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## MUSIC AND PHILOSOPHY

By Finn Mathiassen

Danish society, which for good or ill provided the foundation for Carl Nielsen's existence as man and artist, was, like any other society in what was then called 'the civilised world', a social formation on the way towards bourgeois democracy, industrialisation and the total dominance of the capitalist system of production. This development pursued its own particular paths in Denmark; of relevance here was the fact that our social economy, and the country's well-being as a whole, was dependent on agriculture in a different way from any other nation. But the main tendency was the same as everywhere else. There was no agreement as to where that tendency was leading or what lay behind it, but it was as clear as day that the world was not what it had been. And more and more people were coming to think that it was not what it should be either. For artists the situation in Nielsen's time had long since become precarious. Externally a kind of privatisation had taken place: only vestiges remained of the once so solid material and ideological links between art and feudal society, and between art and the autocracy of the authorities and institutions created by God. Now each and every artistic initiative was obliged to assert itself in the conditions of a free market. Internally the situation can be briefly and very broadly summed up in one word: alienation. Art, which in some Golden Age or other – perhaps even in one as close at hand as the artist's own childhood milieu – had been in general like an elementary necessity of life, was now forced to justify itself as saleable and profitable, as a luxury or a secular status-symbol, an object for snobbery and secular worship, and all this within the framework of the self-created institution of bourgeois cultural life, which for many a sincerely striving artist came to represent a Vanity Fair. Art was certainly in demand, but not respected, and as for 'an elementary necessity of life', this was hardly the case for anyone other than the artist himself. He (and the few women who had the chance to make their mark) was potentially left out in the cold and risked perceiving himself at any moment – as befell Carl Nielsen – as a 'foolish fantast'.

Individual artists naturally reacted to this situation according to their own individual preoccupations, and with very varied results. But here again we can perceive a general tendency: artists were forced to reflect – they had inherited what Thorkil

Kjems has labelled an ‘ideological problematics of production’.<sup>1</sup> To be a composer, for example, had since Beethoven implied a latent requirement for reflection on the ways of the world, on the meaning of life and on music’s place within it all; the eternal question ‘What is Music?’, which until then had in essence figured as an academic problem in the philosophy of philosophers, had become the burning question for a composer’s philosophy. It appeared in all sorts of forms, from public polemics and solemn manifestos to serious articles, but the general aim was for composers, as for artists as a whole, to justify art’s *subjective* necessity of life – which they themselves felt in their bones – as a social, cosmic or divine, but at any rate supra-personal, *objective* necessity of life.

Like so many authentic artists of the time – as distinct from mere purveyors of art – Nielsen also gave some attention to philosophical matters. Admittedly he may have asked himself whether ‘at the end of the day those people are right who say “just don’t think”. Shouldn’t sunshine and blue sky be our only concern?’,<sup>2</sup> and indeed neither Palestrina, Bach, Mozart nor any other of his great models had left behind utterances that pointed to any great philosophical interest. Nevertheless he felt compelled. To the very last he grappled with the question of the ‘reason for everything’ – ‘Why do I compose and you sculpt?’ he wrote at the age of 61 to his wife.<sup>3</sup> His diaries and letters, newspaper and periodical contributions, reviews and interviews, and *My Childhood*, are brimming over with genuine philosophising; orally too he left behind many a pearl of wisdom. In the course of time he reached more definitive statements in the form of a series of essays, feature articles and the like, which he gathered together and published in 1925 under the title *Living Music*. That same year he wrote his ‘Meditations’,<sup>4</sup> which are not only a valuable example of his lively and colourful prose, but also contain in concentrated form some of his most important views. He did not bequeath any kind of philosophical *summa*; that was not his object in life. He never went further than sporadic contributions, but from these we can glimpse a philosophy that was not only consistent but also authentic: a philosophy behind which stood his entire personality.

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1 Thorkil Kjems, ‘Tristans problematik’ [The problematics of *Tristan*] (Master’s thesis, Musicological Institute, University of Århus, 1984). The dissertation is a pilot project for a deeper investigation into the effect of ideology problematics in music.

2 *Mon ikke til syvende og sidst de Mennesker har Ret, som siger: bare ikke tænke. Mon ikke Solens Lys og den blaa Luft burde være al vor Stræben?* Letter from Nielsen to Bror Beckman (begun 29 October 1910, continued 6 November), John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven*, vol. 3, Copenhagen 2007, 556.

3 *Grunden til alting... . Hvorfor skriver jeg Musik og Du former?* Letter of 19 March 1927, Torben Schousboe (ed.), *Carl Nielsen: Dagbøger og brevveksling med Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen*, Copenhagen 1983, 520.

