
CARL NIELSEN AND THE CURRENT OF VITALISM IN ART

By Michael Fjeldsøe

Two remarkable publications have highlighted ‘Vitalism’ as a current of central importance to Danish and European history of the arts and pointed to Carl Nielsen as a key figure. One is the catalogue of the fine exhibition *Livsløst. Sundhed – Skønhed – Styrke i dansk kunst 1890-1940* (Passion of Life. Health – Beauty – Strength in Danish Art 1890-1940), which was shown at Fuglsang Kunstmuseum and at Fyns Kunstmuseum in Odense in 2008. The catalogue contains 460 pages, richly illustrated and with excellent essays on various aspects of its subject. The essay on Nielsen’s musical aesthetics is written by literature historian Anders Ehlers Dam, who also provided the second important contribution, his Ph.D. thesis *Den vitalistiske strømning i dansk litteratur omkring år 1900* (The Vitalist Current in Danish Literature around 1900), which is about to be published.¹

As an introduction, it might be useful to point to a few of the central features in visual art associated with vitalism. There are certain motifs which are naturally suited to vitalist representation of forceful bodily movement and man in close touch with nature, and athletes, swimming boys and nude horsemen are such favourites of vitalist artists. An artist of great importance was the Danish painter Jens Frederik Wilumsen (1863-1958) who in 1910 painted *Sol og Ungdom* (Sun and Youth), considered a principal example of Danish vitalism). This was a motif he worked on several times. The source goes back to a photograph of children on the beach of Amalfi shot in 1902 or 1904. One version of this motif was called *Badende børn på Skagen strand* (Children swimming at the beach of Skagen), painted 1909. This version stresses the bright light of Skagen and the bodies of the children are almost the same bright colour as

1 Anders Ehlers Dam, “‘Musik er liv’. Carl Nielsens vitalistiske musikfilosofi”, in Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner (eds.), *Livsløst. Sundhed – Skønhed – Styrke i dansk kunst 1890-1940*, Fuglsang Kunstmuseum and Forlaget Odense Bys Museer 2008, 276-285; Anders Ehlers Dam, *Den vitalistiske strømning i dansk litteratur omkring år 1900*, unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, Nordisk Institut, Århus Universitet, 2006. I am grateful to Anders Ehlers Dam for providing me a copy of his thesis. It is scheduled for publication by Aarhus University Press, 2010. I would like to thank Colin Roth for improving my English text and making some helpful suggestions.

the sand. In the later version of 1910, vitalist features are much more prominent. The colours are darker and the light is less bright, which attracts the eye to the movement of the bodies whose muscles are reflected by the shades of the shadows.²

Another important artist representing the vitalist trend was Carl Nielsen's wife Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen. Some wonderful small statuettes show athletes, like a runner in the moment of starting a sprint (*300 Meter Start*, 1930), or a naked flute player using all of his body for playing (*Fløjtespiller* (Flute Player), 1929) (see Ill. 1). She also adapts the motif of the naked horseman. In an early version man and horse are merged into one in her statuette *Kentaur-Dreng* (Centaur Boy), 1902, and later she depicts her late husband as a naked horseman playing the pan flute for the statue *Monument for Carl Nielsen*.³

The aim of this article is to provide an introduction to Anders Ehlers Dam's views on vitalism and his interpretation of Nielsen as the key musical figure in this current; further, I will risk some critical remarks, which I might not be able to present in full length, but which might lead to further reflections on a fascinating and maybe overlooked feature of Nielsen's work. Well, not exactly overlooked in the strict sense of the word, as everyone who has ever worked with Nielsen knows his motto 'Music is Life'; but overlooked in the sense that this motto and its aesthetics are part of a current in Danish and European culture of those days, and not just the personal and original invention of Nielsen.

Difficulties pile up as one begins to explain what this current of vitalism was, or was about. For a start, I was made aware that the term vitalism is actually not in use in English in this way, and that it means something else when it is used. That is the first obstacle. Let us accept that I use the term as it is used in the Danish and German tradition of art history, namely art dedicated to the aesthetic of vitality, health, youth and strength. The next hurdle is that it is even then very difficult to explain how this trend was transmitted to Nielsen. He was no philosopher. He did, though, absorb philosophical thoughts of the period and thought about what he had read or heard. But it was rather unsystematic and the main part of his knowledge of philosophy came from popular essays or talks rather than from philosophical texts in the strict sense of the word. On the other hand, vitalism is not just a matter of philosophy. One has to keep in mind that Nielsen was very well informed when it came to art and art history and there are many references in his letters and other statements to his keen interest in painting and sculpture. This is a subject in itself and needs separate consideration.

Concerning formal philosophy, I find myself in line with Lewis Rowell who stated in *The Nielsen Companion* that Nielsen 'does not appear to have been particularly

2 For a detailed account, see Anne Gregersen, 'Vitale Willumsen', in Hvidberg-Hansen & Oelsner (eds.), *op.cit.*, 236-247.

