
CARL NIELSEN'S FOLK-LIKE SONGS AND THE 'DANISH NATIONAL TONE'

By Anne-Marie Reynolds

Remarkably, the notion of 'Danishness' remains a sensitive and contentious issue to this day in Denmark, not only in reference to music, but also within the broader social and political arena, in part because of the tensions caused by the recent influx of Middle-Eastern immigrants. It is surely no coincidence that there has recently been spirited public debate on national identity, and that in 2006 the Minister of Culture felt compelled to establish a Danish cultural canon.¹ 'Danishness becomes the mirror image of what it excludes,' observes Torben Dyrberg in his study, *The Circular Structure of Power: Politics, Identity, Community*.²

Against this social and political backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that Karen Vestergård and Ida-Marie Vorre's recent thesis on Danishness in Nielsen's folk-like songs caused such a stir, since the authors claim that there is actually nothing inherently Danish about the music.³ In making this assertion, they go against the conventional wisdom handed down from generation to generation by writers seeking to create a sense of Nielsen's *folkelige* songs as the quintessential expression of the Danish national tone. The association, they argue persuasively, depends on external factors rather than purely musical characteristics, including Nielsen's public-spirited aim in writing them, their use in communal singing, and their published reception over the years. Nielsen actually came to this conclusion himself: 'It's the people who grab hold of a song and turn it into a national song [...] and when it happens the

1 For a description of the cultural canon, see the homepage of the Danish Ministry of Cultural Affairs at www.kum.dk. The musical part of the canon is discussed in Niels Krabbe, 'Den danske musikkanon: generelle overvejelser og bemærkninger til udvalgte værker' (The Danish Musical Canon: General Reflections and Comments on Selected Works), in John T. Lauridsen and Olaf Olsen (eds.), *Umisteligt: Festskrift til Erland Kolding Nielsen* (Irreplaceable: Papers in Honour of Erland Kolding Nielsen), Copenhagen 2007, 695-718.

2 London 1997, 122.

3 'Den danske sang: en undersøgelse af danskheden i Carl Niensens sange' (The Danish Song: A Study of Danishness in Carl Nielsen's Songs), 95. An article based on their thesis, 'Danishness in Nielsen's Folklike Songs', was subsequently published in *Carl Nielsen Studies* III (2008), 80-101.

decisive factor is the spirit of the times far more than any literary or musical taste [...] [S]uch a melody is a sort of symbol, like the flag or the cross [...] and needn't be "remarkable" in and of itself.⁴ Vestergaard and Vorre also provide a detailed historical context for this association, tracing the development of the communal singing tradition and the related rise in nationalistic sentiment in Denmark.

The problem is that when the authors survey Nielsen's folk-like songs they try to objectify 'Danishness' in musical terms, and to quantify how many of the features they consider 'Danish' appear in a select number of them. These so-called Danishisms are tallied, compared to the relative nationalism of the song texts, and summarized in a chart, whose few correspondences are the source of the authors' negative conclusion. This is too facile an approach to be very meaningful, and is tantamount to Nielsen's own recipe for 'the national element': 'Take one part Andantino in g , one part minor, and one part Danish pear compote that has stood out all night; stir the whole thing together well, set it over a slow fire, and let it cook for around twenty minutes.'⁵

In fact, the horn fifths, flatted sevenths, and falling-fifth motives that the authors use as their litmus test for musical Danishness (drawn from one of Daniel Grimley's articles and Jørgen I. Jensen's book, where they were never intended as such) may be found in Germanic music throughout history.⁶ As Carl Dahlhaus noted, '[i]nstead of belonging to a nation, meaning a people with a common language, folk songs quite often bear traits from specific regions or professional classes. Thanks to their dissemination by wandering minstrels, they could even be international.'⁷ Ironically, then, European folk song may be a distillation of basic features that the different countries *share* rather than a reliable means of distinguishing between their musical styles. Similarly, when diatonic music written by European composers is stripped down to its essentials, it will likely have more, not less, in common. The music in folk-like songs, by itself, may not be distinctly nationalistic.

And yet, even if it is not possible to identify traits that are verifiably Danish in these intentionally spare, folk-like songs, through careful analysis it is possible to tease apart the musical strands that connect Nielsen to the European folk song tradition

4 'Der er et yndigt Land!' (There is a Wonderful Country), interview in *Politiken*, 31.5.1924, in John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid* (Carl Nielsen to his Contemporaries), vol.1, Copenhagen 1999, 312.

5 'Svensk Musikfest: Et dansk Forslag' (Swedish Music Festival: A Danish Proposal), in *ibid.*, 89.