4 See John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, Copenhagen 1999, 328-340.

Nielsen was not an especially well-read person. His schooling had not gone beyond the thatched village school, and throughout his life he was eager to broaden his spiritual horizons, not least through keen reading of philosophical literature. But he was not omnivorous. His favourite author was Plato (he was especially taken by *The Republic*), and on the whole the ancient philosophers seem to have been part of his core reading. On the other hand he was ignorant of the greater part of more recent philosophy, from Kant onwards, and it is especially noticeable that neither Schopenhauer nor Nietzsche, who played such a prominent role for many of his contemporaries (such as Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss and others), gets so much as a mention, any more than do the writings of Richard Wagner or Eduard Hanslick. That he was acquainted with them, if not from his own reading then through conversations and discussions with friends and artistic colleagues, is surely beyond doubt; these writings were part of the compulsory homework for his intellectual contemporaries. But his reactions were hardly positive.<sup>5</sup> In his philosophical concerns, just as in his music, he felt that he had to look behind these people, all the way home to the Classics. What he found there he took on board not as ready-made answers, but as an incitement and guide to his own continued searchings. And that was what he needed. Despite all his reading and other intellectual impulses, his philosophy was no mere academic school trip, but a personal wrestling with a task that was no more possible for him to avoid than it was for other artists of the time: namely to substantiate the subjective life-necessity of art as an objective one.

He engaged with the matter in his own way. Not for him the whole intellectual *fin-de-siècle* ideology, with its pessimism, mysticism, nostalgia, cultivation of *l'art pour l'art* and esoteric sects. He had come in fresh from the Danish countryside, where no one knew about anything of that sort, and when he encountered the problems, as he inevitably had to, he tackled them from the bottom up.

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5 Whatever ideas Nielsen may have adopted from Schopenhauer (via Wagner?) and Nietzsche he in any case turned upside down. When the Preface to the Fourth Symphony asserts that music 'is life, whereas the other [arts] only represent and paraphrase life', that corresponds closely to Schopenhauer's view of music as the immediate expression of the *Wille zum Leben* that constitutes *The World*. And Nielsen's continuation – that 'life is inexhaustible and inextinguishable: a continuing succession of conflict, struggle, procreation and death, and everything returns [in a cycle]' – that may be (and probably is, even if it is hard to understand how he would know it) an echo of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*-idea about *die ewige Wiederkunft*. But while Life, the Will and the World for Schopenhauer stood as intolerable evils, and the idea of eternal return for Nietzsche represented a superhuman challenge, Nielsen's sympathies were entirely on the side of Life, Will and the World, and the idea that 'everything returns' is celebrated in the Fourth Symphony as an unequivocal triumph for everything and everyone that has a share in life.

**‘Music is life...’**

That art was a basic necessity of life for Nielsen is one of the most certain things that can be said about him. To compose music was the only real possibility he had to fully confirm his right to life, and he suffered in those periods of latency or recharging that preceded many of his larger projects; he never knew whether it would work at all, and each time he felt as though he had to begin again from scratch. On the other hand, once he had finally ‘switched on’ (his own expression) he seldom knew how it would turn out. Instead he raced along, and the motor – a highly personal combination of instinct and reflection, musical-visionary fantasy and technical know-how, all united in intense concentration – was as a rule sufficiently robust not to stall at obstacles encountered along the way. When his concentration was at its height and his psyche engaged from top to bottom, he came to experience what it truly means to ‘be absorbed’ in a piece of work:

Then it’s as though my personal will is absent or so attenuated that the project itself takes hold of me, to the extent that I – that is the person I am – am dissolved and as though cast to the winds and floating in space. I have told you that when I was working on *Maskarade* I sometimes had the impression of being like a large drainpipe, through which there flowed a stream I could do absolutely nothing about.<sup>6</sup>

This was the positive joy of work that Nielsen experienced, but in the strongly intensified form that since time immemorial has been the driving force behind all genuine art. Many of his contemporary artists experienced this power as something supernatural, as a mystical revelation of the true connection of things beyond all earthly dualisms, and thereby as the objective justification for their artistic striving. This revelation became the personal-empirical point of departure for many an artist-philosopher and the basis for many an ideology of art at the time, not least for symbolism, which in Denmark gained a footing thanks to those behind the ‘spiritual breakthrough’ of the 1890s, with its profound impact on a significant part of Danish literature and painting in the period leading up to the First World War.

