
CARL NIELSEN AND THE IDEA OF ENGLISH NATIONAL MUSIC

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One of the remarkable features of Nielsen reception is that his international recognition was mainly established through a very positive reception in England during and since the 1950s, especially when contrasted with the more reluctant reception on the continent.¹ In his own lifetime, Nielsen's efforts to achieve an international reputation never really materialized, though for a short while in 1923 he seemed to believe so.² The aim of this article is to discuss why that might be so.

We would like to suggest that part of the answer is due to certain affinities in musical structure between what were perceived as core features of Nielsen's musical characteristics and the core features of what was propagated as English national music during the English musical renaissance. We do not claim that Nielsen was heard as 'English', but we would suggest that the musical values ascribed to English folk song and national music prepared fertile grounds for recognizing similar musical features in Nielsen's music as a signature of good, perceivable music of high quality. We would argue that due to the promotion of an idea of English national music which was developed by people like Cecil J. Sharp and Ralph Vaughan Williams, and the introduction of folk song in the curriculum of English state schools, later generations of critics and the public internalized an image of good music based on this. What occurred in England in the 1950s was the result of performances heard by a public prepared to connect with music such as Nielsen's, which was not the case in

1 Cf. Paolo Muntoni's article in this volume and his MA thesis, 'Den britiske reception af Carl Nielsen', Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen, 2011; Table 1 in the latter suggests that the number of performances in Germany during the last few years has caught up with the number of British performances.

2 Cf. John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven*, vol. 7, 1921-1923; besides a number of successful performances he was appointed a member of the Berlin Academy of the Arts along with such prominent artists as Ferruccio Busoni, Boris Glazunov and Edvard Munch; see letters to J.F. Willumsen, 10.3.1923; to Henrik Cavling, 12.3.1923; to Irmelin Eggert Møller, 13.3.1923; to Carl Claudius, 24.4.1923.

continental Europe, where performances, even if well received, did not make a lasting impact. On another level it might be of importance, too, that Nielsen was perceived as a national composer and a composer of the people, a status which had been idealized in Vaughan Williams's education.

The article is divided into two parts. First we discuss the matter of nationalism in terms of music, focusing on the English folk-song movement. Then we will discuss how the idea of English national music connects to Carl Nielsen, his music and his image.

Nationalism, music, and the peculiar case of England

At the close of the nineteenth century, nationalism had spread all over Europe and had dug its roots deep down into the cultural and scholarly soil of its denizens. According to modern theory on nationalism, 'nationalism is an ideology of the nation, not the state',³ and as such nationalism is to be understood as an ideology and a discourse on the basis of which modern nations are created, not the other way around. Though founded by philosophers in the late eighteenth century, the success and impact of the nationalist ideology was primarily established during the nineteenth century, and as such it is a quite recent phenomenon. According to Ernest Gellner, the emergence of modern nations was primarily due to the need for larger social units in the industrial era, where traditional social units such as family and village lost their importance as a consequence of the rapid migration from sparsely populated rural areas to densely populated urban areas and of the significant and abrupt shift in demographics that had to follow.⁴ To scholars like Gellner and Hobsbawm this implies that nationalism was an ideology imposed by an elite which, due to the modernization of society, found the need to create new allegiances in order to legitimize the authority of the central government. In the words of Gellner: 'The basic deception and self-deception practised by nationalism is this: nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society [...] But this is the very opposite of what nationalism affirms and what nationalists fervently believe.'⁵ And the belief that every person in the world belongs to a nation, without having to specify what defines a nation, could indeed legitimize the authority of a state's central government if the borders of that state were seen to coincide with the borders of the nation. Thus if the state could create a national identity for the people within its borders and make that identity the basis for a new community, that is, the nation, then it would be easier to

3 Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, London 1991, 74.

4 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism*, New York 1982, 40.

5 Gellner, *op. cit.*, 57.

organize and control the work force and reduce the risks of strikes and riots, and in that way production could be increased.⁶

Other scholars like Anthony D. Smith are more inclined to see nationalism as an ideology that makes it possible to create a culture and an identity as a member of a nation and to perceive that identity as a natural and uncontested way of defining yourself as part of a larger community.⁷ Even if these larger units where a member cannot know all other members have been described as ‘imagined communities’ by Benedict Anderson, it does not mean that they do not exist.⁸ When an ideology such as nationalism is believed in and is lived out by those believers, a nation – even when it has not yet gained a nation-state – becomes real indeed.