6 See Daniel Grimley, 'Horn Calls and Flattened Sevenths: Nielsen and Danish Musical Style' in *Musical Constructions of Nationalism*, Harry M. White and Michael Murphy (eds.), Cork 2001, and Jørgen I. Jensen, in *Carl Nielsen: Danskeren* (Carl Nielsen: The Dane), Copenhagen 1991.

7 Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans by J. Bradford Robinson, Berkeley 1991, 111.

Fint og let

Hør, hvor let dens Vin - ger smæk - ker mod den tun - ge Klø - ver - dusk,

mens den som en Skyt - tel læg - ger Far - ten gen - nem Røg og Rusk.

EX. 1: 'Hør, hvor let dens Vinger smækker'

from those that emanate from his distinctive compositional practices. Like his inspiration in this endeavour, J.A.P. Schulz, Nielsen's goal in writing these songs was first and foremost to make them both accessible and memorable. Thus, the text-setting is primarily syllabic, the melodies stepwise, and the rhythms regulated through the repetition of a motif derived from the words' accentual pattern. Typically, the tune is structured in such a way that the singer is learning and committing it to memory in one and the same step, as in 'Hør, hvor let dens Vinger smækker', where each leap in the melody is subsequently filled (see Ex. 1). Nothing in these melodies occurs without having been prepared through a gradual and methodical process. Besides the simple fact that Nielsen knew well how to turn a memorable phrase, this, more than any other feature, is surely what gives these melodies the requisite *Schein des Bekannten*.

But whereas much of the predictability in his folk-like songs is concentrated in the melody so that it should be easy to sing, the expression is usually built into the harmonic progression that supports it, an aspect of the songs not considered by Vestergård and Vorre in their purely melodic analysis. In fact, the sketches reveal that Nielsen often conceived of melody and harmony together, noting key changes at the beginning of the phrases in which they were to occur, as in the sketch to 'Sang bag Ploven,' for example (see Ex. 2). In the small as in the large, Nielsen appears to have viewed the tonal context as a relative phenomenon. Often a key is sustained – or

EX. 2: Nielsen's draft for the beginning of the song 'I Solen gaar jeg bag min Plov'. The Royal Library, Copenhagen.

merely alluded to – for no more than a couple of bars. Indeed, many of these songs exhibit a miniature manifestation of the shifting diatonicism – what Daniel Grimley calls a 'fractured musical surface'⁸ – that has been found to thwart expectation in Nielsen's large-scale compositions. In other words, despite his expressed aim of simplicity and accessibility, Nielsen tested the bounds of the overriding tonic surprisingly often in his *folkelige* songs.

What was his purpose in doing so? In letters and essays, Nielsen stressed the poetry's primacy in his endeavour to write *folkelige* songs, describing his role as that of the servant 'who, with the fewest means, clothe[s] the poets' verses in the same spirit that pervades the poems'.⁹ Vestergård and Vorre, like others who have studied the songs before them, rightly acknowledge that this reverence includes sensitivity to matters of poetic structure, but they venture no further, defending their positivistic analytical approach:

8 Daniel Grimley, 'Organicism, Form and Structural Decay: Nielsen's Second Violin Sonata,' *Music Analysis*, 21/2 (2003), 178.

9 Letter to Julius Röntgen (May 4, 1915) in Irmelin Eggert Møller and Torben Meyer (eds.), *Carl Nielsens Brev* (Carl Nielsen's Letters), Copenhagen 1954, 146.

Our analyses [...] indicate that Nielsen sought a close interplay between text and music in his *folkelige* songs by paying great attention to the form, scansion and rhyme-scheme of his texts – that is the musical flow implicit in the text sources [...]. It is more difficult, however, to give a [...] demonstration of the extent to which Nielsen also succeeded in creating an interaction between text and music by translating the basic mood of the text into music, in that this aspect is bound up with a personal interpretation of the text.¹⁰

Yet the 'spirit that pervades the poems' surely encompasses more than structure, and when Nielsen remarked 'I [...] familiarized myself intensely with the poems until I finally felt I was in that world,' he was referring not only to the architecture of that world but also to the meaning it houses.

The following three analyses will demonstrate that Nielsen's motivation for employing expressive harmonies within the restrictive stylistic confines of the folk-like song was to underscore both the structure and the meaning of the poetry. In 'Naar Odin vinker,' for example, he modelled the song's cadential hierarchy on the poetic structure (see *Ex. 3*). The strongest cadence, besides that which closes the song, occurs in bar 6, underscoring a caesura in the poetry articulated by both punctuation and meaning. While the accompaniment drops out on the penultimate beat, the melody implies B diminished harmony, so that the cadence is ii to V in A minor. The weakest musical articulation occurs at the end of the eighth line of text whose meaning in every verse depends upon the final two lines, the musical elision thus mirroring the poetic continuity (b. 8). The only other cadence, in bar 3, corresponds with the end of the first complete statement in the poetry. Here again the accompaniment drops out on the penultimate beat, but the melody implies that the ascending fifths sequence continues, and E minor follows the A minor chord of the previous bar (b. 2). This gives the final F major chord a deceptive quality, as though the cadence were v to VI in A minor.