For Nielsen too, the ecstasy of artistic work became of fundamental importance for his thinking about the world, life and music. His ideas could soar high

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<sup>6</sup> *Saa er det nemlig som om min personlige Villie er borte eller saa slappet at det er Sagen der tager mig i den Grad at jeg : det Menneske jeg er – er opløst og ligesom udkastet i Luften og svævende i alting. Jeg har fortalt Dig, at da jeg arbejdede på “Maskarade” havde jeg af og til den Forestilling at jeg var som et stort Drænrør hvorigennem der løb en Strøm, jeg aldeles ikke kunde gøre for.* Letter from Nielsen to his wife, 10 July 1914; Schousboe, *op. cit.*, 387.

and wide, but he always only breathed the air of our own planet. He kept both feet on the ground, and in that respect if he has to be classified at all it has to be with those behind ‘the breakthrough of the common people’, the Jutland poets, the first worker-authors and the Funen ‘farmer-painters’.<sup>7</sup> His level-headedness can still today have an almost coarse effect, and for many in his own day it must often have appeared as pure sacrilege. For example, he kept a clear, sceptical distance from such a hallowed term as ‘inspiration’, with all it subsumes. ‘Stop waiting for moods’, he wrote to his Swedish colleague Wilhelm Stenhammar, who had come to a halt with a piece of work:

Try and start off with long semibreves, like dry cantus firmi, like wooden beams that are laid out to provide the base of the house, like boring, rough cornerstones on which to build. You are a master of counterpoint, so use it.<sup>8</sup>

Secular handiwork enthroned; maybe so, but not as the be-all and end-all of art, only as a dignified and modest entry-point to *artistic* work.

What Nielsen experienced, while the artistic process lasted, was that his ego and his will, thoughts and feelings gave way in obedience towards something that he strove all through his life to give a name. His most successful attempt to name it is set out in a comparison with which he introduced a 1922 newspaper review of some newly published Danish songs by Thomas Laub:

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- 7 Nielsen’s life coincided with a period in Danish history whose striking dynamic in all areas of society his contemporaries were already seeking to define by talking about various kinds of ‘breakthrough’ – in this case ‘of the soul’ and ‘of the common people’ – roughly as in our time there has been talk of ‘trends’. For Nielsen this kind of thing held no interest whatsoever. He loved and admired Jeppe Aakjær’s poems ‘beyond thinking, beyond reservations, but as a rich gift from the beloved son of the Danish soil’ (*uden Tanke, uden Kritik, men som en rig Gave fra den danske Jords elskede Søn*; letter to Theodor Wellejus, 20.4.1928, in Eggert Møller and Torben Meyer (eds.), *Carl Nielsens Breve*, 254) and he was delighted to have Fritz Syberg’s painting of a Funen courtyard hanging in his study (see Anne Marie Telmányi, *Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen*, Copenhagen 1979, 85). He was and remained a son of the soil, specifically of the Danish soil. But to be loved was something that was hard to obtain, and when it was a question of really important matters – in his constant craving to experience the redeeming power of art, and in his frictions with an uncomprehending, disorientated age – there he had kindred spirits in two artists who are generally reckoned among the symbolists, namely J.F. Willumsen and Sophus Claussen, both of them friends from his youth. Their mutual relations, both personal and artistic, deserve closer investigation.
- 8 *Lad være med at vente paa Stemninger. Tag og begynd med lange, halve Noder, som tørre Cantus firmi, som Træbjælker der skal ligge og danne Grundformen for Huset, som kedelige grove Hjørnestein, hvor man gaar ud fra. Du er jo en Mester i Kontrapunkt, benyt det.* Letter of 17.9.1921, in Eggert Møller and Torben Meyer (eds.), *Carl Nielsens Breve*, 209.

Anyone who has walked the St. Gotthard pass in spring must surely have noticed the water in the little lake of melted snow at the top. It stands and vibrates, as though it cannot make up its mind. And yet it has to make a choice. The four rivers that spring from this place suck water in different directions, so that there is no point in resisting.

And should we just stand and rot?

And what about free will?

Let's not go into this, but simply rejoice at Nature's great, clear writing, which brings us to a halt and makes us reflect on the universal laws of life, both those that concern matter and those that we observe in what we call our spiritual life. They are one and the same ...<sup>9</sup>

'The universal laws of life': by this expression Nielsen understood nothing supernatural, magical or mystical. The philosophy that underpinned it is worldly through and through, and his comparison is actually not a comparison at all. The forces that made the indecisive water flow where it was supposed to and had to, were naturally not the same as the powers that directed Nielsen to the right outlet for *his* abundance. Matter and spirit are not identical. But they are two sides of one and the same thing: Nature. And they are both thereby subject to the same codex: the laws of all life. 'Music is life...' he wrote in the Preface to his Fourth Symphony. That should be understood literally. It was a definition; and what did he mean by 'life'?