3 Further athletes by Anne Marie Carl Nielsen are shown in Hvidberg-Hansen & Oelsner (eds.), *op.cit.*, plates 43-52.



ILL. 1: Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, *Fløjtespiller* (Flute Player), 1929. Foto: Niels Ulrich Hansen/Galleri VENT. Copyright: Odense Bys Museer/Carl Nielsen Museet.

well read, especially in formal philosophy'.⁴ In my opinion Rowell is wrong in turning this into a general statement, but he is not wide of the mark talking about 'Carl Nielsen's Homespun Philosophy of Music'. There is for sure something homespun to it. I do share his intention, too, that we ought to read Nielsen's texts in order to 'place them in perspective and thereby determine to what extent he reflected, or stood apart from, the prevailing musical ideologies of his time'.⁵

One must have in mind that Rowell wrote his essay 25 years ago, based primarily on the two published volumes of Nielsen's text, *Min fynske Barndom* (My Childhood) and *Levende Musik* (Living Music) and on those of Nielsen's letters to his wife and journal entries which had then been published.⁶ To Rowell, the core of Nielsen's aesthetics is to be found in his 'obsession' with 'the simple original' which 'returns like a leitmotiv throughout his writings on music',⁷ together with his handling of conflict, organic rhythm and musical motion.⁸ Actually, Rowell does not offer any clear answer to his own question – to what extent Nielsen reflected the prevailing musical ideologies of his time – leaving the impression that he rather stood apart and had his own, personal and original homespun music aesthetics.

The great accomplishment of Jørgen I. Jensen in his biography of 1991, *Carl Nielsen – Danskeren* (Carl Nielsen – The Dane) was to point to the importance of symbolism in Nielsen's development, especially in the 1890s. It is a paradox that a book with the subtitle 'The Dane' should make the first serious effort to give an interpretation of Nielsen within the context of an important European cultural current. The core of Jensen's point of view is, that 'Carl Nielsen's art originates in short from a symbolistic culture; it is musical symbolism'.⁹

Summing his views up in *The Nielsen Companion*, Jensen sees Carl Nielsen along with the poet Sophus Claussen and the painter Jens Frederik Willumsen as key figures in Danish symbolism, which was itself part of an international trend.¹⁰ To Jensen, the early symbolism of the 1890s is genuine symbolism, a reaction against the realism and naturalism of the 1880s. Responding to the rationalism of the former period,

4 Lewis Rowell, 'Carl Nielsen's Homespun Philosophy of Music', in *The Nielsen Companion*, ed. Mina Miller, London 1994, 31-57, at 36.

5 *Ibid.*, 31.

6 *Ibid.*, 32; Carl Nielsen, *Levende Musik*, Copenhagen 1925, translated as *Living Music*, London 1953, a collection of essays 1906-1925; Carl Nielsen, *Min fynske Barndom*, Copenhagen 1927, translated as *My Childhood*, London 1953; Torben Schousboe (ed.), *Carl Nielsen. Dagbøger og brevveksling med Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen*, Copenhagen 1983.

7 Rowell, *op. cit.*, 45.

8 *Ibid.*, 39 and 46.

9 Jørgen I. Jensen, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren. Musikbiografi*, Copenhagen 1991, ²1992, 92: *Carl Niensens kunst udgår kort og godt fra en symbolistisk kultur; den er musikalsk symbolisme [...]*

10 Jørgen I. Jensen, 'Carl Nielsen: Artistic Milieu and Tradition: Cultural-Historical Perspectives', in *The Nielsen Companion*, 58-77, esp. 59-65.

these ‘artists [...] turned inwards to listen to their own assumptions and to discover new spiritual depths’¹¹ as well as upwards towards a metaphysical world beyond our reach.¹² A key Nielsen work of this period is *Hymnus Amoris* (1897).

This striving inwards and upwards is, in Jensen’s view, transformed around 1900 into an optimistic symbolism, whose most striking feature is worship of the sun. In this context, central works are Nielsen’s *Helios* (1903) and his *Cantata for the Annual University Commemoration* (1908), and especially the Violin Concerto and *Sinfonia espansiva* (both 1911) which Jensen considers a fulfilment of this trend.¹³ And as a third phase he sees Nielsen reach a new sort of symbolism responding to the outbreak of World War I, revealing optimism to be an untenable position. This, he argues, is marked by Nielsen’s Symphony No. 4, *Det Uudslukkelige* (The Inextinguishable) (1914-16). To Jensen it represents a sort of symbolism without illusions, combining the experience of introvert and extrovert symbolism to a kind of synthesis of optimism and pessimism on a deeper, more essential level.

This movement through three phases is adopted by Anders Ehlers Dam, which from his point of departure in vitalism sees the pattern as a preparation, a breakthrough and a completion of the vitalist trend (see Fig. 1). In the phase of breakthrough the emphasis is on life-affirming, positive vitalism, while its completion tends to a more all-encompassing and essential concept of life as a condition beyond optimism and negativity, beyond good and evil.¹⁴ To Dam this Nietzschean vitalism is genuine vitalism.

In the same way as Jørgen I. Jensen sees Nielsen as a key figure to symbolism,¹⁵ Dam considers Nielsen to be an essential figure in Danish vitalism. In fact, in

11 *Ibid.*, 59, referring to Vilhelm Andersen, *Illustreret dansk Litteraturhistorie*, Copenhagen 1925, vol. 4, 789f.

12 Cf. Henrik Wivel, *Ny dansk kunsthistorie*, vol. 5: *Symbolisme og impressionisme*, Copenhagen 1994, 23.

13 The acknowledged opinion, that the Violin Concerto was finished in 1911, based on the date 13.12.1911 at the end of the pencil draft, is actually wrong. It becomes clear from the critical edition that he worked on the fair ink copy until 12.2.1912, omitting and adding details in the score. ‘Preface’, *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/9, *Concertos*, xiii; cf. the remark concerning Emil Telmányi’s revised edition from 1949 that he introduced several details from the draft which are neither in the fair copy nor in the first edition’, *ibid.*... xxiii.

