
CARL NIELSEN - THE HUMAN CRISIS, THEN AND NOW

By John Fellow

The *Carl Nielsen Brevudgave* (The Carl Nielsen Letter Edition) is underway. Work started in January 2002; volume eight out of a total of eleven volumes, plus a separate index, was published November 2011. The Letter Edition will be completed before the Nielsen anniversary, in 2015. At that point, some 6,000 of the more than 13,000 letters which served as editorial material will have been published. The 3,500 known letters by Carl Nielsen are all included; the 350 letters that have survived from his wife to him are also included in full. The last third of the published letters, the remaining 2,000, were chosen from among the other 9,000 collected letters to and about Carl Nielsen, i.e. letters to and from and between family members, members of Carl Nielsen's circle of friends, work colleagues, and the like.

The letters abundantly make up for the continuous diary that Carl Nielsen never wrote, and they are the main source of the biography that he himself never told beyond the end of his Funen childhood. Carl Nielsen was not a systematic diary-writer: he wrote travel diaries as a young man, and scattered diary and calendar entries on and off during the rest of his life; it is a paradox that the first major publication of Carl Nielsen source material, Torben Schousboe's two volumes from 1983, is titled *Carl Nielsen's Diaries and Correspondence with Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen*.¹ That publication furthermore features only a retouched selection of both. In contrast, the Carl Nielsen Letter Edition includes everything, including those diaries and calendar entries which actually exist and which do not seem much in the context of the letter edition.

One might question the appropriateness of Schousboe's initial release of the extensive source material for the artist couple's lives and the conditions of their art. If, instead of providing a selective and retouched edition of the most private part of the surviving letter material, he had turned to the many correspondences with fellow artists, the subsequent biographies might have aimed in another direction –

1 Torben Schousboe (ed.), *Carl Nielsen. Dagbøger og brevveksling med Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen*, Copenhagen 1983.

or might even have been absent.² But one cannot dispute that Schousboe's edition, which earned a reputation for its abundance of footnotes, in turn led to the first modern, independent Carl Nielsen biography that was not initiated by the composer's descendants and students: Jørgen I. Jensen's *Carl Nielsen, The Dane*, 1991.³ This biography made Carl Nielsen into The Dane *par excellence*, into a carrier of that special Danish "subordinate character syndrome," in literature also known as the Law of Jante formulated by Aksel Sandemose: Don't think you are somebody!⁴ The biography did not originate in the professional music environment, and it did not make fun of Schousboe's many footnotes; on the contrary, Jensen had thoroughly read Schousboe, but unfortunately he was satisfied with the material Schousboe provided and was more inspired by the incompletely exposed private life than by the footnotes through which Schousboe provided access to richer source material.

These footnotes were precisely the beginning of the next major source publication, the three volumes of the composer's articles, lectures, interviews, news clips and works commentaries: *Carl Nielsen to His Contemporaries*, 1999.⁵ This book for the first time since the composer's death gave him a voice nearly as full of character as his Danish contemporaries had themselves allowed it to be. It now became apparent that the composer throughout his life had been very critical of the national attitude toward music.

Previously, the critical edition of Carl Nielsen's music that was completed in 2009 had finally been undertaken. This work also did not originate from a need in the small professional environment, which with Schousboe's retirement by and large was purged of Carl Nielsen, though his music increasingly was being performed, also outside Denmark. What happened was that a Danish conductor, rehearsing the opera *Maskarade* in Innsbruck, realized that using copies of old Danish handwritten music notes, annotated by generations of musicians, would not work for contemporary Austrian musicians. Luckily, a vigilant music journalist, Elisabeth Saugmann, and her newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, realized the opportunities of the situation with the result that the Ministry of Culture, through the Royal Library, "commanded" the academic music environment to increase its interest in Carl Nielsen and funded the Carl Nielsen Edition.

For a composer, it is the music, and fundamentally the notes, that are the basis for any interest in him; the music is in some way what we deal with even when we deal with the circumstances that surround it. Everything can be misused, even

2 See *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven* (CNB), ed. John Fellow, Copenhagen 2005-, vol. 1, 18-21.

