
CARL NIELSEN AND THE DANISH TRADITION OF STORY-TELLING

By Colin Roth

Presenting an interdisciplinary paper is not unlike putting up a tent – it's important to establish secure moorings for the poles first, but difficult to get them to stand in balance with each other, even more difficult to throw the tarpaulin over the lot without knocking some over or getting them stuck in the wrong place.¹ Only when the tent cover is in place, properly supported by its poles, does the structure become recognisable as a tent at all, making sense as a coherent idea – so there's a protracted and sometimes challengingly tangential pathway towards the success you hope you'll eventually achieve when all your ropes are pegged and your flaps zipped. I hope you'll bear with me while I try to put *this* tent up.²

The new edition of Carl Nielsen's works has been a source of great interest to us all as its volumes have been published, one after the other. But one of them was a horrible shock when it arrived. It contained really dreadful stuff, quite awful. That was the score of Aladdin.

Of course, I'm not saying that the editing of Aladdin was shocking! On the contrary, David Fanning's presentation of the material is excellent – indeed, the shock was so great precisely because his presentation was so thorough. He provides a spine-chillingly detailed summary of the plot of Oehlenschläger's poetic drama, which shows all too clearly that there are fashions in modes of story-telling, fashions which have certainly changed since this story was first written!

1 Many kind friends have supported my work on this article; including Niels Krabbe, Peter Hauge, Svend Ravnkilde, David Fanning and Dan Grimley. I particularly want to express my gratitude to the members of the Sheffield Danish Group, who are: Gitte Steffensen and Derek Allen; Lone Kristensen and Gareth Rhys; Olga Popovic and Jens Larsen; and the late Diana Ramasamy. Of course they are not responsible for any misunderstandings or mistranslations here, which remain entirely my own responsibility.

2 In fact, this tent has been built more like a Lego project, made of bricks quarried from other work over many years, including 'Bournonville: some untold stories' in *Fund og Forskning* 47 (2007); a lecture given at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, for their exhibition of work by the artist Vilhelm Hammershøi, 14 July 2008; a piece written on Carl Nielsen and the art movement, Dada. Some tent poles have been shortened here.

Here's a little snatch of it:

The Vizier tries to persuade the Sultan to take measures against the sorcery taking place with Gulnare and Saladin. When the wise man Ali Baba interprets these events, the Sultan decides to put things to a test: if Aladdin can bring him forty golden caskets full of gems, delivered to him by forty black and forty white slaves, he will dissolve the engagement of his daughter and the Vizier's son and instead give his blessing to the wedding of Gulnare and Aladdin.³

Oehlenschläger wasn't alone in telling stories that were dominated, perhaps overwhelmed by our modern standards, by narrative detail. His British contemporaries, Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott did very much the same. But the fashion in narrative modes was changing, and in order to understand why, we need to consider what stories are for.

People are sometimes more interested in hearing *what happens* first, and then seeing what that tells them about how people feel; at other times, they prefer to hear first about *how people feel*, only then taking an interest in the emerging narrative of what happens, once they have established their emotional, 'kinaesthetic', bearings.⁴

This paper cannot provide answers to the questions it raises; it aims instead to offer ideas. You must decide for yourself whether the suggestions made here help to clarify the communication strategies that Nielsen adopts in his sixth symphony, which we will only come to later, after a little journey through the life and works of some of his predecessors. The aim is to establish that one important layer of the *Sinfonia semplice's* 'meaning' requires our recognition of its autobiographical content, an acknowledgement that Nielsen is speaking directly to an audience he wants to provoke and challenge, as well as entertain, and that his mode of address is a matter of self-conscious control by the composer, not an accident. For a start, that audience is all people who've come to a concert for an experience, not 'the future' or a clutch of musicologists making a living out of talking about what they hear.

I want to ask whether good art is made by aiming beyond the personal to the universal: should the creative artist set out with a clear sense of the grand purpose, the long term value of their work? Or is the universal in art contained within the personal, something which emerges from an artist's sincere and authentic expression of their own experience? Clearly the answers to these questions are not the same at different times in cultural history, and the explanations I am interested in here are

3 From Act 3, Scene 13 of the summary-libretto, in *Carl Nielsen, Works, I/8, Aladdin*, Copenhagen 2000, xxxiv.

4 Colin Roth, 'Bournonville – some untold stories', *Fund og Forskning* 47 (2007), 151-166.

those which were believed to be correct in the century between Oehlenschläger and Nielsen, and are rather different from those which other ages would find useful.

I will be suggesting that there has been a distinctly Danish development of narrative mode, through self-awareness and DIDACTIC revelation, which leads clearly and precisely towards mid-20th century French Existentialism, in which, for example, we find Simone de Beauvoir quoting HC Andersen (saying, 'this, the little mermaid, is ME').⁵

I think a number of factors contributed to the evolution of a characteristically Danish mode of story-telling. There seems to be a correlation between the immediacy and susceptibility of autocratic government to personal influence and the capacity of an artistic culture to flourish. Consider the enlightened despotism of King Frederik VI. Frederik's court contained and legitimised elements without whose support Andersen's rise would have been impossible. Frederik's presence seems indivisible from the *guldalder* ['Golden Age'] culture it was part of, just as Josef II of Habsburg Austria's enlightened despotism ran in unprovable but unmistakable parallel with the achievements of several composers during his reign. Those who wished to find a parallel in modern Denmark might reasonably compare the vitality of 'serious' cultural life there to its commercial dependency elsewhere, and wonder whether the relative size of Denmark isn't a considerable advantage.

The different modes of narrative – objective, through a narrator who selects the material they require the reader to attend to; and subjective or experiential, in which the author feigns invisibility, presenting material in a way that requires the reader to step into the story and make their own choice from the carefully 'neutral' material on offer – are discussed at length in terms of the work of August Bournonville, Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Dickens in *Bournonville: some untold stories*.⁶

Though these close friends' influence on each other is probably beyond question, the extent to which Bournonville or Andersen might have been influenced by the prolific authorship of Søren Kierkegaard is far less clear. His presence in and contribution to Copenhagen's cultural life were inescapable, and both Bournonville and Andersen knew of him and read at least some of his works. In fact Kierkegaard's first published work was a highly critical study of Andersen's 1837 third novel, *Kun en Spillemænd* [Only a Fiddler].⁷ In this study, characterised at the time as 'academic, dull,

5 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*, 1954, read in the Folio Society's 2008 edition translated by Leonard M. Friedman, 21-22.

6 Colin Roth, *op. cit.* See also, *When we get to the end ... towards a narratology of the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen*, ed. Per Krogh Hansen and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, Odense 2005.

