
DIFFERENT NAMES FOR THE SAME THING ... ?

Nielsen's Forces, Schenker's Striving, Tarasti's Modalities
and Simpson's Narratives.

By Tom Pankhurst

In an interview for *Politiken* Nielsen commented on the lack of a title for his Fifth Symphony:

My first symphony was also untitled. But then came 'The Four Temperaments', 'The Espansiva' and 'The Inextinguishable', actually just different names for the same thing, the only thing that music in the end can express: resting forces as opposed to active ones.¹

In exploring the manifestation of these 'forces' in *Det uudslukkelige* (The Inextinguishable), I shall aim to utilise the concepts of semiotics, as Jonathan Dunsby and John Stopford advise in a proselytising editorial, to 'revitalise rather than exclude ... those creative and perceptual impulses which have informed musical intuition.'² To this end I shall engage with Heinrich Schenker's understanding of tonal space and also with Robert Simpson's writings on Nielsen's symphonic music, which have attracted nearly as much commentary in the English-speaking world as the music itself. The framework within which I shall attempt to reshape these ideas is borrowed and adapted from the Finnish semiotician Eero Tarasti, whose theories shed some interesting light on the insights of both Schenker and Simpson.

Tarasti's *Theory of Musical Semiotics* synthesises ideas from a wide range of texts on music theory, semiotics, philosophy and other disciplines.³ His application of el-

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- 1 *Min første Symfoni var ogsaa navnløs. Men saa kom 'De fire Temperamenter', 'Espansiva' og 'Det uudslukkelige', egentlig blot forskellige Navne paa det samme, det eneste, som Musikken til syvende og sidst kan udtrykke: de hvilende Kræfter i Modsætning til de aktive.* *Politiken* 24.1.1922, cited in David Fanning, *Nielsen: Symphony No. 5*, Cambridge 1997, 97.
 - 2 Jonathan Dunsby and John Stopford, 'The Case for a Schenkerian Semiotic', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 3 (1981), 51.
 - 3 Eero Tarasti, *Theory of Musical Semiotics*, Bloomington 1994.

ements of Algirdas Julien Greimas's structuralist approach to narrative is of the greatest relevance to the present study (see in particular Greimas's *Structural Semantics* and the collection of his essays entitled *On Meaning*).⁴ Greimas discusses narratives by reducing them to representative sequences concerning the junction of subjects and objects, and by examining their underlying elementary structures. In my essay, the notion of narrative conjunction and disjunction will form the basis for a discussion of motifs in Nielsen's Fourth Symphony, while his dramatic deployment (and distortion) of tonality will be explored in terms of Greimas's elementary structures.

The central concept in Tarasti's adaptation of Greimas is that of 'modality' (used in a general sense rather than to denote musical pitch-collections). According to this view, in a literary narrative the simplest modalities concern the 'being' and 'doing' of subjects and objects. To these basic modalities can be added 'will', 'know', 'can' and 'must', which modify 'doing' and 'being' with desire, knowledge, ability and obligation.⁵ An example might be the statement, 'the Prince wanted the sword'. In this narrative utterance there are two implied states of being: the initial disjunction of prince and sword and their implied eventual conjunction. The Prince moves from one state to the other through 'doing', and this doing is modified or *surmodalised* by his 'wanting' or 'will'. Tarasti suggests that in a musical state of 'being', subject and object are hard to distinguish; this state he equates with consonance. For musical 'doing', however, which he equates with dissonance, he proposes that 'a subject appears in the music's kinetic energy, which from dissonance strives for a state of rest'.⁶

In order to explore Nielsen's powerful yet idiosyncratic engagement with tonality, I have adapted these concepts of modality and combined them with a broadly Schenkerian view of the tonal system. I have taken Tarasti's deliberately general characterisation of musical 'being' as consonance and equated it with a Schenkerian understanding of tonal closure. In this I should emphasise that I am not treating Schenkerian theory as a closed and complete analytical system, but as a metaphorical model of how tonal space is understood to be structured within a particular style and culture – what Tarasti would call 'fictive' space.⁷

For Schenker the *Urlinie*, or descent from $\hat{3}$ (see *Ex. 1*) is the primal tonal motion. In conjunction with the bass 'arpeggiation' I – V – I, it forms one of the simplest background tonal structures – the *Ursatz*. It represents a motion from one point of rest to another, where the first point ($\hat{3}$) itself constitutes a relative tension by comparison with the second ($\hat{1}$) which is at the point of maximum rest or, in terms of

4 Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, Nebraska 1983 [original publication 1966]. Idem, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, Minnesota 1987 [original publication 1970].