3 Jørgen I. Jensen, *Carl Nielsen, Danskeren*, Copenhagen 1991.

4 Aksel Sandemose, *En flygtning krydser sit spor*, Copenhagen 1938.

5 John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, 3 vols., Copenhagen 1999.

so-called absolute music, but where would music literature be without Beethoven's letters and conversation books, or without Mozart's and Brahms' letters?

The Carl Nielsen Letter Edition, another Carl Nielsen project that originates outside of the academic music environment, provides the main source for all of this. The Edition supplies most of the knowledge we can possibly obtain about the composer's public life, his life as a composer, musician, conductor, husband, lover, father, car driver, horse rider, lover of art, book reader, heart patient and much more. It is also not the only, but perhaps the greatest source for understanding the origins of his works, and thus their dating, and the Edition, along with his writings, provides his opinions on his own music as well as that of others, on everything under the sun.

One does not need to be a musicologist to realize that it would have been vastly more advantageous if the Letter Edition had preceded the Music Edition. It was an acknowledged impediment to the editors in their first couple of years of work that they knew so little about the large amounts of unresearched source material, as well as the then-modest Carl Nielsen literature. For a period of time, I had the dubious honor of serving as a consultant to the editors. Later on, the Letter Edition's evolving index of the letters became the starting point for the collection of letter material for the Music Edition's prefaces to the individual music works. In this way, numerous prefaces refer many times to the letters and to the first volumes of the Letter Edition, and may give the impression of both general understanding and thoroughness.

Appearances, however, can be deceptive. Here is just one example: the first sentence of the preface to *Suite for Piano, Opus 45* reads "the only reference in Nielsen's surviving correspondence to his composition of the *Suite* appears in a letter to his pupil Knud Jeppesen of 21 August 1919."⁶ But the Letter Edition has more than thirty references to this Suite. And when this preface was written at least twenty were available, all of which were delivered on request to the editors of the Music Edition.

The Music Edition prefaces compound this misfortune as they constitute all that currently is and for a long time will be available, in a major language, of Carl Nielsen's works, their creation and public reception from a so-called scientific point of view. However highly we might praise the fact that we now have a comprehensive, critical edition of the composer's music, this must be made clear: unfortunately there is nobody else to say it. The Music Edition has published a modest list of corrections to the musical notes, but a modest list would not be enough for the prefaces, and none have yet been published.

The answer to this critique is well-known: this problem is common to all composer scholarship, where projects unfold simultaneously and there is no perfection

6 *Carl Nielsen Works* II/12, xxxii.

to be had in any of them. But in this case they could and should have been avoided or dealt with as the two projects existed side by side in the same institution.

A modest request to modern scholars is that they must meet the ambitions of the available research, or undertake the necessary research involved. The edition of the notes is a magnificent example of the latter, while the prefaces will have to face early obsolescence.

At the Letter Edition we are not without flaws, and we carry full responsibility for the edition, but not for the state of scholarship as such. 90 per cent of the edition is cultivation of new land based on primary sources; a letter edition is so to speak predetermined to find errors, misinterpretations and distortion of perspective in existing literature. But the Letter Edition can of course not turn into a catalogue of the mistakes of others, and will only make exceptions when discrepancies between the Letter Edition and other literature are not evident.⁷

A basic catalogue of Carl Nielsen's musical works is still missing, although approaches have been made toward creating one. The reason for this, it is said, is partly due to unresolved digital issues, partly due to the international development in this area, i.e. the developments that have made a list of works into a giant database, a "site" that can and must accommodate all types of information about the composer, and also is to be under perpetual construction/editing, so that you can enter interim values and pass on questions of authenticity to subsequent editors, who inherently will have had an even lesser hands-on experience with the material than the initial staff.

There is one element of such a catalogue the Letter Edition in particular could benefit, and to which it is a main source of reference: the exposition of the origins of the works. It will not, of course, be possible to complete the editing of this element before the Letter Edition is finished.

Carl Nielsen is neither a Bach nor a Vivaldi. His range of works is manageable, and it is an expression of an interpretation of life, a process that makes both the chronology and the connection between life and society more interesting than that, for instance, of Telemann, and there is such a large amount of facts surrounding his individual works that a good dating, with a few exceptions, is possible. To provide a proper chronology of his works would also reveal many of the defects of which the Music Edition's prefaces are guilty.