Whether nationalism was just a new and more modern way of dividing the world into “us” and “them”, as Anthony D. Smith suggests,⁹ or whether it was a direct consequence of industrialism and thus only possible in industrialized and centralized societies, as it is argued by Ernest Gellner,¹⁰ it is clear that the above stated ideology only gained its more or less global acceptance and importance during the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. England, though, remains a peculiar case. Despite early industrialization it maintained the notion that it was the core of an empire rather than a nation among other nations, and therefore did not experience its ‘moment of Englishness’, where, in the view of Krishan Kumar, English nationalism for the first time ever ‘took cultural, not political, form’, until the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ This is the moment when music, in the particular form of the English musical renaissance and folk-song movement, played a decisive role in the cultural national movement.¹²

To fully understand the nature of this movement, it is necessary to take a further look into some aspects of nineteenth-century England. As mentioned above, the wave of nationalism that flooded the European continent in the nineteenth century

6 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983, 265.

7 Smith, *op. cit.*, 71f.

8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London 1983.

9 Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford 1986, 18.

10 Gellner, *op. cit.*, 42.

11 Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge 2003, xii.

12 Miroslav Hroch, *Das Europa der Nationen. Die moderne Nationsbildung im europäischen Vergleich*, Göttingen 2005, focuses on the role of national movements in the process of nation-building, seeing them as organized groups acting in the name of the nation with a wide range of activities. Still, the English case is special, since most of the goals of national movements, the political power, the language, the inclusion in history, are already in place. The perceived lack of an English music, including an original English folk music, makes this a core issue for English nationalism.

was deeply interwoven with the effects of industrialism. But industrialism took off in England in the middle of the eighteenth century – almost a hundred years before most other European countries – and due to the success of the ever-expanding British Empire, English culture was more a display of what could be brought home from all corners of the empire than what could be produced at home. Thus the fate of English music followed that of the material luxuries: it was imported. Between Henry Purcell in the late seventeenth century and Edward William Elgar in the late nineteenth century, no English composer really put his footprint on classical music history.¹³ Instead, composers were imported from the European continent to work and perform in England, whether short-termed like Joseph Haydn and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy or on a more permanent basis like George Friedrich Handel and Johann Christian Bach. The trade of making and performing music seemed to be lost to the English, and in the late nineteenth century it was simply seen as feminine and short-sighted to choose a career in music. Music was likened to cigars: the English soil and climate was unable to grow the tobacco plants needed for cigars, and so those had to be imported from Cuba; in the same way music had to be imported from the continent since it would not flower in English soil.¹⁴

After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 and for the next half century, Britain was unchallenged as leader of the colonial world. But towards the end of the nineteenth century, other states began to tear at Britain's dominance, and in particular the newly united Germany emerged as a threat to the British Empire – the friction between the two eventually culminating in the First World War. Although the territory of the British Empire was at its greatest after the war, the period from the first steps towards Canada's autonomy in 1867 to the end of the Second World War was marked by a decline in the strength of the empire. As the British Empire began to fade, the nation of England began to mark its territory – both politically and culturally. And as a consequence of this, English music gained an immense national popularity, and English composers were numerous and successful – at home anyway.¹⁵

This period has since been named 'The English Musical Renaissance' due to the sudden appearance and success of so many English composers and the fact that the general trend in their composition of music was to use musical material of earlier generations such as Tudor and folk music (hence the 're-' in renaissance). As father figure for this generation of composers stood Hubert Parry (1848-1918), who both as a composer and a teacher at the Royal College of Music inspired many of the younger

13 A composer like Arthur Sullivan was at the time not considered a serious composer.

14 Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music, and other essays*, London 1963, 4.

15 See, for example, Michael Trend, *The Music Makers*, London 1985.

composers and musicians. Parry taught his students to compose with a personal expression and to draw on their (national) background, and he also brought Darwin's theory of evolution into the world of music and the arts, which would be of great importance to later scholars.¹⁶ But though Parry stood as the source from whom the younger composers would desire to learn, it was the autodidact Edward Elgar that they desired to be. Without any direct access to Parry's compositional guidelines, Elgar was thought to compose with both a deep personal expression and with his roots firmly planted in the national soil.