7 Søren Kierkegaard, *From the Papers of a Person Still Alive, Published Against his Will: On Andersen as a novelist, with constant regard to his most recent work, Only a Fiddler*, 1837. Andersen's novel was re-published in vol. 5 ('Romaner II') of *H.C. Andersens Samlede Værker*, Copenhagen 2004.

stilted',⁸ the startlingly perceptive 25-year-old Kierkegaard commented, 'the joyless struggle that is Andersen's in real life now repeats itself in his writing'.

Of course, the exact same thing is famously true of Kierkegaard's own writings. Rather than delve into his notorious exploration, over several volumes, of his relationship with his fiancée, Regine Olsen, here is an entertaining example of his narrative strategy from a less well-known work which might merit the attention of musicians for its subject, *Repetition*. Kierkegaard uses an anecdote about his own life to illustrate and clarify the significance of a philosophical point he has just made:

I had discovered that there simply is no repetition and had verified it by having it repeated in every possible way [...] My hope lay in my home [...]

[...] I have always strongly mistrusted all upheavals, yes, to the extent that for this reason I even hate any sort of housecleaning, especially floor scrubbing with soap. I had left the strictest instructions that my conservative principles should be maintained also in my absence. But what happens. My faithful servant thought otherwise. When he began a shakeup very shortly after I left, he counted on its being finished well before my return, and he certainly was the man to get everything back in order very punctually. I arrive. I ring my doorbell. My servant opens the door. It was a moment eloquent with meaning. My servant turned as pale as a corpse. Through the door half-opened to the rooms beyond I saw the horror: everything was turned upside down. I was dumbfounded. In his perplexity, he did not know what to do; his bad conscience smote him – and he slammed the door in my face. That was too much. My desolation had reached its extremity, my principles had collapsed; I was obliged to fear the worst, to be treated like a ghost as was Grønmeier, the business manager. I perceived that there is no repetition, and my earlier conception of life was victorious.⁹

Perhaps the most impressive demonstration of the regard in which artists of all kinds were held in Denmark in this period, the early and mid-19th century, is the extraordinary welcome given to the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen when he decided to retire home to Copenhagen after a long and successful working life in Rome. His status, his position as an important artist, is all too evident from images of his arrival home,¹⁰ and of the record made of that event on the mural painted around the special museum erected to house the collection he gave to the Danish nation.

8 Jackie Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, London 2000, 175.

9 *Repetition, a venture in experimenting psychology* by 'Constantin Constantinus' (1843), translation Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton 1983, 171.

10 C.W. Eckersberg, *Thorvaldsens Ankomst 1838* (Thorvaldsen's homecoming 1838), 1839, Thorvaldsens Museum. From *Guldalderhistorie, 20 nærbilleder af perioden 1800-1850*, Copenhagen 1994, 1998, 74.

Although the veneration accorded to Thorvaldsen is important, we must also remember that artists are not recognised as miraculous fairies at their birth: they have to work in the real world, and, just like the rest of us, have to keep a constant and careful eye on their income. This quotation from David Fanning's preface to that Carl Nielsen Edition score of *Aladdin* I mentioned at the outset should be pinned above the desk of everyone who studies and writes about Carl Nielsen and his music:

Since resigning his post as *kapelmester* at The Royal Theatre at the end of June 1914, Nielsen had been a freelance musician. From March 1915 until 1927 he was conductor of the Music Society in Copenhagen (*Musikforeningen*), and in 1916 he joined the governing body of the Copenhagen Conservatory, at the same time being appointed to teach theory and composition. When his friend Wilhelm Stenhammar took a period of leave from his conductorship of the Gothenburg Orchestral Society (*Göteborgs Orkesterförening*) in Autumn 1918, Nielsen took the job as stand-in, and here in Gothenburg he continued the work on *Aladdin* which he had begun in earnest earlier that summer.¹¹

Another artist, later than those we have considered so far and a contemporary and friend of Carl Nielsen, also took account of the need to supply his market more directly than it's usually considered polite to suggest. Far from being a 'reserved' or 'depressive' artist, Vilhelm Hammershøi – who was completely deaf in one ear, making large gatherings hopelessly difficult, which is why he got his reputation for being reserved – painted exactly what he could sell.¹² His interiors, like all his pictures carefully designed to be neutral enough not to date, so that his collectors could see them as viable investments as well as intrinsically beautiful objects, contain elements which look back nostalgically at a lost Denmark, one which had once been more politically and economically powerful. These include items of late-eighteenth-century porcelain that the artist most likely picked up from street traders¹³ and furniture from the earlier part of the nineteenth century like the Marschall piano which one image suspends miraculously only two of its legs¹⁴ – there's a deliberate, self-conscious game

11 David Fanning, Preface to *Carl Nielsen Works*, I/8, *Aladdin*, Copenhagen 2000, xiii-xiv.

12 Poul Vad, *Vilhelm Hammershøi and Danish Art at the Turn of the Century*, Copenhagen 1988; English edition New Haven and London 1992, 170-176. This material was researched for a lecture on Hammershøi for the Royal Academy of Arts, London's exhibition of his work in the summer of 2008.

13 Personal communication with Steen Nottelman, Curator, Royal Copenhagen Porcelain.

14 Vad, *op.cit.*, 376. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior, Strandgade 30, 1901*, Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum, Royal Academy exhibition catalogue, *Hammershøi: The Poetry of Silence*, London 2008, No. 30.

being played between the artist and his collectors, little stories being told, narratives and ideas hinted at within the surface of these 'aesthetic' neutralities.

Carl Nielsen and Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen mention Vilhelm Hammershøi three times in their (so far) published correspondence: an exchange between the Niensens in December 1912, and she to him after she had seen Ida at Vilhelm Hammershøi's funeral in 1916. Nielsen's and Hammershøi's awareness of the market they're addressing is evident in this passage, where Nielsen considers whether it would be appropriate for his wife's work to be seen in a particular (collective) public context, an exhibition of modern art in Rome:

I suppose I could understand it if someone like Hammershøi should feel an urge to see his own quiet things in the midst of the din made by the others, and I guess he would benefit from anything that could draw him in another direction, but you [AM] have often enough had occasion to see what you are and also the kind of impression that you make.

And mind, it is a very different matter in music, as the [live] performance has such importance attached to it already.¹⁵

Hammershøi regularly used photographs as the basis for his works. This isn't in the least unusual, and photographs are only one of the many devices artists have used over the centuries to help them structure their compositions, so I'm not suggesting at all that Hammershøi was being slack in using them!

