
CARL NIELSEN AND HIS ORGAN PRELUDES

In The Context of Hans Henny Jahnn, Hugo Distler and Ernst Pepping

By Jan Crummenerl

*As far as I know, the Danish composer Carl Nielsen, who is probably quite unknown to you, also happens to be one of the greatest.*¹

These are the words of the Hamburg writer, music publisher and organ-builder Hans Henny Jahnn (1894-1959). Jahnn wrote this letter to his friend Hilmar Trede in Göttingen on 8 January 1939 while he was living in exile on the Danish island of Bornholm. In another letter, written a year and a half later in 1940, Jahnn described Carl Nielsen as an heir to the likes of Bach and Mozart. His belief was that Nielsen had inherited a great deal from Bach 'just as one sees in Mozart in his best moments'.² In another of his letters, also from the war year 1940, Jahnn speaks sorrowfully about what he could have achieved himself, had he not dedicated his life to his publishing company and organ-building workshop but instead followed his dream of becoming a composer. The Danish composer's name is also mentioned here.³ In the winter of 1943-44, Jahnn also sent two unspecified Nielsen scores to Germany as a Christmas present.⁴

But what role did Nielsen play in Jahnn's perception of the musical world? As an organ-builder and publisher, he was a leading figure in the Organ Reform Movement in Germany. His favourite composers were the early baroque northern German composers Vincent Lübeck, Samuel Scheidt and, in particular, Dietrich Buxtehude. As well as these, he admired masters such as Ockegem, Desprez and Gesualdo. Jahnn already had an ambivalent relationship with Bach; although he held Bach's free organ works in high esteem, he despised 'the pietistic organ chorales and the gruesome cantata texts'.⁵ He only learned to appreciate Mozart in the 30s when staying on the island

1 Hans Henny Jahnn, *Letters 1913-1940*, Hamburg 1994, 1249.

2 *Ibid.*, 1349.

3 *Ibid.*, 1344.

4 Hans Henny Jahnn, *Letters 1941-1959*, Hamburg 1994, 121.

5 Uwe Schweikert, 'I have never met him in person - Jahnn and Carl Nielsen', in Uwe Schweikert (ed.), *Orgelbauer bin ich auch*, Paderborn 1995, 169.

of Bornholm. He also found his contemporaries very difficult to relate to, though with two exceptions: Igor Stravinsky and Carl Nielsen. He had liked Stravinsky since the mid 20s, appreciating his interest in the neo-baroque form and stylistic principles.⁶

Jahnn's fondness for Nielsen may also be attributed to his own personal connections with the Scandinavian countries. Being an anti-war proponent, Jahnn had moved to Norway with a friend in order to escape World War I during the years 1915 to 1918. Jahnn had also spent time working in Sweden as an organ-builder. From 1934 to 1945, being a writer and therefore unpopular with the National Socialist regime, he lived in exile on the Danish island of Bornholm.⁷ Jahnn, who would later read Nielsen's autobiography, could have come across his music during one of his numerous organ trips to Denmark and Sweden.⁸

Jahnn's much-discussed stylistic admiration for Carl Nielsen's work is not least a result of his involvement within the organ movement, which is briefly discussed here. 'Back to the polyphonic, non-orchestral organs demanded by Bach!' wrote Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of the 20th century.⁹ In various writings from 1906 and 1909, he turned away from 'the modern factory-built organs, which are inspired by the devil of invention'.¹⁰ This so-called 'Elsässer' Organ Reform Movement promoted by Schweitzer and Emile Rupp turned its back on the serially produced instruments and the romantic giant organs that strived to match the timbre of the orchestra, with predominantly harmonically weak 8 and 16-foot registers. There was a desire to return to the harmonically rich baroque organs with their light mixtures. Furthermore, there was a preference for a mechanical-action which provided the organist with greater possibilities for influencing the tone than the electrical solutions designed to improve playability and register.

