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# N I E L S E N - B R O D - J A N Á Č Ě K

By Tomáš Kráčmar

Ever since I first came to know the music of Carl Nielsen, it seemed to me that it was somehow spiritually related to that of Leoš Janáček. More than 90 years before me, the Czech-born writer and philosopher Max Brod (1884-1968) had the same impression. He is best known as a close friend of Franz Kafka; he published Kafka's works posthumously and wrote his first biography. He was also the first biographer of Leoš Janáček and the translator of his operas into German. Furthermore, Brod was a great enthusiast for Carl Nielsen, whom he got to know in 1910 through the Prague music periodical *Kunstwart*. He was in correspondence both with Nielsen and with Janáček, and his relationship with the Danish composer is quite elaborately described in Karl Clausen's study of 1966.<sup>1</sup>

Brod valued Nielsen as the finest contemporary north-European composer, and he tried to support and promote his music as much as possible. In his book *Über die Schönheit häßlicher Bilder* (On the Beauty of Ugly Images) he wrote:

I am simply obsessed with Nielsen, I rank him alongside Reger, Smetana, Bach, alongside all those names, which are sacred to me. [...] I ask all conductors to perform orchestral pieces by Nielsen, so I can be in peace.<sup>2</sup>

He saw in Nielsen a musical equivalent of the Nobel Prize-winning Norwegian writer, Knud Hamsun.

Nielsen created the music of northern lands, just as Hamsun created its literature (that boring old Sibelius didn't achieve it, of course). Since Nielsen's

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- 1 See the correspondence between Janáček and Brod in Jan Racek, Artuš Rektorys (eds.): *Korespondence Leoše Janáčka s Maxem Brodem*, Prague, SNKLHU, 1953, and between Nielsen and Brod in Karl Clausen, 'Max Brod og Carl Nielsen', in *Oplevelser og studier omkring Carl Nielsen*, Tønder 1966, 9-36.
  - 2 *Ich bin von Nielsen einfach besessen, ich stelle ihn neben Brahms, Reger, Smetana, Bach, neben alle die Namen, die mir zu Altären geworden sind. [...] Ich bitte alle Kapellmeister, die Orchesterwerke von Nielsen aufzuführen, damit ich endlich Ruhe habe.* Max Brod, *Über die Schönheit häßlicher Bilder*, Vienna-Hamburg 1967, 200, 203.

music had touched my horizons and superbly expanded them, the question of finding a parallel to Hamsun (though so childish, so immature) was answered. I can see in Nielsen Hamsun's plain-speaking tough, solid humanity, and also his softness and melancholy hidden under this armour.<sup>3</sup>

In fact all these features could also be cited as characteristic of the style of Leoš Janáček. Brod often pointed out 'eine Verwandtschaft des Geistes' (spiritual affinity) he saw between Janáček and Nielsen. In the article 'Leos Janaceks Jenufa' – in his book *Sternenhimmel* (Sky of Stars) – Brod wrote:

Unless I'm deceiving myself, Janáček found a style-principle of how to join the most real local colour (ergo an impressionistic element) with the purest formal strictness of music 'an sich'. But it is not the case that the national and objective artistic elements are simply superimposed – not at all – both streams murmur and pulse together in the same artery, they appear as one impulse. [...] The same inner fusion of mighty, common, musical power rooted in Bach (like Bach, Janáček is a master of the organ) with a special national individuality is also characteristic of Smetana, just as it is of the not well-known Danish musical genius Carl Nielsen.<sup>4</sup>

In other words: Brod saw in Janáček and Nielsen a common ability to compose music that is a natural synthesis (or fusion) of local/national colour and – though he didn't mention it directly – principles of Hanslick's aesthetics (namely of musical autonomy and beauty without reference to the world outside).