Here is an example of one photograph,¹⁶ then the picture Hammershøi made from it, of the building on Strandgade where Hammershøi lived with his wife for many years (Figs. 1-2).¹⁷ You can see the vertical distortion of the tall building carried directly from the photograph into the painting – but you can also see that the artist has carefully removed any human trace from the image. The people, the practical bits of street furniture, have been elided, not for any grand artistic purpose, but because such details date so quickly. A painting with people in it shows, through their clothes

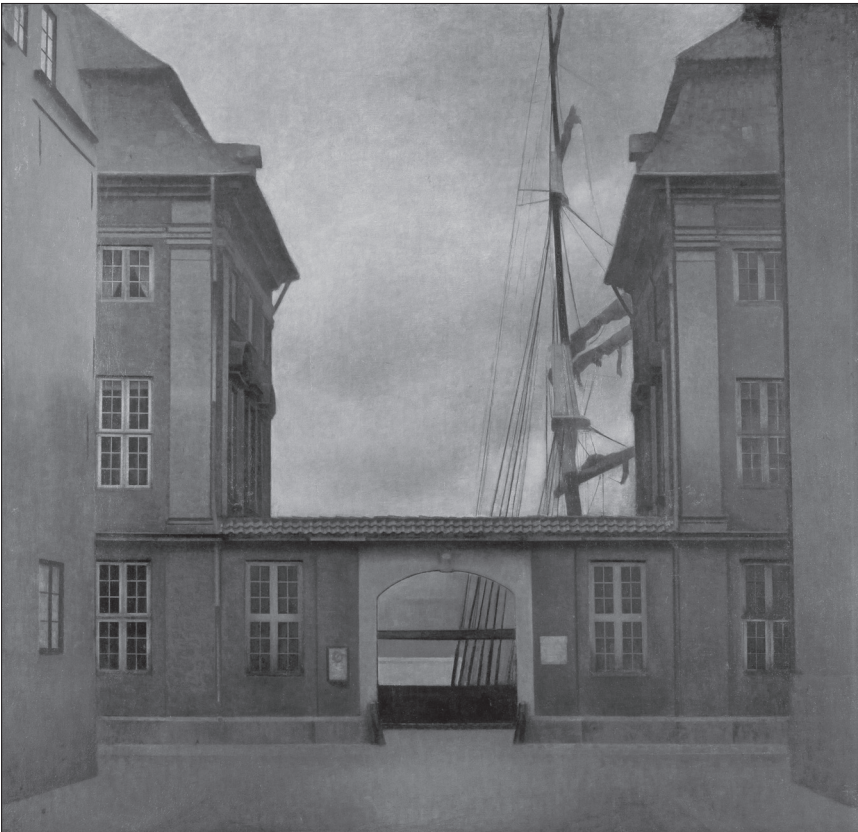
15 Letter dated 9.11.1911 but actually 9.12.1911, Carl Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen. *Jeg kunde tilnød forstaa om f.Expl: Hammershøj kunde ville se sine stille Ting blandt de andres Rabalder og han kunde vistnok have godt af alt hvad der drog ham i en anden Retning, men Du har saa ofte set hvad Du er og hvorledes Du virker. Forresten er det noget helt andet med Musik, fordi Udførelsen har i sig selv saa stor Interesse.* Torben Schousboe (ed.). *Carl Nielsen, Dagbøger og brevveksling med Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen*, Copenhagen 1983, vol. 2, 319. I am grateful to Svend Ravnkilde for his help with the translation of this letter.

16 The Asiatic Company Buildings, c. 1900; photograph which belonged to Hammershøi. From Poul Vad, *op.cit.*, 242.

17 Vilhelm Hammershøi, *The Asiatic Company Buildings, 1902*. Private collection on deposit at Ordrupgaard, Royal Academy catalogue 34.



ILL. 1: *The Asiatic Company Buildings, c. 1900; photograph which belonged to Vilhelm Hammershøi. (From Poul Vad, op.cit., p. 242.)*



ILL. 2: *Vilhelm Hammershøi, The Asiatic Company Buildings, 1902. Private collection on deposit at Ordrupgaard.*

and hair styles, whether they are wearing hats or not, exactly when it was painted – and Hammershøi knew that his collectors had an eye on the ‘universal’, or at least, on the long-term value of their substantial investment in his paintings. It was necessary, rather than a matter of choice, that the content should be time-neutral to make the paintings as collectable, that is as ‘universal’, as possible.

Nielsen’s *Sinfonia Semplice*

Sinfonia semplice shares with Dada an almost brutal determination to speak its own mind as it sees fit. It is a disconcerting work, which almost continually draws attention to its own processes, to the events which lie within and, in being less than straightforwardly literal in the musical story it tells, almost continually draws your attention to whether or not you understand what is going on, and what the composer might, or might not, mean by this or that gesture. Its ironised, disruptive self-consciousness makes us aware of how we feel about what we’re thinking, makes us think about how we feel, a trait we associate with Existentialism and, in Danish cultural terms especially, with Kierkegaard’s recognition that experiential thought is as deserving of consideration as object-related ‘rational’ thought.

The symphony is a deeply personal statement by its composer, in its first movement making clear references to the passage of time (most obviously through his reference to Haydn’s ‘Clock’ symphony) and, if we accept the testimony of Thorvald Nielsen,¹⁸ to his own fragile health. Though Thorvald Nielsen talks specifically about these elements’ place in the symphony’s final movement, there is no mistaking their presence in the first, and when you recognise that we also hear reminiscences of elements from the third and fourth symphonies¹⁹ there too, it seems clear that the first movement constitutes a valedictory manifestation of the composer’s life; to quote Jørgen I. Jensen, the symphony is, amongst other things, ‘a memoir in music – a work, however, in which Nielsen recalls not his childhood but the subsequent course of his life’.²⁰ That Nielsen was in a reflective state of mind around this time is supported by his contemporaneous work on his memoir of his childhood, *Min Fynske Barndom* [My Childhood on Funen].²¹

Was Nielsen, in bringing the dislocations and discomforts of his angina into the concert hall, anticipating the self-conscious directness of the Existentialists? Is this the same disconcerting strategy for engaging the emotional commitment of the listener that those authors employed, embodying their ordinariness in art (they certainly weren’t the first to do that – Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Zola’s anything had been doing it 80 years earlier) in a way that connects the whole of a listener’s emo-

18 *Carl Nielsen Centenary Essays*, Copenhagen 1965, 16.

19 Jørgen I. Jensen, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren*, Copenhagen 1991, 426.

20 ‘Et musikalsk erindringsværk – ikke en erindring af barndommen, men af det senere liv’, Jørgen I. Jensen, *op.cit.*, 420. Translation by Svend Ravnkilde.

