
MUSIC AS LIFE: AUTHORITY AND MEANING IN NIELSEN'S FOURTH SYMPHONY¹

By Raymond Knapp

Although Carl Nielsen provided an explanation for his Fourth Symphony, *The Inextinguishable* – which, in fact, ranks among his most often quoted statements – neither there nor elsewhere in his public or private writings does he even mention, let alone try to explain, the symphony's most extreme moment: the startling *coup de théâtre* that interrupts the finale, when, completely unprepared, a timpani duet suddenly erupts (beginning with the pickup to b. 765), briefly silencing the rest of the orchestra.² I wish in this essay to query this decidedly odd symphonic moment and its position within the symphony, in particular within the symphony as 'explained' by its composer.

As a starting point, I do think it matters what composers say about their work, however eccentric. This may be true for any creative artist, but it is especially so for a creator of *music*, which as a medium has rather more verbs and modifiers than nouns in its vocabulary. Frankly, we need all the help we can get in figuring out what a piece of music might mean, especially when it does unexpected things, such as the passage in question. Yet here there is a particularly sharp bifurcation between Nielsen's explana-

1 This essay owes much to the invigorating discussions that took place during 'Carl Nielsen: Inheritance and Legacy' (symposium hosted by the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at Copenhagen University, the Royal Danish Academy of Music, and the Royal Library in Copenhagen, November 2011); I owe special thanks to Daniel Grimley for his feedback in the early stages of planning this essay, and for his valuable comments and advice after reading an early draft.

2 The one exception is a kind of 'smoking gun' (in two senses), startling in its singularity. Thorvald Nielsen in 'Nogle personlige erindringer', in Jürgen Balzer (ed.), *Carl Nielsen i hundredåret for hans fødsel*, Copenhagen 1965, reports that Nielsen told him in 1915, in response to his question concerning what he was currently working on, 'A new symphony, in fact. I have got an idea about a duel between two kettledrums, something about the war' (*Ja, det er såmænd en ny symfoni. Jeg har en ide med en duel mellem to pauker, det er noget med krigen*), going on to describe the lyrical theme in the first movement, in parallel thirds, which he confesses is 'not quite like me, but it came out in that way, so it's going to be like that all the same' (*Det ligner ellers ikke mig, men det kom nu sådan, og sådan skal det alligevel være.*) (12). Taken together with

tion for the work as a whole and what this passage suggests through its engagement in more familiar tropes of instrumental expression, especially given its historical moment.

On the one hand, we have Nielsen's famous declaration – made in reference specifically to this symphony but often applied more broadly as an explanation for his practices and philosophy as a composer – that 'music is life':

The Composer, in using the title *The Inextinguishable*, has attempted to suggest in a single word what only the music itself has the power to express fully: the elementary will to life. [...]

Once more: music is life, and like it inextinguishable. For that reason the word that the composer has set above his work might seem superfluous; however, he has used it to emphasize the strictly musical character of his task. No programme, but a signpost into music's own domain.³

Nielsen's more familiar (and mutually reinforcing) statements about the symphony, this reminiscence rather more proves than disproves his avoidance of the issue, since it comes from a unique private communication well before the symphony was presented to the public, was apparently never repeated by Nielsen despite many opportunities, and (probably because it is late-appearing and anecdotal) has been neither much quoted nor much discussed in the scholarly literature on the symphony. Despite its anecdotal basis, the statement rings true to Nielsen's ways of talking about his own work, especially his remarks about the first-movement theme.

Most of Nielsen's other public and private statements regarding the Fourth Symphony – all variants of the familiar statement in the published score – have been conveniently brought together by Michael Fjeldsøe as Fig. 3 in his 'Carl Nielsen and the Current of Vitalism in Art,' *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 26-42, 36-37. Fjeldsøe also includes other statements from Nielsen regarding the Fourth, garnered from Nielsen's letters (31 and 34). For another, overlapping compilation of Nielsen's statements about the symphony, see *Carl Nielsen Works II/4, The Inextinguishable*, Copenhagen 2000, ed. Claus Røllum-Larsen, 'Preface', xi-xxi.