Beyond bringing out syntactic details, Nielsen cared equally to represent the meaning of Oehlenschläger's challenging poem – no small feat within just eleven bars – and this was surely the reason for the song's remarkable tonal plan. The poem on which Nielsen's song is based draws on Scandinavian mythology – the same source as Wagner's *Ring* narrative – for its characters and setting. Odin (a.k.a. Wotan) is the leader of the Gods and Valhalla is their home (see *Fig. 1*). Nielsen gives the song a fittingly heroic tone: stark root position triads progressing at primal fourth and fifth intervals and a slow, steady pace, a homophonic texture, octave doublings, and a mar-

¹⁰ Vestergård and Vorre, 'Danishness in Nielsen's *Folkelige* Songs,' *Carl Nielsen Studies* III, 92.

Med Kraft og Dristighed

Naar O - din vin - ker, naar Svær - det blin - ker, er Hel - ten glad; i

rø - de Strøm - me, i Lig, som svøm - me i Bir - tings - bad, paa Ly - nets Vin - ger han

i - ler kold, naar Skø - gul svin - ger sit rø - - de Skjold.

C G Dm Am (Em) F *f*

Am: ii V *poco rall.*

F Am D G (V)

EX. 3: 'Naar Odin vinker'

tial-sounding vocal line. And yet, the intricacies of his setting suggest that he sought to transcend this theme of heroism and to express an even more timeless message.

Though the poem is generally about 'the brave warrior hero,' it focuses not on his victories but on the ultimate loss – that of his own life. The poem, then, is about the hero's passage from his transitory existence on earth to everlasting life in Valhalla, the hall where heroes slain in battle are taken. All of the verses, save one, are concerned with the hero's character, bravery, skill and beauty in the face of this passage. In the fifth verse alone, the speaker steps back and takes a philosophical

When Odin beckons,
when the sword gleams,
the hero is happy;
in red streams,
in corpses that swim
in Birtingsbad;
on the wings of lightening
he coolly hastens,
when Skøgul swings
her red shield.

His weapon clangs;
the gleaming blade
he swings powerfully.
To Valhalla,
when the sword pierces
his armour,
the proud warrior rides,
whose bravery
cannot be undermined by fear
among the corpses and blood.

On the battlefield,
in armour
and copper helmet,
like the blood goddess,
through the air
the slender elm stalk
with steel and spike
he easily throws
in order to draw
the red liquid.

Odin with flames,
Thor with hammer
Tyr with club,
and the battle's viking women
all rise to the earth
when the sparks fly.
When the lur howls
like a hungry bear,
the gods are drawn
to the children of the battle.

What, then, is life?
A puff of wind in the rushes,
that sinks;
a game of strength
that yearns towards
eternity.
To eternity,
so red like the dawn,
the only path from down here
is through death.

Among mead and girls,
you Danish warrior!
Among blood and corpses
proudly, you carry yourself,
until Skøgul's wings
brush you aside.
With his sword drawn,
with an oak crown
the hero looks handsome
in his last dance.

FIG. 1: 'Naar Odin vinker,' translation.

stance on the action, musing about the meaning of life, suggesting that the hero's valiant efforts amount to little in the whole scheme of things – that he is engaged in a lifelong quest for immortality which, ironically, can be attained through no means other than his own death.

What, then, is life?
 A puff of wind in the rushes,
 that sinks; (*First cadence, v-VI in A minor*)
 a game of strength,
 that yearns towards
 eternity. (*Second cadence, V of A minor*)
 To eternity,
 so red like the dawn, (musical elision)
 the only path from down here
 is through death. (*Final cadence in G major, V of C major*)

FIG. 2: 'Naar Odin vinker,' verse 5

Clearly, this is the most provocative verse of the poem, and the song suggests that it drew Nielsen's attention, too. His carefully-wrought symbiosis of poetic and musical punctuation, for example, is best exemplified by this verse, where the relative finality of the line endings is supported by the cadential hierarchy (see Fig. 2). The music seems to follow the meaning of this particular verse most closely as well. The descending vocal line of the first phrase suggests the image of sinking into the rushes, and the contrary motion between the bass line and the arching vocal melody in the song's second half may represent both the height and breadth of 'eternity' and the road 'down here' that leads to it only through death.