21 Written during 1925.

tional and thinking being to the work? The listener is not allowed to listen just with their left-brain, in a nicely controlled, objective way, hearing structures, motives, patterns; they are shocked into engaging their right-brains too: 'why did that happen?'; 'this kind of music isn't supposed to sound like that'; 'I don't understand what's going on, or what I'm meant to be feeling'.²²

As the 20th century recedes, it is easier to see that one of its great contributions to cultural history was something it hardly appreciated itself: the revival of enthusiasm for mythologies, and the emergence of a genre of fantasy-adventure, often in the form of quests, with clear roots in the Scandinavian sagas. The Danish word 'eventyr' captures this idea beautifully, standing as it does between the English word which came from it ('adventure') and its modern Danish sense, the one which forces translators of Hans Christian Andersen to render it as 'fairy tale'. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*²³ remains one of the greatest as well as having been one of the first, but there have been distinguished successors, more often in contemporary media like film and television than in literature: *Indiana Jones*,²⁴ *The Tribe*²⁵ and most recently JK Rowling's Harry Potter.²⁶

What is it that characterises this fantasy-adventure genre? It is the deliberate blurring of the boundary between what is straightforwardly real, what might be real in special circumstances, and most importantly, what can only be taken for real by willingly suspending our disbelief. The mixture depends absolutely on one factor: the *subliminal* presence of a knowing narrator, an author who occasionally nods at his audience, who allows his characters to wink at us with a contemporary reference or an ironical aside, as, for example, when Superman (Christopher Reeve) smiles knowingly at us as he flies out of the screen past us at the end of the first *Superman* movie.²⁷ The narrative strategies we have been describing have now developed, not merging into one single mode of address to the audience, but heightening expression by con-

22 For a discussion of left- and right-brainedness and its impact on our perceptions and personalities, see Colin Roth, *Being Happier*, Sheffield 1997.

23 Published in three volumes: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, London 1954; *The Two Towers*, London 1954; *The Return of the King*, London 1955. I have used the edition published by the Folio Society, London 1977, with illustrations by H.M. Queen Margrethe of Denmark.

24 George Lucas directed a series of three films following the adventures of this archaeological adventurer, 1981-1989. A fourth adventure is currently in production (2007).

25 New Zealand-made co-production of Cloud Nine and UK Channel 5, 1999-2004.

26 A series of seven books published in London between 1997-2007.

27 *Superman The Movie*, 1978. The smile is at 2 hours, 15 minutes, 28 seconds. In a dvd commentary the producer, Pierre Spengler says of this moment, 'there, my fiction reality becomes totally real'. Further illustrations of the self-conscious address to the audience's engagement lie in the joke about not being able to change from Clark Kent to Superman in a modern telephone kiosk at 1 hour, 14 minutes, 8 seconds, and, in the 'balcony scene' with Lois at 1 hour, 26 minutes, 35 seconds, Superman's riposte to the deprecatory remark his *alter ego* Clark has made to Lois, 'Peter Pan flew with children, Lois, in a fairy tale' – by which he asserts that his own flying now, with Lois, is real flying for adults.

juring a seeming reality while using glimpses of a narrator's existence, the author's own hand, to reinforce a suggestion that this really *is* true – just as the sneeze which begins Kodaly's *Hary Janos* is supposed to assure us of the truth of that story! The audience's engagement remains as it was for most of the nineteenth century, locked on how the story feels rather than a detailed account of what happens.

This element, the self-conscious address by a character or the narrator to the audience, only re-emerged steadily, or rather, in fits and starts, during the 20th century to become the essential identifying characteristic it has now become – there is relatively little of it in Tolkien, and jokes with characters' names, like Oliphant for Elephant, are about as far as it goes. Perhaps the long musical tradition of playing with an audience's expectations, for example in Haydn (the 'Joke' quartet most obviously, but more seriously in the 'Chaos' which introduces *The Creation*, a work Nielsen conducted for the Music Society in Copenhagen while he was working on *Sinfonia semplice*)²⁸ may have attracted Nielsen to this element in Dada?

Another absolutely clear characteristic of the genre is that it is intelligible: it speaks directly to its audience by using language that is familiar to them; by making reference to cultural patterns and social norms that are comfortable. It lives in the present even when it is clothed in historically coloured cloth. It is the content of what is being said that matters, more than the style in which it is framed, and audiences know, expect, that they are meant to extrapolate a broad, generalised 'meaning' from the detailed narrative that is presented to them. The genre capitalises on its normative narrative drive: it is given to game-playing with intelligibility, knowing that the audience will scratch at the apparently nonsensical surface until they recognise meaning in a form they can understand. Seen from this point of view, it may be the absence of readily intelligible meaning beneath the surface of some musics of the 20th century that has led to their eclipse.

In these ways, it seems to me that Nielsen's *Sinfonia semplice* prefigures the fantasy-adventure genre, aiming to engage its listeners by quite radical and sometimes upsetting emotional disruptions and ambiguous ironies while expecting them to understand that the detailed engagement has a broader expressive purpose. How characteristic of Nielsen, to see past the distraction of modish but transient musical styles towards the expressive needs of coming generations.

Ways of doing musicology

Just as I'm arguing that Nielsen deliberately engages our emotions by challenging us to feel unexpected things, to consider what his music really means because we cannot simply objectify it and take its patterns for granted (it is no accident that the

28 Torben Schousboe, *op. cit.*, Copenhagen 1983, 478, note 6.

emotional disruption brought by self-consciousness, irony, 'existential' narrative, is balanced by a reversion to the symphony's traditional four movement form after the ideologically driven, through-composed structures of the fourth and fifth symphonies) we also have to consider how best to set about understanding the music we're listening to. A careful description of a work of art's appearance and construction may have considerable value and interest on its own terms, but such a description is of limited value in studying the meaning or worth of a piece of art, something which can only emerge if we also look for an understanding of its intended audiences' expectations, preconceptions, beliefs, and a study of the ways in which the artist has engaged with them.²⁹

Eric Clarke has argued that we should be open to the range and reach of events, the possibility that their significance stretches beyond an immediately recognisable internal paradigm, when considering musical structures. His mode of analysis, which he terms 'ecological', is itself a response to the primacy of narrative in current music's strategies – neutrally objective analysis on internal grounds can seem to be meaningful when aesthetics rather than narrative rule the roost.³⁰

It seems to me that the 'eventyr' of musicology is, in itself, worthy of a little self-consciousness. We should recognise that our curiosity, our urge to understand, is driven by an intuitive awareness that we are 'hearing' a communication offered to us by someone who is highly articulate in their chosen medium, but because of that, also highly demanding of our attention and effort. Musicology, like the genre of fantasy-adventure, requires a daring mixture of solid attention to reality and an awareness of context, a capacity to wonder whether this or that connection has value or relevance.

Like the creative artist, the sensitive critic is 'merely human'. That it gives me a deeper insight into Nielsen's character to have discovered that he was, in his later years, a – shall we say? – assertive driver, is as much a reflection of my character as his (musicologists are sometimes assertive drivers too) – but it helps me to understand the sheer pace of his music, its energy and drive, and the way in which he understands and can exploit the frustration of being becalmed to do so.³¹ My capacity to respond to Nielsen's 'communication' is in part a product of my empathy with this particular element in his creative character, just as my capacity to contribute to musicological scholarship is, in my view, a product of my capacity to articulate my own responses, and articulate them so that they can be shared, considered and then assimilated or rejected. I would be just as excited to know that Nielsen had been an enthusiastic supporter of his local football club or fond of pets, though sad to say, I don't think he was.