14 Jørgen I. Jensen gives a similar account, when he describes the transition to phase three: *Nielsen’s most difficult and, at the same time, most vitalizing phase began when the art of life and strength and its connected extroverted national sense were contradicted by events both in the great world around him and in the small world of his family.* (Jensen, ‘Artistic Milieu’, 62). Thus, his ‘most vitalizing phase’ succeeds and surpasses ‘the art of life and strength’, which correspond to optimistic vitalism.

15 Jensen, ‘Artistic Milieu’, 61: *The connection between Nielsen’s music and symbolism is not a passive reflection of initiatives which in general came first in the other artistic media and thought in Denmark. On the contrary. His music in the 1890s is an independent musical contribution to the new culture which can yield a greater understanding of its aims.*

Symbolism	Vitalism
phase 1: 1890s – ‘genuine’ symbolism	phase 1: 1890s – symbolism as ‘negative’ preparation
phase 2: 1900ff. – optimistic symbolism	phase 2: 1900ff – ‘positive’ life-affirming vitalism
phase 3: 1914ff. – synthesis of 1 and 2 on a deeper level	phase 3: 1914ff. – ‘genuine’, ‘Nietzschean’ vitalism

FIG. 1: Features of symbolism, according to Jørgen I. Jensen, compared to features of vitalism, according to Anders Ehlers Dam.

his Ph.D. thesis Dam more than once lets Carl Nielsen stand out as the writer who delivers *the* core phrase to characterize vitalism in Danish art. In his Introduction, he begins with Nielsen’s statement on his Fourth Symphony in the well known letter of February 1920 to Julius Röntgen:

The music should express the manifestation of utmost elementary forces between human beings, animals, even plants. We can say: if the whole world was destroyed through fires, floods, volcanos, etc., and all things alive were destroyed and dead, even then would Nature resume growing new life, begin thriving and pushing with those strong and fine forces which are found in matter itself. Soon plants would start breathing, the mating and screaming of birds would be heard and seen, the aspirations and wishes of man would be felt. These forces, which are ‘inextinguishable’, I have tried to show.¹⁶

This is used by Dam as the basis for this statement of his own: ‘The concept of an inextinguishable force of life, *such as Nielsen describes it*, is central to that vitalist current which marked European and Danish literature, music and art from 1900 onwards [...] especially in the first decades of the century’.¹⁷

16 Letter from Carl Nielsen to Julius Röntgen, 15.2.1920, in *Carl Niensens Breve*, ed. Irmelin Eggert Møller og Torben Meyer, Copenhagen 1954, 189: *Musiken skulde udtrykke de allerelementæreste Kræfters Tilsyneladelse mellem Mennesker, Dyr, ja Planter. Vi kan sige: ifald hele Verden blev ødelagt gennem Brand, Vandflod, Vulkaner o.s.v. og alle levende Ting var ødelagte og døde, saa vilde dog Naturen atter begynde at avle nyt Liv, begynde at trænge paa med de stærke og fine Kræfter der findes i selve Stoffet. Snart vilde Planterne begynde at formere sig, Fuglenes Parren og Skrigen høres og ses, Menneskenes Higen og Ønsker Mærkes. Disse Kræfter der er ‘uudslukkelige’ har jeg søgt at skildre.* (author’s translation).

17 Dam, *Den vitalistiske strømning*, 6, my emphasis: *Forestillingen om en uudslukkelig livskraft, sådan som Nielsen beskriver den, står i centrum i den vitalistiske strømning, der prægede europæisk og dansk litteratur, musik og kunst fra omkring år 1900 og frem [...] [i]lsær i de første par årtier [...] Further examples of Dam referring to Nielsen’s wording are found on pp. 37 and 133.*

Anders Ehlers Dam's approach to Nielsen is to read his texts as literature – quite another approach from that of musicology, which tends to read his texts as though they were metaphorical statements concerning the basis of his music, or oracular subtexts to his compositions.¹⁸ Dam's approach has its advantages as it makes it possible to read Nielsen's writing for what it is, one on one, compared to the output of other writers. Dam had a forerunner in Tom Kristensen, who wrote his essay 'Carl Nielsen as a Writer' in 1932, concluding that Nielsen, because of his mastery of his means, as a writer belongs to Denmark's great artists in this field too.¹⁹ At least one has to admit that Nielsen is among the most important Danish vitalist writers.

Further, it is crucial to recognize Dam's point of departure in an interpretation of philosophy, where both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are seen as crucial determinants of the vitalist concept of thought.²⁰ What they have in common is the conception of the world as a godforsaken place whose core is the absolute will of (or will to) life.²¹ They differ on the question of how to deal with this. To Dam, Schopenhauer represents a paradigmatic line of thought, a 'negative, life-denying' trend to turn away from the concrete, present life towards religion or art as a way of escaping into 'schöner Schein'. Nietzsche represents 'a positive, life-asserting line, which affirms the energetic, the active, the simple and healthy, that which is full of life and power'.²² Seen this way, symbolism becomes an early, negative version of vitalism, from which genuine vitalism breaks away around 1900. This shift is carried out mainly by a generation of artists who themselves had their background in the culture of the 1890s.²³

Dam summarizes his views in 'a series of essential features of the vitalist concept of life'. Life is something elemental, physical and concrete; all things are considered life-affirming or life-denying; life is a source for religiosity, which might be secular²⁴; man is biology and part of life that is experienced (or even better in German: *Erlebnis*); and when it comes to art, it must be filled with and express life (see *Fig. 2*).²⁵

18 Cf., for example, my own argument in my Ph.D. thesis that one should read Nielsen's texts and compositions in 'contrapuntal' fashion, as complementary items, Michael Fjeldsøe, *Den fortrængte modernisme*, Copenhagen 1999, 125f.

