism theory this is a classic instance of disjunction rebalanced.

We could then move on to a more detailed level and focus on the point of disjunction itself, asking how Nielsen maintains the underlying flow, the 'unbroken musical current' that Asafyev also insists on. This moment can be understood as a modal pivot, with the  $B^{\flat}_4$  – the agent of disruption – not instantly obliterating the F major dominant preparation, but rather behaving as a  $C^{\flat}$ , a diminished fifth as part of a Shostakovichian 'flatter-than minor' mode still rooted on F. As we mentally search for a way to understand this disruption, our first instinct is surely that the F major harmony has not been instantly vaporised but may rather have been just temporarily clouded. It is only when the altered dominant chord of D flat comes in that we mentally reinterpret the transition – specifically the oboe line – as another 'flatter-than-minor' mode, but one now rooted on D flat. This is the line of thought I have tried to encapsulate in *Ex. 1*.

Viewed in this light, the harmonic sense of this passage is an adaptation of the familiar pivot-chord function in modulations, only now operating at the level of modality. The temporary F major tonic acts as a mediant (in effect a substitute dominant) to D flat. And the pivotal function is fulfilled by two flatter-than-minor modes.



Ex. 1: Nielsen, *Symphony No. 1*, first movement, bb. 39-47.

That is the technical explanation. But what it tells us is how the obvious disjunction is subordinated to the less-than-obvious flow – how something apparently broken is in fact unbroken. And that in turn tells us how Nielsen deals musically with the experience of shock. His music accepts shock and reshapes it, finding a way forward that might not otherwise have been contemplated and that is certainly far from straightforward, but that eventually returns us to the path we were on before the shock. We rejoin that path with a renewed sense of inner strength. Of course we hardly need Asafyev's help to tell us all that. But it is reassuring to be able to turn to such a major figure – albeit working within a different musical culture – for support. And it is intriguing, at the very least, that such an influential thinker should have placed the topic of rebalanced disjunction at the heart of his theory of what real symphonism is.<sup>10</sup> Because this is an area in which Nielsen is one of the select few twentieth-century masters.

Asafyev was articulating similar intellectual priorities to a number of musical aestheticians and theorists in turn-of-the-century Germany, in particular to the writings of Ernst Kurth that stand at the far end of this line: *Grundlagen des linearen*

<sup>10</sup> We might also note the similar psychological attitude to motion in Heinrich Schenker's comments on Background structure: 'In the art of music, as in life, motion toward the goal encounters obstacles, reverses, disappointments, and involves great distances, detours, expansions, interpolations, and, in short, retardations of all kinds. Therein lies the source of all artistic delaying, from which the creative mind can derive content that is ever new.' *Free Composition*, trans. and ed. Ernst Oster, London 1979, 5.

*Kontrapunkts* (1917, translated by Asafyev in 1931), *Die romantische Harmonik und ihre Krise in Wagners Tristan* (1920), and *Bruckner* (1925). Like Asafyev, Kurth was no systematic theorist, in the sense that Heinrich Schenker and Hugo Riemann were. Both Asafyev and Kurth wanted the listener to retain some freedom of interpretation. They wanted to explore what the musical listening experience is and to do so above all by means of empathy, rather than aspiring to watertight theory.<sup>11</sup> Kurth was in tune with the anti-intellectualist thinking that was part of a broader reaction in late nineteenth-century Germany against the ethos of progress that had accompanied that country's economic boom and scientific advances since about 1850. He borrowed new ideas from phenomenology and Gestalt psychology and in effect was an undeclared anti-Positivist,<sup>12</sup> just as Asafyev openly declared himself to be.<sup>13</sup> This went along with a certain atavism, a wishful return to an earlier age of supposed heightened cultural awareness. To use the terms made famous by Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (written either side of 1920), this was a longing for 'culture' rather than 'civilisation'.