29 Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, London 1968.

30 Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*, Oxford 2005. See also Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime*, Cambridge 1981, 1-28.

31 Colin Roth, 'Stasis and Energy', in *Carl Nielsen Studies I* (2003), 156-164.

Is music just sound?

Michael Fjeldsøe follows up comments made by Nielsen in his 11 December 1925 *Politken* interview³² about the capacity of ‘sound’ (just sound) to have a musical function, examining an important element of *Sinfonia semplice*’s sound world in his, *Den fortrængte modernisme – den ny musik i dansk musikliv 1920-1940*.³³ Fjeldsøe remarks in particular on the importance to the work of unpitched percussion instruments. Nielsen, he argues, extends the range of kinds of sound that can be considered a part of ‘music’ to include ‘noise’ (*støjlyd*) – though Nielsen is hardly polite about the potential value to the orchestral palette of ‘wrapping paper’ – and Michael Fjeldsøe also quotes a 1923 pocket diary entry published by Schousboe in which Nielsen describes some of the fashionable noises as ‘affectation’ (*skaberi*).³⁴

And new sounds are added to the machines (threshers, automobiles), all of which is not meant to be enjoyed aesthetically. May God deliver us from such affectation. But without knowing it, we do receive lots of life-giving impressions, which may freshen up the mind and make the whole life worth living. (deaf ones are always cross).³⁵

I would like to go further, and suggest that Nielsen extends the capacity of ‘sound’ to carry meaning, managing levels of discourse and their inter-relationship as well as their sequential flow. Abstract thought, employing ‘sound’ as such, can co-exist with emotional narrative which exploits associations and culturally defined ‘meanings’ (like ‘minor=sad’ or ‘oboe=pastoral’). So when Nielsen seems to recognise the overwhelmingly urban complexion of the sounds used by his ‘avant garde’ contemporaries, jokingly using a firmly rural threshing machine (a farm engine) as an example of the mechanical sounds that might be incorporated into ‘music’, he is also recognising the capacity of sound to mean more than just its literal ‘noise’ value. We are aware of the nature, the true context, of sounds being used in ‘music’, and wrap this perception of them into our hearing of their presence, attributing some kind of contextual meaning to them, at least in one layer of the music’s discourse. Sounds are not ‘just sounds’; they exist at that level and for their referential value too.³⁶

32 John Fellow, *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, Copenhagen 1999, 378-379.

33 Copenhagen 1999.

34 Schousboe, *op. cit.*, 468.

35 *Og der kommer nye Lyde til Maskiner, (Tærskes Auto-) alt dette skal ikke nydes ætisk.*

Gud fri us for sligt Skaberi! Men vi mo[d]tager uden at ane det en Mængde livgivende In[d]tryk som kan forfriske Sindet og gøre hele Livet hyggeligt (De døde er altid gnavne).

36 Michael Fjeldsøe, *Den fortrængte modernisme, den ny musik i dansk musikliv 1920-1940*, Copenhagen 1999, 160.

As elsewhere, we need to take care in reading what Nielsen says in words about his music, protecting ourselves from the delusion that Nielsen necessarily meant exactly and only what he said: there are too many contradictory utterances for that, and no evidence at all that Nielsen wanted to explain his music to the point where it wouldn't be necessary to listen to it. Michael Fjeldsøe observes Nielsen's ambivalent and paradoxical, sometimes self-contradictory statements about 'new' music, and argues³⁷ that Nielsen recognised that his music could not just be 'beautiful' (*skøn*) but also needed to encompass the uglier (*grim*) emotions too.

It is important to recognise the scale of Nielsen's awareness of European cultural life, his ability to 'hear' and understand the ideas of his contemporaries. So when he dismissed 'threshing machines' as 'affectation', he may have been remembering the fuss that was made about the machines that Diaghilev pressed Erik Satie into using in his score for the Cocteau/Picasso 'realist ballet', *Parade* (1917).³⁸

It is just as important to consider the audience Nielsen was addressing. He was not thinking of a notional audience of future-people who would be seeking evidence to support their belief in his status as 'Denmark's greatest composer', nor was he addressing future generations of composers as if to say, 'in my opinion this is the best way to write music, and you should imitate this as well as you can if you want to succeed'. He certainly wasn't addressing musicologists, if his response to Povl Hamburger's criticism of his organ preludes is anything to go by.³⁹ You should recognise the pleasure he must have had from writing self-referential material for the wind players who, having succeeded in delighting the composer with their performance of his quintet, earned themselves concertos, and you could legitimately make a case for Nielsen having shared with Haydn and Debussy an intellectual delight in crafting music that held hidden treasures only musicians were likely to see. But for the most part, Carl Nielsen's audience was 'the people', those who enjoyed music and responded to it fondly enough to pay to place themselves in front of it. Although radio arrived in the last years of Nielsen's life, audiences still, for the most part, had to get up and take themselves to a performance, or play themselves, to hear music. That degree of voluntary engagement, of willingness to listen, is the line Nielsen (like all his contemporaries) drew when they thought of the audience they were speaking to. So it behoves us to remember, when we musicologists discuss Carl Nielsen's music, that he wanted to speak to a wider public than us, in a language that was meant to be comprehensible to them and not only to professional musicians and musicolo-

37 Fjeldsøe, *op. cit.*, 157 and 158.

38 Nesta Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed by critics in England and the United States, 1911-1929*, New York and London 1975, 235-245.

39 John Fellow, *op. cit.*, 599.

gists. When we consider what the composer might have meant by a piece, we really must remember to consider who he was talking to and what expectations they would bring to their listening.

Sinfonia semplice addressed

It would be contrary to the purpose of this paper – to challenge, to stimulate, to enquire – to provide a full and comprehensive account of the musical content of *Sinfonia semplice* here. To do so would risk the new description of its structure and expressive purpose displacing older accounts only to place new muffs on the ears of future listeners, who might expect to hear these ideas rather than the old ones.⁴⁰ Instead I propose a sequence of questions and propositions which address particularly significant characteristics of each movement in order of the symphony's progress, in the hope that they will stimulate fresh listening, and prompt new understanding.

First, let us be clear about the work's compositional chronology, and its relation to the early-1925 trip that the Niensens made to the south of France, which included a friendly meeting with the Schoenbergs.

The first movement had long since been completed, so its tick-tock reference to Haydn, its representation of angina pains prefiguring the 'heart attack' Thorvald Nielsen identified in the finale (of which more below), and the decision to incorporate selected quotations from earlier works⁴¹ had already been made before the trip. I recognise a parallel between Nielsen's 'autobiographical' narrative and the self-promotion of Dadaists which appears to be cultural concurrence rather than 'influence'; at least, if Nielsen was already aware of and influenced by Dada, there is no evidence at all to say that the knowledge or influence was present at this early but decisive stage in the planning of the symphony.