5 See Greimas (1987), *op. cit.*, 121-9.

6 Tarasti, *op. cit.*, 104.

7 *Ibid.*, 85 ff.

Tarasti's adaptation of Greimas's modalities, 'being' (hence 'will to-be' on Ex. 1). At this deep level the intervening $\hat{2}$ is conceptually a dissonance and therefore embodies the modality of 'doing'. The supporting harmonic framework clearly plays a part in these modalities, since motions away from the tonic project 'doing' ('will to-do') while those towards it engender 'being' ('will to-be'). Fundamental to Schenker's conception of tonal space is the notion that $\hat{3}$ embodies 'striving toward a goal'⁸ and that arrival on $\hat{1}$ means that 'all tensions in a musical work cease'.⁹ This 'striving' accords well with the Tarastian modality of 'will'. In addition, Schenker's subordination of structure to the norms of strict counterpoint introduces a significant degree of 'must' – the apparent culturally determined obligation to create and ultimately resolve tensions in particular ways (hence the overall 'must not-do' on Ex. 1).

Ex. 1: modal interpretation of Schenker's *Ursatz*.

Theoretically, one could ascribe different combinations of these modalities to all the various foreground and middleground progressions that Schenkerian analysis propounds. For example, a linear progression from $\hat{3}$ to $\hat{1}$ potentially projects 'will to-be', a striving for the stable consonance of closure on $\hat{1}$.¹⁰ This modality is only potential, because closure in tonal music is, of course, dependent on a combination of harmonic, rhythmic and textural factors. The realisation of modalities projected by linear progressions is always dependent on the nature of their manifestation at the musical surface.¹¹

If a descending third-progression from $\hat{3}$ projects the modality of 'will to-be', a descending third-progression from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$ is subtly different; it strives to move away

8 Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition*, New York 1979 [original publication 1935], 4.

9 *Ibid.*, 13.

10 Ascending motion to $\hat{3}$ or $\hat{5}$, on the other hand, could be understood as projecting either 'will to-do' (i.e. striving towards a relative dissonance) or 'will not-to-be' (i.e. striving away from maximally stable consonance). I am exploring the modal implications of different tonal progressions in my Ph.D. thesis (University of Manchester, in progress) with regard to Nielsen and Beethoven's symphonic music. The model is also developed in my forthcoming articles in *Musical Semiotics Revisited*, to be published by *Acta Semiotica Fennica*.

11 In Greimasian terms 'will' and 'must' are strictly speaking virtualising modalities; the conjunctions in question would be actualised by 'can' and 'know' and realised only in performance (see Greimas 1987, 132).

from tension ('will not-to-do'), but without reaching the complete resolution on $\hat{1}$. In this sense, the progression is unable wholly to resolve the tension introduced by $\hat{5}$. The ability to be tonally closed can be described in terms of the surmodalisation of 'being' with 'can': a progression might be able or unable to be tonally closed ('can be' or 'not-can be').¹² The inability of a progression to be tonally closed might be inherent, as in the case of a descent from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$, or it might be the result of its particular presentation in the foreground. The relevance of this inability depends on the context; to play a part in a 'modal' interpretation, it needs to be shown to be dramatically or structurally pertinent in some way.

Ex. 2 shows a passage at the beginning of the Fourth Symphony where a sense of key is starting to crystallise for the first time. The two descending third-progressions beginning at b. 19 and the end of b. 23 strive towards a decrease in tension. The second progression (E minor) with its 'will to-be' of $\hat{3}$ to $\hat{1}$ is able to achieve local tonal closure more emphatically than the first which descends from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$ (C major). Although E minor will eventually change into the dominant of A (from b. 27), locally its increased stability relative to C major is underlined by the rhythmically more stable bass and the coming together of the two instrumental choirs (woodwind and strings). At least locally, this second progression projects a greater degree of 'can be' with respect to its ability to be tonally closed and tension-resolving. This may or may not turn out to be dramatically pertinent, but if it were to be so, the first progression could then be more firmly characterised as projecting 'not-can be' (unable to be tonally closed).