While other large letter collections, for example that of Hans Christian Andersen, emerged as singular correspondences that have been added one by one over the decades, and where a full scope comprehension has been pushed forward into the future, and commenting has been made more difficult, perhaps over generations, the

7 Cf. CNB 2, 17.

Carl Nielsen Letter Edition will do it all in one fell swoop – in 13 years. This was made possible due to an initial collection that was undertaken by the Danish Royal Library as early as 1935, when the Carl Nielsen Archive was established. Much new material has also been collected by the Letter Edition in its first years, but the guidelines for this work were available in the already collected material as it was read and recorded and as older Carl Nielsen literature was re-read through this lens.

The Letter Edition places Carl Nielsen researchers in the favorable position that the full scope of the correspondence will be available in three years' time; by then all one has to do is to read the eleven volumes. The contemporary Carl Nielsen researcher can hereby break with the current trend of only meeting his contemporaries' need in the most rudimentary fashion. Instead he can, his ears filled with the drama of Carl Nielsen's musical works, read the whole drama of Carl Nielsen from beginning to end. He can start over and ask what particular issues and revisions the material *itself* implies. This is an undertaking that reaches right into Danish history, cultural history, the history of civilization, intellectual history, Nordic and European music history – and into the future of them all – if there should be one.

Carl Nielsen came from society's lowest layers, he laboriously climbed to the pinnacle of the art world where he was a contentious figure until he died, and where he remains even today. He looked like a Danish success, but during the last six years of his life he had no publisher for his major works. He lived during the formative years of the welfare state, and his life and works expressed both its aspiration and the misery of failure – a dualism that has not since ceased to plague “developed” societies – and he kept in touch with people he met from all layers of society as he moved through his own life. The Letter Edition in this way is also a psychogram of modern Western society in a decisive phase on its way to our time.

Here, it is not possible to account for even a fraction of what can be read in the introductions to the already published letter volumes. Instead, and based on the Letter Edition, I will try to draw a mini-portrait of Carl Nielsen.

Much is biased and flawed in the older literature – and in the newer; from the time when *Min fynske barndom* (translated: *My Funen Childhood*) ended with his admission to the Academy of Music in January 1884, until in the autumn of 1890 he undertook his first trip abroad, there was *only* darkness, and for once one suspects that something has been deliberately erased. Diaries must also have existed from the time before this travel. During the hunt for letters for the Edition, Emilie Demant Hatt's memories of her own early youth with Carl Nielsen turned up.⁸ Then the composer's granddaughter, Joan Curran from the U.S., showed up to talk about her

8 Emilie Demant Hatt (ed. John Fellow), *Foraarsbølger*, Copenhagen 2002.

father, Carl August Hansen, who was Carl Nielsen's son from before his marriage. As a result of this, the story of the composer's youth was able to be pieced together: a bitter-sweet story of an impossible struggle to integrate sex and love, a story that also shined light on his foster parents and benefactors, and which pushed art and the artist to extremes.⁹

The year 1889 was a year of genuine crisis for Carl Nielsen, culminating in the autumn with a suicide attempt that was foiled at the last minute. What is striking is the extent to which the artist's personality and the structure of its encounter with the outside world can be clearly observed in the story of his youth. The young man is not pleased with himself when he flirts with a young woman he is not in love with, and who is not in love with him, but he cannot resist, and he tells this to the 8-years younger Emilie, with whom he is in love and who therefore must know everything about him, including all of his shortcomings. There is something light and fleeting in his character, he says, a fundamental flaw: he is not able to remain balanced, his emotions swing from one extreme to the other, and this painful condition he connects with being a real musician. Being a musician is a particular state of mind, a special kind of nature, and "nobody needs love and understanding to the degree that a real musician does."¹⁰ In his farewell letter to Emilie, before the planned suicide, his psyche, the spiritual part of him, had become so painful that he writes, "If I cannot die spiritually, I must kill my body."¹¹

The man, the musician, who has all the movements of the psyche, as a chaotic, ungovernable primordial sea, to fight, at his disposal or against him, is neither easy to handle for others or himself, especially not in his loneliness. Carl Nielsen was not the only musician and artist who knew this state of mind, and it never quite left him, it was also a source of music, and if you read it all, you discover that when he is artistically barren, his old crisis was always just around the corner and his longing for death never far away.