The reference to Albert Schweitzer and his fellow French proponents, as well as the close relationship between Jahnn and Carl Nielsen, is itself a sign that the Organ Reform Movement was a European rather than a solely German phenomenon. It heralded a change of style – or rather a break from the harmonies and structural ideals of the late-romantic style towards modern music at the beginning of the 20th century. There was a tendency to move away from the harmony and structural ideal of the late-romantic music towards a new tonal system and new forms that drew inspiration from baroque and renaissance models, using these as a basis for a new, anti-romantic tonality.

6 *Ibid.*, 170.

7 Dietrich Killan, 'Hans Henny Jahnn', in Friedrich Blume (ed.), *MGG*, vol. 16, Kassel 1976, column 858.

8 Schweikert, *op. cit.*, 171.

9 Hans Klotz, 'Organs', in Friedrich Blume (ed.), *MGG* vol. 10, Kassel, 1962.

10 Christiane Bernsdorff-Engelbrecht, *Geschichte der evangelischen Kirchenmusik*, vol. 2, Wilhelmshafen 1980, 328.

This return to the mechanics and traditions of the baroque organ, and the rejection of the orchestral tonal ideal, went hand in hand with the change in style from late romantic to modern at the beginning of the 20th century. An example is the movement away from the monumental tonal body as evident in the works of Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler with their late-romantic harmonies towards the often crisper and sharper tonality and structure of Paul Hindemith, Hugo Distler or the second Viennese school at the time of Arnold Schönberg. A clear schism probably arose in relation to World War I, which laid waste to an entire era.

In the years 1921-22, Wilibald Gurlitt and Oscar Walcker built an organ at the Institute of Musicology at the University of Freiburg in Breisgau based on a blueprint of Michael Praetorius. At the same time, Jahnn returned the Arp-Schnitger organ in Hamburg's Sankt Jakobi church to its original baroque condition. By doing so, Jahnn became the pioneer and leading light within the German Organ Reform Movement, showing the way at the 1925 Hamburg and 1926 Freiburg organ congresses. The term 'Organ Reform Movement' was first used by Karl Hasse, who, in a scholarly article wrote about the organ congress in Freiburg.¹¹

One by one, those new organs that have been influenced by the Organ Reform Movement, are reviving the principles of the baroque organ: the structure of the works, a harmonically rich and timbre rich pipe arrangement, mechanical-action, and closed chambers. The organs are particularly good at reproducing organ music from the time up until around 1850.¹²

At the same time – for both political and scholarly reasons – opposition to the Organ Reform Movement emerged. On the one hand, the third organ congress held in Freiberg in Saxony in October 1927 marked the pinnacle of the organ movement; on the other hand, it also marked the beginning of its demise.

On the one hand, many organ-builders felt financially threatened by the Organ Reform Movement, which promoted a distancing from the factory-built, serially produced organs and huge romantic organs. On top of this were the underlying economic problems stemming from the worldwide economic depression which began in 1929. On the other hand, the Organ Reform Movement met resistance from the growing national socialist movement. In 1933, 'Die Technisch-wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft und Gesellschaft für Orgelbau' (TAGO) together with the so-called

11 Karl Hasse: 'Freiburger Tagung für deutsche Orgelkunst', in *Zeitschrift für evangelische Kirchenmusik* IV, (1926), 2602.

12 Helmut Völkl, 'Geschichte der Orgel in Grundzügen', in Siegfried Bauer (ed.), *Lehrbuch zur Grundausbildung in der Evangelischen Kirchenmusik*, München 1996, 52.

‘Deutschen Christen’ launched a national socialist counter-movement against the Organ Reform Movement. As part of its smear campaign, the chief engineer and treasurer in TAGO, Theodore Herzberg, wrote a direct attack on Hans Henny Jahnn in April 1933:

The Organ Reform Movement is a worthy bedfellow of the equally decadent phenomena in other areas of the arts. In the same way that some have ‘re-aestheticised’ completely degenerate, if not to say perverse, artworks, the Organ Reform Movement has labelled something as being “beautiful” that completely contradicts the healthy German sentiment and any normal ear for music. (...) The collective German organ-building industry, and the majority of German organists, ought to stand up against this harmful influence from this know-it-all from Hamburg.¹³

Any semblance of professional competence was stripped from Jahnn, and his company was branded as nothing less than filth. Claims were also made that Jahnn derided Christianity and mocked German traditions, and there was a sentiment that ‘he has no right to play a leading role in this noble German art form’.