19 Tom Kristensen, 'Carl Nielsen som Prosaist', *Dansk Musiktidsskrift* 7 (1932), 15-21; translated as 'Carl Nielsen as a Writer', in *The Nielsen Companion*, 151-159.

20 Dam, *Den vitalistiske strømning*, 16.

21 *Ibid.*, 18.

22 *Ibid.*: *en positiv, livsbekræftende linje, hvor det handlekraftige, det aktive, det vitale, det enkle og sunde, det kraft- og livfulde hylides.*

23 *Ibid.*, 7.

24 Cf. Ole Wivel's description of Willumsen's vitalist painting as a *secularized symbolism* (en *sækulariseret symbolisme*), which Dam summarizes as follows: *The painting is not a symbol for another world, but for life itself [...] (Billedet er ikke symbol på en anden verden, men på livet selv [...])*, Dam, *Den vitalistiske strømning*, 10. Cf. Peter Nørgaard Larsen, 'Solbilleder. Vitalismen i dansk billedkunst 1890-1910', *Kritik*, vol. 171 (2004), 19-28.

25 Dam, *Den vitalistiske strømning*, 11.

Essential features of the vitalist concept of life

- life as something essential, basic, physical, concrete
- life-affirming and life-denying elements
- a source for [secularized] religiosity
- man as biology and part of life
- aesthetics: life expressed in art

FIG. 2: Features of the vitalist concept of life according to Anders Ehlers Dam.

Vitalist features in Nielsen

This leads to the question: Are such vitalist features to be found in Carl Nielsen? Certainly we can find them in some of his texts and statements. One example of the second phase – genuine life-affirming vitalism – is his programme note on *Sinfonia espansiva*:

The work is the result of many kinds of forces. The first movement was meant as a gust of energy and life-affirmation blown out into the wide world, which we human beings would not only like to get to know in its multiplicity of activities, but also to conquer and make our own. The second movement is the absolute opposite: the purest idyll, and when the human voices are heard at last, it is only to underscore the peaceful mood that one could imagine in Paradise before the Fall of our First Parents, Adam and Eve. The third movement is a thing that cannot really be described, because both evil and good are manifested without any real settling of the issue. By contrast, the Finale is perfectly straightforward: a hymn to work and the healthy activity of everyday life. Not a gushing homage to life, but a certain expansive happiness about being able to participate in the work of life and the day and to see activity and ability manifested on all sides around us.²⁶

²⁶ Carl Nielsen, 'Sinfonia espansiva' (1931), in *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, ed. John Fellow, Copenhagen 1999, 595, quoted in the translation of the *Carl Nielsen Works, II/3, Symphony No. 3*, xix f. (*Værket er et Udslag af mange Slags Kræfter. Første Sats er tænkt som et Kast af Energi og Livsbejaelse ud i den vide Verden, som vi Mennesker ikke blot gerne vilde lære at kende i dens brogede Virksomhed, men ogsaa gerne erobre og tilegne os. Anden Sats er den absolute Modsetning: den reneste Idyl, og naar Menneskestemmerne tilsidst lader sig høre, er det kun for at understrege den fredelige Stemning, som kunde tænkes i Paradiset inden Syndefaldet af vore første Forældre, Adam og Eva. Tredie Sats er en Sag, som ikke rigtig kan karakteriseres, fordi baade ondt og godt giver sig tilkende uden nogen virkelig Afgørelse. Derimod er Finalen lige ud ad Landevejen: en Hymne til Arbejdet og det daglige Livs sunde Udfoldelse. Ikke en patetisk Hyldest til Livet, men en vis bred Glæde over at kunne tage Del i Livets og Dagens Arbejde og se Virksomhed og Dygtighed udfolde sig til alle Sider omkring os).*

Here Nielsen speaks about an outburst of energy as a life-affirming gesture in the first movement, and the healthy activity of everyday work in the Finale. This is clearly a description within the discourse of vitalism. One should remember, though, that this text was written 1931 and stands out from his earlier texts on this symphony.

Even more explicitly, we find what I have described as a Nietzschean concept of vitalism in a variety of texts on his Symphony No. 4. One example is his letter to his wife, where he presents his idea of the new work:

I have an idea for a new work, which has no programme, but which will express what we understand by zest for life or expressions of life, that is: everything that moves, that desires life, which can be called either good nor bad, high nor low, big nor small, but only: 'that which is life' or: 'that which desires life' – you see: no particular idea of anything 'grandiose' or anything 'refined and delicate' or hot or cold (intense perhaps) but only life and movement, but different, very different, but coherent, and as if always flowing in one great movement in a single stream.²⁷

It is interesting to notice how close he is to the wording and the gesture of extreme opposites found in a note written by Nietzsche in 1885, even if we have no evidence that he knew this particular text:²⁸

This world: [...] force throughout, as a play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many, increasing here and at the same time decreasing there; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, [...] out of the simplest forms striving towards the most complex, out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms towards the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory, and then again returning to the simple out of this abundance, out of the play of contradictions back to the joy of concord [...] this, my *Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this [...] my 'beyond good and evil,' [...] ²⁹

27 Letter from Carl Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 3 May 1914, quoted from *The Nielsen Companion*, 46; another translation is found *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/4, *Symphony No. 4*, xi.