For Nielsen the term Life was bound up with the notion of things that moved, that came into being, existed, and ceased, from inner necessity and by virtue of their own being: by their nature in other words, and thereby – and this for him was no mere play on words – were in harmony with Nature. With the passing years the term came to mean more and more for him, until eventually it embraced the entire cosmic reality from atoms and microbes to the paths of the planets across the firmament, with man and the animals on the green earth somewhere in the middle – in short it embraced everything that no one can speculate or fantasize about, but everything that is possible for any healthy and observant person to absorb through his senses

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9 *Enhver, der har vandret over St. Gotthard i Foraarstiden, har sikkert lagt Mærke til Vandet i den lille Sø af smeltet Sne, som findes på Toppen. Det staar og dirrer, som om det ikke kan beslutte sig. Og dog må der træffes et Valg. De fire Strømme, der har deres Udspring fra dette Sted, suger hver sin Vej, saa det nytter ikke at stritte imod. – Vi vil da heller ikke staa her og raadne!*

*Og den fri vilje?*

*Lad os ikke komme ind herpaa, men glæde os over Naturens store, tydelige Skrift, der standser os og bringer os til Eftertanke om Lovene for alt Liv, saavel dem, der gælder Materien som dem, vi ser i det, vi kalder det aandelige Liv. De er de selv samme [...] . Levende Musik ("Danske Sange"), Copenhagen 1925, 61; *Living Music*, London n.d., 50; John Fellow (1999) *op. cit.* ("Nye Sange"), 248.*

and to process by means of his understanding and fantasy. For Nielsen, forces opposed to *life* were therefore naturally *death* – the absence of all movement – , but in a characteristic coupling with notions of non-Nature: affectation, sentimentality, conditioning, robotic discipline, in general everything forced, rootless and unnatural.

So much for Nielsen's understanding of the word *Life*. But what did he mean by speaking of its *Laws*? Words like 'law', 'law-abiding' and others with the same content belong to the weightiest he deployed with his pen. By them he understood nothing of the order of juridical paragraphs or moral precepts; nor did his concept of *Laws* correspond to that of the natural sciences , or mathematics or logic. And it is an important fact that it had nothing to do with any form of normative aesthetics either, for example with rules of musical composition. When he talked enthusiastically at one point of 'legitimate counterpoint',<sup>10</sup> this was – with all due respect to good craftsmanship – not with Bellermann's or anyone else's textbook in mind. Nor did the musical *Laws* have anything to do with 'mechanical polyphony', which he found so repulsive in Wagner's *Meistersinger* Prelude. Rather they had to do with an 'organic polyphony',<sup>11</sup> one of the many forms of a fantasy-borne manifestation of *Music's* own being, and precisely for that reason allied to *Nature* and its 'laws for all life'. And to pin down that kind of law in words, never mind in paragraphs, prescriptions or rules, could not be done. Nielsen's 'laws for all life' were, properly understood, incomprehensible, raised above all theorising as much as they were above any day-to-day conception of transgression and punishment, cause and effect – but all the same very real: the only laws that were able unswervingly to uphold themselves in his presence.

**To 'hear with the eyes, see with the ears, smell with the hands, think with the heart, and feel with the brain'**

Much has been said and written about Nielsen's 'originality', pointing especially to his peculiarly direct relationship to musical material, as though he had only just fallen in love, cf. his famous words, cited in and out of season, about the third as 'a gift of God, a fourth as an experience and a fifth as the highest joy'.<sup>12</sup> And with justice. But when – as has happened so often, and not without consequences in Danish musical life – people have wanted to connect this originality with notions of his music's 'absolute' character and its 'purity', that has been a fruitless chase. Admittedly

10 The expression came from Max Brod. See Karl Clausen: 'Max Brod og Carl Nielsen', in *Oplevelser og studier omkring Carl Nielsen* [Carl Nielsen: Experiences and Studies], Tønder 1966, pp. 13ff.

11 'Mozart og vor Tid', *Levende Musik*, op. cit., 20; *Living Music*, op. cit., 20-21; *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 84.

12 *Man maa vise de overmætte, at et melodisk Terzspring bør betragtes som en Guds gave, en Kvart som en Oplevelse og en Kvint som den højeste Lykke*. 'Musikalske problemer', *Levende Musik*, op. cit., 50; *Living Music*, op. cit., 42; John Fellow (1999), op. cit., 265.

an abundance of canonic passages from the master himself seemingly allows itself to be readily taken as a confirmation for a puristic Nielsen reception; his essay 'Words, Music and Programme Music' of 1909, not least, has been a gold-mine. Here we may read, amongst other things:

If you ask a composer what he meant by a particular chord or a particular succession of notes, in reality he can only reply by playing or singing the passage in question; all other explanation is nonsense.<sup>13</sup>

I shall return to this article's value as a philosophical source-text and will confine myself here to the observation that declarations such as this are in open conflict with Nielsen's practice as a composer. He was notoriously unable to explain what he meant by his music – whether by a 'particular chord or succession of notes' or by an entire work – just by playing it (or by having it played; he was no high-flyer on the piano, and his talents as a conductor are controversial). Time and again he had to resort to paraphrases and images, which in many cases admittedly strike one by their musico-poetical aptness, but which also from time to time turn out in such a way that one is tempted to turn his words against him and say: that's nonsense. It should also be clear that if – again to use his own words – 'in reality' a composer can only explain the meaning of his music by music itself, then we're talking about an abstract, purely theoretical reality. And yet, there really had been a time when music had demanded neither explanations nor philosophical reflection, but was able to speak for itself.