And things got worse still. In May 1933, an association with similar opinions, called ‘Reichsverband für Orgelwesen’, was founded. In point two of the association’s statutes, the association’s duties are stated with a direct reference to Jahnn: ‘The fight against all culturally hostile excesses within the field of organ building, such as those evident in the activities of people like Hans Henny Jahnn.’¹⁴ Although Jahnn did defend himself, he was ostracised both as an organ-builder and as a writer in national socialist Germany. He had no other option than to flee and live in exile in Denmark.

In addition to the organ-builders, there were many composers who took part in the Organ Reform Movement and who wrote works which fitted in with the movement’s ideas. Two worth mentioning are Ernst Pepping and Hugo Distler. From a structural perspective, both drew inspiration from French-Flemish and baroque archetypes. Their tonal system made use of a modality that pointed towards the modern style. There was also a distinct anti-romantic sentiment within the works. With these, they established a point of contact with Carl Nielsen, who was a generation older. The extent to which Pepping and Distler on the one hand and Nielsen on the other were aware of each other’s works must remain an unanswered question here. But here – as well as in other countries – there were some common European tenden-

13 Rüdiger Wagner, ‘Hans Henny Jahnn und die Orgelbewegung’, in Uwe Scheiwert (ed.), *Orgelbauer bin ich auch*, Paderborn 1995, 70.

14 Wagner, *op. cit.*, 71.

cies pointing in the same direction. No matter what, it is noteworthy that the older composer Nielsen pointed forward to his younger German colleagues.

It is therefore natural to compare Carl Nielsen's 29 small preludes, published in 1930, with Ernst Pepping's *Kleines Orgelbuch* from 1941 and Hugo Distler's *Kleine Orgelchoralbearbeitungen*, Opus 8 No. 3 from 1938. What links these three works is the fact that they were published as completed compilations and were written for that purpose. In this way, they differ from similar collective organ works by Max Drischer or Helmut Walcha, in which the pieces, which stem from improvisations from the preceding years, were compiled later, not to mention those collections which at that time were often compiled using works by different composers. The three works of Nielsen, Pepping and Distler were written specifically to be published as collections. Another factor linking the three was the simplistic accentuation of the works: they were all written to be used during church services and were not too technically challenging for the organist. Nielsen required that the works could be played on the organ as well as on the harmonium. Being small in their scale, these works represented a musical and structural experiment in a new way of writing for the organ. A further common factor shared by these three works was – also with a view to simplicity – the almost complete absence of expression marks, unlike, for example, the romantically influenced organ music – even in its smaller forms – by Max Reger or Sigfrit Karg-Elert.

It could be argued that Pepping's and Distler's preludes are tied to chorale melodies (which Nielsen's are not), but whether the composer made use of already published material or composed it himself, the style is not affected.

Having used a fragmented composition method in his 5th symphony, Nielsen in his small preludes Opus 51 turned to experimenting with and trying out smaller forms. Many of these preludes are only eight bars long. Pepping's and Distler's preludes take the same direction. A comparison, to follow, of random excerpts taken from the three works will show how the much older Nielsen and the two composers born around the turn of the century were very much on a par with one another in terms of both timing and style. They were also in line with the aforementioned Organ Reform Movement lead by Hans Henny Jahnn. We will show that the three composers, each in his own way, drew inspiration from baroque period and earlier forms, reinterpreting them into their own style. The same applies to harmony and melody, with all three reviving modal patterns from the past. These two things represent a turning away from the late-romantic style with its highly chromatic diatonic function and from the structures based on this. This can be described as an anti-romantic sentiment where the composer is consciously harking back to the stylistic elements of the old music in order to use them as inspiration to create new music.

