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# ORGANICISM AND CONSTRUCTION

## in Nielsen's Symphony No. 5<sup>1</sup>

By Michael Fjeldsøe

With the exception of certain of his late works, Nielsen's music is commonly held to be characterised by organicism and diatonic melody. Even in such late works as the Sixth Symphony, where the principle of organicism is significantly challenged, there is no doubt that diatonic melodic construction is predominant.<sup>2</sup> Neither in *Tre Klaverstykker* (Three Pieces for the Piano), Op. 59, where twelve-note themes may be found, nor in the Prelude to the third movement of the Wind Quintet, where classical tonality seems to be set aside, are there grounds to assert that Nielsen was moving towards a chromatic, atonal language.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than developing this line of discussion here, I wish to draw attention to another aspect of this characterisation of Nielsen. For we are dealing here with terms that rest on implied dichotomies and that are part of a larger context. In twentieth-century musical historiography, modernism was for long periods the dominant discourse. Placing Nielsen in the categories of organic and diatonic therefore implies placing him as a non-modernist. Organicism implies that the music is *not* composed with the help of systems or constructional methods, which is a standard term in the negative description of (central-European) modernism, just as diatonicism implies that the music is *not* chromatic and thereby tendentially twelve-note or atonal. In

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1 This article draws on material from the chapter on Nielsen in my Ph.D.-thesis *Den fortrængte modernisme – den ny musik i dansk musikliv 1920-1940* [Displaced Modernism: New Music in Danish Musical Life 1920-1940], University of Copenhagen 1999, 125-64, especially 127-37, 147-53.

2 Cf. Jonathan D. Kramer: 'Unity and Disunity in Nielsen's Sixth Symphony', in Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion*, London 1994, 293-344. Kramer asserts that there is 'unity', but not 'organicism' in the Sixth Symphony (323). On the other hand, see interpretations that point towards organic connections despite fragmented form, for instance David Fanning: 'Progressive Thematicism in Nielsen's Symphonies', in Mina Miller, *op.cit.*, 196-200.

3 Cf. Richard S. Parks: 'Pitch Structure in Carl Nielsen's Wind Quintet', in Mina Miller, *op. cit.*, 541-98. Parks shows that neither classical tonal structures nor atonal features are dominant in the Wind Quintet's finale Prelude (568 f., 583, 588), whereas a harmonic analysis is able to explain the Prelude on the basis of principles found in romantic harmony, cf. Michael Fjeldsøe, *op.cit.*, 154-7.

much Nordic and Anglo-American reception of Nielsen there is a thinly-veiled relish in finding a front-rank composer who represents an alternative to a musical historiography long bound up with modernist dogma.

This discussion, which could lead us all round the houses, would not be relevant in this connection, were it not for the fact that it has so clearly influenced analytical approaches to Nielsen's work. The fundamental acceptance of the notion that organicism constitutes the basis for the understanding, and hence for the analysis, of this music, has, on the basis of the underlying dichotomy organicism-construction, led to an analytical practice in which the focus has not been trained on the constructive, potentially system-forming elements in Nielsen.

In the present article I shall attempt to show how the construction of diatonic intervallic structures on non-tonal principles plays a decisive role in Nielsen's Fifth Symphony. This does not happen in opposition to the organic principle, but rather precisely in passages from the Symphony where organicism plays an essential role.

Nielsen's definition of organicism is 'coherence': 'For what matters now and in the future is certainly to work towards uniting the utmost *freedom* in terms of individual content and the utmost *strictness* with regard to organicism: that is to say, coherence.'<sup>4</sup>

This strictness with regard to organicism-understood-as-coherence is precisely the germ of the constructional principle, and in this way construction and organicism come to represent two sides of the same coin rather than antagonisms. When the major-minor tonal system is no longer in operation, the demands on motivic-thematic coherence are intensified, and in music laid out strictly organically on this basis lies the germ of the principle of constructions. Fundamentally this way of thinking is not far from that of Webern, who in the spirit of the Schoenberg school asserted: 'Coherence means in general, to achieve the greatest possible inter-relationship between the parts. The task in music is therefore ... to make the relationship between the parts as clear as possible, in a word, to show how one thing leads to another.'<sup>5</sup>