All that led Kurth to conceive of the elements of music with an emphasis on their motion rather than their fixity. For him, melody was not a succession of points but a stream; counterpoint should be understood not as a kind of figured harmony but as a confluence of streams; melody was kinetic energy, the embodiment of psychic energy; and counterpoint united more than one stream of energy in a complementary flow.<sup>14</sup> For Kurth harmony was not *Klang* but *Drang* – not acoustic harmony but psychological urge<sup>15</sup> – and by extension form was a balance of streaming and congealing forces, a stage between untrammelled musical dynamism and formal staticism. This was in essence an aesthetics of freedom, and it resonates strikingly with Nielsen's statements about the elements of music.<sup>16</sup>

There is yet one more figure to bring in here. In the Asafyev quote at the head of this essay about what music expresses, I missed out the last item from the list: after 'the incomprehensible essence of life itself, its growth, its dynamics' Asafyev adds 'its "durée"'. *Durée* is a fundamental component in the writings of Henri Bergson, professor of philosophy at the Collège de France in Paris and author of various monographs on cognition, memory, evolution and metaphysics, mainly between 1889 and 1903. Bergson's most famous ideas emerged from his profound meditation on the nature of Time and from his dissatisfaction with scientific approaches to it: anti-Positivism

11 See Lee A. Rothfarb, *Ernst Kurth: Selected Writings*, Cambridge 1991, 17.

12 Rothfarb, *ibid.*, 11.

13 Haas, *op.cit.*, 413.

14 Rothfarb, *op.cit.*, 24.

15 Rothfarb, *op.cit.*, 28.

16 See the essays 'Ord, Musik og Programmusik' [Words, Music, and Programme Music] and 'Musikalske Problemer' [Musical Problems] in John Fellow, *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid* [Carl Nielsen to his Contemporaries], Copenhagen 1999, 125 and 262, trans. (Reginald Spink) in *Living Music*, London 1953, 24-49.

in action again. Bergson argued for a reinstatement of our awareness of our passage through time, our intuition of the continuous flow of time, which we lose by the habits of life. This is what he meant by *durée*, and this is what Asafyev, and Hegel before the existence of the term, considered music uniquely able to seize.

The concept of *durée* led Bergson, like Asafyev and Kurth, to stress mobility rather than stasis, flux rather than fixity, as pre-requisites for overcoming the ingrained habits of civilised mind. This is still a rather oblique connection to the ‘current’ embodied in Nielsen’s music. Rather more palpable is Bergson’s concept of *élan vital*, popularized by George Bernard Shaw as the ‘Life Force’. By this Bergson meant ‘an intuited common source and unity behind and within all natural phenomena’,<sup>17</sup> the same thing that Asafyev reckoned united Man, Nature and Art. In 1918 Asafyev wrote about:

a life source manifesting itself in the artistic forms, i.e. a creative process which results in a synthesis that cannot be divided into independent elements. The sensation inside oneself of this process and the likening of it to the same process in nature as it is intuitively comprehended (*élan vital*, stream) could inspire the development of a new theory of knowledge or at least substantiate it. The sensation of the *élan vital* is more apparent to musicians than to other artists, for it is concretized by them into the fluid material of sound.<sup>18</sup>

Strip away the verbiage and there we find an outlook that Nielsen would surely have acknowledged. Again, there is no proof that Nielsen encountered Bergson’s work directly at any stage, and we look in vain for the name of Bergson in any book on Nielsen (although Jørgen I. Jensen gets close when he brings the term ‘vitalism’ into his commentaries).<sup>19</sup> But this is still – and I can’t avoid the word – a vital trend underpinning Asafyev’s thinking and Nielsen’s too (consciously or otherwise), and it certainly helps us to understand the affinity between the Russian scholar and the Danish composer.