The second movement, too, with its tongue-in-cheek representation of modernist musical style and its paradoxical trombone 'yawns', was composed before the trip to France.

So although the emotional incongruities of the final set of variations, the weird gear changes between styles and the hint of a Beethovenian reminiscence in the rhythmic motive that dominates much of the symphony, could be connected to the emergence in Nielsen's spoken and written accounts of the symphony of Dadaist language, there can be no doubt at all that the basic 'proposition' of the symphony,

40 The history of Robert Simpson's published commentaries on the *Sinfonia semplice* is a warning of what can go wrong: see the preface to the 1979 edition of *Carl Nielsen Symphonist*, originally published in London in 1952. Simpson's analysis of the symphony provides much of the information about the work omitted here: it is overwhelmingly concerned with pitch and tonal relations, and hardly notices motivic development and rhythmic patterns, though it does consider the relation of the work to Nielsen's life events.

41 Jørgen I. Jensen, *op. cit.*, 426-428.

the expressive purpose which hints at an influence from Dada, was set in Nielsen's mind and on paper before the composer is likely to have come across Dadaist ideas and language and their 'ironised, disruptive, self-consciousness'.⁴²

What I aim to present here is a map of some of the important events in the symphony's narrative, discussing their relationship to broader issues of 'meaning' and 'significance' while recognising that the symphony also functions in some ways at an 'abstract' level, 'as music'.

Autobiography in sound?

Thorvald Nielsen, close friend and correspondent of the composer reported:




After the first performance [of the sixth symphony] the audience were somewhat bewildered, and the press criticisms ranged from eulogy to the opposite [...] All through he operates with purely thematic material. There is, indeed, some gaiety, but this gaiety moves on a higher plane, and the undercurrent has often a touch of something demoniacal, which momentarily lapses into downright eeriness. Nielsen himself told me that Variation IX [of the final movement] is Death knocking at the gate. With this knowledge in mind it is not difficult to interpret what each instrument represents: the big drum the knocking; the xylophone bony Death; the deep tuba the black void. Nielsen explained on, 'But I want to defy death – and then follows the flourish'. Variation IX may also be taken as a burlesque joke – as indeed has been done – this only goes to show how ambiguous great art may be.⁴³

One recognises the 'official' line in this, the view Carl Nielsen presented in his letters, that a narrative core might exist, and serve as a motivational drive during the compositional process, but that the final work is 'just' music, sound, entitled to exist in terms of itself alone. Is that line compatible with the much more immediate narrative suggested by Thorvald Nielsen's tale, that this music embodies Carl Nielsen's angina pectoris, and looks to the prospect of death itself?

Though Thorvald Nielsen's story relates to the variation in the final movement where some form of 'heart attack' is represented very directly, that 'attack' is there as

42 Of the links to Dada, one should be mentioned here: one of the sections of Tristan Tzara's *sept manifestes dada quelque dessins de francis picabia*, Paris 1924, republished in facsimile, Paris 2005, is entitled 'Active Simplicity' and uses language similar to that adopted by Nielsen in his later comments on the symphony's progress, and the paradoxical name, *Sinfonia semplice*, (as Jørgen I. Jensen, *op.cit.*, 420 points out) the symphony is hardly plain or simple) only appears after Nielsen's French trip. English translation, Barbara Wright, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, London and Flemington New Jersey, USA 1992-2003.

43 *Carl Nielsen 1865-1965 Centenary Essays*, Copenhagen 1965, 16-17.

a quotation of its first iterations in the symphony's opening movement. The first hint of the 'attack' rhythmic motive can be heard in the higher strings at bar 8, a simple  that is no more than part of the clock mechanism. It gradually works its way round the orchestra, collecting less than comfortable companions like the oboe and high bassoon passages at bars 18-22. The oboes, clarinets and bassoons lead a squeal of pain at bars 29-30, taken over by the strings in bars 31-32, but the music reverts to an unconcerned tick-tocking at bar 33. It is the violins who next register discomfort, from bar 41, using an augmented (in the old usage meaning 'notes of much greater length') line which begins with an accented drop of a minor 3rd which will later attach itself to the accent at the climax of the rhythmic motive, perhaps hinting at a reminiscence of Beethoven's 5th symphony. The violins are accompanied by alarming, rocking horns and succeeded by worried woodwind, but at bar 54 a brisk, business-like fugue sets off, as if to say, 'enough of this!'. The horns, as they come to dominate the fussing in the strings, assert *ffz* drops, mostly fourths, as they sing over the chattering strings, but at bar 80 it is the wind who first pronounce the full  motive, completing the phrase here, though, with a rising fourth rather than a falling minor 3rd. The music becomes steadily more anxious, first through the irritating persistence of the *marcato* trumpet monotone but then also through contributions from the campanelli, the lower strings and, at bar 89 by *pianissimo* upper strings who scream up to a *fortissimo* high E and then glissando downwards in a dramatic gesture to C# (bar 90). The tension continues to build until bar 110, when the horns, *forte* and *molto cantabile*, seem to offer some emotional reassurance. At bar 125 the violins take over the horns' comforting melody, but there is no escape from the 'mechanical', and from bar 129 the campanelli and piccolo intrude their insistent selves on what has now settled more clearly into a  rhythm. At bar 141 it is the turn of the flute, then the clarinet, oboe and bassoon to resume the business-like fugato; but at 152 there is a stretto of melodic fragments, an embodiment of that state of anxiety in which everything tumbles into the mind at once, and the competing elements worry themselves into a huge *ffz* trill from which the strings emerge in octave-unison, scurrying towards aggressive iterations of the 'Beethoven' motto at bar 171. There is an almost complete breakdown at bar 187, when the campanelli stab away like a broken clock – not an unnatural analogy for heart disease – while the lower strings, cellos soaring with the violas, perhaps in a reference to a similar passage of the fifth symphony, initiate a *Lento, ma non troppo* which expresses emotion that can seem to lie somewhere between terror and a shocked but calm recognition of inescapable catastrophe. At bar 237 a tonally cruel, dissonant, version of the business-like fugato interrupts the strings' attempt to work towards some sort of consolatory calm, which finally emerges in the movement's closing bars – compromised, though, by the campanelli's hints that this is only a brief respite.

How far can we hear these brutal intrusions into the flow and style of the music, the violent contrasts of mood and texture, as ‘pure sound’ once we acknowledge their source in Nielsen’s experience of heart illness? Yes, the symphony as a whole has ‘layers of meaning’, an expressive content that can slip from relatively abstract ‘music’ towards narrative and back again. But are moments like this capable of being construed without hearing their origins? Is it actually possible to accept Nielsen’s assertion⁴⁴ that the work addresses only ‘purely musical problems’?