It was at this psychological level that he (re)discovered Mozart at the end of 1905 – the year which brought both the furious inspiration that became *Maskarade*, and a serious crisis in his marriage. These words are a defense of a brother-in-spirit, but also a self-defense:

And who could be surprised that in many respects his life was disorderly and reckless. In this, his detractors are also to blame. Even to be able to exist and leave his mark in the midst of the cabal and intrigue that towered over him,

9 John Fellow, *Vil Herren ikke hilse på sin Slægt?* Copenhagen 2005.

10 CNB, vol. 1, texts Nos. 16 and 27.

11 CNB, vol. 1, text No. 26.

he had to work like a madman; it is no surprise that the pendulum swung too far in the opposite direction. It was probably a psycho-physical necessity, and he ought to be forgiven that he was no angel but only a human with human desires, hope, attractions, passion, virtues and flaws, and all that which casts humans far down and up high.¹²

From this constitution of the psyche – which we all probably possess in a more or less muddled-up version – there is also a direct line to the exchange with Victor Bendix following the premiere of his Fifth Symphony in 1922. To Bendix's violent attack on Carl Nielsen for having thrown “filthy trench music”¹³ at a defenseless audience, he replied: “Is it wrong that I must tear myself up every time I have to write something bigger?”¹⁴ An unruly psyche was necessary for him, and the creative process was needed to get a grip on the psyche, and from the beginning each time! He could hardly, as Bruno Walter did for Gustav Mahler, claim that each symphony was a new attempt at finding a way to God.¹⁵ Rather, what he knew and practiced is that any major work was a new answer to man's basic existential challenge to shape the psyche, individually and collectively, in one single action, and that this process put the artist in the same category as the religious founders.¹⁶ If one goes deeply enough into the psyche, one does not only emerge with something that is individual, but also with something collective, and he understood this as well as contemporary Psychology did – a discipline for which, characteristically, he did not have much regard.

Most people who have listened to Nielsen to some extent, and have listened to great music to some extent, have experienced the peculiarity that while much music can stimulate one's emotions, Nielsen's larger pieces transport us into entire world dramas. This is probably why so many Nielsen performances disappoint, and why so many musicians and audiences find it hard to get on the same wavelength as Nielsen – or prefer him individually romanticized.

Carl Nielsen's life was not idyllic, and even those of us with some prior knowledge of him are surprised at the scale and persistence of the conflicts in his life when we read through the entire source material. His marriage conflict has been a topic of interest since Schousboe's book was published in 1983, but it is more intense and complex than has previously been rendered, and it deserves better than to be squeezed into today's middle-class gender-political frameworks.

12 *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid, op. cit.*, 77.

13 CNB, vol. 7, text No. 180.

14 CNB, vol. 7, text No. 181.

15 *A Talking Portrait, Bruno Walter in Conversation with Arnold Michaelis*, June 1956, Sony SM2K 64452.

16 *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid, op. cit.*, 214.

He was in conflict with cultural institutions, for instance the Royal Theatre, a dispute that has so many aspects to it that the common shorthand perception – that he was simply inadequate as a conductor – resembles a full-bore application of the previously mentioned Law of Jante against a foreign element in Copenhagen’s upper and middle-class musical life. He came into conflict with the music publishing company Wilhelm Hansen, where he had started out as a young, serious-music forerunner, but it culminated rather than originated in his public statements in the autumn 1925,¹⁷ as has often been said.

The tax authorities was another entity that provided conflict – as a millionaire, as a stock market speculator, in a failed attempt to raise funds to subsidize the promotion of his art. In this, his wife and her King Christian IX monument played a large role, but this is not what caused the conflict between husband and wife. Incidentally, Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen’s conflict with the monument committee surpasses what Carl Nielsen experienced in his work. The conflict spans 1908 to 1927 and not much in the life of the members of this family can be understood without getting the drama organized. The Letter Edition has done this.