The philosophising Nielsen's sense of real reality increased with the years. Writing to his Swedish colleague Ture Rangström in 1920, he sketched a vision based on quite a different realistic foundation :

In my mind's eye I foresee a new kind of musical generation, which will draw from sources not like shady thieves with careful hands, but as open and dauntless artists, who consider everything that is and has been as their natural property.... We shall hear with our eyes, see with our ears, smell with our hands, think with our hearts, and feel with our brains.<sup>14</sup>

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13 *Spørger man en Komponist, hvad han har ment med en eller anden bestemt Akkord eller Tonerække, kan han i Virkeligheden kun svare ved at spille eller synge det omhandlede Sted, al anden Forklaring er Nonsens. 'Ord, Musik og Programmusik' in *Levende Musik*, op. cit., 31; *Living Music*, op. cit., 29; John Fellow (1999), op. cit., 129.*

14 *Jeg ser i Aanden, at der vil komme en ny Musikslægt, der øser af Kilderne, ikke som fordægtige Tyve med forsigtige Hænder, men som aabne og frejdige Kunstnere, der betragter alt hvad der er og har været som naturlig Ejendom. [...] Vi skal høre med Øjnene, se med Ørerne, lugte med Hænderne, tænke med Hjertet og føle med Hjernen.* Letter of 16.2.1890, Møller and Meyer, op. cit., 189-190.

Leaving aside the doings of coming musical generations, he himself indeed drew all through his life openly and dauntlessly from whatever presented itself to him as Sources: 'everything that is and has been', not only within music itself or art as a whole, but in principle everything that presented itself to his senses, feelings, understanding and fantasy. 'We cannot hear without having ears', he wrote in a diary entry of 1 February 1926, 'but we don't therefore have to believe that it's our ears we hear with when we listen to a piece of music',<sup>15</sup> and it was certainly not only his ears he used when he composed a piece of music.

It was entirely founded in his predisposition as a personality, and it is characteristic, that precisely in his childhood memoirs he would take the question up in more detail. In the introductory chapter to *My Childhood* he set out thoughts, which, slightly reorganized, can be boiled down as follows:<sup>16</sup>

The common origin of all thought, science and art is *poetic experience*, a special form of mastering of reality, which in its eternal present changes mere sense-data (for example the sight of a flock of geese taking wing) into part of a visionary sense of connection and transforms passive perception into productive activity.<sup>17</sup> We were all born with the ability to experience the world in this manner, 'the poetic gift', but most of us by far have squandered it by the rigours of existence and the incomprehension of adults. The great 'poets, thinkers, scientists and artists' are merely the exceptions that prove the rule. Nielsen stressed the distinction between the ability for poetic experience – 'the divine gift of fantasy' – and mere conscientiousness:

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15 *men vi må ikke derfor tro at det er Ørene vi hører med naar vi hører paa et Musikstykke*. Schousboe, *op. cit.*, 491.

16 *Min fynske Barndom*, Copenhagen 1927, 7-8; *My Childhood*, London n.d., 10-11.

17 Like most of his ideas, Nielsen's notion of 'poetic experience' as the common origin for both science and art was profoundly personal. Of course this does not exclude the possibility that he got onto that track via his friends and artistic colleagues, through their acquaintance with the doctrines of the contemporary French philosopher Henri Bergson about intuition and *l'elan vital*, which at that time were all the rage in symbolist circles. Nielsen took his idea quite literally. For example, in his 'Meditations' he portrays an artist (himself, of course) impressing a building engineer with his intuitive knowledge about the best mixture of sand and cement for making concrete. Nor was he alone in this area; his friend Sophus Claussen in a theatre review had discussed 'the Hamlet-like oblique glance, that seems to come right up from the back of the brain', only later to learn that it had been discovered that the optic nerve was attached to the rearmost part of the brain (cf. the Preface to his collection of lyric poetry, *Heroica*, Copenhagen, 1925). Even so, it is safe to assume that neither of them would have put their trust in building construction or brain surgery that was based exclusively on intuition. They both knew that specialist ability and patient application were also necessary.