First, a theoretical digression: can the return to the musical texture of the baroque and pre-baroque periods at the end of the so-called romantic period be seen as a reversal in stylistic change from baroque to classicism to romantic?

The rhythmic pulse of the Baroque period can be compared to the forward-driving musical motor which can be found in the works of Nielsen, some of his contemporaries and the younger generation who have turned away from the aforementioned style, with motoric rhythm and contrasts as the style-setting element. But, this is no recourse in the meaning of the revival of an old style but rather an assimilation and transmission with the aim of developing a new musical language that decisively stands apart from classicism, romanticism and late-romanticism. This was the path which Nielsen and the other composers discussed here followed. This renunciation, or more precisely this departure from the style-defining element of functional harmony and the composers' search for new structural models that made use of old patterns, carried with it a risk of becoming formless – something that can be seen in the new music of the 1950s. In this way, Anton Weber's twelve-tone work makes as little audible sense as would setting a sonata on modal feet. Nielsen, Distler and Pepping endeavoured to solve this problem in different, yet related, ways.

We will now look at four small organ pieces which were composed in a period spanning just over ten years between 1930 and 1941. The pieces in question are numbers I and XVIII from Carl Nielsen's organ preludes, the prelude to 'Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern' by Hugo Distler and the prelude to 'Es kommt ein Schiff, geladen' by Ernst Pepping.

Looking first at the themes or motives (*Ex. 1*), the first thing we notice is the emphasis given to the fifth and the fourth, the so-called natural intervals. Nielsen's first prelude and Distler's and Pepping's pieces are also oriented towards the triad. In addition, for example in Nielsen's 18th prelude and in Pepping's works, fourth, fifth and octave chords allow the scale type to remain open. Also, Nielsen's choice of rhythm emphasises the simplicity in his motifs, whereas Distler and Pepping choose complex rhythmical structure as a counterbalance.

The theme in Nielsen's first prelude shows a tonal and rhythmic simplicity upon which any counterpoint student could write an academically correct fugue. Nielsen does not do this, even though his prelude with its three sections is in actuality a fugue (*Ex. 2*). Even though the entry in the first bar starts in the principal key, and the entry of the subject in bar two is in the subdominant, we do not move to the expected dominant in the third entry of the subject in bar five, but to the subdominant parallel. This leads on to the second section of the fugue, which starts on a D in the dominant parallel. Just before the third entry of the subject on G, the



Ex. 1

phrygian second E^b appears, which we find again in bars six and seven, and there is a modal transition to d in bar nine. The next three entries of the subject in the second section follow on D (bar 9), C (bar 9) and C again (bar 13). Whereas the first section of the fugue leads to the subdominant, the second section remains in the dominant, the subdominant being eventually reached at the beginning of the third section in bar 17. The entry of the subject on C in this bar is however revoked immediately when the theme is repeated in the bass straight afterwards. This apparent confirmation of the principal key in bar 19 leads over the mid-dominant E major to A minor and then again to D major. The two last entries of the subject in bar 33 stress F minor and A major. Overall, the three last bars lead the concluding F minor out of the subdominant area.

Besides the counterpoint structure, the most striking thing is the great extent to which the composer refrains from using the dominant key. Instead, he moves over into the major-parallel key subdominant area. At no time is there a characterisation given in the same manner as in the function-harmonic characterised sonata form. This 'relaxed' harmony, which is given a modal character through the pregnant interval of the Phrygian second, leaving the piece's musical development to the polyphonic drive of the fugue form.

I

(♩ = ca. 69)

5 *a tempo*
rall.

10

15 *a tempo*
poco rall.