For more uplifting aspects of Carl Nielsen’s life, you have to cross the sound to Sweden. In the midst of the worst crisis in his relations with Anne Marie, he decided in 1918 to travel to Gothenburg as conductor-substitute to Wilhelm Stenhammar; until spring 1922, he lived for long periods in Gothenburg and took part in the flourishing arts and music scene in Sweden’s second-largest city. Here he seemed to have been understood, some of his powers seem to have flourished, and his friendship with Stenhammar blossomed when the two composers were able to talk together daily for long periods. This development had its beginnings in 1910, when Stenhammar began composing his own G-minor symphony and discovered Nielsen’s first symphony and performed it in Gothenburg.

A major participant in the environment was the newly appointed music critic at the *Göteborgs Handels-och Sjöfart-Tidning*, Julius Rabe. He was a student of Bror Beckman in Stockholm, Nielsen’s friend since the early nineties. Beckman had almost given up composing. But he was very active and conscientious as Director of the Music Conservatory in Stockholm, from where he pulled many strings, even for Nielsen, whenever possible. Beckman had already secured Ture Rangström a position in 1907 as music critic at *Svenska Dagbladet*, hoping to create a counterweight to the infamous Wilhelm Peterson-Bergner of the *Dagens Nyheter*. Rangström debuted with a full-page article about Nielsen as the herald of a new musical renaissance in the showdown with the late-Romantics.

At his low point in 1918, it was as if at least some of the work of the previous 25 years began to make some progress in Sweden. Rabe was on an equal footing with

17 Cf. CNB 8, 50-56.

Rangström, he was better educated, less youthfully flippant and provocative in his statements, though no less striking and programmatic. Rabe's first encounter with Nielsen's music, as a critic, was when Stenhammar again performed Nielsen's First Symphony in Gothenburg on March 13th, 1918. Bo Wallner described the review as a musical article of faith.¹⁸

Rabe emphasizes that within Nielsen's first symphony each part lived, he did not use counterpoint like Wagner or Richard Strauss, which simply required movement in every part to make for a better overall sound experience, that is, to employ a counterpoint with sensual timbral intentions. Carl Nielsen, on the contrary, intended every detail to support a larger concept, and did not indulge sensuous aspects, but rather stressed the architectural tension, the logic of form and progression. Rabe writes:

We must learn again, we must open our eyes to the fact that the Great Ones we admire were not emotional people like us, but that they experienced form ... And he, who in an artistic way experiences a form, will always experience an inflaming act of will. ... The quietism and lack of willpower that the art of yesterday expresses is the same that brought us into the misery of a world war and which has as a result that no leaders in the present generation seem to have the power to untangle. We must make ourselves into spiritual activists; we must procure the willpower to create, and to create on a large scale. To do this, a form-oriented art can help us, and with his music Carl Nielsen is almost the only person who can bring us closer to this future life atmosphere.¹⁹

Which comes first: the chicken or the egg, the world war or decadent art? That is obviously a question, but these people believed in a connection, they believed that when the world goes to Hell, art is also to blame; not only artists believed this but the music critic did as well. Carl Nielsen's views on vulgar music, including his infamous attack on jazz, which today we often forgive with our know-it-all attitude, must be taken seriously if we want to understand the consciousness-battle that his music represents and the defeat of which he experienced at the end of his life – and which, jazz music or not, we are probably right in believing that we have lost since then repeatedly.

The Letter Edition shows that quite a few conversations took place in Gothenburg at the time, but no conversation books exist. Nielsen and Rabe frequently discussed the music prior to Rabe's reviews; part of the reviews are in this way an articulation of a dialogue with Nielsen. In the Nielsen literature it is traditional to quote the Copenhagen music critics copiously; most were temporal (*zeitgebundene*) compos-

18 Bo Wallner, *Wilhelm Stenhammar och hans tid*, III, Göteborg 1991, vol. 3, 282.

19 *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfart-Tidning*, 3.3.1918.

ers with their own agenda or lack of the same, and they were also part of the Copenhagen *ménage*; there is no tradition in the Nielsen literature for dealing with his reception in Sweden. But without that, his life and artistic destiny would have been different. He survived in Sweden when life seemed the darkest.