28 This fragment from 1885 was among those compiled into *Die Wille zur Macht. Versuch einer Umwerthung aller Werthe*, published by Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche and her collaborators, Leipzig 1901, 411f. It is found as the very last one, no. 1067, in the expanded version of 1906, translated into English as *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York 1968, 549f.; cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, R. Geuss and A. Nehamas (eds.), translation Ladislaus Löb, Cambridge 2009, x.

29 I quote the translation in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 550. 'Diese Welt: [...] Kraft überall, als Spiel von Kräften und Kraftwellen zugleich Eins und

Further examples are found in *Fig. 3*, offering various descriptions of Nielsen's Fourth Symphony, all of them representing the discourse of vitalist aesthetics.

Where else would we look for manifestations of vitalism? One manifestation might be the idea that 'aesthetic creation and Nature's development of life are regarded as two aspects of the same thing.'³⁰ Dam considers 'this way of thinking valid throughout Nielsen's music aesthetics.'³¹ Even though I would not go that far, this idea is clearly to be found, maybe most strikingly in the beginning of Nielsen's Fifth Symphony, where the process of composing and the organic development of musical matter seems to be identical.³² Searching for them, we would also be able to find numerous examples of Nielsen being in favour of natural behaviour, strength, health, preferring manly bearing to weakness, effeminacy, affectation or unnaturalness.

Another trend he shared with vitalism is the admiration of ancient Greek art and culture.³³ This trend included the reinvention of the Olympic Games; a curious Danish group of artists running around naked in the hills of Western Zealand pretending to be 'men from Hellas' ['hellenere']; Danish archaeologists, artists and art historians travelling to Greece; and the establishing of a Greek Society in 1905, of which Carl Nielsen, Harald Høffding and Georg Brandes were among the founding

"Vieles", hier sich häufend und zugleich dort sich mindern, ein Meer in sich selber stürmender und fluthender Kräfte, ewig sich wandelnd, ewig zurücklaufend, [...] aus den einfachsten in die vielfältigsten hinaustreibend, aus dem Stillsten, Starrsten, Kältesten hinaus in das Glühendste, Wildeste, Sichselber-widersprechendste, und dann wieder aus der Fülle heimkehrend zum Einfachen, aus dem Spiel der Widersprüche zurück bis zur Lust des Einklangs [...] diese meine *dionysische* Welt des Ewig-sich-selber-Schaffens, des Ewig-sich-selber-Zerstörens [...] dieß mein Jenseits von Gut und Böse [...]'. Friedrich Nietzsche, Fragment 38[12] (1885), in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 11: *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884-1885*, München 1988, 610f.

30 Dam, *Den vitalistiske strømning*, 141: *æstetisk tilblivelse og naturens livsudfoldelse opfattes som to sider af samme sag*

31 *Ibid.*: [...] *gælder denne tankegang på gennemført vis i Niensens musikæstetik* [...]

32 Cf. Michael Fjeldsøe, 'Carl Niensens 5. symfoni. Dens tilblivelse og reception i 1920erne', *Dansk Årbog for Musikforskning* 24 (1996), 51-68, 55 and compare with the facsimile of the first page of the pencil draft in *Carl Nielsen Works, II/5, Symphony No. 5*, xvi, also found in my article 'Organism and Construction in Nielsen's Symphony No. 5', *Carl Nielsen Studies I* (2003), 18-26, at 21. In my opinion, as hinted at in 'Organicism and Construction', 19, Carl Nielsen's letters from February 1920, including the abovementioned letter to Röntgen and the letter on the following day to Ture Rangström, which contain some of Nielsen's most central passages on aesthetics of composing, are as much or even more to be read as considerations on topical ideas of composition which are carried out in composing esp. the beginning of the Fifth Symphony later that year, as they are statements (re)considering the Fourth Symphony.

33 Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen, 'Hellas under nordlig himmel', in Hvidberg-Hansen & Oelsner (eds.), *op.cit.*, 88-105, and Gertrud Olsner, 'Den sunde natur', in *ibid.*, 158-197; cf. Ole Nørlyng, 'Kunstner og friluftsmenneske; Svend Hammershøi blandt Hellenerne på Refsnæs omkring år 1900' in *Svend Hammershøi – en kunstner og hans tid*, Skovgaard Museet og Øregaard Museum, 2008, 34-43.

[...] I have come a good way on a new, large orchestral work, a kind of symphony in one movement, which would describe everything one feels and thinks by the concept we call Life or, rather, 'Life' in its inmost meaning. That is; everything that has the will to live and move. Everything can be included in this concept, and more than the other arts, music is a manifestation of Life, in that it is either completely dead – at that moment when it is not sounding – or completely alive and, therefore, it can exactly express the concept of Life from its most elementary form of utterance to the highest spiritual ecstasy.

Letter from Carl Nielsen to Emil Holm 24 July 1914, quoted from *The Nielsen Companion*, ed. Mina Miller, London 1994, 627.

[Symphony No. 4] is based on a particular idea: that the most elementary essence of music is light, life and movement, which chop the silence into pieces. In other words, what I have wanted to describe is all that has the will and the urge to life that cannot be kept down. Not in the sense of de-meaning my art to mere nature imitation, but of letting it try to express what lies behind. The calls of the birds, the cries of sadness and joy of animals and human beings, their hungry murmurings and shouting, fighting and mating, and whatever all the most elementary things are called.