The image shows a musical score for two parts: woodwind and strings. The woodwind part is in the upper staff, and the strings part is in the lower staff. The score is divided into two sections. The first section, from measure 19 to 23, is in C major and features a descending third progression from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$. The second section, from measure 24 to 27, is in E minor and features a descending third progression from $\hat{3}$ to $\hat{1}$. The score includes dynamic markings such as *fz* and *fg*, and articulation marks like accents and slurs. Above the woodwind staff, there are labels for the modes: C: $\hat{5}$ (will not-to-do; not-can be) and $\hat{3}$. Above the strings staff, there are labels for the modes: E: $\hat{3}$ (will to-be; can-be) and $\hat{1}$. Below the strings staff, there are labels for the modes: C: V (will to-be) and I, and E: V (will to-be) and I.

Ex. 2: Fourth Symphony, first movement, bb. 19-24, descending third progressions.

These very straightforward modalities could be found on the surface of almost any piece of tonal music. However, what makes this approach particularly useful for Nielsen's music is that it allows us to discuss his dramatic distortions of common-

12 In Tarasti, *op.cit.*, the modality of 'can' is associated with technical or instrumental virtuosity. Tarasti has indicated, however, that he finds my various extensions of his model appropriate (private correspondence, October 21, 2001).

practice tonality in essentially the same terms. The passage shown in *Ex. 3*, for example, is still constructed with descending melodic thirds, as details of orchestration confirm (see brackets on example), but although these still nominally project the modality of ‘will not-to-do’, their oblique harmonic relationship to the E pedal and the accompanying non-diatonic harmonies do not allow them to function in this way.

Ex. 3: Fourth Symphony, first movement, bb. 27ff., descending third progressions.

The E pedal and the general sense of thematic liquidation nonetheless signal some sort of striving for structural closure, so that the inability of the descending thirds to provide *tonal* confirmation of this closure is brought into dramatic focus. In terms of the opposition of ‘can be’ and ‘not-can be’ already introduced, this clearly belongs to the latter category. But the passage can be understood more subtly than that. Tarasti, after Greimas, uses a so-called semiotic square to open up such simple oppositions into a more sophisticated structure.¹³ An example from outside music is the opposition of good and evil. The semiotic square describing the elementary structure of signification around this opposition would consist of good versus evil, plus their negations (i.e. not-good and not-evil). By analogy, *Fig. 1* shows the semiotic square that maps out the underlying structure relating to tonal closure in terms of the modalities of ‘can’ and ‘be’. The dramatic focus on the inability to provide tonal closure in *Ex. 3* could be represented not only by a movement towards the third position on the square (‘not-can be’) but also by a movement towards the fourth position: the double negative ‘not-can not-be’. This would indicate that the inability to provide tonal closure is made pertinent or even problematised in some way.

By extension the semiotic square offers us a tool with which to explore other aspects of Nielsen’s dramatic deployment of tonality, especially in cases where, like

¹³ See Tarasti, *op.cit.*, 87-93, and Greimas (1987), 49ff.

many turn-of-the-20th-century composers, he pushes at its boundaries. The rest of this article will draw on Fig. 1 and on other semiotic squares in an attempt to shed light on musical narratives in *The Inextinguishable* that are already instinctively sensed – such as those of struggle and order-to-chaos, described by Simpson and other commentators – but with the aim of shifting our understanding of these narratives away from what Dan Grimley has criticised as a ‘one-dimensional unscrolling’.¹⁴

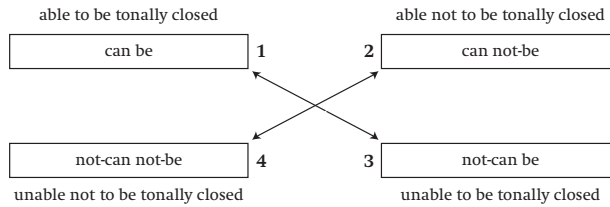


FIG. 1: Semiotic square of tonal closure in terms of the modalities of ‘can’ and ‘be’.