Being a student of Parry and an occasional admirer of Elgar, Ralph Vaughan Williams found a desire to write national English music, but being of scholarly family and mind, he also wanted to be able to say exactly what it was that made the music English, and so he became the first to formulate a more thorough concept of how to compose national music – a concept that would guide and inspire English composers, critics and scholars in the many years that followed. Vaughan Williams grew up with his mother's family in intellectual and scholarly surroundings – Charles Darwin being his great-uncle on his mother's side – and although he made his trade firstly as a composer, his work as a teacher and scholar has made a lasting impression on both English music and national music in general. It was not until the fourth decade of his life, though, that Vaughan Williams finally encountered the phenomenon that would guide his work on national music in the following years: the folk song. In 1903 he heard and wrote down his first full authentic folksong "Bushes and Briars", and the encounter sparked a lifelong love for folk music in Vaughan Williams and thus changed the face of English music for good.¹⁷

When saying "authentic folk song" or "folk song proper" we are referring to the theories of Vaughan Williams' good friend and co-collector Cecil Sharp, who was the first to systematize and theorize on the collection of folk music, the result of which was his book *English Folk-Song. Some Conclusions*.¹⁸ In this book he described how the folk song – a purely oral phenomenon – would wander from singer to singer, from generation to generation, and how every singer would use the bits that he or she liked and discard those that were found to be distasteful. Very much inspired by Darwin, Sharp described how the folk song undergoes a 'survival-of-the-fittest'-process, where the folk song with every generation becomes more pleasant to the ear of a listener of the same blood and soil as the singers who handed it down. This process is cut short

16 Dibble, Jeremy, 'Parry, Sir Hubert', *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (accessed January 2, 2012).

17 Hugh Ottaway and Alain Frogley, 'Vaughan Williams, Ralph' *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (accessed February 9, 2012).

18 Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk-Song, Some Conclusions*, London 1907.

if the singer becomes familiar with written music, be it art music or popular music, in which case he or she will most likely try to emulate this more professional sort of music making, which in turn would corrupt the sung folk song, since the written music is an individual and not a communal product. This means that in the early twentieth century only people living in the most secluded rural areas would be able to sing folk song proper in England. Sharp also sums up the specific musical traits found in the newly collected folk songs (although he focuses more on examples than on statistics), and he finds that they most notably include modal scales, non-harmony based melodic lines and irregular bars. The last chapters of the book are used to express Sharp's view on the use of the folk song collections and the future for the folk song, but he mainly thinks of it in terms of education and domestic use, with only a slight gesture at the possibilities it presented for English composers.¹⁹

While Sharp continued to focus on exploration and collection, Vaughan Williams found himself wishing to confer the beauty that had so compelled him in the folk song into the world of art music that was his own trade. So Vaughan Williams (drawing much on his collaboration with Gustav Holst) put an effort into the development of a theory that would explain how and why the folk song could and should be integrated into the music of the modern composer. In 1932 he was invited to America to hold a series of lectures at Bryn Mawr College. He would later publish these lectures as a book under the title *National Music*,²⁰ in which he thoroughly summed up all the conclusions he had come to on the subject.

His views on the folk song itself tallies with the theories Sharp had published nearly twenty years before, both regarding his evolution theory and the specific musical nature of the English folk songs. But Vaughan Williams puts these views into a larger cultural-political context, where he compares the folk song to the mother tongue of the people. He believed, as Sharp did, that certain musical (and linguistic) structures came more naturally to people of the same blood and soil (he assumes that people of the same nation have a common ancestry), and that the composer therefore should use the folk songs of his nation as inspiration, since this would allow him to speak more directly from the heart – and so make it easier for him to express the emotions behind the music, which to Vaughan Williams was the main purpose of art music.²¹ This argument is of course part of the nationalist and racial discourse of the early 20th century, which certainly is offensive; but one should not forget that the existence of a dominant discourse does imply that these were the words and thoughts available for discussions of nationalist matters like national musics.