What are we to make of the reference to Haydn’s ‘Clock’ symphony⁴⁵ first noted by Jørgen I. Jensen, and the other quotations which, in sum, allow Jensen to describe the movement by saying that the sixth symphony is, ‘a memoir in music – a work, however, in which Nielsen recalls not his childhood but the subsequent course of his life’⁴⁶ if we do not accept the music as possessing an autobiographical narrative? What significance do the ‘abstract’ layers of ‘just music’ have when that narrative content seems so assertive? Is it legitimate for a symphonic movement to be so literally autobiographical? Does the story-telling compromise the symphony’s status in limiting its abstraction? Is Nielsen sinning in the same sense that Berlioz did in his *Symphonie Fantastique*, and is that a bad thing if it’s true?

Nielsen’s attitude to Schönberg and ‘modern’ style, and the ‘Humoresque’

This is not the place for a full account of Nielsen’s interest in, and remarks about, ‘modern’ musical style and ideas. But because it seems to manifest so strongly in the ‘Humoresque’ (second movement) of *Sinfonia semplice*, I would like to draw attention to one recurring feature in Nielsen’s recorded comments on his Austrian contemporary: his association of Schönberg’s musical ideas, and of his character as a man, with a notion of ‘childishness’.

This is from Nielsen’s letter to Julius Röntgen of 3.1.21:

The Schönbergian illegitimacy may amuse children, but not a grown up man who thinks. I recently took another close look at his 3 *Piano Pieces* Op.11 and find the principles they work on very childish (always augmented octaves, clashing seconds, and so on) and the execution inept.⁴⁷

44 Carl Nielsen interviewed in *Politiken*, 9.11.1925 in Fellow, *op.cit.*, 359-361.

45 Symphony 101 in D major, 1791.

46 Jørgen I. Jensen, *op. cit.*, 420 and 426f.

47 *Den Schönbergske Illigitimitet kan maaske mere Børn, men ikke en tænkende, voksen Mand. Jeg har nylig gennemset paany hans 3 Klaverstykker Op 11 og finder dem meget barnlige i Principperne (bestandige verspandte Octaver, smaa Secundsammenstød o.s.v) og dumme i Udførelsen.* Irmelin Eggert Møller and Torben Meyer (eds.), *Carl Nielsens Breve*, Copenhagen 1954, 195-197. I am grateful to Svend Ravnkilde for this translation, as for his continuing support and willingness to respond to questions and requests for clarification.

A letter of 12 February 1925 – so written as a direct report of the apparently friendly meetings Carl and Anne Marie had with the Schoenbergs at their villa in Beaulieu, Nice – says,

I like Schoenberg, and mother says that he is very eager to talk with me. The sympathy may be mutual, but in any case it is very good to talk with him and he is both intelligent and childish: a very pleasant constellation. We shall see!⁴⁸

It is clear from the final remark here, ‘he is both intelligent and childish, a very pleasant constellation’ that Nielsen sees this as, at least to some degree, a positive merit. But ‘childish’, as is clear from the letter to Röntgen, can also suggest ‘naive’, ‘foolish’, ‘innocent of the significance of choices’ as well as ‘clumsy in execution’.

So we need to be very careful when we read:

It’s a little night-time tale, told by purely musical means. The instruments lie sound asleep in their sweetest dreams – now and then making small nocturnal sounds. Then gradually they wake up to a terrible row. But they seem to fall calm again, then the clarinet, supported by the bassoon, goes to work on a happy little tune. But that is too much for the trombone: it breaks out in ‘a contemptuous yawn’, a big glissando meant to say, ‘Oh, give all that baby food a rest’. They all get terribly excited. But sleepiness prevails all the same. And soon they are again sleeping peacefully side by side.⁴⁹

For the precise placing of the trombone’s yawns is not immediately after the pastiche modernism with which the movement begins, but after it gives way to a puerile diatonic jogging in thirds and sixths in the wind. Nielsen seems to be poking fun at both styles, and we should take care not to assume that he takes the stance of a tonal composer who dislikes modernism: such an assumption would be nonsensical for the author of the Clarinet Concerto and other works that delight in exploiting dissonance and anti-tonal strategies. We should note, too, that ‘contemptuous’ arrived a little later than the idea of the yawn itself: the facsimile plate of this page of Nielsen’s

48 Schousboe, *op. cit.*, 478, where note 4 includes a useful collection of material relating to Schönberg’s contacts with Nielsen. *Jeg kan lide Schönberg og Mor siger at han er uhyre optaget af at tale med mig. Det kan godt være at Sympatien er gensidig, men ihvertfald er det meget morsomt at tale med ham og han er baade intelligent og barnlig: en tiltalende Konstellation. Nu skal vi se.*

49 Ludvig Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen, En Musikografi*, Odense 1949, 285, quoted in *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/6, xvii. Nielsen told the story in the interview he gave *Nationaltidende*, 9.12.1925, in Fellow, *op. cit.*, 375-377.

score published in the Carl Nielsen Edition shows that Nielsen wrote *som en Gaben* ('like a yawn') first, then added *foragtelig* ('contemptuous') a little later, above a caret drawn between *en* and *Gaben*.⁵⁰


There is only a problem here if we want Nielsen to be easily understandable, straightforward, perhaps even boring. But those are precisely the qualities Nielsen himself abhorred in admiring (some aspects at least, of) Schönberg's capacity for 'childishness'. As that wonderful set of early photographs of Nielsen demonstrate, he had always been capable of fooling around, presenting one thing while meaning another, of irony and sophistication. An 'easy' interpretation of Nielsen is a lazy one. In this 'Humoresque', the yawning trombone is one character in a little drama: the other characters include the other instruments, as Nielsen explained in his story; but they also include 'modernism' and 'tonal jogging'. What we hear in the 'Humoresque' deserves another comparison to the world of art: it is structured in the same way as a Cubist painting, an assemblage of elements seen at different times and from different perspectives, tumbled together in a way that aspires to capture more of the complexity of our awareness, less of the logically ordered 'answer' that we come to when we understand (or think we understand) what it is we're looking at. The discontinuities and dislocations are an intended part of the humour, not a puzzle to be resolved.

So when Nielsen wrote to his daughter, Søs, on 24 October 1924 ...

I am quite busy composing something. Lord knows how it will turn out! I don't know myself, but what if it does turn out to be rubbish, [it] doesn't really matter, little Nielsen can't damn well go on the same way all the time, with temperament and all that. This time [it] will be good and boring and respectable.⁵¹

... 'little Nielsen' is clearly aiming to upset his audience's expectations with something different, something which, though not 'rubbish', might be unexpected and perhaps uncomfortable.

'Proposta seria'

This 'very passionate' movement⁵² alternates between a serious motto figure,  with a falling augmented second from the penultimate note to the last, and a gentle rocking figure. It certainly 'reads' perfectly well as serious, abstract, symphonic writing, and its style – especially that of the rocking figure – correlates comfortably with other works by Nielsen. Functioning as the emotional heart of the symphony, it also has the best claim to being 'pure music'.

⁵⁰ *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/6, xxiv.