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3 *Nielsen hat die Hamsun entsprechende Musik der Nordländer geschaffen (der langweilige Sibelius hat sie selbstverständlich nicht geschaffen). Seit Nielsens Werke meinen Horizont berührt hatten und glanzvoll heraufzogen, war die (übrigens so kindische, so jugendliche) Frage nach dem Analogon Hamsuns beschwichtigt. Ich erkannte in Nielsen Hamsuns phrasenlose straffe, tüchtige Männlichkeit wider sowie seine unter diesem Panzer verhüllte Zartheit und Schwermut.* Max Brod, *Streitbares Leben*, München-Berlin 1969, 261. It might be worth mentioning here that Hamsun and Sibelius were in fact much closer than Brod suggests and they were often coupled together by other writers on Nordic culture (for instance Adorno).

4 *Wenn mich nicht alles trügt, hat Janáček das Stilprinzip gefunden, in dem künftighin jedes anhörbare Musikdrama sich zu bewegen haben wird. Vorbildlich ist es, wie er materiellstes Lokalkolorit (also Impressionistisches) mit der allerreinsten Formstrenge einer abstrakten 'Musik an sich' vereinigt. Doch nicht so, daß Nationales und Allgemein-Künstlerisches erst verbunden wird, nein, beide Ströme rauschen gemeinsam in derselben Blutader, kommen schon als ein und derselbe Impuls aus dem Körper hervor. [...] Dieselbe innere Transfusion der großen allgemeinen, von Bach her strömenden Musikgewalt (wie Bach ist Janáček ein Meister der Orgel) mit der besondern nationalen Individualität ist auch ein Charakteristikum Smetanas, ebenso des viel zu wenig bekannten dänischen Genius Carl Nielsen.* Max Brod, *Sternenhimmel*, 29-30.

In the book *Adolf Schreiber, ein Musikerschicksal* (Adolf Schreiber, a Musician's Fate),<sup>5</sup> Brod again mentioned Janáček and Nielsen together:

For Gustav Mahler too, I at first struggled all alone, at times to the point of despair. And nowadays, who knows the great Danish Musician Carl Nielsen, or the aged Czech Janáček whose 'Jenůfa' some day will be ranked next to 'Carmen' and 'Aida'! Who knows these figures, whose causes I have fought for so many years! But the world is deaf; in its spitefulness, it deprives itself of the most beautiful joys.<sup>6</sup>

It was also Brod, who attempted to inform each composer about the other (at least he informed Janáček about Nielsen's music). He was going to involve Nielsen in a performance of 'Jenůfa' in Copenhagen, and he asked Janáček to facilitate a performance of 'The Inextinguishable' in Brno. In May 1919 he wrote to Janáček:

Dear Mr. Janáček,

As I have read, *Jenůfa* has been performed in Cologne. The English will hear it there. – Now, I want to try to involve also Mr. Carl Nielsen, Hofkapellmeister in Copenhagen, for *Jenůfa*. Do you know Nielsen as a composer? He is now the most outstanding Danish composer, but outside of Scandinavia not well known, though I already tried to agitate in several articles on behalf of his really great and original folk-genius. He is about 55 years old; I was in correspondence with him before the war and now he has written to me again and has sent me the very interesting score of his new Symphony 'The inextinguible' [sic!]. – Shall I lend you this score to look at and would it be possible for you to get it performed in Brno? – I would just like to say that I find a spiritual affinity between your music and his.<sup>7</sup>

Janáček was obviously very keen and immediately answered:

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- 5 Adolf Schreiber (1883-1920), German conductor and composer, pupil of Antonín Dvořák. He was a friend of Max Brod and author of stage music to his plays. In 1920 he committed suicide in Berlin.
  - 6 *Auch um Gustav Mahler habe ich ja anfänglich völlig einsam gekämpft, bis zum Krampf manchmal. Und wer kennt noch heute den großen Dänen-Musiker Carl Nielsen, oder den säkularen Tschechen Janáček, dessen 'Jenůfa' man einmal neben 'Carmen' und 'Aida' stellen wird! Wer kennt sie, auf die ich seit Jahren hinweise! Aber die Welt ist taub, in ihrer Tücke bringt sie sich selbst um die schönsten Genüsse! Max Brod, Adolf Schreiber, Ein Musikerschicksal, Berlin 1921, 39-40.*
  - 7 Letter from Prague of 20.5.1919. Jan Racek, Artuš Rektorys (eds.), *Korespondence Leoše Janáčka s Maxem Brodem*, Praha 1953, 58-59.