19 Sharp, *op. cit.*, 129.

20 The first edition was published 1934.

21 Vaughan Williams, *op. cit.*, 9.

The use of folk music was not just a means by which to enhance the beauty of the music composed, it was also part of a political agenda to inspire English composers to throw off the yoke of the Teutonic music culture that still had a firm grasp on England, and to free the nation from the appellation “Das Land ohne Musik” that the German journalist Oskar Schmitz had bestowed on it thirty years earlier.²² Still, the nationalist ideology of Vaughan Williams is not insular or chauvinistically English *per se*. The reason why English folk music is the main focus of Vaughan Williams is not that it is more beautiful than the folk music of other nations, but that, of course, it is the folk music he knows best and, following his own line of thought, that an Englishman will be most easily moved by. But it is also due to his conviction that the art music of most other nations had not been segregated from their folk music to the same extent as was the case in England (and America). Vaughan Williams saw the folk song as the most fundamental musical expression of emotion, and he believed that to become a great composer one had to be able to express oneself in the most natural way before applying any other inspiration. Thus the more integrated the sound of the nation’s folk song was in the early life of a composer, the easier it would be for him to maintain an authentic personal expression in his compositions, even when inspired by the most unfamiliar and exotic sounds.²³

Here Vaughan Williams has indirectly explained to us his views on why the musical landscape of Europe had become what it was at this time: the reason why German composers dominated European art music was that German folk songs were closely interwoven with its art music – Vaughan Williams mentions Bach and Beethoven as prime examples of this – and so every new German composer raised with music built on his native folk music would, in turn, be armed with a natural means of expression that would make his musical ideas flourish with ease. Not only does this explain the German dominance in European musical culture, says Vaughan Williams, it also explains why composers from all corners of Europe within a generation or two had broken the central European dominance and had gained popularity both at home and abroad. All these composers sprang from nations where the local folk and popular music had had a renaissance due to the needs of the emerging nations and where, for the same reasons, nationalism was put ahead of internationalism. From Vaughan Williams’ point of view, Edvard Grieg’s success came from his being Norwegian before being European, Jean Sibelius’ from being

22 Oscar A. H. Schmitz, *Das Land ohne Musik*, München 1904. On the perceived German threat, cf. Alain Frogley, ‘Constructing Englishness in music: national character and the reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams’, in Frogley (ed.), *Vaughan Williams Studies*, Cambridge 1996, 1-22, at 10f.

23 Vaughan Williams, *op. cit.*, 10-11.

Finnish, Béla Bartók's from being Hungarian. And in England itself, Elgar gained his musical mastery not from studying Richard Wagner fervently, but from being raised in the countryside far from the professional musical life of London – much like Nielsen in Denmark.

The intent here is not to validate Vaughan Williams' theories, but rather to show a line of thought that came to permeate much of the English view of music throughout the twentieth century. Even though the music of Vaughan Williams lost its appeal to the intellectual part of the English musical establishment after the Second World War, his thoughts had already rooted themselves deep in their minds. An example of this can be found in Constant Lambert's *Music Ho!* in which he criticizes Vaughan Williams' music (mainly the Pastoral Symphony) for being too local in its colour and construction, arguing that a balance between the national, which should show in the unintended colour of the music, and the international, which should be found in the technique and skill of the composer, must be found.²⁴ This is, however, very much in line with the arguments of Sharp and Vaughan Williams sketched out above, because Lambert, though not rejecting internationalism, insists upon the unconscious local schooling of the composer's mind during his formative years. His choice of Sibelius – rather than Schönberg – as the composer to inspire the future, in part because of his national grounding, underlines his agreement with Vaughan Williams on this point.²⁵ Lambert could have chosen Nielsen as well, as he would fit well into this model. But Schönberg would not fit, although he might be a home-grown Austrian. This is due to the underlying, mostly unspoken, assumption that good music applies to the laws of organicism while Schönberg represents the opposite, a modernism associated with rigid systems and construction. And this is in part another nationalist model, due to which English and Scandinavian music defines itself as being different and better than Central European, for which read German, modes of composition.²⁶

Apart from Vaughan Williams' inspiration of the thoughts of the English music establishment, traces of his school of national- and folk-inspired English music can be found in works of most English composers up to Benjamin Britten and it can be traced in popular music, most notably in the Beatles, in folk-music bands like Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention, and in music by contemporary composers like John Tavener and John Rutter.²⁷

24 Constant Lambert, *Music Ho!*, London 1934, third edn. 1966, 134-37.

25 *Ibid.*, 277.

26 Cf. Michael Fjeldsøe, 'Organicism and construction in Nielsen's Symphony No. 5', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 1 (2003), 18f.