It was in the years around 1920 that Nielsen, speaking about music, established a strong connection between the concept of developing forces implied in the

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4 *Thi det, det kommer an paa nu og i Fremtiden, er sikkert at arbejde hen imod en Forening af den størst mulige Frihed i Udfoldelsen af det personlige Indhold og den størst mulige Strenghed med Hensyn til Organisme: Sammenhæng.* Letter from Nielsen to Ture Rangström, 16.2.1920, in Irmelin Eggert Møller and Torben Meyer (eds.), *Carl Nielsen: Breve* [Carl Nielsen: Letters], Copenhagen 1954, 190 (Nielsen's emphases).

5 *Zusammenhang ist ganz allgemein: eine möglichst große Beziehung der Teile untereinander herbeizuführen. So gilt es, in der Musik ... die Beziehungen unter den Teilen im Zusammenhang möglichst klarzumachen, mit einem Wort: zu zeigen, wie eines zum andern kommt.* Anton Webern: *Wege zur neuen Musik*, (ed.) Willi Reich, Vienna 1960, 45.

musical material, the idea of establishing the greatest possible musical coherence, and the idea of concentration on the essentials of music. In so doing he stressed the concept of organicism and held up thematic development and musical form as ideals. This radicalised concept of organicism is found in its most profound way in Nielsen's thinking during the years 1920-1922, the period when he was composing his Symphony No. 5. Small wonder, therefore, that it is exactly at the beginning of this work that we find this radical organicism in its purest form.

That the composer intended to realise this concept in this very work, is confirmed by the fact that the first pages of the autograph draft in full score bear the title *Vegetatio*, meaning something that grows (see Fig. 1).

The beginning of the first movement is characterised by a highly coherent musical structure. Thematic development is worked out with great logic and economy, and motifs are developed in such a way that every new appearance is a further development of the previous appearances of the motif. This is what David Fanning, using an analogy to Robert Simpson's later withdrawn expression 'progressive tonality', has very strikingly called 'progressive thematicism'.<sup>6</sup>

In the following analysis I shall focus on these organic melodic unfoldings, with a view to showing how Nielsen simultaneously works out the melodic-thematic development and establishes a network of fixed pitches constructed on quite different principles from major/minor keys and modal scales. In fact the organic thematic development is founded on a strictly diatonic principle of construction, in which the basic intervallic structure repeats at the fourth, whereas traditional modal and tonal structures repeat at the octave. Accordingly the tetrachord  $g' - a' - b^b' - c''$  is repeated a fourth higher as  $c'' - d'' - e^b'' - f''$ , and so on, as will be seen below.

The image shows two musical staves. The upper staff is for the Viola (Va.) in bass clef, starting at measure 41. It features a melodic line with a forte (f) dynamic marking. The lower staff is in treble clef and shows the pitch structure of the motif, divided into 'core notes' and 'pitch structure'.

Ex. 1: *The main motif in Nielsen's Fifth Symphony and its pitch structure, first movement, bb. 41-42.*

6 David Fanning, in Mina Miller, *op.cit.*, 169. In the revised second edition of his *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, London 1979, Simpson quietly changed the expression 'progressive tonality' into 'emerging tonality', and he withdrew the term altogether in *The Nielsen Companion*, 83.

*Allo moderato* ~ I (Vegetation) (26)

Flauto  
Clarinete  
Violino I  
Violino II  
Viola  
Violoncello  
Bassi  
Bassi II  
Piano  
Piano

pp  
p  
mp  
dim.  
pppp  
pppp

5

Clarinete I-II  
B

FIG. 1: Nielsen's Fifth Symphony, autograph draft, p. 1 (The Royal Library, Copenhagen).

The main motif is presented for the first time in bb. 41-42. It is the starting-point for the melodic and thematic development in the following passages, as will be seen. But not only is this motif the seed from which the following long melodies in the violins grow, it also itself grew out of the thematic material in the very first bars of the movement.

