

R E V I E W

Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven: Bind 1, 1886-1897, Bind 2, 1898-1905, Bind 3, 1906-1910. Compiled, edited, and with introductions and notes by John Fellow. Copenhagen, Multi-vers, 2005, 2006, 2007. Dkr 398 each.

Carl Nielsen Studies 1 carried a concise Report (p. 166) on the setting-up of the complete Carl Nielsen Letters Edition, and the appearance of volume 1 was noted in *Carl Nielsen Studies 2* (p.233). Now the first three volumes are published, running to 571, 598, 589 pages respectively, and taking us roughly to the mid-point of the composer's career. It is hard to think of any 20th-century composer who has been honoured with this kind of comprehensive project. In fact with this Letters Edition, on top of the soon-to-be-complete edition of the music and John Fellow's collected edition of Nielsen's writings (*Carl Nielsen til sin samtid: artikler, foredrag, interview, presseindlæg, værknoter og manuskripter 1891-1931*, Copenhagen, 1999), Nielsen has suddenly leap-frogged from somewhere near the back of the queue in terms of availability of source-material to somewhere near the front.

Given the 1954 selection of the composer's letters compiled by the composer's daughter elder daughter Irmelin

Eggert Møller and his biographer Torben Meyer, and Torben Schousboe's two-volume 1983 edition of Nielsen's diaries and correspondence with his wife, supplemented by several smaller collections of his exchanges with various individuals, it might be thought that we already had a fairly adequate picture of his day-to-day life and artistic concerns. But no one who has looked carefully at the *Carl Nielsen Edition* could possibly agree, since each of the Prefaces in those volumes includes fascinating snippets of information from previously unpublished sources (in most cases using the good offices of the Letters Edition as it was being assembled). Moreover, anyone who places the previously published collections of letters side-by-side with the new volumes will not long remain in doubt over the value of the new project. Schousboe made no secret of the fact that family wishes had led him to withhold several letters from publication, while many of those he did publish contain elisions (most of them scrupulously marked). Now that those missing letters and passages are restored, they prove to be full of revealing detail about Nielsen's personality, his family, and his friends. Indeed some of the letters now appearing for the first

time are quite striking in their existential angst. That goes especially for the fraught year of 1905, when he resigned his post at the Royal Theatre, came to the brink of divorce, and was somehow composing the miraculous hymn to love and high spirits that is *Maskarade*. And even the restoration of tiny details, such as the endearments with which Nielsen signed letters to his wife, helps us to take the temperature of his emotional well-being at specific times.

So while enlarged reprints of the old partial editions might conceivably have been an option, it is to the enduring credit of all concerned that the idea of a comprehensive publication was retained. The efforts of individuals and institutions to make that happen are laid out in John Fellow's introduction to the first volume, where he also traces the broad lines of Nielsen's development as a verbal communicator, the state of his preserved correspondence, and its relation to existing scholarly studies. Some 3500 letters from the composer survive, along with 500 from his wife to him, and a further 8500 addressed either to him or to those close to him, of which 2000 are judged sufficiently pertinent to be included in the Edition. That leaves only the single envelope containing letters apparently of such a private nature that Eggert Møller (second husband of Irnelin) had them embargoed until 2026, plus of course any letters that may turn up in the future. Some letters to recipients as important as Thomas Laub ap-

pear not to have survived; what a shame when that deprives us of Nielsen's part in the exchange that included a lengthy epistle from Laub about strictness and freedom in the renaissance style (vol. 3, pp. 483-489). There are also some letters presumed burned, including correspondence with Marie Møller, the trained masseuse who was connected with the family as governess from 1897 and who became the proximate cause of Nielsen's most intense and enduring marital crisis from 1915 (the many letters that do survive between her and other members of the Nielsen family are among the many fascinating new threads in the volumes under review).

Also in John Fellow's editorial introductions are succinct summaries of the main events in the composer's life and of what the complete correspondence adds (or, frustratingly, does not add) to existing published knowledge about them. Fellow has already extracted some of the most startling personal revelations for separate publication; and who could blame him? So we already know, for instance, of the passionate relationship between the student Nielsen and the teenage niece of his Copenhagen foster-parents, set out in *Emilie Demant Hatt: Foraarsbølger* (Copenhagen 2002, reviewed in *CNS 1*, pp. 184-188); and the complex picture of his other youthful relationships and their issue is recorded in *Vil Herren ikke hilse på sin slægt* (Copenhagen 2005). These topics, and the various details included in the Complete Edition of works,

now take their place in a chronological unfolding that is absorbing in itself and made all the more pleasurable by Fellow's discreet yet scrupulous editorial clarifications along the way. As in Schousboe's volumes, Nielsen's diary entries are interspersed with the letters.