Simpson suggests that in its entirety the Fourth Symphony ‘evolves the key of E major out of apparent chaos’.¹⁵ Although Simpson’s tonal narratives have rightly been questioned, there is nevertheless in this instance a palpable sense of evolution, in whose development the pervasive second subject theme plays a central part. As shown in Ex. 4, Nielsen presents the theme’s descending fourth motif and its many variants in two principal ways: sometimes (Ex. 4a) as a descending fourth that leans harmonically towards the dominant, at other times (Ex. 4b) as a descending third progression plus neighbour note, a configuration that leans towards a tonic prolongation. These subtly different presentations project different modalities – the first, a ‘will to-do’ and the second a ‘will not-to-do’ – and the dramatic tension developed between the two will permeate the symphony. It is not until the closing bars of the final movement that the latent ‘will to-be’ of the theme is fully realised (see Ex. 4c). Here the second subject is presented with maximum stability as a pair of third progressions that together constitute a tension-resolving $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{1}$. Each note is alternately supported by tonic and dominant, and for the first time the $\hat{7}$ of the second half of the theme resolves definitively to $\hat{8}$. There is still not complete closure, however, as the second timpani hammers out a repeated bass-note pattern of I – V – I – V that is not finally reversed until the very last bar of the work.

Moving away from the second subject itself, these two basic progressions – a descending fourth and a descending third with lower neighbour note – permeate the

¹⁴ Daniel Grimley, *Nielsen, Nationalism and Danish Musical Style*, (Ph.D. diss., King’s College, Cambridge 1998), 4.

¹⁵ Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, rev. edn, London 1979, 77.

a) First movement, bb. 51ff.

b) First movement, bb. 96ff.

c) Fourth movement, bb. 1156ff.

Ex. 4: Fourth Symphony, differing configurations of the second subject theme.

fabric of the work on many levels. To take just one example, the second of these progressions wrests a brief moment of F# minor stability from the whole-tone maelstrom of one of the famous timpani duels (Ex. 5). Here it imposes some tonal order on the preceding chaos, the sense of struggle being reinforced by the strongly emphasised, unsupported neighbour notes.

If the descending-third-plus-neighbour-note paradigm generally prevails in the foreground, towards the end of the work the deep middleground voice-leading is

Ex. 5: *Fourth Symphony, fourth movement, bb. 781 ff.*

dominated by fourth-progressions. The exposition and recapitulation of the first movement have clearly described a treble descent from A to E, and a similar progression spans the greater part of the final movement, from the development section to the end, as shown in *Ex. 6*.

Incipit a) on *Ex. 6* shows the repeated *a*'s that disturb the calm end of the exposition of the last movement. As shown in incipit b), G^{\flat} emerges from a series of descending thirds that reactivate the harmonic rhythm at the beginning of the development, and it continues to dominate the accompanying wind chords as the violins perform a twice-interrupted descent from $\hat{3}$ in C minor. As can be seen on the graph from b. 909, the completion of this descent slips almost immediately into a long dominant of E, shown at incipit c), at the top of which an F^{\sharp} predominates. The peculiar stasis of this dominant is broken by an explosion of energy precipitated by the final timpani duel. Incipit d) shows the local descent from A to E in the trombones that drives this energy into the coda. The descent, through G^{\sharp} rather than G^{\flat} , is supported by a II – V – I cadence in E.

These are just a few of many foreground and middleground examples of this descending fourth motif. But my argument is not simply that old chestnut of pointing to a network of parallelisms as proof of a given work's worthiness to join the canon of coherent masterpieces. The prevalence of this diatonic motif has an important role in one of the central tonal dramas of the Fourth Symphony (one also played out in the Flute Concerto, among other works), namely an apparent struggle for sharpwards rather than flatwards modulation. The descending fourth progression in the treble, at various levels, helps to secure the overall sharpwards trajectory of the work – from D minor to A major to E major – against a middleground tendency to move flatwards towards tonal closure (at the end of the first movement, for example). As shown in *Ex. 6*, the 'will to-do' of the tonic-to-dominant structure of the last movement is secured by the deep-middleground descending-fourth progression, and this stabilisation is reinforced by the 'will to-be' of the local descending fifth, supported by I – V – I in E (see b. 1156 ff. on *Ex. 6*).