⁵¹ *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/6, xii.

⁵² *Berlingske Tidende*, 3.6.1925, *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/6, xvi quoting Fellow.

Perhaps it takes a particularly annoying kind of mentality to attribute referential meaning, referentiality, to such music. But I cannot sense any lack of 'belonging' between this and the symphony's other movements; it feels at home here even if it tells a story less obviously. Could it have a referential layer that is less obvious, but which helps it to cohere with its neighbours and plays a part in the symphony's story as a whole?

The capacity of the human mind to see pattern where none exists – faces and figures in the clouds, for example – is well known. But sometimes our instincts do have substance. Is it possible to hear $\downarrow \downarrow \downarrow \downarrow \downarrow$ as a modified quotation of the motto of Beethoven's 5th, C minor, symphony? The idea that this serious movement might represent the composer's contemplation of impending death, the implacable power of fate and the impossibility of defeating it, makes emotional sense to me even though there is not, and will never be, a way of proving the proposition's validity. If the suggestion does have validity, should we ask why this use of the motif, unlike Tchaikovsky's (in his fourth symphony), does not countenance the possibility of victory?

Thematic unity and the 'Theme and Variations'

In the symphony so far, we have seen melodic and rhythmic motives in families which might be characterised as either 'Beethovenian' (referring to the gradually evolving $\downarrow \downarrow \downarrow \downarrow \downarrow$ motive) or 'rocking'. These two have been placed in adversarial dialogue and in happy partnership throughout. Now they are literally brought together in the theme Nielsen provides for the set of variations that closes his sixth symphony.

There is an issue, addressed at length by Rudolph R ti in *The Thematic Process in Music*,⁵³ whether composers are, or need to be in order for it to be significant, aware of the thematic relationships that can sometimes be observed in their works. There is little doubt that some composers have produced 'integrated' thematic material from instinct rather than design⁵⁴ where others, most obviously those who developed 'cyclical' and 'evolutionary' forms during the nineteenth century, have engineered such relationships.

I don't think we need to be sure whether Nielsen was deliberately engineering thematic coherence in his symphony to recognise the extent to which the 'Beethovenian' and 'rocking' motives dominate it, and the way in which they are combined artfully in the theme of the final movement. After a rising arpeggio, we have the 'Beethovenian' motive, this time with its accented final dotted quaver falling through

53 London 1961. See also *Thematic Patterns in Sonatas of Beethoven*, London 1967.

54 The best example is Mozart, whose character Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*) has thematically tight music throughout her arias in the first, Vienna, version of the work (1787) but then stylistically and emotionally tight but thematically disconnected new material for her 1788 Prague iteration.

a semi-quaver to another, staccato semi, instead of the ‘snap’ inversion used in ‘Proposta seria’. Then comes the rocking motif, crisply delivered (with each upper note staccato and followed by a semi-quaver rest). The sequence is repeated at a new pitch. Then the sequence is repeated again, but this time with all the note values halved (so speeded up) and resolved in a nippy descending flurry of arpeggios.

As a consequence, the movement can be read (though this is certainly not the only way to read it) as a ‘purely musical problem’, an exercise in variations not just of the theme, but of the core motifs of the symphony as a whole which have generated it.

Isn’t it rather appropriate for a composer reflecting on his life-in-music to move from direct narrative relating to his feelings, his physical life and experience, towards a more cerebral celebration of his skills? Might Nielsen have conceived this movement as another form of self-portrait, this time a sampler of his ingenuity as a composer? Does that help to explain why the styles he adopts in the variations are so extremely characterised, so individualistic? Rather than follow the route laid out by Brahms in his fourth symphony’s ‘Passacaglia’, which aims to develop a fully coherent symphonic argument while also tying itself to a continually repeating ground bass, Nielsen seems to me to be seeing how far he can get from his theme, how wildly he can extend the emotional and textural range of the movement and still keep it together.

This time there’s no missing the angina intruding into the musical texture, at bar 266 in Variation VII. It is succeeded by the most conspicuously emotional music in the symphony, the closest Nielsen comes (in my view) to a valedictory utterance – and it is no surprise whatever to find him incapable of maintaining that straight face for long! The cobwebs are blown away with a fanfare, and the movement, the symphony, hurtles to a conclusion that’s as brusque and assertive as any compulsive joker might pen. If there was any risk that we might take this symphony or its composer seriously, he seems to be saying, we should think again: he wants to have fun, and he wants us to have fun too.

Conclusion

So, what we have in *Sinfonia semplice* is not just autobiography. In a way, it is a living self-portrait of the composer in dialogue with his own audience, provoking and challenging them and their expectations, and in dialogue with the past, his own musical past and with some of those composers who have played a part in it. Nielsen has used the opportunity to ‘speak’ about his own experience and concerns, in order that his audience might see and feel those concerns echoing and paralleling their own, so that a universal ‘artistic’ experience emerges from the anecdotal level of the music’s material content.

That he does so is, I have suggested, in part a product of his cultural experience, the consequence of living in a land in which HC Andersen, Kierkegaard and August Bournonville have elevated autobiographical writing to be a means of considering art, life, experience and its meaning, patterns we have observed too in the work of Nielsen's contemporary and acquaintance, Vilhelm Hammershøi. In his own way, Nielsen plays a part in the transmission of the concerns of the Danish Golden Age and their means of addressing them, onwards towards the mainstream of modern European life and thought in a distinctively Danish contribution to our modern world.

With hindsight we can also see that Nielsen has entered into dialogue with that future, even though doing so would certainly not have been his intention. His innovations prefigure some of the primary concerns of the century ahead: self-consciousness, insecurity, and the fantasy-adventure which provides the imaginative listener with relief from those destabilising emotions. In the twentieth century, film (and later television) largely displaced the two-dimensional portrait as the primary means through which we recorded, and understood, personality. Because, after Freud, our model of 'personality' was that it might and perhaps should change, a fixed and solitary image feels wrong precisely because it is fixed and passive, a person without a social and emotional context. Nielsen, ever to the fore, has made a musical portrait of himself, a swash-buckling and devil-may-care adventurer in music, poking fun but also plumbing a vein of deep seriousness, in a way that anticipates the best explorations of this biographical genre before film, let alone television, were practical realities. Here, in a sense that extends but does not distort what Nielsen probably meant when he said it, 'Music IS life'.

A B S T R A C T

The author explains Carl Nielsen's sixth symphony, '*semplice*', as 'eventyr', 'fantasy-adventure', setting it in the context of works by Golden Age authors like Adam Oehenschläger, Hans Christian Andersen, August Bournonville and Søren Kierkegaard, and Nielsen's own friend, the painter Vilhelm Hammershøi. Colin Roth reads *Sinfonia semplice* as a direct address to Nielsen's own audience, its ironised, disruptive self-consciousness blending autobiographical elements with musical ones in order to heighten the symphony's narrative and expressive power.