Although Nielsen conceived and presented the symphony as one extended movement, I follow the established convention, encouraged by the symphony's layout in four broad sections, of referring to its sections as the movements of a traditional symphonic cycle, but using the continuous measure numbers as given in the published score; thus, the finale begins after the Grand Pause in b. 681.

- 3 *Komponisten har ved Anvendelsen af Titlen 'det Uudslukkelige' med et enkelt Ord søgt at antyde, hvad kun selve Musiken har Magt til fuldt at udtrykke: den elementære Villie til Liv. [...]*

Endnu engang: Musik er Liv, som dette uudslukkelig. Derfor kunde det Ord Komponisten har sat over sit Værk, synes overflødig: han har imidlertid anvendt det for at understrege sin Opgaves strengt musikalske Karakter. Intet Program, men en Vejviser ind paa Musikens eget Omraade. This statement was compiled from Nielsen's notes by his pupil Knud Jeppesen for the occasion of the work's premiere on February 1, 1916, (Claus Røllum-Larsen, *op. cit.*, xiii-xiv), here slightly abbreviated. For an apparent draft for this statement by Nielsen himself, found in his unpublished papers, see Røllum-Larsen, *op. cit.*, in a note on xiv.

Moreover, something along these lines was already part of his generating idea for the symphony, according to a letter he wrote to his wife in May 1914:

I have an idea for a new work which has no programme, but which is to express what we understand by Life Urge or Life Expression – that is, everything that moves, that has the will to life, that cannot be called either bad or good, high or low, large or small, but simply ‘That which is life’ or ‘That which has the will to life’ – you understand, no particular idea of anything ‘magnificent’ or anything ‘fine and delicate’ or warm or cold (violent perhaps) but just life and motion, yet different, very different, but in a context, and sort of constantly flowing, in one great movement or flow. I must have a word or a short title that says this [...] ⁴

If, as Nielsen suggests, the overall ‘noun’ for the Fourth Symphony is ‘the will to life,’ on the other hand we have the strong suggestion that this particular passage, first performed nearly two years into the First World War, and employing timpani in a way that both exploits and emphasizes their capacity to suggest the sounds of battle, is meant to evoke that war. With timpani deployed on either side of the stage, it is presented more as a timpani *duel* than as a timpani *duet*, and in its ferocity seems particularly suggestive of a sea battle, evoking an exchange of cannon fire, like broadside volleys from opposed batteries of heavy artillery. Even if the inception of the symphony predated the outbreak of war by a month or so, and the completion and performance of the work predated the Battle of Jutland by several months,⁵ these specific referents reinforce the impression that the timpani duel is topical in two senses, that it introduces the musical topic of battle during a time when much of the world was at war.

4 As given and translated in Røllum-Larsen’s ‘Preface’ to *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/4, xi.
 [...] jeg har en Idé til et nyt Arbejde, som intet Program har, men som skal udtrykke det vi forstaar ved Livstrang eller Livsytringer, altsaa: alt hvad der rører sig, hvad der vil Liv, hvad der ikke kan kaldes, hverken ondt eller godt eller højt eller lavt, stort eller smaat men blot: ‘Det der er Liv’ eller ‘Det der vil Liv’ – Forstaar Du: ingen bestemt Idé om noget ‘storslaet’ eller noget ‘fint og sart’ eller varmt eller koldt (voldsomt maaske) men bare Liv og Bevægelse, dog forskelligt, meget forskelligt, men i en Sammenhæng, og ligesom bestandigt rindende, i én stor Sats i én Strøm. Jeg maa have et Ord eller en kort Titel, der siger dette; letter of 3.5.1914 to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, quoted from John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven*, vol. 5, Copenhagen 2009, 108.