The song's harmonic scheme also suggests that Nielsen was fixated on this verse's 'aspir[ing] towards eternity.' It is in the key of C major, ending on the dominant, but within the body of the song this harmony is peripheral to a tonal rivalry between A minor and F major.¹¹ It has already been noted that the F major chord at the end of the first musical phrase, for example, sounds deceptive, as though it were part of a v to VI progression in A minor (b. 3). A second attempt to tonicize A minor is thwarted at the end of the next phrase (b. 6). The cadence on its dominant (E major) leads not to A minor as expected but, in a retrogression, to D minor and eventually F major for the song's climax (b. 9).

It is not the tension between these keys that reflects the quest towards eternity so much as their placement among the other harmonies involved in the struggle for tonal supremacy. With few exceptions, the harmonies unfold a symmetrical plan that pivots around the crucial E major cadence, a cadence which in the fifth verse specifically supports the word 'eternity' (see Fig. 3). The ascending-fifths progression

¹¹ In this respect the song is reminiscent of Nielsen's 'Har Dagen sanket al sin Sorg,' not to mention Schubert's 'Meeres Stille'.

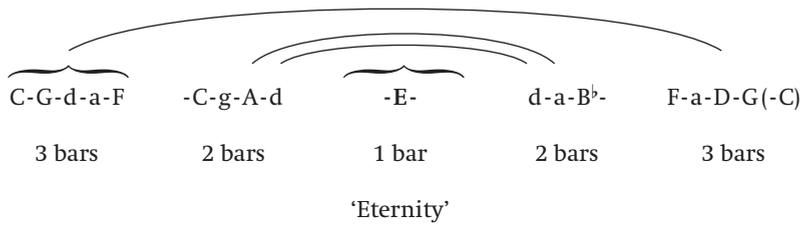


FIG. 3: ‘Naar Odin vinker,’ *Symmetrical harmonic scheme*

with which the song began, then, becomes a descending circle-of-fifths sequence at the end.¹² This is a subtle but important distinction: because ascending fifths are not goal-directed, the song’s opening has a modal character, while the latter, more common sequence causes the ending to sound more tonal. One of the crucial features of Nielsen’s compositional style in general, and his *folkelige* song style in particular, is precisely this sort of juxtaposition of modal and tonal progressions. The song is balanced around the axial E major chord, both harmonically and temporally, so that there is no beginning and no end, a circularity underscored by the necessity of continuing on to the next verse in order to come full circle (i.e., back to C major). In its continuity, this musical palindrome is a subtle but ingenious analogue for the notion of eternity.

As ‘seemingly familiar’ as Nielsen’s folk-like songs were designed to be, sometimes what makes them expressive, and hence memorable, is that the listener’s expectations are first aroused, and in the next instant, momentarily thwarted. Again, the motivation for the unexpected turn may be traced back to the poetry. The simplest and most common example of this deviation from the norm is when the second phrase of the melody begins similarly but continues differently from the first,¹³ or when an unusual harmony is unexpectedly introduced.¹⁴ ‘Tidt er jeg glad’ (Often I am Happy) provides a more complex example of how Nielsen establishes musical expectations and then, as the melody follows its natural course, smoothly undermines the fulfilment harmonically, the momentary lapses contributing to the expression of both the structure and the meaning of the poetry.

The point of the poem is to suggest that things are not what they seem, that the protagonist’s inner reality is exactly the opposite of his outward appearance (see Fig. 4). In his aphoristic presentation of contrasting emotions and images, the poet

12 Bach’s first Invention shares this feature; the harmonic progression rises from C to G to D and finally reaches A minor; the progression then reverses direction, falling back down to C via the same circle of fifths.

13 Examples are ‘Underlige Aftenluftel’, ‘Der dukker af Disen min Fædrenejord’, and ‘Vi Sletternes Sønner’.

14 An example is the flat VII in ‘Rosen blusser’.

Often I am happy and yet would like to cry,
for no heart shares completely in my joy.
Often I am sorrowful and yet must laugh,
so that no one will see my frightened tears.

Often I love, and yet would like to sigh;
for my heart must silently and tightly seal itself off.
Often I feel angry and yet must smile;
for those I feel anger towards are fools.

Often I am warm, and shiver in my warmth;
for the world embraces me with frozen arms.
Often I am cold and yet feel flushed;
for the world cannot extinguish my love.

Often I speak and yet wish to be silent,
when my words don't wait for my thoughts.
Often I am silent and wish for a thunderous voice,
in order to empty my tortured breast.

Oh you, the only one who can share my joy!
the only one upon whose bosom I could freely cry!
Oh, if you knew me, if you loved me,
I could always be as I am ... with you.

FIG. 4: *Tidt er jeg glad,* translation.

Bernhard Severin Ingemann conveys the turmoil suffered and energy expended in hiding one's deepest feelings. Surely it was this tension between extremes of emotion that attracted Nielsen to his poem.