19

23

Detailed description: This is a piano score for a piece titled 'I' by Jan Crummenerl. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and common time. It consists of six systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system (measures 1-4) starts with a tempo marking of approximately 69 quarter notes per minute. The second system (measures 5-8) includes a 'rall.' (ritardando) marking and a change to 2/4 time. The third system (measures 9-12) continues in 2/4 time. The fourth system (measures 13-16) includes an 'a tempo' marking and a change to 3/4 time. The fifth system (measures 17-18) includes a 'poco rall.' marking. The sixth system (measures 19-23) concludes the piece. The bass line features a steady eighth-note accompaniment throughout.

Ex. 2

Distler's prelude also takes the fugue form (Ex. 3). Just as in Nielsen's first prelude, it begins harmlessly: 1st entry of the subject in the main key, 2nd in the dominant. But already in bar two, the next entries of the subject come in C# and B. Here, a turn is made directly into the subdominant area. This, together with the cross voicing, leads the listener into further uncertainty. Additionally, the composer does not naturalise the leading-tones which are unnatural to the scale, but jumps away from them. Something similar applies to the dominant key, which plays a secondary role. The C# in bar 9 is only a suspended chord, and the A minor without a third in bar 6 leads to the parallel key of B major, with the same being true for the A minor in the position of third in bar 13 which also leads to the parallel key. From here, the development moves towards B major followed by a D minor and the major dominant E major, which leads to Bb major which then changes to the concluding D minor. Here, we can see that as well as the contrapoint construction, there is a significant avoidance

Fließende ♩

leggiero c.f.

4

6

Ex. 3

Ex. 3 continued

of the dominant and the dominant area in the harmony. The harmonic transitions primarily move through the subdominant area. Furthermore, an emphasis on parallel fourths, particularly in bar 10, which is marked *alla cadenza*. The result which we have reached by examining the composition method is the same as that in the case of Nielsen. One further fact which clearly shows Distler's way of thinking is the following: if all of the entries of the subject are collected on their different levels of the scale and are built up as a scale over the keynote, then these form a Lydian scale stemming from the note D (Ex. 4).

Ex. 4

Nielsen's 18th prelude is fundamentally maintained in a movement as four-part harmony but in a pronounced contrapuntal style. The individual fourth motive is a recurring motif which permeates all of the instrumental parts in the short work and is also used as a motif in the third and, in variants as a motif, in the second. It is presented as early as the first bar (*Ex. 5*) where the scale type is briefly kept open in the first half of the bar using octave and fifth-fourth chords. Here, too, the rapid change into the subdominant area plays a decisive role. Already in bar four, the transition to G major in bar five begins. From here, the target is A major in bar nine. But the dominant E major in bar seven is immediately followed by the subdominant. By doing this, the subdominant area leads to the mid-tonic A major. Via E minor, we reach B major through the mediant as a second chord without a keynote. In the next bar, we follow a return from C# minor to B major, a deceptive cadence in major in the reverse direction. From here, the target is D minor. Here also the mediant A minor takes a diversion, in this case over the parallel tone Bb minor. D minor is predominant in the following bar until the main key of C minor is again reached in bar 19 via the dominant in the third position. Confirmation of the key, however, only comes through the seven-bar-long organ-point on C where the dominant plays no role. C major is reached from a place deep in the subdominant area through Bb minor and F minor. Here, too, we see a contrapuntal structure which is combined with a harmony that for the most part avoids the dominant and plays out in the subdominant area.

Pepping's prelude (*Ex. 6*) appears to be a three-part harmony throughout, but in reality is a two-part harmony between the two upper parts as the bass part consists of a repetition of the bass tone D. Only once does this move up to F, which is the keynote in the parallel key. In terms of theme, the otherwise freely constructed parts are held up by the Doric chorale 'Es kommt ein Schiff, geladen', which is a Protestant version of a Marian song from the 15th century. The repetition of the tone in the bass is the same as the tonal repetition at the beginning of the chorale, which only uses second and third tone shifts. The latter are also the most important in the two upper parts, which develop in an independent form and which do not allow any discernible theme. The two upper parts flow independently alongside each other. In the upward sections (second part, bar 4), sharps are added, and in the downward sections (second part, bar 5) flats are added. This results in harmonic tension which can not be interpreted in a functional-harmonic way, as well as in emphasis of the independence of the upper parts in relation to each other and in relation to the bass part. Another modal interjection comes through the use of the Phrygian second before the keynote, which can be found in bars 5 and 14. In bar 6, the two upper parts come together in a passage with parallel fourths. This creates on the one hand an archaic feeling, and on the other, it signals the bass part's shift from D to F. As a result, there is modulation to

XVIII

(♩ = 60)

6

11

16 *a tempo*
poco rall.