5 The chronology is as follows:

May 1914: Nielsen’s earliest mention of the symphony, in a letter to his wife
 June 1914: Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand
 July 1914: First declaration of war
 January 1916: Completion of the symphony (premiered Feb. 1)
 May 1916: Battle of Jutland, the naval battle between the German and the British fleets fought off the West coast of Jutland on 31 May and 1 June, involving heavy losses on both sides

Curiously, the timpani duel does not figure nearly as prominently in scholarly accounts of the symphony as in more broadly aimed descriptions and explanations. Moreover, when musicologists do discuss the passage, they almost never identify its evocation of war as such, despite Nielsen's parenthetical phrase – '(violent perhaps)'⁶ – in the 1914 letter to his wife quoted above, and despite the frequency with which commentators outside the academy have identified this element. In fact, in the musicological literature concerning this symphony published in recent decades, I have found only one passage that attempts to apprehend the timpani duel in other than general terms. And, tellingly, that one instance consists of a quotation from a 1923 concert review that relates the timpani duel directly to war: writing after the first performance of the symphony in England, in June 1923, Ernest Newman finds the timpani duel representative of what he terms 'an almost childlike naïveté,' declaring that 'the spasmodic explosions of the kettledrums made us think the air raids had come again.'⁷

More recent accounts of the symphony intended for non-academic audiences continue to show a similar predilection for identifying a 'war' or 'battle' topic for this passage. The *Wikipedia* entry for the symphony refers to 'a 'battle' between two sets of timpani.'⁸ Another general guide to Nielsen notes that the symphony

depicts a battle between the destructive forces of hatred and the burgeoning 'elemental will to live.' [...] One section has a dramatic 'battle of the timpani,' where two complete sets of timpani (kettledrums) hammer out chords, drowning out the rest of the orchestra for a time. [...] [Writing] during the Great War, Nielsen was undoubtedly influenced by the events of the period.⁹

An online concert-season announcement for the Boston Philharmonic's 2011-12 season, referring to performances of the work scheduled for October 2011, notes that the piece was 'written against the backdrop of the First World War and ends with the famous battle between two timpani players,'¹⁰ whereas an online review of that performance refers to the symphony's 'famous duel for timpani in the finale that shakes you like the artillery then blowing Europe apart.'¹¹ A newspaper review of another recent performance asserts, with colorfully mixed images, that

6 (voldsomt maaske)

7 As quoted, without comment of this aspect of the review, in Røllum-Larsen's 'Preface' to *Carl Nielsen Works*, II/4, xix.

8 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Nielsen\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Nielsen)) (accessed December 3, 2011).

9 'Carl Nielsen – Composer,' *h2g2: The Guide to Life, The Universe and Everything*, <http://h2g2.com/dna/h2g2/A592751> (accessed December 3, 2011).

10 <http://www.bostonphil.org/SeasonIntro> (accessed December 3, 2011).

11 Thomas Garvey, 'Zander's Grandeur,' *The Hub Review*, 20.10. 2011, <http://hubreview.blogspot.com/2011/10/zander-in-his-elements.html> (accessed December 3, 2011).

It's a piece that grabs you by the throat and leaves you flattened, culminating with a pitched battle between two full sets of timpani, positioned at opposite sides of the orchestra, that evokes nothing so much as trench warfare (the piece was written during World War I).¹²

Finally, an online review of yet another recent performance of the work offers a similar mix of war-based images: 'Written during the First World War, Nielsen's music summons up the sounds of armies that battle, the ensuing anguish and a call to begin life out of the ashes of despair.'¹³ And so, while it remains important to pay close heed to what Nielsen had to say about the symphony, it seems equally important to pay attention to that which he did *not* say, but which many who are uninhibited by musicological traditions say with some regularity.