27 Ottaway and Frogley, *op. cit.*

So to sum up on the first part of this article: Vaughan Williams was the main representative and creator of a highly influential movement in English composition known as the English Folk-Song Movement, which in turn was the main current in the English Musical Renaissance, where a national English music was created and disseminated to all parts of musical England. It was a national music based on research into a forgotten England: the folk songs and dances of unrelated rural areas, as well as the music of the Tudors and the early renaissance. Gustav Holst gives perhaps the best statement of the *Zeitgeist* in a lecture in the 1920's:

Something is happening in England in the 20th century that has never happened before. For the first time in the history of English music we are trying to learn to honour and appreciate our forefathers. We know our national folk-songs and dances (I knew none till I was over 25). Less than 12 years ago we were able for the first time to know all the Tudor madrigals. Less than 12 years ago we *began* to learn the complete Tudor sacred music.... We are laying a sure foundation of our national art.²⁸

Preparing fertile soil for Nielsen reception

In the second part of the article we will argue that the idea of English music, formed by people like Cecil Sharp and Vaughan Williams, did not find its way to the hearts and minds of English listeners and critics by accident or as some kind of revelation. It was due to a deliberate effort by a national movement and as such it delivers a very clear example of how ideas of national music are constructed. The argument goes on like this: when established, ideas of national music are embedded in a value system that considers such music of high quality, and thus music like Nielsen's, which has affinities with the image of English national music, will be recognized and appreciated as 'good'.

Cecil J. Sharp was, as already stated, a very central figure in the English Music Renaissance. It is clear from his foreword to his influential book *English Folk-Song. Some Conclusions* (published 1907) that he intends his book to have practical as well as scholarly impact. He explains the purpose as a) scholarly collection and publication of original folk music and b) the 're-introduction of folk-songs into our public life'. His book is meant to underpin that 'folk-song proper' is 'generically distinct from ordinary music' through scientific arguments, in order to counter the 'misconception that the folk-song proper and the "merely popular song" were generically identical.'²⁹ We agree with Alain Frogley (and others) that what matters is not whether Sharp was right

28 Trend, *op. cit.*, 108.

29 Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk-Song. Some Conclusions*, London 1907, xf.

about English folk music being ‘distinctively and demonstrably English in its origin’ – what matters is the *perceptions* of the actors of that time.³⁰ To Sharp it was crucial to establish that a folk song is not the product of an individual composer, but a ‘communal and racial product, the expression, in musical idiom, of aims and ideals that are primarily national in character’ and thus suited to ‘serve a national purpose’.³¹ He does not try to conceal that he is acting on behalf of a ‘national movement’.³²

The urgency of bringing this argument out relates to the heated debate following a proposal presented by the Board of Education in 1905, *Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers*. In England the teaching of music was not made a mandatory part of the curriculum in the Educational Act of 1870 but was increasingly included during the following decades, in part by payments to the schools of one additional schilling per scholar if singing was taught satisfactory. At the turn of the century, singing by sight was preferred and the repertoire included mainly “national” songs of English composers from the 18. and 19. century.³³ The proposal of 1905 advocated a list of “national and folk songs” to be included into the curriculum of primary schools, which would be a most important tool to accomplish the re-introduction of folk-songs into public life. To Sharp, this was a move in the right direction, but too short a step by far. He was an ardent critic of the proposed song curriculum, arguing that what was propagated as folk song was only folk song proper to a very limited degree.³⁴ Here, he is in line with other, one could say ‘modern’, early-twentieth-century folk-song researchers in his critique that folk songs were distorted and misrepresented during the ‘romantic’ nineteenth century, when people related them to minor-major-tonality and did not know the difference between “real”, “authentic”, folk music from the rural communities and modern popular song. This argument is in line with Bartók and Kodály in Hungary and Thomas Laub in Denmark.

His critique led to major disputes, dividing the Folk-Song Society as well as public opinion, and a war concerning school song books emerged. To counter the *National Song Book* of 1906, Sharp issued the *Folk-Songs for Schools* later that year, ‘made’, he stated, ‘to meet the requirements of the Board of Education’,³⁵ that is: as he felt

30 Frogley, *op. cit.*, 10.

31 Sharp, *op. cit.*, x.

32 Cf. Hroch, *op. cit.*, esp. 111ff.

33 Gordon Cox, ‘Britain: Towards “a long overdue renaissance”?’ in Gordon Cox and Robin Stevens (eds.), *The origins and foundations of music education: Cross-Cultural Historical Studies of Music in Compulsory Schooling*, London 2010, 15-22.