The image displays a musical score for the beginning of Nielsen's Fifth Symphony, first movement, measures 1-8. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 1-2) features a bass clef staff (labeled 'Fig. 2') with a whole rest, a viola staff (labeled 'Va.') with a tremolo-like motion of eighth notes starting on G2, and a 'core notes' staff with two quarter notes: C2 and A1. The second system (measures 5-8) features a bass clef staff with a melodic line starting on C2, a viola staff with a tremolo-like motion of eighth notes, and a 'core notes' staff with two quarter notes: C2 and A1. Dynamics include *p* and *pp*.

Ex 2: Beginning of Nielsen's Fifth Symphony, first movement, bb. 1-8.

The melodic germ at the beginning of the symphony is the minor third downwards from  $c''$  to  $a'$ , which opens the movement in a tremolo-like motion in the violas. We find the first five notes of the main motif as a combination of the first notes of the violas ( $c'' - a'$ ) and the second bassoon ( $c' - d' - e^b$ ).

At the level of melodic structure the pitch  $c''$  is central. This is the note on which the movement begins and which frames the main motif. As a structure the notes of the main motif turn out to be symmetrical, the interval  $c'' - a'$  being mirrored by  $c'' - e^b$ . The note  $d''$  appears as a link between  $c''$  and  $e^b$ .

We might expect this development of the main motif from the material presented in the first bars to have been planned in advance by the composer; but looking at the autograph draft in full score this seems unlikely. In the margin of the first page, at the lower right edge, there is a sketch showing the main motif, as notated during the act of composing, to be used later. It seems that the idea of developing the main

motif out of the thematic material in the first bars not only fits an analytical description of organic thematism but also shows something of the actual act of composing.<sup>7</sup>

I shall now focus on the presentation of the main motif and the first two melodies in the violins, analysing the melodic structures. After the presentation of the main motif in bb. 41-42, the first long melodic development of this material takes place from b. 44.

The image displays a musical score for Violin I, measures 44 to 67. The score is presented in a system of three staves. The top staff shows the melodic line with various dynamics and articulations. The middle staff is labeled 'core notes' and the bottom staff is labeled 'pitch structure'. The score is divided into four systems of two staves each, with measure numbers 44, 49, 54, 59, and 64 indicated at the beginning of each system. The first system (measures 44-48) is marked 'con sord.' and 'p'. The second system (measures 49-53) is marked 'p'. The third system (measures 54-58) is marked 'p'. The fourth system (measures 59-63) is marked 'mf'. The final system (measures 64-67) is marked 'p' and 'molto dim.'.

Ex. 3: The violins' melodic line and its pitch-structure, bb. 44-67.

7 For a more detailed consideration of the Symphony's origins, see Michael Fjeldsøe: 'Preface', in *Carl Nielsen. Symphony No. 5*, ed. by Michael Fjeldsøe, (Carl Nielsen, Works vol. I/5, vii-ix), and Michael Fjeldsøe: 'Carl Niensens 5. symfoni. Dens tilblivelse og reception i 1920erne' [Carl Nielsen's 5th Symphony. Its Making and its Reception in the 1920s], *Dansk Årbog for Musikforskning*, 24 (1996), 51-68.

The melody in the violins from b. 44 takes its starting-point from the intervallic structure of the main motif, transposed down a fourth, the central note being  $g'$ . With the introduction of the note  $f'$  in b. 47 the symmetrical structure becomes complete, consisting of a major second and a minor third on each side of the central note  $g'$ , i.e.  $e' - f' - g' - a' - b^b'$ .

The development proceeds in three waves:

In the first wave (bb. 48-51) the melody moves from the symmetrical structure around  $g'$  up to a symmetrical structure around  $c''$ , which then is itself completed by the introduction of the note  $b^b''$  in b. 49. This shows the first stage of the construction of the network of fixed pitches: the structure around  $g'$  is transposed a fourth up.

The second wave (bb. 52-58) sets off as a motion from the structure around  $g'$  through the structure around  $c''$  on to a structure around  $f''$ , and back. So the fabric of fixed pitches is again expanded upwards: another structure a fourth higher is added.

The third and last wave (bb. 58-67) moves still another fourth up to a symmetrical structure around the note  $b^b''$ , and then back to the structure around  $g'$ , where the melody comes to rest.



Ex. 4: Pitch structures in the violins' melodic line, bb. 44-67, forming a chain with central notes  $g'$ ,  $c''$ ,  $f''$  and  $b^b''$ .