Maybe it will be objected that the poetic gift consists in the gift for presentation. But presentation is after all only working out, which must be a question of training, culture and education.<sup>18</sup>

In other words: ‘the poetic gift’, the gift for intensive and fructifying experience, is inborn and timeless; the gift for representation on the other hand is acquired, and both historically and socially determined. And what gives the thing represented (for example a work of art) its ‘rightness’ (as he called it) or authenticity (as many would probably call it nowadays) is not ‘working out’ for its own sake, but what this working out – in all its ties to its time and place – includes of poetic experience. From his childhood on he had loved hearing people make speeches, and this irrespective of their oratorical ability:

What captivated me was something that as it were lay beneath the surface: the impulse that drove the words, the gestures, the play of facial expressions, the circulation if I can so put it, and the entire counterpoint of inner compulsion, of distress and joy, of tension and resolution.<sup>19</sup>

Nor was ‘working out’ Nielsen’s strongest point as a composer. His sense of form was good, as Gade had already told him in 1883, but not ideal; there are questionable transitions and formal lopsidedness in his works that cannot all be excused by the maxim that there is no beauty without a certain oddity in proportions. And as for the quality of his instrumentation there is still no agreement to this day. He was not specially interested in the ‘finish’ of his works and in general only placed a low value on their appearance as works in the absolute sense: as fixed objects inviolable in their perfection; there are numerous examples of his almost irresponsible tolerance in respect of conductors’ and pianists’ liberties with his creations. Not that he in any way put up with bungling or diletantism, either from himself or from others; the ‘basic skeleton’ naturally had to be sound. But no more than that – self-conscious artistry was not his thing. What counted was his music’s ‘rightness’, and that never lay in the working out of his music but in its presentation of what ‘as it were lay

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18 *Man vil maaske indvende, at Digterevnen bestaar i Evnen til at fremstille. Men Fremstillingen er jo kun Udformningen, som maa være et Spørgsmaal om Opøvnning, Kulturpaavirkning og Undervisning. Min fynske Barndom, 7-8; My Childhood, 11.*

19 *Det, som fængslede mig, var noget, der ligesom laa bag ved: det, der drev Ordene, Bevægelserne, Minespillet, Blodmløbet – kan man godt sige – og det hele Sammenspil af indre Trængsel, af Nød og Glæde, Spænding og Udløsning. Min fynske Barndom, 6; My Childhood, 9.*

beneath': the poetic experience. 'Experience! Yes, this word is the gateway to the whole world', he wrote in the extract from his memoirs quoted above. And he continued by talking about his excitement with life on our planet, with creatures great and small, with plants...

*Experience* was for Nielsen not only experience of the splendour of intervals and timbres. For him music was indissolubly bound up with a many-sided, 'poetic' possession of all reality – be it great or small – that came within his field of vision. As a 15-year-old bugler in the 16<sup>th</sup> battalion in Odense he had seen pictures in his mind's eye accompanying the four company bugle-calls; with the first, for example, the sun had just risen, and 'there was a rank of soldiers, waving their caps in greeting'.<sup>20</sup> On the largest scale there were the thoughts and visions that came to him during his work on the Fourth Symphony (1915-16). When he confided them to his Dutch friend and colleague Julius Röntgen, it was with wise reservations over the usefulness of 'ideas' and 'explanations'; but, he added,

[...] there is still something in the fact that even an unclear thought or perception can be valuable for one's work; at any rate I cannot free myself from a series of notions during my time of production, and that's why I suppose it's not so absurd for me to talk about them.<sup>21</sup>

It was not absurd in the slightest. It was solid experience that lay behind his basic motto: that music is life. And if he had ever had the opportunity to formulate the reverse – that life is music – then the empirical foundation would have been precisely the same. When he experienced his environment 'poetically' (which he naturally did not always go around doing), that meant the same as experiencing it musically. Everything that reality added to his life, through his existence as a biological individual, formerly the son of a poor man of the soil, currently a citizen of society and the world, as husband and father, professional musician and composer, was something that he was ready and willing to experience as music, and that with his considerable competence and from an unceasing inner urge he strove to shape and present as musical works. It was not just hearing and compositional technique that were involved here, but everything that he understood by Life.

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20 og der var en Række Soldater, der hilste og svingede med Huen. *Min fynske Barndom*, 131; *My Childhood*, 111.

21 der er nu alligevel noget om, at selv en uklar Tanke eller Fornemmelse kan have Værdi for Ens Arbejde; ihvertfald kan jeg ikke frigøre mig fra en Række Forestillinger under min Produktionstid og det er vel derfor heller ikke saa absurd at jeg taler om det. Letter of 4.5.1915, Møller & Meyer, *op. cit.*, 146.

## Programme music

To reflect on things and to fashion valid opinions was for Nielsen a process full of inner and outer contradictions, inhibitions and risks of derailment. There is hardly any more striking example of this than his remarkably contradictory attitudes to programme music and its associated issues .

Nielsen was not the only one to realise that programme music had its problematic issues; these date from the emergence of instrumental music as an autonomous art at the end of the 1700s and was a recurring topic in the musical debates of his time. But problematic or not, programme music had long since taken hold in bourgeois musical life, both in the concert hall and in middle class homes with a piano – and in the consciousness of composers too. Or maybe rather in their subconscious: Nielsen, who can hardly be said to have been unacquainted with the problems of programme music, at any rate did nothing to avoid its forms.