Dear Friend!

I was glad to receive your note. I'll stop by to see you on my next visit; it will be soon. I'll pick up Nielsen's score then. [František] Neumann is the director of the Brno opera; he likes to conduct concerts. I will put in a good word. [...]<sup>8</sup>

Despite this initial enthusiasm, it took two years until Janáček received Nielsen's score. In April 1921 Brod wrote:

By the same post I send you the score of the symphony by Carl Nielsen. Nielsen is the first conductor of the Royal Court opera in Copenhagen, Denmark. I rate him very highly and find him related to your art. I would be very much interested in your opinion.

Maybe you can arrange a performance of this piece in Brno and maybe it will be then also possible, that Jenufa will appear in Danish in the Court Opera in Copenhagen (Kodaň), which would be very important. [...]<sup>9</sup>

After all this, maybe Janáček's judgement, which arrived on 2 June 1921, comes as a surprise:

My dear Friend!

[...] For you I've read Nielsen's symphony 'The Inextinguishable.' I'm sorry to criticise the composition. In each [composition] I find something to demur at.

I love music, which is interwoven with all life, the whole world. I don't love music just because it sounds. Only all the life doesn't go out, the tone [life] only, once didn't burn and once can go out – if will be isolated.<sup>10</sup>

At the end the symphony will be effective, also because of the peculiarity of the timpani on page 80 etc. Generally some hardness, torpidity, almost primitivism takes one aback.

Just look at these bars:

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8 Letter from Brno of 31.5.1919. Jan Racek, Artuš Rektorys (eds.), *op. cit.*, 59.

9 Letter from Prague of 21.4.1921. Jan Racek, Artuš Rektorys (eds.), *op. cit.*, 71-72.

10 This obscure sentence, here translated word-for-word, is very difficult to comprehend, even in Czech. It seems to mean that music (i.e. tone-life) must not be isolated from real life otherwise it will go out, i.e. become extinguished. To paraphrase: Life as a whole is the only thing that is inextinguishable; and music can only fail to burn or can only be extinguished if it is isolated from life. In other words, Janáček is re-formulating Nielsen's motto idea in his own terms.



Aren't they scary!?

I don't know if the local conductor Neumann would like to perform it. Shall I give him the score, or return it to you? [...] <sup>11</sup>

It is not necessary to excuse Janáček for such a critical review. Not only was he a difficult personality, but he also had very specific musical tastes and much music sounded foreign to him (Strauss's *Elektra* he considered crazy, for example). He was not afraid to voice his real opinion without inhibition; it could sound rude, even if it meant immediate danger for his career. For example, he criticised very unflatteringly some pieces that Karel Kovařovic composed for the National Theatre, which caused many problems and delay to the premiere of *Jenůfa* in Prague, since Kovařovic became the director of the National Theatre opera. From this point of view, the critique of Nielsen's symphony does not appear so drastic. Nevertheless, Janáček wrote this review for his friend Max Brod and was conscious of Brod's enthusiasm for Nielsen. So it seems that his antipathy was quite sharp.

There is no evidence that Janáček and Nielsen ever met each other or if Janáček knew more of Nielsen's music.<sup>12</sup> There are no reports as to whether Nielsen ever heard any of Janáček's music either, or even saw any of his scores (such as *Jenůfa*, which Brod wanted Nielsen to perform in Copenhagen). At the end of June 1927, Janáček also took part in the fifth festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music in Frankfurt. He attended the rehearsal and the performance of his *Concertino for piano left hand*. The next day there was an orchestral concert conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler including Nielsen's Fifth Symphony.<sup>13</sup> But whether Janáček stayed on for this concert and heard Nielsen's arguably most famous piece remains an unanswered question.