Letter from Carl Nielsen to Julius Röntgen, 4 May 1915, *Carl Nielsens Breve*, København 1954, 145f., quoted from the translation in *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/4, Symphony No. 4, xii.

The composer, using the title *L'inestinguibile* ('The Inextinguishable'), has attempted with a single word to put into writing what music in its diversity can express; that is, the elementary will to life, the driving force, the great movement behind everything. Music is in itself life: i.e. motion. Faced with a task like this, to express life abstractly where the other arts stand without resources, bound as they are to the concrete, obliged to symbolize, music is like a fish in the sea.

Nielsen's text, which appears to a sketch for the programme note for the first performance, *DK-Kk*, CNA I.D.3a, translation quoted from *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/4, Symphony No. 4, xiv (footnote 14)

The composer, in using the title *The Inextinguishable*, has attempted to suggest in a single word what only the music itself has the power to express fully: the elemental will to life.

Faced with a task like this – to express life abstractly, where the other arts stand without resources, forced to go roundabout ways, to extract, to symbolize – there and only there is music at home in its primal region, at ease in its element, simply because solely by being itself it has performed its task. For it is life there, where the others only represent and write about life. Life is indomitable and inextinguishable; the struggle, the wrestling, the generation and the wasting away go on today as yesterday, tomorrow as today, and everything returns.

Once more: music is life, and like it inextinguishable. [...]

Text in the programme for the first performance, 1 Feb. 1916. The final text was drawn up by Nielsen's pupil Knud Jeppesen. Translation quoted from *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/4, Symphony No. 4, xiii f.

Music is Life.

As soon as a single note sounds in the air or through space, it is the result of life and movement; that is why music (and the dance) are the most immediate expressions of the will to life.

The symphony evokes the most primal sources of life and the well-spring of the life-feeling; that is, what lies behind all human, animal and plant life, as we see[,] perceive or live it. It is not a musical, programme-like account of the development of a life within a limited stretch of time and space, but an un-programme-like dip right down to the layers of the emotional life that are still half-chaotic and wholly elementary. [...]

It is in a way a completely thoughtless expression of what makes the birds cry, the animals roar, bleat, run and fight, and humans moan, groan, exult and shout without any explanation. The symphony does not describe all this, but the basic emotion that lies beneath all this. [...] For it is life, whereas other arts only represent and paraphrase life. [...]

Nielsen's programme note written for Gerhardt Lyngé, 1916/17, in John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, København 1999, 194f. Translation quoted from *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/4, Symphony No. 4, xv f.

FIG. 3: Statements by Carl Nielsen on his Fourth Symphony.

fathers, and where Nielsen gave his lecture on Greek music in 1907. Following this path of investigation, I might also be able to trace some of Nielsen's sources for this line of thought.

One early journal entry from 1893 shows that Greeks (ancient, that is) were on his mind. In a passage, which also might be an early account of having read or discussed or just heard of Nietzsche's ideas, he states: 'How strange! The ancient Greeks, among men the most healthy, most capable of living and most passionate of life, believed in a life after this, but in the Realm of Shadows. Christians – our lineage, the weakest, most depressed and miserable of men ever known to us, believe in a life after this, but a life in Joy and Happiness.'³⁴

We know that he read Greek philosophers, especially Plato who is mentioned for the first time in 1895, not as something elevated, but as an item for everyday use which he needed for his holiday along with bed linen for the children, one old suit and some sheet music.³⁵

In 1897, he got in touch with Johan Ludvig Heiberg, not the famous but long dead former head of the Royal Theatre, but a professor in classical languages, who translated the text for *Hymnus Amoris* into Latin. Based on the letters,³⁶ he seems to have been in touch with Anne Marie and Carl Nielsen prior to their journey to Greece in 1903. After travelling together with Carl Nielsen on a train to Berlin in November 1903 they frequently saw each other over the next couple of years. But apart from an interesting evening in 1904, where Heiberg told Nielsen about new findings of ancient texts in Egypt, among those a text of Plato,³⁷ he seems more or less to have been an adviser on practical matters concerning travelling in Italy and Greece. Heiberg attended Nielsen's lecture on Greek music, but was not involved in preparing it. So he might not appear to be so important after all. (And there seems to have been some kind of rivalry with another academic in classic languages, Ove Jørgensen, whom the Niensens had met in Greece and who became their close friend.³⁸)

Travelling to Greece was of course important. Anne Marie went to Greece in January 1903 and Carl came some weeks later. He was thrilled with what he saw, and

34 Carl Nielsen's journal entry, 5.2.1893, *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven* (CNB), ed. John Fellow, Copenhagen 2005ff, vol. 1, no. 380: *Hvor underligt! De gamle Grækere, de sundeste, mest levedygtige og levelystne Mennesker vi kjender, troede paa et Liv efter dette men i 'Skyggernes Rige.'* De Christne, – vor Slægt, de svageste, livsledeste og usleste Mennesker vi kjender, tror paa et Liv efter dette, men et Liv i Herlighed og Glæde.