Now, to be sure, it is quite possible to reconcile these two ways of getting at the 'nouns' of the Fourth Symphony, and to coordinate the very different nouns – the will to life and war – that they produce. But it is worth considering first how odd it is that Nielsen himself, in explaining the symphony, does not even mention the timpani duel, whether to explain, to deny, or even to explain *away* its evocation of war within his representation of the inextinguishable will to life. We don't even have a non-denial denial, such as Brahms's scornful retort – 'every ass hears as much' – regarding his allusion to Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' theme in the finale of his First Symphony.¹⁴ Perhaps Nielsen felt he didn't have to say anything about his apparent allusion to war because it was too obvious to mention, but he, in parallel to Brahms, thus left the way open for others to deny altogether the possibility that the episode deliberately evokes war. After all, one might argue, Denmark was not even a combatant in the 'Great War.' Or perhaps his not mentioning the episode was deliberate, meant to ensure that war be kept subordinate to the symphony's central theme – the will to life – and not emerge as the Fourth Symphony's main event.

12 Anne Midgette, 'Review: With Beethoven, Dausgaard's NSO debut is a curious letdown,' *The Washington Post*, 19.5.2011. http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/review-with-beethoven-dausgaards-nso-debut-is-a-curious-let-down/2011/05/19/AFYtZV7G_story.html?wprss=rss_wellness (accessed December 3, 2011).

13 James Bash, 'Gomyo and Oregon Symphony create sublime Beethoven – orchestra follows with triumphant Nielsen,' *Oregon Music News*, 2.11.2011, <http://oregonmusicnews.com/tag/carin-miller-packwood/> (accessed December 3, 2011).

14 As recounted by Max Kalbeck, Brahms responded to an impudent observation about the 'remarkable' resemblance of his theme to Beethoven's, with the observation, 'Indeed, and it is even more remarkable that every ass hears as much' (*Es ist merkwürdig, wie das C-Dur-Thema in Ihrem Finale dem Freudenthema der 'Neunten' ähnelt. / Jawohl, und noch merkwürdiger ist, dass das jeder Esel gleich hört*). See Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 4 Vols., Berlin 1912; rep. Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1976), III. 109n.

Let's consider first the question of denial. To claim that Nielsen did not mean to evoke war is, as I've suggested, similar to claiming that Brahms did not mean to allude to Beethoven's Ninth; both claims, at bottom, deny the basic competence of their composers, who we must then assume failed to notice what will be obvious to any alert listener. But even if we have the temerity to suggest such a thing – after all, composers are as prone to misjudgments and oversights as anyone else – we are still left with the problem that such associations cannot be written out of the music itself, so that our sense of each symphony, to be satisfying, must include them. While the codes and conventions of music are more fluid than those of verbal languages, they are not infinitely so. Indeed, this specific situation brings to mind two comic emblems of pompous authority on the brink of collapse: Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty just before his 'great fall,' who haughtily decrees, 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less,' and the exposed Wizard of Oz's admonition to 'Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.'¹⁵ Even if we accept Humpty Dumpty's authority to impose *ad hoc* meanings, conventional associations of his redefined words must still linger; moreover, we cannot unlearn facts once we have learned them, least of all that the fearsome Wizard is no more than a rather ordinary man. So in the end we are left with *both* 'music is life' – no matter what else music might be for us under other circumstances – *and* the evocation of war as an unexpected intruder in the finale. And I see no reason not to shift the burden of this situation back to Nielsen: given the high profile of both these musical nouns, it is much easier – and more plausible – to assume that the composer intended to evoke war, and saw no conflict between that evocation and his main idea for the symphony.

Critical to any understanding of what Nielsen *meant* by evoking war in the finale is what actually happens in musical terms. This is both a general issue and a specific one. Generally, what music *does* with its nebulous nouns is the main substance of a piece, not the noun itself. Moreover, specific to the Fourth Symphony, Nielsen was pretty clear about the relative importance of programmatic associations, although that part of his statement is easily overshadowed by his startling claim that 'music is life': he means with his title to 'emphasize the strictly musical character of his task,' and to direct our attention to 'music's own domain.' This intention has wider implications, as well, consistent with Nielsen's general disregard for programs,¹⁶ but it be-

15 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*, London 1872, Chapter 6; and *The Wizard of Oz*, film directed by Victor Fleming, 1939.