11 Original text: *Milý příteli! [...] Vám kvůli přečetl jsem Nielsenovu symfonii 'Nehasnoucí'. Nerád skladbu kritisuji. V každé si najdu něco, nad čím se pozastavím. Já miluji hudbu, jež prolíná celý život, celý svět. Nemiluji hudby jen proto, že to zní. Jen všechen život nehasíná, tónový jen, kdysi nehořel a kdysi může uhasnout – bude-li izolován. V konci bude symfonie účinkovat i pro ty divnosti tympan na str. 80 atd. Z celku zaráží jakási tvrdost, ztrnulost, až primitivnost. Pohleďte na tyto takty: [musical example] Nejde z nich hrůza!? Nevím, jestli by se zdejší dirig. Neumann do provedení pustil. Mám mu partituru odevzdat nebo Vám ji vrátit? [...].* Letter from Brno of 2.6.1921. Jan Ráček, Artuš Rektorys (eds.), *op. cit.*, 79.

12 Brod also had scores of the third and fifth symphonies, some chamber music (notably the Violin Sonata, Op. 9) and some songs.

13 The second part of the concert featured Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 1, with the composer as soloist.

### Common features in the music of Carl Nielsen and Leoš Janáček

Moving beyond Brod's perception of a general spiritual affinity, it is possible to identify some more detailed common features: some of Nielsen's ostinatos are remarkably similar to Janáček's (or maybe it is Janáček's that are similar to Nielsen...). The long pedal-points in Nielsen's music are also very close to Janáček's piano style. And a peculiarly intense use of timpani and brass – especially in the second half of Nielsen's career – is also common to both. As for similarities at the level of expressive topics, this kind of comparison may be controversial or disputable given that these are both highly original personalities, but it is still possible to find common elements at certain specific times, even though the sources of that commonality and the communicative rationale may be very different.

John Tyrrell's article for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* about Janáček's musical style includes the following observation:

Another type of contrast that Janáček's music exploits is one of conflicting elements, as for instance in the last movement of the Violin Sonata, where a tiny repetitive fragment on the violin interrupts the would-be broad-arched tune of the piano. Sometimes such 'interruption motifs' are repeated to form a disruptive ostinato, as in the overture to *Makropulos*, where a high degree of tension is generated by the precarious balance of melodic foreground and disruptive background. The tension of these rapid ostinato figures is increased by their generally jagged outlines with awkward jumps.<sup>14</sup>

To focus for a moment on the 'repetitive fragment': Janáček believed that rhythmic figures in spoken language are related to states of mind, and he constructed his own idiosyncratic theory about musical events in time as related to psychological phenomena. His highly characteristic mature handling of motifs is based on this theory. Fragments such as this – or more precisely their rhythmic structure – were identified by Janáček's untranslatable self-invented term '*sčasovka*.' It has been mostly translated as 'a short rhythmic entity'<sup>15</sup> and is a crucial element of Janáček's complicated theory of '*sčasování*'<sup>16</sup> which was a result of his ethnographic studies. Janáček believed that rhythmic figures in spoken language are related to states of mind. *Sčasovka* is the basic rhythmic unit of this theory. According to senior Czech musicologist Jarmil Burghauser, 'It is not a synonym for rhythm (even though he himself

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<sup>14</sup> John Tyrrell, 'Janáček, Leoš' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians second edition*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, vol. 12, London 2001, 777.

<sup>15</sup> See Michael Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist*, Stuyvesant NY 1994, 134.

<sup>16</sup> 'The word used by Janáček to describe musical events in time, especially as related to psychological phenomena.' See Beckerman, *op. cit.*, 134.

“translated” it so) in the contemporary sense of the word but rather: 1. a name for the realm in which such phenomena unfolds; here it would be possible to replace Janáček’s term with the term “metro-rhythmic”, or 2. A name for compositional activity which deals with forming and organizing in this area.<sup>17</sup> *Sčasovkas* and the figures derived from them appear in almost all Janáček’s mature works as a foreign independent element, which occurs quasi-randomly and disturbs the melody. Very often it expands into an intensive ostinato. In this way the *sčasovka* enriches the metro-rhythmic layer of the music, increasing tension and giving the characteristic pulsation to the composition.