34 Guido Heldt. *Das Nationale als Problem in der englischen Musik des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts Tondichtungen von Granville Bartock, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Edward Elgar, George Butterworth, Gerald Finzi und Gustav Holst*, Hamburg 2007, 127f.

35 Sharp quoted in Georgina Boyes, *The imagined village. Culture, ideology and the English Folk Revival*, Leeds 2010, 67. Boyes gives a critical and very interesting assessment of the Folk Revival movement.

they should be met. In this way he became a parallel figure to Thomas Laub, both in his ability to divide opinions and to assemble a group of devoted followers behind his ideas. This applies to the field of congregational songs too: Laub and Sharp both propagated a reform of the hymns used in the churches, cleaning out what was considered romantic sentimentality, a reform which was successful with the revised *Hymnal* edition initiated by Sharp and edited by Vaughan Williams.³⁶

This is an obvious example of a construction of national music according to Hobsbawm's theories. In his view, nationalism is something imposed on the population on behalf of an elite, and one of the main tools is the educational system, primary schools being one of the most effective. And Sharp seems to have been most successful, which is crucial to our argument: 'Sharp's ideas quickly became the orthodoxy of English musical education.'³⁷ Hobsbawm's views on nationalism fit the English way of establishing national folk song singing as mandatory school curriculum remarkably well, which – besides his basic Marxist assumptions of ideology as an instrument imposed by the ruling classes – delivers wonderful confirmation of his approach that they were constructions imposed by an elite. In this case, we are most definitely seeing an example of installing in a population the notion of being the *folk* through establishing a common knowledge and praxis of singing "folk songs proper" in state schools. And it is clearly stated by all involved, that this is something that the population did not have a clue about just twenty years earlier: not only that they did not sing or recognize songs from backward rural areas as worth singing, they were of the opinion that such songs did not exist at all in England.³⁸ They had hardly missed them.

The success of this strategy implies that later generations of British concert goers, music lovers and music critics had internalized aesthetic values which made them inclined to recognize and appreciate similar features in music like Nielsen's.

When trying to link the idea of the characteristics of English music to the Nielsen reception one must focus not on the actual folk songs but on the *images* of English music and Englishness that were promoted. This is the point of view in one of the latest accounts of this problem, the 940 page German revised edition of a dissertation by Guido Heldt on the problem of nationality in English music. He argues that the concept of 'images' makes it possible to discuss the 'negotiation within a discourse of definitions of national identity, the actual wording and discussion of what certain social groups at certain times have understood or propagated as characteristic of English music as well as the fact that the phenomenon [of Englishness] goes further than the

36 Heldt, *op. cit.*, 128.

37 Kumar, *op. cit.*, 208, referring to the work of Alun Howkins.

38 As Sharp admits, '[t]wenty years ago ... it was only by a very few people that folk-songs were known to exist in this country' (Sharp, *op. cit.*, vii).

deliberate construction and its fixation in words. What is felt or understood as English includes a lot which is not necessarily part of a verbal discourse: ways of life, social habits and rituals, ..., from visual representations of landscapes to ... the sound of a certain music.³⁹ Another important point stressed by Heldt is the fact that two competing images of England existed side by side, a 'Southern Metaphor' of a 'romantic, illogical, muddled, divinely lucky, Anglican, aristocratic, traditional, frivolous' England and a 'Northern Metaphor' of a 'bourgeois, enterprising, adventurous, scientific, serious' England; the first is embodied in images of a pastoral England with historical roots, the second in images of modern, industrial England.⁴⁰ Heldt states that the Southern Metaphor remains the image of 'England proper' until the Second World War, and one could add, looking at recent television sequels like *Downton Abbey*, that this image still seems to be rather alive and well. It is quite obvious that the image of English music, as propagated by Sharp and Vaughan Williams, fits the image of the Southern Metaphor, and although Sharp admits that the limits of available research does not give him certain *proof* that the folk songs of Somerset are representative of England as such, he states that he *believes* they are, and they are certainly propagated in that way.⁴¹

As to the content of the image of English national music, the arguments of Vaughan Williams in his lectures on 'National Music' (published 1934)⁴² are revealing. He argues in the nationalist vein – nationalism being the ideology of nations – that musical 'style is ultimately national'⁴³ and that there is no such thing as universal