21

Ex. 5

F minor via the subdominant B. The bass's return from F to D occurs without harmonic lead in bars 11 and 12. At no time is the D seriously left from being the tonal centre. No dominant is present. The only two places where C# appears (second part bars 4 and 14) it is used as a transition tone. Only the three bars on F and the leading half bar on F make a shift to the parallel key with a connection to the subdominant area.

Sostenuto
mp

5

9

13

Ex. 6

To summarise, we can determine the following: even though the four musical pieces composed in roughly the same decade have been selected at random, they display striking parallels that link the much older Carl Nielsen to his younger colleagues and to the international Organ Reform Movement. The pieces are all small simple works intended for use in churches, and in their small formats are particularly well suited to experimenting with new compositional ideas in miniature. Foremost, we find a simple theme, which firstly emphasises fourths and fifths resulting secondly in the creation of a contrast to the complex harmony. To a large extent it avoids the functions of the dominant and moves over to the less tense subdominant area. To this

come modal elements in the harmony and musical voice. The use of the highly characteristic Phrygian second contributes to the modal colouring. As a result, the composition moves away from traditional functional harmony, and whereas it was this which characterised the structural composition in classicism and romanticism, polyphony now becomes the primary form-giving element. Instead of the form-creating tension between the main key and the dominant, we find a contrapuntal movement pulse. This comes about not through the resurrection of an old style but through the transformation of this into a new tonal language for a new, post-romantic, or even anti-romantic, music. The clear counterpoint fits in with the aims of the Organ Reform Movement, whose ideal is organs with clear, resonant transparency drawing inspiration from the baroque period. The Organ Reform Movement, whose leading figure was the Nielsen admirer Hans Henny Jahnn, was a casualty of national socialist Germany. The voices of the composers discussed here, who aesthetically were close to the Organ Reform Movement, are no longer to be heard. Carl Nielsen died in 1931, Hugo Distler committed suicide in 1942, and Ernst Pepping adapted his style to that of the 19th century to avoid problems with the regime.

A B S T R A C T

In summer 1931 a correspondence between Carl Nielsen and the German author Hans Henny Jahnn (1894-1959) started. Jahnn was organ builder and publisher of music in unison. He knew the 29 little preludes and the *Commotio* op. 58 for organ, Nielsen had sent him. He was willing to publish them for Germany. Because of Nielsen's death at the beginning of October 1931 this plan failed. Jahnn, as an organ builder one of the masterminds of german organ movement and an expert in organ music of the baroque, refused to accept any other contemporary composers than Strawinsky and Nielsen. Likely because of their close relationship to baroque compositions. Therefore Nielsen would have been the only contemporary in Jahnn's publishing programme – besides masters of the baroque. Jahnn was fascinated by Nielsen's anti-romantic position, which used to be also an essential part of the organ movement. For that reason it's natural to compare Niensens 29 little preludes, published in Copenhagen in 1930, to commensurable works of younger composers in conjunction with the organ movement. Good examples are the *Kleine Orgelchoral-Bearbeitungen* op. 8/3 (1938) by Hugo Distler (1908-1942) and the *Kleine Orgelbuch* (1941) by Ernst Pepping (1901-1981). In spite of the fact that their personal style is very different, there are interesting congruities to be found in their works: strong composition of form, transparent and reverts partially to modal elements. These correspondences testify in no case an influence on another. It's rather an example for a kind of climate that crosses/oversteps borders – this kind of climate that includes as well the organ movement and the composers close to it.