35 Letter from Carl Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 27.6.1895, CNB I, no. 541.

36 I am using CNB, vols. 1-5, containing letters until the end of 1917.

37 Letter from Carl Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 23.11.1904, CNB II, no. 370.

38 See esp. letter from Carl Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 17.11.1904, CNB II, no. 366. Cf. Jensen, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren*, 175. Ove Jørgensen is mentioned 63 times in CNB, vols. 2-5.

when he got to see the Acropolis, it was even more impressive than he had expected.³⁹ During the stay he composed *Helios*, op. 17, which was completed on April 23. He calls it an 'overture in homage to the sun' and his description is on the lines of a powerfully experienced impression of Nature:

It begins very quiet with some long bass tones and gradually more instruments join and some French horns then sing a half-solemn morning hymn. Now it rises and rises until one is almost dazzled by the quivering noonlight and everything dwells in an ocean of light which nearly makes everything alive drowsy and lethargic and at last it sinks again and goes down slowly and majestically behind the distant mountains turning blue far off in the west.⁴⁰

This is as much impressionist-symbolist writing as it is vitalist. One looks in vain for vitalist outbursts in other letters or journal entries from Athens.

Four years later, on 22 October 1907, he gave his lecture on Greek music to the Greek Society. This is a quite matter-of-fact account of what is known about Greek music and music theory and whether we know how it might have sounded. The cult of Dionysus is mentioned as well as dionysian music but not as an ideal to be followed. His views on ancient Greece seem at this moment of time to be more of the classicist than vitalist sort.⁴¹

To sum up, Nielsen's writing in the period of time when he was occupied with Greece, a core subject of vitalism, seems not to have been dominated by the discourse of vitalism.

Nielsen and vitalist philosophy

As has been established, Nielsen did, at certain times, especially in texts concerning his Fourth Symphony, represent his aesthetic views in a powerful language within the discourse of vitalist aesthetics. At other times, though, he seems not to have been concerned with vitalist concepts, and he seems not to have shared a vitalist interpre-

39 Letter from Carl Nielsen, Athens to Svend Godske-Nielsen, 20.2.1903, CNB II, no. 247: 'These ancient Athenians!!' Cf. Nielsen's journal entries, *ibid.*, no. 252ff.

40 Letter from Carl Nielsen to Julius and Dagmar Borup, 24.4.1903, CNB II, no. 285: *Den begynder ganske stille med nogle lange Bastoner og lidt efter lidt kommer flere Instrumenter til og nogle Valdhorn synger saa en halvt-højtidelig Morgensang. Nu stiger og stiger den indtil Middagens dirrende Lys næsten blander En og alting ligger i et Lyshav som næsten gjør alt levende døsig og dvask og endelig daler den igjen og synker langsomt og majestætisk ned bag de fjerne blaanende Bjerger langt ude i Vesten.* (author's translation).

41 Carl Nielsen, 'Græsk musik', *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, 99-110. Cf. Thomas Michelsen, 'Carl Nielsen og den græske musik', *Fund og Forskning* 37 (1998), 219-231.

tation of Ancient Greece in those years at the beginning of the century when he travelled there and studied ancient Greek music. This raises the question: when and how did Nielsen get his knowledge of philosophy and in this case vitalist philosophy?

Based on registers of the edition of his complete published texts (*Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*) as well as those of the new edition of his letters, whose – at this moment – five volumes cover the period until end of 1917 and contain more than 3500 entries, it is fair to say: we don't know for sure. Concerning Greek philosophy: Plato is mentioned 18 times, five of these not directly connected to Nielsen; Aristotle once; Socrates five times. Or if we look for the philosophers of vitalism: Nietzsche is mentioned only once, in a letter from 1894, where Nielsen tells his wife that he has heard that a friend of theirs, Poul Morgan, had gone Nietzsche-mad and stated that he just needed to get rid of his last weakness, his love for his mother. This is certainly not a fan of Nietzsche writing like this.⁴² Schopenhauer: not once. Bergson, for that matter: not a single entry. So where did he pick it up?

Probably he was informed on these matters by reading the newspapers, magazines like *Tilskueren*, picking up some books, talking to people, by discussing matters of art with his friends and colleges, or with, let's not forget, his wife. The next step could be to look into the kind of people he knew: Willumsen, of course – whom he met in Paris on the same trip as he met Anne Marie – and many more. This is a difficult task, which I will not perform here.

On the other hand, we might consider his knowledge to be in line with the 'common opinion' or dominant discourse of the period.⁴³ For example, as Georg Brandes around 1889 introduced Nietzsche to the Danish (and, actually, European public, too), and published his essay 'Aristocratic radicalism', which then was countered by an essay by the famous philosopher Harald Høffding, it would hardly be surprising if Nielsen's views were formed through the discussion arising from these essays.⁴⁴ Brandes did not, in his essay, pay any attention to *The Birth of Tragedy* or to the concept of Dionysus, and Høffding did not argue that he should have. It was another 10 years before these aspects of Nietzsche were commonly recognized in Danish intellectual life.⁴⁵ One very important influence might be Vilhelm Andersen, whose *Bacchustoget i Norden* (1904) was a kind of Nordic parallel to Nietzsche's *The*

42 Letter from Carl Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 16.10.1894, CNB I, no. 481.

43 Søren Møller Sørensen points out the significance of popular aesthetics for public discourse in the 19th century, cf. Søren Møller Sørensen, 'Har de set den tyske professors toner? Om Chladnis klangfigurer og Ørstedes musikæstetik', *Musik & Forskning* 28 (2003), 7-42, esp. 20ff. and the remarks in footnote 37.

44 Dam, *Den vitalistiske strømning*, 188-193.

45 *Ibid.*, 198.