Tyrrell’s account a while back could equally apply to Nielsen’s work, especially ‘the evil motif’ in the first movement of his 5th symphony (see *Ex. 1* and 2). We can rewrite what Tyrrell says and get a reasonably precise description of this movement: ‘Another type of contrast that *Nielsen’s* music exploits is one of conflicting elements, as for instance in the Adagio of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, where a [...] repetitive fragment on the *woodwinds* interrupts the would-be broad-arched tune of the *strings*. These “interruption motifs” are repeated to form a disruptive ostinato [...] where a high degree of tension is generated by the precarious balance of melodic foreground and disruptive background. The tension of these rapid ostinato figures is increased by their generally jagged outlines [...]’ Apart from the Prelude to *Makropulos*, another example of strong similarity to Nielsen’s ‘wave-like motif’ is the last movement of Janáček’s *Sinfonietta* (see *Ex. 3* and 4).

(Andante ♩ = 109)  
vn. va. ww.  
vc. db. hn.  
+ timp.

EX. 1: Leoš Janáček: *The Makropulos Affair*, prelude, bb. 9-12.

17 Jarmil Burghauser: Hudební metrika v Janáčkově teoretickém díle, In *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty Brněnské univerzity*, XXXII-XXXIII, Brno, Masarykova univerzita v Brně 1984, 137-153. This paragraph printed in Beckerman, *op. cit.*, 82. A melodic equivalent to *sčasovkas* are *nápěvky mluvy* (literally: speech tunelets), defined as ‘A musical entity deduced from the intonation patterns of human speech. Janáček theorized that the key to the human spirit lay in the understanding of these elements.’ see Beckerman, *op. cit.*, 133.

(Adagio) fl. ob. cl. fg.

trp. trb. vl. va. vc. db.

trb. tb.

EX. 2: Carl Nielsen: *Symphony No. 5, first movement, Adagio*, bb. 343-345.

Allegro (♩ = 92)

fl. cl. cb. vl. va.

pizz. arco

EX. 3: Leoš Janáček: *Sinfonietta, fifth movement*, bb. 1-5.

(tranquillo)

cl. bs. hn. va. db. tamb.

fl. 3 3 3 3

8<sup>vb</sup>

EX. 4: Carl Nielsen: *Symphony No. 5, first movement, tranquillo*, bb. 168-170.



The point is not to prove whether Nielsen was influenced by Janáček or vice versa. They each had their own highly original style. Nevertheless it is remarkable testimony to the spiritual affinity observed by Brod that the two composers intuitively arrived at similar techniques of dramatic expression, and at moments of greatest intensity in their mature work, even though for Janáček they were a typical and central element, whereas they are more exceptional and peripheral in Nielsen's output.

#### **The Bohemian-Danish Folk Songs: from a Czech point of view**

Nielsen had at least one encounter contact with Czech music that is firmly documented, and it deserves at least a footnote to the history of his work.

The *Bohemian-Danish Folk Songs* hardly counts among Nielsen's most central pieces, but it is the only one that has an immediate relationship with my homeland. This piece was composed in 1928 for a concert of the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the foundation of Czechoslovakia. At the request of Emil Holm, head of the Radio Symphony Orchestra at that time, Nielsen here used the melody of the Moravian folk song *Teče voda teče* (Flows the water, it flows) and the Danish folksong *Dronning Dagmar ligger i Ribe syg* (Queen Dagmar lies ill in Ribe).