16 Concerning Nielsen's attitudes regarding programs, the primary text is Nielsen's 1909 essay, 'Ord, Musik og Programmusik' (Words, Music and Programme Music), in John Fellow (ed.), *Nielsen til sin samtid*, Copenhagen 1999, 125-136; among many relevant discussions of this text and of Nielsen's views on programs more generally, see especially Finn Mathiassen, 'Music and Philosophy', in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 3 (2008), 65-79.

hooves us first to pay closer attention to what happens to war, in specifically musical terms, within his larger exploration of the ‘will to life,’ paying attention not only to the interactions of the primary belligerents, but also to the effect of their conflict on the larger group, and vice versa.

In broad terms, the timpani duel initially intensifies a crisis already underway near the beginning of the finale, but in the end the combatants align themselves with a triumphant completion to the larger statement of the symphony, by supporting an intensified return of the lyrically folk-like secondary theme of the first movement (bb. 1140-end). As the duel begins (pickup to b. 765), each timpanist plays a different tritone (F-B and D^b-G), each in combative imitation with the other, and in combination producing a French-augmented-sixth chord. And this in itself is worth some attention, in particular to note that the French-sixth chord was especially beloved by Russian composers in the late nineteenth century and after, in part for its capacity to point emphatically in two directions at once (within diatonic harmonic practices, in this case pointing to a resolution to either F[#] or C), and in part because it could be produced within either the whole-tone or octatonic collections (the latter then known as the ‘Rimsky’ scale), in fact constituting the precise overlap between the two collections.¹⁷ For Scriabin, in particular, this capacity of the French-sixth chord to bridge systems held a special allure, allowing it to form the basis for his famous ‘Mystic Chord’ and confirming (for him) the deep connections between music and larger forces – part of a shared philosophical basis that links him to Nielsen’s ‘music is life,’ as we shall see.

As the timpani duel heats up, with accelerating entries, the winds reinforce the French-sixth chord in various figurations (beginning b. 769), while the unison strings develop the full whole-tone scale, beginning with a recollection of the unison motive that launched the symphony, reconfigured as A prefaced by a grace-note G (beginning b. 768; see *Fig. 1* for a summary of the formal trajectory traced through the three timpani-duel episodes). This intensifying frenzy resolves in b. 781 to one of the two tonal alternatives presented by the French-sixth chord (F[#]), with the timpanists initially also aligning with that resolution by sounding an open fifth (F[#]-C[#]). But this resolution does not end the conflict. After a brief re-engagement of the timpanic combatants (bb. 804-810), with opposing tritones producing a different French-sixth chord (E-B^b/C-G^b), they then more consistently unite in supporting the rest of the orchestra in a general

17 Until recently, Nielsen’s use of alternative modes and scales has not received the attention it deserves. See, however, Daniel M. Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, Woodbridge 2010, 272-273, regarding Nielsen’s use of both whole-tone and octatonic collections in the Sixth Symphony; and Robert Rival’s contribution to this volume, regarding octatonicism in the Fifth Symphony.

drive to the triumphant conclusion. In their closest approximation to their original duel after this moment (bb. 1059-1107), the timpanists oppose overlapping sixths rather than disjunct tritones, combining to produce a D-minor triad, and then conclude the episode with ascending glissandi in parallel thirds (from F-A to D[#]-F[#]; b. 1108-1109), setting up the subsequent arrival in E major, where the symphony will conclude.