Birth of Tragedy. Even though their opinions differ on crucial points, this is the most important introduction to Dionysian thinking in Danish.⁴⁶ Or another example, which might have been as important as Nietzsche: Henri Bergson was introduced in Denmark in 1914 by Harald Høffding in such a way that Bergson wrote him a very kind letter explaining that he had misunderstood the core of his argument.⁴⁷ Still, it might be obvious that it was Høffding's interpretation which was reproduced in Danish public sphere.

Final remarks

I am convinced that important aspects of Nielsen's work will be better understood if we are ready to recognize vitalism as an important current of thought in the period after 1900 and accept that Nielsen took part in this. Still, I am not ready to go so far as Jørgen I. Jensen did, which would be to say that 'Carl Nielsen's art originates in short from a vitalistic culture; it is musical vitalism.' I have at least three concerns.

Firstly, I insist on a close historical reading of this topic as opposed to a systematic one. Nielsen's views change over time, and so does the context he is addressing. Even the concept of 'vitalism' is not untouched by history. As this paper has shown, he was not vitalist at all times or in all his views.

Secondly, I insist – as a musicologist – that the core of Nielsen's output as an artist is his music, even if he was a brilliant writer. We will have to examine how and to what extent this current is manifest in his musical works. To quote a thoughtful remark in the *Livslust* catalogue, counterbalancing the tendency of such books to make everything become whatever the catchword is: 'When is it proper to pigeonhole art as vitalism? [...] Is it enough, when a bunch of children swims at the beach, and the canvas was produced during the "vitalist era"?' I think not. As far as I can see, the picture must contain an explicit or implicit reference to the key vitalist concept of *life as an autonomous force manifest in Nature, which man strives to remain part of* [...] The analysis must argue in which way and with what intensity vitalist thought and concepts are manifest in the picture.⁴⁸

46 *Ibid.*, 148-187.

47 Harald Høffding, *Henri Bergson's Filosofi. Karakteristik og Kritik*, Copenhagen 1914. Peter Kemp, 'Indledning', in Kemp (ed.), *Bergson*, Copenhagen 1991, 31998, 7-21, esp. 8ff. Cf. Bergson's letter to Høffding, in *ibid.*, 198-200.

48 Sven Halse, 'Den vidtfavnende vitalisme. Om begrebet og fænomenet vitalisme i filosofi og kunst', in Hvidberg-Hansen & Oelsner (eds.), *op.cit.*, 46-57, at 52: *Hvornår kan kunst siges at være vitalistisk? [...] Er det nok, at der er en flok badende børn på stranden, og at billedet er malet i den 'vitalistiske periode'. Jeg mener nej. Så vidt jeg kan skønne, må der i et billede være en eksplicit eller implicit reference til den vitalistiske grundtanke om livet som en autonom kraft, som findes i naturen, og som mennesket stræber efter at fastholde sin delagtighed i [...] Analysen må argumentere for, på hvilken måde og med hvilken intensitet vitalistiske tanker og idéer er til stede i kunstværket.*

Thirdly, I insist that Nielsen was a man in constant development, changing his views and his art all his life, and that he was not only part of one current of European art or thought. He participated in many currents in different ways at different times. Seven years ago, a major part of the papers presented at the Nielsen conference in Birmingham tried to understand Nielsen in a European context, and all of those had other currents in mind.⁴⁹ Lewis Rowell's idea, that we should try to 'determine to what extent [Nielsen] reflected, or stood apart from, the prevailing musical ideologies of his time,' is still valid. And there is still much to be done.

A B S T R A C T

The great accomplishment of Jørgen I. Jensen in his biography *Carl Nielsen – Danskeren* (Nielsen – The Dane) was to point to the importance of symbolism to Nielsen's development especially in the 1890s. That provided a new approach to contextualising features by Nielsen which otherwise had appeared to be particular to him. Vitalism on the other hand is a current in art which has not been spoken much of in the latest 60 years, not least because it became part of fascist aesthetics in the 1930s. One could try to verify the idea that, as in the case of J.F. Willumsen, there might be features which, though, barely explainable as the heritage of symbolism, could make sense if one acknowledges vitalism as a current running through Nielsen's oeuvre. With the large exhibition *Livslust* (Passion of Life) in 2008, Danish art history has thrown new light on this current, and an essay in the catalogue is the first attempt to make a reading of Nielsen in this context.

Symbolism, itself a child of modernity, was a rebellion against the rationalism of modern Scandinavian literature and art since the 1870s. After 1900, though, a symbolist interpretation becomes less convincing. Here we find an engagement in the arabesque with affinity to *Jugendstil* which acts as transition to an engagement in the Greek, youth, health and vitality, fully in keeping with the views of vitalism. Tracing this engagement might help understand some aspects of Nielsen's music and aesthetics, though he never became a one hundred per cent vitalist artist. He was all his life an artist with seismographic sensibility to new currents, to which he responded without giving himself totally to them.

49 Cf. esp. David Fanning, 'Carl Nielsen and Early Twentieth-Century Musical/Aesthetic Theory', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 1 (2003), 9-17; Fjeldsøe, 'Organicism and Construction', *ibid.*, 18-26; Tom Pankhurst, 'Different Names for the Same Thing ... ? Nielsen's Forces, Schenker's Striving, Tarasti's Modalities and Simpson's Narratives', *ibid.*, 124-136; and Colin Roth, 'Stasis and Energy. Danish Paradox or European Issue?', *ibid.*, 156-164.