In this way a network of fixed pitches comes into being, constituted by the stacking of intervallic structures transposed each time by a fourth. This network determines every note in the melody. As it proceeds upwards, the notes move flatwards in terms of major/minor scales.

As this network of fixed pitches is worked out, the concept of pitch-set classes, one of the very basic concepts of tonal music, is suspended: the  $e'$  fixed in one octave (violins b. 59) would not fit in an octave higher, where  $e^b''$  is prescribed (violins b. 60).

After repeating the main motif in bb. 69-70, the second long melody begins in b. 72. It continues the development of the thematic material from the first long melody, but it also expands the intervallic structure around  $g'$  with the note  $d^\sharp'$ , added to the structure a semitone beneath the hitherto lowest note of this structure,  $e'$  (all these notes are doubled at the octave above).

In bb. 75-77 the first two bars of the melody are heard in sequence, transposed up a sixth (motif a). This brings disorder into the system, since this transposition up a

VI. I

72

3

div.

mp

fp

a

core notes

pitch structure

Ex. 5: Beginning of the violins' second long melodic line, bb. 72-77.

sixth nevertheless still uses the same notes of the pitch-structure which appeared by moving the first melody up a fourth,  $e^b$  being the central note of the melody, but situated in a symmetrical intervallic structure around  $c''$ :  $a' b^b c'' d'' e^b$ .

VI. I

78

unis.

dim.

p

core notes

pitch structure

Ex. 6: Continuation of violin line, bb. 78-83.

Nielsen made another alteration, however, which produces a solution to this problem. By letting the violins play this second melody in octaves, he has the opportunity of re-interpreting which of the notes in the octaves is to be considered the 'real' one, and which is 'accidental'. In bb. 72-78 the lower note fits into the network of fixed pitches. In b. 79 he re-interprets this, so that now the upper note is considered the more prominent. These upper notes fit into the network, since by changing the  $d''-d'''$  of b. 78 into the  $d^b''-d^b'''$  of b. 79, Nielsen 'modulates' into a pitch-structure around the central note  $e^b'''$ . Therefore the central notes of the melody and the pitch network come back together on the  $e^b'''$ . The symmetrical structure around  $e^b'''$ :  $c''' d^b''' e^b''' f'''$  (plus hypothetical  $g^b'''$ ) turns out to be another fourth on top of the network of fixed pitches. From the first note of b. 79 to the second of b. 81, the melody descends through the complete network.

This interdependency of organicism and construction is not achieved by accident. It is a way of fulfilling - in a way which is not merely metaphorical but on the



contrary fulfils the requirements of a musical structure – the vision that Nielsen expressed in his often quoted letter to Henrik Knudsen, written on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1913: ‘We should try at once to get away from the keys and yet work convincingly diatonically. That’s the matter, and, in this, here I feel a great yearning within me for freedom.’<sup>8</sup> This striving is what unites organicism and construction in a state of interdependence. The consistent organicism brings about the construction of a network of fixed pitches; and this construction enables the setting free of melodic organicism from the demands of inherited keys or modes.

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

This article points to the fact, that most analytical approaches to Nielsen’s music are embedded in an underlying modernist discourse shared by its opponents, in which construction and chromaticism are considered as opposed to organicism and diatonicism. Analysing the melodic and interval structures at the beginning of Nielsen’s Fifth Symphony it can be shown that Nielsen develops a system of recurring symmetrical intervallic structures, which are not based on the octave or any traditional modes. Construction and organicism enter a state of interdependence, where consistent organicism brings about the construction of a network of fixed pitches; and this construction enables the setting free of melodic organicism from the demands of inherited keys or modes.

*Translated by David Fanning*

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8 Translation by Alan Swanson, in Mina Miller, *op.cit.*, 624. *Vi skulde paa engang se at komme bort fra Tonearterne og alligevel virke diatonisk overbevisende. Dette er Sagen; og her føler jeg i mig en Stræben efter Frihed.* Irmelin Eggert Møller and Torben Meyer (eds.), *Carl Nielsen: Breve* [Carl Nielsen: Letters], Copenhagen 1954, 133.