- 1 First timpani duel (F-B and D^b-G; bb. 764-780)
- 2 Plus Whole-Tone Scale (G-A / B-D^b-E^b-F; bb. 775-780)
- 3 Resolution to F[#]; united timpanic support for orchestra (bb. 781-795)
- 4 Second, briefer timpani episode (E-B^b and C-G^b; bb. 804-810)
- 5 United timpanic support for orchestra (bb. 830-841)
- 6 Final timpani episode (F-D and A-F; bb. 1059-1107)
- 7 Timpani glissandi (F to D[#] & A to F[#]; bb. 1108-1109), leading to final buildup
- 8 Timpani aligned with triumphant completion (bb. 1140 to end)

Fig. 1. Trajectory of the three timpani duels in the finale of *The Inextinguishable*

One way to read this trajectory is as a triumphalist narrative in which the 'right side' wins the war – a reading based in nationalist musical practices that I contextualized and critiqued in the previous *Carl Nielsen Studies*.¹⁸ But this reading, aside from falling into what I there term the 'nationalist trap,' and besides feeling wrongheaded given the actual musical events I've detailed here, also flatly contradicts Nielsen's emphasis. Nielsen suggests rather that, whatever the programmatic basis for the timpani duel, it creates a specifically *musical* situation that carries forward to a specifically *musical* solution. Moreover, in the process, the musical discourse expresses, at once, both the preeminence of music as a domain and a fierce, 'inextinguishable' will to life. If we were to understand this situation according to usual programmatic symphonic practices, we might imagine that the energies of war had been rechanneled in more productive directions, but even that runs somewhat counter to Nielsen's claims, which categorically deny the programmatic dimension of his symphony in favor of its musical statement. But can we as listeners so easily set aside the programmatic dimension? We've already seen 'the man behind the curtain'; the timpani duel evokes the specter of war in fairly direct terms even as it is sublimated into musical processes. How exactly does that sublimation constitute a *solution* to war, even a musical one?

18 Raymond Knapp, 'Carl Nielsen and the Nationalist Trap; or, What, Exactly, Is *Inextinguishable*?', in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 63-76.

War's sublimation into music depends on the suasive ontological unfolding of music: once war has been couched in *musical* terms, its resolution may be assured within well-established musical processes and modes of resolution. Extending this situation according to Nielsen's equation: expressing war in musical terms in effect embraces war as part of *life*, perhaps *à la* Nietzsche.¹⁹ To be sure, this has but limited application in real terms; while the will to life might well express itself in terms of war, few would find war an apt long-term expression of that impulse, given war's inevitably destructive results. But if Nielsen's symphonic statement is to be translated back into real terms, it must surely follow the Nietzschean line that any full statement of the will to life must also include and, *somehow*, absorb the impulse to war. Certainly, this would have been a pressing issue in 1916, even in a neutral nation. Important for Nielsen, as well, is the engagement and partial reconciliation of opposites, in parallel to what we may trace in this and others of his compositions involving rustic simplicity colliding with the worldly complex, or the childlike and natural with cosmopolitan adult sophistication.²⁰ As for that critical *somehow* by which 'life' subsumes 'war,' it may perhaps be found in the slippage between music and life in Nielsen's equation – of which, more later.

But first we must take some account of the problem involved in separating music, conceived in essentialized terms, from its long-standing referential practices. This is not a new problem, to be sure, but it is one that intensifies for Nielsen and his generation in interesting ways. And, indeed, it has been a recurring problem for Nielsen scholars. Several have succeeded well in finding referential meaning in Nielsen's symphonies, including, in particular, Robert Simpson in his pioneering book, David Fanning in his monograph on the Fifth Symphony, and, in their recent books, Anne-Marie Reynolds regarding the First Symphony (chapter 6) and Daniel Grimley regarding the Sixth Symphony (chapter 7).²¹ Yet these and other scholars have also wrestled with Nielsen's intuition-driven method of working with his materials, often – as with

19 For a discussion of how Nielsen's statements for the Fourth Symphony do and do not conform with Nietzschean ideas, see Finn Mathiassen, *op. cit.*, 67.