In the song, the general sadness of the poem is conveyed through the minor-mode context, consistently serious tone, and plaintive melody. Even though phrase after phrase presents opposing adjectives, the music maintains a single sombre mood throughout. Nielsen chose more subtle musical means than the simple vacillation between major and minor modes, or slow and lively rhythms, to underscore these polarities.

Each of the short phrases of text is supported by just two bars of music (see *Ex. 4*). Even though these small units are equal in length, the song does not come apart

Inderligt

Tidt er jeg glad, og vil dog ger - ne græ - de;

mp

Fm: V **i** **A♭: iv⁶ ii⁶** **V₄⁶ : ₃⁵**

3

thi in - tet Hjør - te de - ler helt min Glæ - de. Tidt er jeg sor - rig - fuld og

D♭: I **I** **Fm: iv⁶ ii⁶** **V** **VI**

6

maa dog le, at in - gen skal den ban - ge Taa - re se.

B♭: V **VI** **Fm: ♭II** **V₄⁶ : ₃⁵** **i**

EX. 4: 'Tidt er jeg glad'.

at the seams because Nielsen has arranged the harmony so that the end of one phrase is at the same time the beginning of the next. Each phrase ends on a dominant that progresses into the next phrase; this musical dependency matches the poetry's string of dependent clauses. Also, on a larger scale, the two-bar units are joined by a circle-of-fifths sequence. At the end of the first phrase, instead of launching this sequential progression, Nielsen might have returned to the F minor tonic, the iv^6 in bar 2 leading to V as the listener expects, just as the poet might have explained the protagonist's

crying as tears of joy, thereby fulfilling the reader's expectation. But it is precisely the reinterpretation of this B-flat chord as ii⁶ in the key of A flat that makes this first phrase so expressive and propels the melody onward, just as the sombre twist in the second line of the poem catches the reader by surprise, in the process arousing both sympathy and interest. The musical phrase closes on the dominant of A flat, and this open ending becomes the prototype for the remaining phrases – a pattern that, once again, mirrors the poem's syntactical pattern.

In the next phrase (bb. 3-4), A flat leads to D flat and then to a G diminished chord. Finally, C major at the end of the phrase returns the music to the tonic, F minor, completing the full circle of fifths in just four bars. This sequential progression breaks off before reaching its goal, however. Instead, the tonic return is thwarted with a deceptive motion that sets up the dramatic melodic climax in the third phrase (b. 6). The phrase-ending dominant this time is V of iv, and, in an effective parallelism, the final phrase begins with yet *another* deceptive motion (b. 7) which ultimately is reinterpreted as flat II in F minor – the means, then, of returning to the tonic to end the song.

Thus, in as concentrated a fashion as Ingemann himself, Nielsen has matched the poem's balanced presentation of polarized emotions with a musical counterpart: a pattern of alternating harmonic poles – dominant and tonic – the circle-of-fifths harmonic sequence. Further, as an analogue for the protagonist's emotional deception, he interrupts this sequence with deceptive motions, translating into musical terms the dichotomy between what the person *appears* to feel and is *actually* experiencing. The continual fluctuation between anticipation and retrospective reinterpretation in the harmonic domain, then, serves to intensify the poem's emotional zigzaggery. Finally, in an even more precise correspondence, Nielsen duplicates the alternating presentation of contrasting poetic images at the phrase level of the song. Each line of text is supported by two kinds of harmonic motion: first a progression propels the music forward (in bb. 1, 3, 5 and 7), and then a cadence immediately quells this progress (in bb. 2, 4, 6 and 8; see Fig. 5). The resulting start-and-stop effect is heightened by a corresponding alternation between eighth- and quarter-note motion, the expressive appoggiaturas in the even-numbered bars contributing even more to the sense of broadening at the cadences. By underscoring the contrasting emotions with opposing harmonic functions in this fashion, Nielsen succeeded in fusing the musical and poetic syntax.

'Tidt er jeg glad' traverses many keys in the space of just eight bars. In some of the *folkelige* songs such harmonic transience causes the tonal balance to tilt precipitously far from the tonic towards a second key. Nielsen typically plays on the resultant tension between the two keys as a means of underscoring some conflict in the poetry. For example, in 'Min lille Fugl,' Nielsen plays on the ambiguity between relative keys.

b. 1: progression in F minor	→	b. 2: cadence in A-flat major
b. 3: progression in A-flat	→	b. 4: cadence in F minor
b. 5: progression in F minor	→	b. 6: cadence in B-flat minor
b. 7: progression in B-flat minor	→	b. 8: cadence in F minor

FIG. 5: 'Tidt er jeg glad,' Harmonic motion.