There are two great Scandinavian works about this era in music history, Bo Wallner's work on Wilhelm Stenhammar²⁰ and Erik Tawaststjerna's on Jean Sibelius.²¹ A similar work on Nielsen does not exist. In both of those great works, there are passages that the Carl Nielsen Letter Edition can complement and correct. In Swedish music, Carl Nielsen was a positive force, while in Denmark he was viewed as being too big and bothersome at least until the 1920s generation. After the Second World War, his students and followers became compromised by their relationship with him. Everybody has had to relate to Carl Nielsen, whether they liked it or not; luckily, we have the Law of Jante – to such a great extent that Jørgen I. Jensen, 60 years after Nielsen's death, had to invent a subordinate character syndrome to make the Danish equation still come out right!

Apart from the obvious fact that Denmark has not, like Sweden and Finland, had a great musicologist, who has dealt with the matter in due course, the real cause is, of course, the wretched state of affairs in Denmark: because of the small, ever-threatened country's history, we wanted desperately to have our proper national composer, and if he wasn't, we would *make* him! When it comes to the Danish composer, it is about a larger national wound, not about a greater or a lesser composer – and this is why it makes particular sense that the material of the Carl Nielsen Letter Edition considers this larger context to such a great extent.

Carl Nielsen's biography is not interesting because it explains his music – it does *not* explain his music! Because the music is so universal, and is rooted so deeply in Western culture and its problems, it is more accurate to say that the opposite dynamic is at work: that art intervenes in life, for both husband and wife. It is the struggle to create and communicate art that contributes to the messing up of the lives of two large, uncompromising artists. This life story has nevertheless, alongside the music and especially in combination with social and cultural developments, an independent value: it leads us back to the origins of modern society and allows one's consciousness to regress and open itself to a larger and more original experience of our own *ménage* in the chrysalis stage.

We still have, according to Rabe's testimony, another consciousness that has not been honored, with which we need to acquaint ourselves for the sake of a po-

20 Wallner, *op. cit.*

21 Erik Tawaststjerna, *Jean Sibelius*, I-V, Helsingfors 1991-1993.

tential future for man's humanity, and to this end the Letter Edition is more than merely information that can be extracted for the benefit of the positivist-oriented music research of our time. The material deserves to be read in its entirety, with a deep experience of the music in mind. The task of the arts and humanities is not to convey their own present time in dealing with the past, but to convey the insights of the past to benefit the present, to do the old insights justice, and to allow them to provoke the present and, ultimately, to punch a hole in today's self-sufficient narcissism and point out the lethal splits of the aspiring psyche.

Is this at all possible? Today, the humanities are no longer the root canal treatment and future dream world of human culture and civilization, which they have otherwise been since the earliest cave paintings, but rather are initiated from the institutional and bureaucratic layers of our crisis culture, as if they are occupational therapy measures for unemployed academics who have barely experienced the roots of their professions.

Don't ask what *you* can use from this material. Ask what challenges the material as a whole presents to you and your time. It is not until then that a human renaissance and the stewardship of Carl Nielsen's legacy can begin.

A B S T R A C T

Beginning with an account of the context in which the *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven* (translated: The Carl Nielsen Letter Edition) began, this paper describes the source material for the eleven volumes and separate index. Eight volumes have already been published; the Edition will be completed in 2014.

While the Edition is still a work in progress, it highlights the stages, themes, and general progression of Carl Nielsen's life and the way these interact with his family, the music and cultural scene, and society in general.

How private is the Edition, one might ask, and what does his private life have to do with his music? Is there a connection between life and art, or is there no connection, or perhaps the opposite: that the artistic visions, and the struggles to express and communicate them, affected the private lives of both husband and wife?

The artistic outlook of Carl Nielsen is characterised on the basis of evidence in the source material, from his own statements as well as those of his colleagues. This was not a narrow-scope artistic discussion for them, but a debate on human emotional life itself and the structure of the human psyche: it was human development at this deep level that music both ought to and could influence. And that is what it increasingly did, also in a *destructive* way.

What does the whole wretched business of our own age have to do with that of Carl Nielsen's time period? How can we benefit from his answers? Have we come up with better answers? And if so, why are we even discussing Carl Nielsen?