Holm's idea was not so very surprising. Firstly, Queen Dagmar was a Bohemian princess, married to the Danish king Valdemar II; and secondly, the Moravian folk song was (together with the Czech song *Ach synku, synku* – Oh little son, little son) a favourite of the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. As a founder of Czechoslovakia, President Masaryk was much beloved by his people (in fact he was called 'president-liberator') and that is the reason why these two songs very soon became extremely popular nationwide. They were something like an unofficial anthem of the first Czech president and were always sung by leading Czech singers on political occasions, especially at anniversaries of the constitution of the independent state of Czechoslovakia, and on Masaryk's birthday. In fact *Teče voda teče* and *Ach synku, synku* were understood (and still are) as Masaryk's musical symbol.

During my very first hearing of Nielsen's piece I felt there was something strange in it (see *Ex 5* and *6*). And it is this: the beginning of the second part of the Czech song (bar five) – as Nielsen quotes it – does not follow the melody line of the song as it is known to Czechs. In fact, Nielsen quotes the song incorrectly. This is not a major *faux pas*, as Nielsen's melody proceeds just a third lower – following the melody line that has generally been used as the second voice (as in the songbook *Slovácké písničky* from 1943).

Volně (♩ = 60)

*p* Te - če vo - da te - če, pres ve - lic - ký ma - jír,

*f* ko - mus ňa tu ne - chal *mf* sta - ro - dáv - ný fra - jír?

EX. 5: The song *Teče voda teče* in the songbook *Slovácké písničky* (Melantrich 1943, reprint 1949).<sup>18</sup>

Andante con moto (♩ = ca. 66)

*mf* Te - če vo - da te - če

EX. 6: The song *Teče voda teče* as quoted by Nielsen (Carl Nielsen Edition, Copenhagen 2004).

As it happens, the song *Teče voda teče* cannot be found in any of the most important Moravian song collections from the 19<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So one possibility – although not very likely – is that Nielsen became familiar with some other version of the song during his stay in Czechoslovakia, in Sliáč (in June–July 1928) or via Emil Holm himself. It is also possible that Emil Holm taught Nielsen this ‘version’ (it is equally unlikely that so experienced a professional singer as Holm didn’t sing correctly). But *Teče voda teče* and *Ach synku, synku* are very special cases by virtue of their political associations, and most probably the change in the melody was a result of Nielsen’s or Holm’s faulty transcription.

Despite all Brod’s efforts to bring Nielsen’s music to Czechoslovakia (and also due to the political situation after the World War Two), the Danish master is still barely known to Czech concertgoers. Only recently has the British conductor Douglas Bostock put Nielsen on his concert programmes and recorded some of Nielsen’s music with the Czech Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra (Classico, 2006),<sup>19</sup> while a very good

18 Jan Poláček, (ed.), *Slovácké písničky*, vol. 3, Praha 1949, 103.

19 *Clarinet Concerto, Flute Concerto, Bohemian-Danish Rhapsody, Pan and Syrinx, At the Bier of a young Artist.*

complete recording of Nielsen's symphonies has been made by the American conductor Theodore Kuchar with the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra (Brilliant Classics 2005). There is also the ambition of organizing a Nielsen-programme at the Prague Spring Festival in the future. These few projects have begun to realize Brod's idea of bringing Nielsen's music to the Czech Republic, and it remains to be seen whether Nielsen's spiritual affinity with Janáček will help it catch the imagination of audiences, performers and critics.

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

This article probes the musical relationship between Carl Nielsen and Leoš Janáček. Their mutual friend Max Brod was convinced that the two composers were spiritually related. A comparison of their musical language indicates a small number of common elements, especially in their music of the 1920s. Janáček believed that rhythmic figures in spoken language are related to states of mind and he constructed his own specific theory (so-called 'časování') about musical events in time related to psychological phenomena, and his mature work is based on this theory. Carl Nielsen's 'evil motif' in the first movement of his 5th symphony comes very near to Janáček's intention, and other ideas in this work suggest that Nielsen and Janáček intuitively arrived at similar techniques of dramatic expression.

The last part of the article deals with Nielsen's *Bohemian-Danish Folk Songs*, which is based on two national folksongs – Czech and Danish. It suggests that Nielsen's quotation of the Czech song is not entirely correct.