In the 1890s he wrote little piano pieces, Op. 3 and Op. 11, which with suggestive titles such as *Folk Tune*, *Mignon*, *Elf Dance*, *Spinning Top*, *Jack-in-the-box* etc. aligned themselves with a well-established romantic-bourgeois tradition. His weightiest contribution to the genre was, however, a series of orchestral pieces, each in their own way representing that form of programme music which since Gade had been preferred by the Danish concert-going public, namely the ‘classically’ orientated concert overture and the single-movement orchestral piece formally related to it – by contrast with the ‘New German’ symphonic poem à la Franz Liszt or Richard Strauss. We are talking about such sterling pieces of work as *Helios* (1903), *Saga-Dream* (1907-08) and *Pan and Syrinx* (1917-18), all of them centrally placed in his output, and also *A Fantasy Journey to the Faeroes* (1927, a commissioned work). He also enriched the chamber music literature with a piece of programme music, the striking little *Serenata in vano* (1914).

But that’s not all. His contemporaries, who were inclined to interpret all music as programme music, made no exception for Nielsen, and he laid himself open to it. As mentioned, he could hardly resist *telling* what he had meant by his music, whether by this or that passage or by the work as a whole. For example, the phlegmatic boy, who in the Second Symphony (*The Four Temperaments*, 1901-02) is disturbed by a barrel falling into the water from one of the boats in the harbour;<sup>22</sup> the man who having told a good story empties out his pipe at the end of the F major String Quartet’s second version (1919);<sup>23</sup> another man – perhaps Jørgen Brønlund from Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen’s ill-fated Greenland expedition in 1907? – who fights with his back against a mountain of ice at the end of the *Theme and Variations* (1917);<sup>24</sup> the

22 Torben Meyer & Frede Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen. Kunstneren og Mennesket*, Copenhagen, 1947-1948, vol.1, 189.

23 Ludvig Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen. En Musikografi* [Carl Nielsen. A Musicography], Odense 1949, 159.

24 Letter of 3.1.1921 to Julius Röntgen, Møller & Meyer, *op. cit.*, 197.

grotesque fun and games in the second movement of the Sixth Symphony (1925), ‘a little nocturnal tale, told with purely musical means’<sup>25</sup> – all these are selected more or less at random. But what should one think of the Fourth Symphony, which has not only a title – *The Inextinguishable* – and a motto: ‘Music is life, and like it, inextinguishable’, but also a regular programme: ‘Life is indomitable; things fight, wrestle, procreate and are consumed today as yesterday, tomorrow as today and everything returns’ – but whose Preface was nevertheless intended as a kind of anti-programme: ‘no programme, but a pointer towards music’s own domain’?<sup>26</sup>

As regards the question of programme music, Nielsen was apparently like a priest confronting sin: he was ‘mostly against’. But it remained a thorn in his flesh, and it plagued him. This may have been the fault of his puritanical friend Thomas Laub, for whom the history of music since early Beethoven had gone down the wrong track, and whose opinions he always took seriously. Presumably he had also read Hanslick, or at least knew his definition of music as *tönend bewegte Formen*, which cannot have failed to strike a chord with him. And the blame may lie with the fact that things had been done – and still were being done – in the name of programme music fully sanctioned by the public, but which with his musical instincts he could only perceive as gross offences against aesthetic integrity. All this certainly contributed to the fact that in the above-cited article of 1909 ‘Words, Music and Programme Music’<sup>27</sup> he addressed the topic in detail. His aim with this was undoubtedly a double one: in part to set the public on the right path, in part to keep track of his own understanding of the relationship between music and everything that was not music but that still had a way of getting mixed up with it.

He took the opportunity to say many a pointed word about the relationship of the arts to one another (‘the one art cannot flourish at all without the other’, but any attempt ‘to express the nature of one art using the means of another’<sup>28</sup> is an absurdity), about words and vocal music (‘the relationship is purely decorative ... but in the same

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25 Dolleris, *op. cit.*, 285.

26 The Preface to *The Inextinguishable* was printed in the programme for the first performance in 1916; it was subsequently included in the study score in the slightly shortened version, in which it is cited in Meyer and Schandorf Petersen, *op. cit.*, 2, 115. From the facsimile of Nielsen’s draft reproduced in the same place we gain a vivid impression of the trouble he took to get it in the right shape. He didn’t even succeed. His pupil Knud Jeppesen recalled (orally) that Nielsen left the responsibility for the final wording to him, but – whether out of modesty or piety – he omitted to mention this in his memoirs of Nielsen in *Dansk Årbog for Musikforskning IV* (1964-65), 137ff.

27 *Levende Musik*, 24-43; *Living Music*, 24-37; John Fellow (1999), *op. cit.*, 125-136.