39 Heldt, *op. cit.*, 50: 'Die diskursive Verhandlung von nationalen Identitätsdefinitionen, die tatsächliche Formulierung und Diskussion von dem, was bestimmte gesellschaftliche Gruppen zu bestimmten Zeiten als charakteristisch englisch betrachtet oder propagiert haben, lässt sich darin ebenso unterbringen wie die Tatsache, dass das Phänomen über die gezielte Konstruktion und ihre verbalen Fixierung hinausgeht. Was als englisch empfunden oder verstanden wurde, begreift vieles ein, was nicht unbedingt Gegenstand verbaler Diskurse ist: Lebensweisen, soziale Üblichkeiten und Rituale ebenso wie vom Bild einer als charakteristisch empfundenen Landschaft bis ... zum Klang einer bestimmten Musik.' Heldt is using the term 'Bilder' but he is obviously referring to the English term 'images'. How powerful 'images' are in determining the preferred discourse used to grasp a certain music or composer, became clear to me when I studied the different images of Bartók in early Danish Bartók reception, cf. Michael Fjeldsøe, 'Different Images: A Case Study on Bartók Reception in Denmark', (Bartók's Orbit. The Context of Influence of His Work. Proceedings of the International Conference held by the Bartók Archives, Budapest (20-24 March 2006), part I), *Studia Musicologica* 47/3-4 (sept. 2006), Academia Scientiarum Hungaricae, Budapest 2006, 453-65.

40 Heldt, *op. cit.*, 62f. The concepts of Northern and Southern Metaphor are quotes from Donald Horne, *God is an Englishman*, Sidney and London 1970.

41 Sharp, *op. cit.*, ix.

42 Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, Oxford University Press 1934. We have used this first edition.

43 *Ibid.*, 4, quoting Hubert Parry.

and timeless standards of beauty. Thus, music must have its offspring in home soil: 'if the roots of your art are firmly planted in your own soil and that soil has anything individual to give you, you may still gain the whole world'.⁴⁴ This is obviously a view that could embrace Nielsen, the lad from Funen soil who was about to conquer the whole world without giving up his healthy roots. (And it is almost literally applied to Nielsen by Robert Simpson in his 1952 book: 'He [Nielsen] realizes ... that he and his music are dependent on ... the ordinary, straightforward folk among whom he feels at home.'⁴⁵) This is of course only one way of interpreting the Nielsen legacy but it was for sixty years the dominant one in Nielsen reception, relying heavily on Nielsen's childhood memoirs and his collection of essays *Living Music*.

The soil of music is, according to Vaughan Williams, found in the tone of the language and in original, uncorrupted folk music. This is no surprise, as this is the model for national musics all over Europe, based on Herder's thoughts on the nation and the *folk*.

Vaughan Williams relies on Sharp's substantial collections of English folk song, which were to a large extent from Somerset. As we do not any longer believe that there is such thing as a natural core of the nation just waiting to be found within folk music, what is of interest is *how* he interprets this body of songs and *what* he considers the essential features. And quite interestingly, the one phrase he presents as the quintessential example of English tone has quite a few resemblances to characteristics of Nielsen's musical language (or at least one could say: to one of the legacies of the essentials in Nielsen's musical language).



Fig. 1. Music example from Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, p. 33.

It shows the upbeat rising fourth, and contains a movement to a minor third and back, metric irregularity, and a minor seventh. And a few pages later he shows the whole tune, 'Searching for lambs', arguing that one phrase is 'growing naturally' out of the former and that the full complex features '[a]ll the principles of great art ...: unity, variety, symmetry, development, continuity.'⁴⁶ These are aesthetic values of organicism and organic growth, demonstrated to be essential to English folk song,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁵ Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen Symphonist*, 2nd edn., 56. The passage refers to Nielsen at the time he was composing his Third Symphony, 1910-11.

⁴⁶ Vaughan Williams, *op. cit.*, 35f.

“SEARCHING FOR LAMBS”

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Fig. 2. Music example from Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, p. 36.

exemplified with *that* specific tune carefully chosen out of hundreds which most convincingly shows these features.

One more thing before we leave Vaughan Williams behind: in his evaluation of true folk song, he lists features that are close to some of the characteristics of Nielsen’s aesthetics and *topoi* in Nielsen reception. Folk song is 1) purely intuitive, not calculated; 2) purely oral, therefore memorable; 3) applied to words or dance; 4) purely melodic, and as such absolutely free in its rhythmical figures and modal rather than tonal in the modern sense of the word.⁴⁷ As an ideal it resembles Nielsen’s statement that one ought to strive for a purely melodic, unison music.⁴⁸ Not that he did actually compose that way, but still, it is a powerful vision of purely melodic music as the highest goal to be reached.