860 881 897 909 917 933 1059 1120 1136 1140 1156

(c: I V I) E: V II V I V I

A: I

a) 860 ob. Strings

b) 909 Wind Strings

Wind Strings

c) 933 v1.1.2 pp vc., va. pp timp. pp

d) 1136 trb. vl. tb., cb., cor.

Ex. 6: Fourth Symphony, fourth movement, bb. 860 to end, selective middleground.

One way of understanding this aspect of the Fourth Symphony is in terms of two types of movement between the positions on the semiotic square shown above in Fig. 1. On the one hand Nielsen moves from position three – ‘not-can be’ – to position one – ‘can be’: the presentation of the second subject changes so that it is able to be tonally closed, as shown in Ex. 4. At the same time, a rather different movement across the square occurs – from position four (‘not-can not-be’) to position two (‘can not-be’). In this context, these modalities refer to an underlying expectation for tonally closed structures, and in the case of position two, this is successfully resisted. As seen in Ex. 3 (the descending third-progressions over an E pedal), ‘not-can not-be’ describes a situation in which an inability to be tonally closed is dramatised and made pertinent. ‘Can not-be’ describes the opposite situation: a progression is able not to be tonally closed, or to put it in slightly plainer English, the fact that a progression is tonally open ceases to be a problem. This is what Nielsen achieves at the end of *The Inextinguishable* by means of a local descent from $\hat{5}$ (Ex. 5) and the middleground descending fourth (Ex. 6).

If music is to be shown to be ‘inextinguishable’, there must of course be an attempt to extinguish it. One feature subjected to this treatment in the Fourth Symphony is tonality itself, which at various points and in different ways is pushed to the verge of disintegration.

In the development section of the first movement, for example, basic scale and arpeggio figures are juxtaposed in such a way that they threaten to dissolve the possibility of tonal resolution. First, as shown in Ex. 7a, a descending series of broken triads is alternated with fragments of the second subject, as the music moves rapidly and disjointedly through a variety of keys. Then, at the *molto tranquillo* (Ex. 7b), the same material is combined in a greatly expanded perfect cadence in C major. The arpeggiating figure and the second subject fragment combine over a double pedal, so that the tensions inherent in the Schenkerian understanding of tonal space (for example $\hat{3}$ striving for resolution to $\hat{1}$) are close to being absorbed by the level of diatonic dissonance. It is interesting that the very elements that Schenker chooses to stand for the tonal system in his *Ursatz* – the rising arpeggio and the falling linear progression – are those that Nielsen uses here to depict its stagnation. In fact these basic building-blocks are central to the drama of *The Inextinguishable*. The scalar falling fourth eventually secures stability and closure, while the rising arpeggio most often generates energy, including the sort of disruptive and excessive energy found in Ex. 7c from the last movement. In Ex. 7b the dynamic potential of tonality was threatened by paralysing inactivity; but here it is violent activity that disrupts all tonal sense. This furious and highly chromatic fugato eventually leads into the first timpani duel.

a) First movement, bb. 244ff.

Musical score for measures 244-250. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of two flats. The top staff is for strings and wind, marked *ff*. It contains several triplet markings over eighth notes. The middle staff is for timpani (timp.), marked *cl.* and *timp.*. The bottom staff is for the bass line.

b) First movement, bb. 300ff.

Musical score for measures 300-306. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of two flats. The top staff is for flute (fl.), marked *pp*. The middle staff is for clarinet (cl.), marked *fp espress.* and *ff*, with a *dim.* marking at the end. The bottom staff is for strings, marked *pp*, and contains many triplet markings over eighth notes.

c) Fourth movement, bb. 730ff.

Musical score for measures 730-736. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of three sharps. The top staff is for violin 1 and 2 (vl.1,2), marked *ff*. The middle staff is for viola, cello, and contrabass (va., vc., cb.), also marked *ff*. The bottom staff is for woodwind, marked *ff*. The score shows complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings.