As the 1920s went on, Asafyev’s thinking gradually metamorphosed, taking on more and more Marxist baggage, and shifting in emphasis from psychological to sociological concerns. That gradually dragged him down intellectually, to the point where he could write in *Musical Form as Process* that ‘The symphonism of Beethoven was an expression of the dynamics of the victorious class’s world view’ – fine words from the

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<sup>17</sup> Haas, *op.cit.*, 414.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> ‘At the Boundary between Music and Science: from Per Nørgård to Carl Nielsen’, *Fontes Artis Musicae*, 42/1 (1995), 55-61.

point of view of the unreconstructed Marxist-Leninist, but otherwise intellectually deeply depressing. In the Soviet Union under Socialist Realism from the 1930s on, even the word 'life-affirming' was misappropriated, to the extent where hardly any Russians over the age of 40 today would be able to use it without cynicism. That just goes to show how easily noble ideas can be perverted. And in a curious way it is comforting to know that after all the disappointments Nielsen had to face in the 1920s, he did not live to see some of his most cherished ideals mangled under the Fascist and Stalinist-Communist dictatorships of the 1930s and beyond.

Already by that time Asafyev's writings had percolated through to the world of Soviet symphonic practice. They reached Shostakovich partly via his closest friend, the musicologist and polymath Ivan Sollertinsky, who developed Asafyev's views on symphonism in articles and lectures of his own.<sup>20</sup> They also reached him via the composer-pedagogue Vladimir Shcherbachov, who joined the composition faculty at the Leningrad Conservatoire while Shostakovich was still studying there, and who taught a course explicitly based on Asafyev's symphonism theory.<sup>21</sup> Here is one reason why we need not attribute the many echoes of Nielsen's music in Shostakovich's to the latter's direct knowledge of the scores, which he may or may not have had. What the two great symphonists undoubtedly had was a significant degree of shared background, not only in the core repertoire of symphonic music but also in the aesthetic principles I have been outlining.

The essential point here is that symphonism as Asafyev first conceived it cut across considerations of form, technique and genre. For him it was a direct embodiment of ideas about the mind – of microcosm and macrocosm, of stream of consciousness. And it was this kind of thinking that, however it may have percolated through to them, validated Nielsen's and Shostakovich's search for a renewal of the symphonic genre, at times leading them to startlingly similar musical gestures.

This could be put in more militant terms: to try to understand Nielsen without some conception of the ideas in circulation around him is like trying to understand Elgar without taking into account late-Victorian and Edwardian culture, or Schoenberg without the Vienna of Freud, Kraus and Loos, or Bartók without the intellectual ferments of early twentieth-century Hungary, or Stravinsky without the *World of Art* movement and Cocteau. Not that we can or should map ideas from other thinkers directly onto their music; and even the most comprehensive understanding of the world of ideas is no substitute for musical understanding. But awareness of such

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20 For example, 'The Problem of Symphonism in Soviet Music', *Zhizn' iskusstva*, 46 (1929), 1-3.

21 Haas, *op.cit.*, 427.



ideas does enable the music to stand in clearer relief. It demythologises, in the sense of guarding against the view that Nielsen somehow came by all his attitudes and musical concepts purely as a result of his personal musical evolution and that these attitudes and concepts are unique to him. And it offers positive support for and high-level understanding of the aims of detailed musical analysis.

A great deal more could be said about this topic. Although we are not well off for indications of the actual philosophical and aesthetic writings that Nielsen knew and read (which is not to preclude the possibility of interesting revelations once his letters are published in full),<sup>22</sup> in a sense that is a positive thing, since it opens the way for informed speculation. And following this line of thought – tracking down affinities in aesthetic as well as in musical style – may help us to understand more clearly what is genuinely unique about Nielsen's music, why it is worth reading closely, and why so many of us continue to find it so inspiring.

#### A B S T R A C T

Both in his music and in his writings, Nielsen's independence of spirit resists categorisation. Nevertheless, many of the articles of faith most closely associated with him – and even the actual words in which they are couched – reflect the musical/aesthetic discourses of his time. Such affinities may be traced, for instance, in the writings of the Russian musicologist Boris Asafyev, the Austro-Swiss theoretician Ernst Kurth and the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Awareness of this intellectual context helps to explain why close examination of Nielsen's musical language is of more than merely technical significance (an example is given from the first movement of his First Symphony).

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<sup>22</sup> A complete annotated edition of Nielsen's letters is in preparation at The Royal Library, Copenhagen, for publication in 2004-10 (*editor's note*).