A few examples of core features in Nielsen’s music which resemble the features in the example above might make the case (see Music Example 1). We refer to well-known examples, which we do not claim prove what is of overall significance in Nielsen’s style. This is a discussion of reception, not of style. As was the case with English folk song, the point is to be found in the *perception* of core features in Nielsen’s music. Actually, these are quite well known. Concerning his use of rising fourths and melodic movement within the scope of a minor, one might just point to Jørgen I. Jensen’s biography, and the use of the low seventh degree has been another recurring *topoi* in

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 42ff.

⁴⁸ Carl Nielsen in a letter to Julius Röntgen, 16.12.1905: ‘jeg ser i Aanden en hel ny Kunst af det rene archaiske Præg. Hvad siger Du til en enstemmig Musik?’, in John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven*, vol. 2, Copenhagen 2006, 582. Cf. Thomas Michelsen, ‘Carl Nielsen og den græske musik’, *Fund og Forskning* 37 (1998), esp. 225-27.

1) Upbeat rising fourth

a) Du danske mand (1906)



b) Jens Vejmand (1907)



c) Symphony No. 3, 1. movement, main theme (1911)



d) Symphony No. 3, 4. movement, main theme (1911)



e) Symphony No. 5, 2. movement, presto theme (1922)



2) Movement to minor third and back

a) Genrebillede, Op. 6 I (189?)



b) Symphony No. 5



3) Flat sevenths

a) Symphony No. 2



b) Violin Sonata, Op. 9



Ex. 1. Characteristic features in Nielsen's music.

Nielsen reception, at least since Ludvig Dolleris' monograph on Nielsen.⁴⁹ Even if it is rare to find (notated) extended bars like the one in the English folk tune, Nielsen's freedom in handling the rhythm in his melodic lines and the organicity displayed in rhythmical as well as melodic developments in his music are other well-known features appreciated by Nielsen listeners. One could just mention the beginning of his Fifth Symphony, which is commonly perceived as pure organic growth. For Robert Simpson, this extends to the whole first part of the symphony: "Who would have thought that so much could have come out of a gently waving viola line in empty space?"⁵⁰

To sum up: the affinity between Vaughan Williams' image of English national music and perceived characteristics of Nielsen's style made it easier for English listeners and critics to appreciate Nielsen's music than for those on the European Continent, and this might help explain the rather favourable reception of Nielsen in Britain.

49 Jørgen I. Jensen, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren*, Copenhagen 1991, has numerous references to the rising fourth and the use of minor thirds as well as to what he considers the 'female' motif, that is, falling melodic lines from the fifth to the first degree. Ludvig Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen. En Musikografi*, Odense 1949, is close to obsessed with the idea of Nielsen's use of '... the antique principle', mainly low sevenths, of which he lists a range on 354f.

50 Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, rev. edn., London 1979, 101f. Cf. Fjeldsøe, *op. cit.*, 18-26.

A B S T R A C T

Why did Carl Nielsen achieve such a favourable reception in England from the 1950s on, compared to the rather reluctant recognition in continental Europe? We would suggest that one reason could be an affinity of features in his music with the concept of English national music. This attempt to discuss the British reception of Nielsen does, of course, not imply that Nielsen's music is English. From a constructivist position, national musics are based on cultural common-views in a population of people identifying themselves with a certain concept of a nation which they regard their own.

The concept of English national music had Ralph Vaughan Williams as chief engineer and champion. Based on Cecil J. Sharp's scientific investigation of the English folk song, Vaughan Williams developed a theoretical background on which English composers could (and later would) create their compositions, and his thoughts became prevalent through the English musical establishment.

Such ideas of English music did not by accident or as some kind of revelation find their way to the hearts and minds of English listeners and critics. The success was due to a deliberate effort by a national movement, and a most crucial feature was the introduction of folk song singing in elementary schools, instilling these particular views into following generations of listeners. Though mainly concerned with the music of England, Vaughan Williams' ideas were not limited by nationality as such, but were general guidelines for every composer in every nation of the world. In many ways Nielsen's music can be seen to fit Vaughan Williams' characteristics for good music. When first established, ideas of national music are embedded in a value system that considers such music of high quality and thus music – like Nielsen's – which has affinities with the image of English national music, is more likely to be recognized and appreciated as 'good'.