Several new angles (new to me, at least) emerge from correspondence not directly involving Nielsen but pertaining to his adolescence and to the national identity of his music. For instance, his former teacher Orla Rosenhoff remarks in a letter of 3 March 1905 to one of Nielsen's pupils who was preparing a biographical article: 'Danish or Nordic (Gade, Hartmann) he has never been.'¹ Discuss!! Also new to me is the correspondence with Nielsen's mother, lasting until her death in January 1897, and with his brothers and sisters abroad. But the highlight of the first three volumes is surely the marital crisis of late 1904 and the first half of 1905, which here unfolds more fully and more dramatically than ever before. I defy anyone who cares for either Carl or Anne-Marie, as artists or human beings, to read her heartbreaking letter of 28 and 30 March 1905 with dry eyes. The passages from this letter that Schousboe felt compelled to omit, and the build-up of pressure over the previous months, combine to make this outpouring of emotion overwhelming. Even after the couple's reconciliation had edged them away from the threshold of divorce, dark suspicions of the presence

of another woman surfaced, despite the composer's promise that he had not strayed (Nielsen to his wife on 15 June). Perhaps the full explanation lies in the still-embargoed letters. The whole drama of these months is the more intense for the fact that the post generally took four or five days to get between Denmark and Athens, where Anne Marie was working. That was a torture for them both at the time, but from the reader's point of view it is a huge contributory factor to the unfolding of the drama.

The opening-out of elisions elsewhere in the correspondence between husband and wife often concerns domestic matters, though even those may be interesting as indications of day-to-day pressures (Nielsen reminding his wife about their agreement not to smoke tobacco; she recommending leeches as a treatment for haemorrhoids – vol. 3, pp. 533–534). More seriously, Schousboe made numerous cuts to passages that might have shown darker sides of Nielsen's character: not only in respect of pre-marital frustrations and dalliances with the opposite sex (recorded in volume 1), but also references to professional enmity and existential despair, not least in the diary-entries. Touches of humour, too, are reinstated: among the diary entries that were omitted by Schousboe is one for 20 September 1890 from Dresden, where Nielsen underlays Brünnhilde's motif from *The Ring* with the words 'Oh, you have diarrhoea in your stomach' (vol. 1, p. 121).

1 *Dansk eller nordisk (Gade, Hartmann) har han aldrig været.*

In a minor way, there are welcome details about Nielsen as a teacher, including the kind of detailed observations he made on his pupils' work (see, for example, vol. 3, pp. 457-458, to the father of an aspiring composer regarding a modest sonatina, and on pp. 478-480 a quite severe pricking of pretensions addressed to the more experienced Knud Harder). Even more enticing are the rare glimpses of political views, such as the expression of rather decisive antipathy towards socialism, in a letter to Svend Godske-Nielsen of 27 July 1910 (vol. 3, pp. 529-530). Such snippets have to be handled with special care, of course, because they are likely to be coloured by the views of the recipient (Godske-Nielsen worked in the finance ministry, as well as being a sometime composition pupil of Nielsen's). But this topic is certainly one I hope to see picked up in subsequent volumes.

Any hopes of revelations about Nielsen's major works are, it should be said, largely unfulfilled. As Fellow himself notes (vol. 3, p. 20), it is natural that the commissioned and occasional works should be quite well documented in the composer's correspondence, whereas the conception and execution of his symphonies, for example, was rarely recorded verbally, and then mainly in programme notes, interviews and the like, after the fact. Even so, given what Nielsen did confide during the creation of *The Inextinguishable*, it is slightly galling to find little or nothing of a comparable nature about the first three symphonies.

That is my only slight disappointment with regard to content, and it is clearly no one's fault. Indeed it is hard to find any serious fault at all with such a meticulously prepared and executed project, though Danes may spot more typos in the text than I did (I noted fewer than one per 50 pages). The level of user-friendliness is generally extremely high. The layout feels well judged, not cramming too much information onto each page, and the large number of photographs brings to visual life almost all the important characters in encountered in the correspondence. Once in a blue moon identifications of individuals are not made at their first appearance (as for instance, the German translator of *Maskerade*, first mentioned in vol. 3, p. 72, but not identified until p. 88). Volume 1 is supplied with a separate index of letter-writers, names and Nielsen's works; but for volumes 2 and 3 the index of names is not included, so that tracing references to, say, Grieg or Strauss, is impossible. Presumably that will be rectified on completion of the project, but in the meantime sticky tabs or pencilled notes are the only recourse.

For the non-native reader, it might have been useful to have in addition a map of Denmark showing the various locations where Nielsen went on holiday and composed, and also a street-plan of Copenhagen, to indicate his various places of residence and the halls where his music was performed. And while Nielsen's own language is almost

entirely clear and non-idiosyncratic to a non-Dane, his wife's is more given to colloquialism and abbreviations, as well as being more hastily written; the edition quite rightly retains her imprecise punctuation (her younger daughter Anne Marie ['Søs'] seems to have inherited her disdain for the full stop), but there were times reading those letters when I did find myself longing for the parallel English translation planned at the outset of the Edition.

That may be a dream too far. But for the moment it is simply a joy to hail the appearance of these handsomely presented volumes, which will stand as cornerstones of Nielsen research for the 21st century. Few editors would have the dedication, patience and staying-power, never mind the specialist scholarly qualifications, for this job. John Fellow has put his fellow-countrymen and Nielsen-followers all over the world deeply in his debt.

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