The poem's subject suggests the nature of Nielsen's setting: the accompaniment is so light and its tessitura so high that it is more like a duet with the voice, and the vocal melody, gently nudged along by the $\frac{6}{8}$ metre, virtually sings itself. The prevalence of major chords, short-long rhythmic pattern, and emphasis on the interval of a third in both melody and harmony are clearly reminiscent of birdsong, a musical source Nielsen acknowledged. 'There is surely no one who will deny that it is the intervals that surprise and delight us anew every time we hear the cuckoo call on a summer day. If it called on just one pitch, we would surely react more indifferently. And what is it after all? A minor – sometimes a major – third.'¹⁵

The text is comprised of three strophes of five short lines, each line translating into a musical sub-phrase of a mere two bars (see Fig. 6). The odd number of lines sets the final phrase apart, as though it were a spontaneous expression of anguish on the part of the speaker. But the first lines of the poem betray none of this pain. The person speaking simply calls after his bird, wondering where it is among the green trees. In the song, Nielsen accompanies these words with simple two-voice counterpoint moving in contrary motion. The convergence of these lines forms two successive gestures which, in the pianist's hands, feel like attempts at catching something, and each gesture ends in an open fifth as though he comes up empty-handed (see Ex. 5; bb. 2-3). When the texture thickens to three parts, the vocal line lies between the left and right hands in terms of range, at just the moment when the bird flies 'between the trees' in the poem. The poem goes on to clarify that what actually eludes the protagonist is the return of his affections; the bird represents a love he cannot have. Nielsen's choice of a strophic setting is appropriate to an obsessive longing for something out of reach.

Like most of Nielsen's *folkelige* songs, the melody has both unity and balance. The repetition of a melodic cell, the intervals of a second plus a third, generates the first two phrases. These consist of two descending gestures (bb. 2-3) followed by a rising line that includes two of the thirds just heard in the descent (bb. 3-4). The up-sweep of this melodic gesture is underscored by the B - C[#] - D bass line at the cadence, together a musical manifestation of the speaker's query concerning the bird's where-

15 'Musikalske Problemer' (Musical Problems), in John Fellow, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 262.

My little bird, where do you fly
 between green branches?
 Alas, I wonder if you ever think of me?
 My heart is about to break!
 Oh God, how lonely I am!

You said that you would be good to me
 yes, everyone means to do well by me,
 but if you understood my sorrow rightly,
 you would have come, have sung to me soulfully,
 and I wouldn't have sat alone.

My little bird, you do not come
 from your green branches:
 so I'll quietly continue on my way;
 Ah, no one loves you as I do!
 Oh God, how lonely I am!

FIG. 6: 'Min lille Fugl,' translation.

abouts. The melodic cell similarly dominates the subsequent two phrases, the interval of a third now filled in by step (bb. 6-9). These bars comprise an embellished linear descent from B to F[#] – the song's introductory pitch – the turn downward triggered by the C-natural upper neighbor in the vocal melody of bar 5.

The most remarkable and poetically significant feature of the song is the harmonic language. The introduction consists of a single sustained pitch, F[#], which, aside from the obvious poetic association with the speaker's lonely state, is harmonically ambiguous.¹⁶ Then, since the song proper begins with two-voice counterpoint, it is still difficult to discern the root of the harmony. The notes of the initial phrase, taken as a whole, arpeggiate first a B minor and then a G major seventh chord, with the third of the chord sounding in the lowest voice on the downbeats (bb. 2-3) – not a very strong means of establishing tonic. In fact, since the song's first cadence (at the end of the second phrase) is in D major, the listener likely assumes it to be the tonic rather than B minor, heard only fleetingly and with an added seventh at the beginning.

Throughout the song Nielsen plays on the ambiguity between these relative keys, B minor and D major, leaning decidedly towards the latter. The only two perfect cadences before the end of the song are in D major (bb. 5 and 9) and, in fact, the song

16 Might not the 'bird's eye' above this pitch be an instance of *Augenmusik*? If so, Nielsen is playing to three senses at once: the aural, tactile and visual.

Lidt dvælende, dog ikke langsomt

1. Min lil - le Fugl, hvor fly - ver du i -

mel - lem grøn - ne Gre - ne? Ak mon jeg rin - der dig i Hu? Mit

4

8

Hjer - te bri - ste vil i - tu! - O Gud hvor jeg dog er e - ne! 2. Du

mp

mf

D G: V vi

D: V⁶ V I IV⁶ Bm: VI⁶ V i

EX. 5: 'Min lille Fugl'.

is practically over before B minor exerts its authority. This abrupt tonal reorientation is made all the more obvious by the accompaniment's descent into the bass range for the very first time and the strong root-position progressions, virtually absent until now.