28 *Den ene Kunst kan slet ikke trives uden den anden [...]. ved Hjælp af den ene Kunst Midler til udtrykke den andens Væsen*. *Levende Musik*, 28; *Living Music*, 26-27; John Fellow (1999), *op. cit.*, 127.

way as the sun's relationship to things, which it illuminates, colours, shines on and gives glory and also warms and gives life, so that everything possible comes to fruition'<sup>29</sup>) and in an entirely natural continuation thereof also about programme music. He also said a number of things that may have hit this or that target but not the bull's-eye; as mentioned above, the article must be understood as not merely an objective elucidation of a personal problem but also an attempt at setting an errant public back on track, and understandably enough Nielsen stooped here and there to arguments on the level of his target group. In particular his conclusion regarding programme music is a remarkably weak-kneed affair, however straightforward it may appear to be:

So is there absolutely nothing at all in the programme idea, given that so many artists – including many gifted ones – have occupied themselves with it? Indeed there is, but only a very few know where to draw the line between mere fantasy and the genuinely possible. And what about in music? If one confines oneself to a short indication or title, then music can illuminate and accentuate things from many points of view and in many ways, just as we saw in its relationship to the word. Of course. But then the programme or title must in itself contain an aspect of feeling or movement, but never a motif of thought or of concrete plot.<sup>30</sup>

He can hardly have thought that this settled the question as he had posed it to himself. We can detect symptoms of unease: 'strictly speaking nothing is fixed', he writes in what follows, and 'the question of how far one can go in this respect is of course a matter of tact and taste'.<sup>31</sup> Yet if we take his own output as a witness as to how far he himself could go, then the question of his own tact and taste becomes really rather precarious. Here there was no question of restricting himself to brief indications or titles specifying aspects of feeling or movement; here there was also a place and a

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29 *Forholdet er rent dekorativt [...] men paa samme Maade som Solens Forhold til Tingene, som den belyser og giver Farve, bestraalet og giver Glans og tillige varmer og giver Liv, saa alle Muligheder kommer til Udfoldelse. Levende Musik, 32; Living Music, 29; John Fellow (1999), op. cit., 129.*

30 *Men er der da aldeles ikke noget i Program-Ideén, eftersom saa mange Kunstnere – og deriblandt saa mange begavede – har befattet sig dermed? Jo, men de færreste forstaar at drage den rette Grænselinie mellem Fantasteri og Mulighed. Nu i Musiken? Indskrænker man sig til en kort Antydning eller Titel, kan Musiken fra flere Sider og paa mange Maader belyse og fremhæve, ligesom vi saa det i dens Forhold til Ordet. Naturligvis. Men Programmet eller Titlen maa da i sig selv indeholde et Stemnings- eller Bevægelsesmotiv, men aldrig et Tanke- eller konkret Handlingsmotiv. Levende Musik, 41; Living Music, 36; John Fellow (1999), op. cit., 135.*

31 *Strengt taget staar intet fast [...] Spørgsmaalet om, hvor vidt man kan gaa i denne Henseende, er naturligvis en Takt- og Smagssag. Levende Musik, 41; Living Music, 36; John Fellow (1999), op. cit., 135.*

need for veritable programmes, which included motifs of both thought and plot. And objectively speaking: where is the actual dividing-line between title, motto ('short indication') and programme; between aspects of feeling and movement on the one hand, and motifs of thought and plot on the other?

In the interests of polemic and pedagogy, Nielsen had put the question wrong, specifically as a question about how far something that lay outside music could be represented and recognised, expressed and understood through the medium of music, and if at all, then what and how. To this question there is no absolute universally valid answer – indeed 'strictly speaking nothing is fixed'! But answers of this kind were exactly what he always sought. His instruction of the musical public was no proper answer to what in actual fact was the real question: the relationship between music and everything that was not music but that still had a way of getting mixed up with it.

To *this* question he had in reality long ago found his answer. Not through reasoning, but by instinct; he was so to speak born with it, and from first to last he held it alive and active in his compositional practice as an inner truth, in itself quite unproblematic, which with the years revealed itself more and more to his consciousness, without his at any point in time feeling obliged to articulate it in a completely thought-out and rounded-off verbal form. A reconstruction might look something like the following: Music is by its nature involved in everything that falls under the heading of Life, and a composer may therefore depict or express anything at all – on one condition: that it is inscribed through poetic experience.

If this condition was met, then for his own part all anxieties disappeared concerning words, music and programme music, recognisability and comprehensibility; Music and Life had once again turned out to be one and the same.

*Translated by David Fanning*

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

Carl Nielsen's youth covered a period when art was no longer an integrated part of daily life but rather a commodity functioning as a kind of status-symbol. The article discusses Nielsen's attitude to this new situation, stressing the fact that for him art was still a compelling necessity, as expressed in his famous *dictum* prefacing the Fourth Symphony: "Music is life". With reference to Nielsen's own writings the article re-assesses his somewhat controversial attitude to programme music and the "meaning" of music.