Ex. 7: Fourth Symphony, examples of tonal distortion.

Once again, the semiotic square offers a framework within which to discuss such contrasts. In terms of *Fig. 1* they are extreme examples of ‘not-can be’ (a problematised lack of tonal closure). Nielsen himself discusses an opposition that seems relevant to this situation. In a letter to Henrik Knudsen about the latter’s analysis of his Third Symphony, the composer asks whether there is not a problem with the author’s discussion on the one hand of all the tonalities constituting a ‘mortar’, and on the other hand of ‘diatonic relationships’, i.e. the scalar relationships of an established key. Nielsen goes on to voice the aspiration that ‘we should try at once to get away from keys and yet work convincingly diatonically.’¹⁶

Here Nielsen is highlighting two essential qualities of tonal music: the hierarchy of diatonic scales, and the centripetal force of monotonicity. These two ideas can themselves be mapped on to a semiotic square in the same way as ‘can’ and ‘be’ in *Fig. 1*. The resulting four positions are shown in *Fig. 2*.

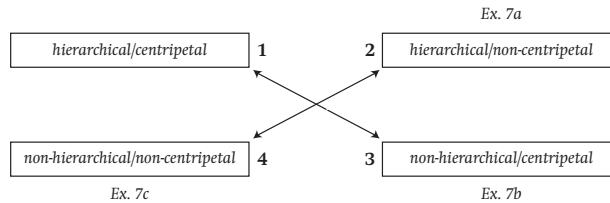


FIG. 2: Semiotic square of tonal distortion in terms of hierarchical and centripetal properties.

The first position on this square represents common-practice tonality, incorporating the hierarchy of the diatonic scale and the centripetal forces of an overall tonic. The second position expresses Nielsen’s aspiration – diatonic writing but without being tied to a key.

The various ways in which tonality is threatened in *The Inextinguishable* can also be mapped onto this square. The music shown in *Ex. 7a* is made up of diatonic fragments. They move too quickly, however, to have any sense of relationship even to a local tonic, and this is represented by the second position on the square. *Ex. 7b* occupies the third position – we are clearly centred around C, but the tonal hierarchy is paralysed by the mass of diatonic dissonances. Finally, the fugato section (*Ex. 7c*) pushes towards the fourth position on the square – so chromatic that it is hard to distinguish a local point of reference, let alone a global one.

16 Vi skulde paa engang se at komme bort fra Tonearterne og alligevel virke diatonisk overbevisende. Letter to Henrik Knudsen 19.8.1913, cited in Alan Swanson, ‘Carl Nielsen’s letters: a selection’, in Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion*, London 1994, 624.

A still broader perspective would situate the background of progressive tonal schemes in general on the second position of the square – basically diatonic, but not monotonal – and it is interesting that this is also the position where Nielsen’s aspiration for diatonic mobility is situated, which he characterises as a ‘great yearning for freedom’.¹⁷

If the semiotic metalanguage that I have adopted seemingly offers merely ‘different names for the same thing’, it does so for a purpose. Its combination with Schenkerian and other models of tonal space potentially provides a flexible tool with which to explore Nielsen’s tonal language on a number of levels. The Greimasian notion of modality potentially sharpens our detailed foreground analyses, and the semiotic square can then mediate between our own analytical observations and those of Nielsen or other commentators. The goal-directed approaches of Simpson and Schenker, for example, tend to subsume each moment into an overall single narrative, whereas the semiotic squares posited in this essay offer a different perspective on the alternation of the resting and active forces that Nielsen describes. Finally, the semiotic square potentially provides a useful framework within which to compare Nielsen’s music and ideas with those of his contemporaries, especially with regard to tonality.

A B S T R A C T

Carl Nielsen said that titles for his third and fourth symphonies were ‘actually just different names for the same thing, the only thing that music in the end can express: resting forces as opposed to active ones’ (cited in Fanning (1997) 97). This article attempts to describe the articulation of these forces in *The Inextinguishable* in terms of A. J. Greimas’s model of narrative. It concentrates first on some details regarding the second subject before considering how Nielsen pushes at the boundaries of tonality at various points in the work.

¹⁷ *en stræben efter Frihed. Ibid.*