G major gets caught up in the tonal struggle as well.¹⁷ In bar five, for example, it occurs within the context of D, as IV. Then in like fashion, C enters as IV of G, and the relationship between D and G is transformed from I - IV to V - I (bb. 5-7). Nielsen

¹⁷ G and D, the most prominent harmonies in the song aside from the tonic, flank B minor at the distance of a third, just as the final chord progressions, V - I, IV - I, flank the tonic by fourths. While this is but a minuscule instance, such tonal symmetries abound in Nielsen's music.

is clearly playing on the functional reciprocity of keys related by a fourth as a means of creating ambiguity within the confines of a short piece and without resorting to chromaticism. Next, E minor is briefly invoked through a deceptive cadence (b. 7), presaging, perhaps, its role as the 'real' subdominant, within the key that will finally win out as tonic, B minor. In the context of the present phrase, however, this harmony, built on the fifth of a harmonically-arpeggiated dominant-seventh chord (bb. 6-9), soon leads back to D major (b. 9). These bars are a compressed example of one of Nielsen's favourite, and by this time familiar, techniques: the harmonic language may be strictly diatonic but, as the music unfolds, the functional context changes and the relationship between the harmonies may be interpreted in various ways.

Over the entire song the motion of the lowest voice is narrow in contour, moving up and down the interval of a third, between the pitches B and D as, for example, in the progression I - V⁶ - IV⁶ of bars 9 to 10. Similarly, stepwise motion also prevails among the upper voices. Since it is the age-old means of representing a sigh or moan, a half step occurs appropriately in the melody at the exclamation 'Ak mon,' (Alas) and is especially poignant in the penultimate bar at 'O Gud [...]' (Oh God [...]) where, precisely by way of this sinking half step, G major gives way to B minor and the tonic is finally established (b. 10). This 6-5 motion also connects the E and B minor harmonies that close the song (b. 11).¹⁸

The tonal ambiguity in this song acts as a subtle musical parallel to the poetic theme of unrequited love. The constant push to establish D major as tonic is like the protagonist's desire for a relationship with the woman he loves, a musical manifestation of his wishful thinking. With the abrupt but definite closure in B minor, then, he is jerked back to the reality of his solitary existence. Then, when the music circles back for the second verse and the listener hears about the bird's past reassurances supported by D major¹⁹ – a key the listener now knows is not the tonic – these falsehoods, both poetic and musical, ring hollow. With each rehearing, the initial harmonic ambiguity is progressively clarified and B minor sounds more and more convincing as tonic, just as by the third verse of the poem, the protagonist has gradually come to accept reality. He knows now that his bird will never return, and he has no choice but to continue on his way, alone. This notion of an initial ambiguity clarified through rehearsals has interesting implications for the strophic song setting in general.

Though obviously understated in this stylistically restricted context, such harmonic sophistication is but one feature that Nielsen's folk-like songs – despite their obvious differences – have in common with his instrumental compositions. Here, as

18 Scale degree 5, F², is implied.

19 D major is also the key of the wood dove in Wagner's *Siegfried*.

in his larger works, the structure typically unfolds contrapuntally, with melody and harmony connected through motivic parallelism, and supported by first tonal and then – sometimes as soon as the next bar – modal progressions, as in 'Naar Odin vinker.' As often as Nielsen set up expectations and fulfilled them within the melodies of these songs, he confounded them with the harmonic support, as in 'Tidt er jeg Glad'. This sleight-of-ear is accomplished via stepwise voice-leading so that, rather than making the melody more difficult to sing and remember, it actually makes it easier to recall. Still more surprising is to find that some of these aphoristic compositions involve the sort of tension between two keys that characterizes not only his art songs but his symphonies. In this context, the harmonic ambiguity typically reflects some conflict or tension in the poetry, like the theme of unrequited love in 'Min lille Fugl'. Despite their overall simplicity and economy of means, these songs are often sophisticated harmonically, and nothing in them is unrelated; every melodic gesture and harmonic motion builds on what has come before. In these fundamental respects, the folk-like songs exhibit concentrated, refined examples of the same organic compositional practices that are writ large in his instrumental music, employed here in the service of the text.

Indeed, Nielsen's primary aim in writing these songs clearly was to enliven his chosen poetry, more than to create nationalistic music. Even in those poems that have a patriotic character it is not the stand-up-and-fight-for-your-country sort of allegiance, but rather the opposite, a *hygge sammen* (cozy up together) variety.²⁰ Nielsen actually questioned whether a distinctly Danish tone could even exist, when the musical histories of Denmark and Germany are so entwined, and cautioned against contriving to evoke one, saying: 'It cannot be denied that when the national element is cultivated too strongly, something more artistically meaningful may easily be lost, and art stagnates';²¹ and, on a different occasion: 'There is nothing that destroys art more than nationalism [...] Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, and it is impossible to write national music on command. If one tries, he is not an artist but a patch tailor'.²²

It is interesting that the question of Danishness in Nielsen's songs has been raised again just now, with Denmark struggling to assimilate its large middle-Eastern immigrant population. This period of consciously cultivated nationalism is reminiscent of the early twentieth century, when Nielsen's folk-like songs were composed. Denmark's borders had shrunk drastically over the nineteenth century, filling some

20 The Danes of the early twentieth century hardly wished to be reminded of their performance in recent wars.

21 'Dansk musik' (Danish Music), in *Politiken* (14.11.1926), John Fellow, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 408.

22 '60 Aar,' in *Social-Demokraten* (9.6.1925), in *ibid.*, vol. 1, 354.

Danes with the desire to reject things foreign, and the resolve to define a uniquely Danish identity,²³ so as to ‘win within what outwardly had been lost’.²⁴ As Dahlhaus noted, ‘[n]ationalistic music invariably emerges as an expression of a politically motivated need, which tends to appear when national independence is being jeopardized rather than attained or consolidated.’²⁵ Perhaps not coincidentally, at the time that Nielsen wrote most of his folk-like songs, he was living in Sweden, estranged from his wife, and feeling nostalgic for his homeland and happier times. The physical and emotional isolation he experienced was painful, yet seemed also to inspire him. ‘In order to write about nature one should preferably sit in a little room in the city’, he once observed, ‘[...] because then one *longs* naturally for that which one doesn’t have’.²⁶

We have seen that, even if Nielsen’s folk-like songs do not exhibit traits that can be quantified as uniquely Danish, they *do* bear the composer’s stamp, albeit in subtler ways than in his symphonies. This begs the question: if a country’s most highly-prized composer has written songs that, for a variety of *extrinsic* reasons, have become national emblems, and these songs exhibit stylistic characteristics of that composer, cannot these *intrinsic* characteristics, by extension, be considered Danish? Perhaps there was no Danish tone before Nielsen, but over time, specifically by virtue of being associated with his music, his stylistic traits have come to sound Danish, both at home and abroad. The ‘Danishness’ in Nielsen’s music, then, depends largely on the fact that his music has long represented Denmark to the rest of the world, and his distinctive voice has been embraced by his countrymen as their own.

23 Kingsbury Marzolf, review of Ole Feldbæk, ed., *Dansk Identitetshistorie* (The History of Danish Identity), in *Scandinavian Studies*, 66/3 (1994), 418. See also Benedikte Brincker, “A Small Great National State,” An Analysis of the Cultural and Political Factors that Shaped Danish Nationalism, 1760-1870’, in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 16/4 (December 2003), 407-431.

24 Hans Kuhn, *Defining a Nation in Song: Danish Patriotic Songs in Songbooks of the Period 1832-1870*, Copenhagen 1990, 19. The sentence was coined by the poet H. P. Holst, and soon became the slogan of the *Det danske Hedeselskab* (The Danish Society for Moorland Reclamation), founded by Enrico M. Dalgas in 1866 (Hvad udad tabes, det skal indad vindes). The society’s purpose was to turn Jutland’s heath into farmland, to compensate for the land lost to Germany. Steven M. Borish, *The Land of the Living: The Danish Folk High Schools and Denmark’s Non-violent Path to Modernization*, Nevada City 2004, 14.

25 Carl Dahlhaus, *op. cit.*, 38.

26 ‘Carl Nielsen om sin lystige Symfoni’ (Carl Nielsen on His Cheerful Symphony), interview with Clerk in *Nationaltidende* (9.12.1925), in John Fellow, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 376.

A B S T R A C T

The notion of 'Danishness' remains a sensitive issue in Denmark, not only in reference to music, but also within the broader socio-political arena, in part because of the tensions caused by the influx of Middle-Eastern immigrants. The recent public debate, rash of publications on national identity, and creation of a Danish cultural canon are surely no coincidence. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that Karen Vestergård and Ida-Marie Vorre's 2006 study on Danishness in Nielsen's folk-like songs sparked controversy, since the authors conclude that there is actually nothing inherently Danish about them, challenging the conventional wisdom that Nielsen's *folkelige* songs express the 'Danish national tone'. Yet even if one cannot verify Danish traits in these songs, it is possible to separate features of the European folk song tradition from Nielsen's distinctive compositional practices. For example, whereas the songs' folk-like character is mostly concentrated in the melody, their expressive quality derives largely from the harmonic language, an aspect not considered by Vestergaard and Vorre in their purely melodic analysis. Indeed, many songs manifest in miniature the shifting diatonicism that has been found to thwart expectation in Nielsen's large-scale compositions. So even if these songs do not exhibit uniquely Danish traits, they do bear Nielsen's stamp. This begs the question: if a country's foremost composer has written songs that, for various extrinsic reasons, have become part of the collective folk heritage, cannot his stylistic characteristics, by extension, be considered nationalistic? Perhaps there was no Danish national tone before Nielsen, but over time, specifically through association with his music, these traits have come to represent Danishness, a perspective I argue in this article.