20 Regarding Nielsen's employment of opposed dualisms, see David Fanning, *Symphony No. 5*, Cambridge 1997, 13-15, and *passim*, as well as his contribution to this volume. Anne-Marie Reynolds, in *Carl Nielsen's Voice: His Songs in Context*, chapter 7, Copenhagen 2010, explores Nielsen's dramatic use of musical dualisms in *Masquerade*; see especially 277-289, on this subject, see also her earlier *Carl Nielsen Unmasked: Art and Popular Music Styles in Maskarade* in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 1 (2004), 137-155. Daniel Grimley, in 'Nielsen's Vitalist Counterpoints', discusses the contrapuntal dimension of these dualisms, *op. cit.*, 212-224; see especially 218f.

21 See Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, London 1952; revised London and New York 1979; Fanning, *op. cit.*, 1997; Reynolds, *op. cit.*, 2010; and Grimley, *op. cit.*

The Inextinguishable – seemingly without real regard for those referential meanings, instead allowing the music in some experiential sense to dictate its own unfolding.²² Although scarcely unique to Nielsen, as he describes it this formulation of the compositional process implicitly claims music to be a mysterious and powerful force akin to – and even overlapping with – nature. This claim may be understood materially, suggesting (to paraphrase Francis Bacon) that music, to be commanded, must be obeyed – or, to put the same thing another way, that one cannot compose against the grain of music. But it may also be understood as pointing to a deeper sense of music's mysterious power, deep enough to allow it to fuse with other profoundly sensed but immaterial or otherwise elusive forces or constructs, such as God, absolute consciousness, infinity (or eternity), *Tristan und Isolde's* 'world breath,' instinctual 'Dionysian' energy, the *Übermensch*, Nielsen's 'will to life,' or, simply, the Will.

But against this construction of music's essential nature, we must also consider the many ways that Nielsen's symphonic discourse is patently referential. Most obviously so is his use of topics, whether well-established, newly minted, or something in between; among the latter, according to David Fanning, may be counted the side drum passages in the Fifth Symphony, with which Fanning argues 'that Nielsen is [...] taking part in the creation of a *topos* as much as [...] drawing on one.'²³ More subtle are his instrumental borrowings from song, which, as Anne-Marie Reynolds has suggested with regard to Nielsen's setting of *Genre Painting* (Genrebillede) and the First Symphony, involve not only a variety of musical techniques, such as Nielsen's complex harmonic and contrapuntal practices, but also striking situational parallels.²⁴ And, in more general terms, there are the myriad ways that Nielsen responds to or aligns himself with the modernist musical predilections of his age, a subject Daniel Grimley explores in *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*. Among the many musical elements Grimley discusses, we may usefully mention two here.

First, there is the unusual conclusion to his *Theme and Variations*, Opus 40, which Nielsen relates, through analogy, to a specifically Nordic exhaustion.²⁵ Far more than a 'signpost,' his account is tantamount to a programmatic explanation. Moreover, as he describes his process, instead of simply following music's inner impulses, he seems actively to have resisted doing so in this instance, even if we might find some unexpected resonance with his observation, regarding the Fifth

22 See Grimley, *op. cit.*, 239-240, regarding, specifically, Nielsen's sometimes intuition-driven experience in composing the first movement of the Sixth Symphony.

23 Fanning, *op. cit.*, 1997, 28.

24 Reynolds, *op. cit.*, 2010, chapter 6.

25 Grimley, *op. cit.*, 210-211.

Symphony, that musical endings cannot be preset, since ‘we never know where we will end up.’²⁶

Second, there is the matter of Nielsen’s counterpoint. Counterpoint, as Grimley suggests in summing up a familiar critical position, ‘signals purity, mastery and authority: it was imbued with canonic values that served [...] to elevate Nielsen’s music into a higher artistic realm.’²⁷ As Grimley demonstrates, counterpoint is, in Nielsen’s case, what many critics point to and wrestle with, and it is hard to believe, given Nielsen’s practices, that he himself did not see counterpoint in similar terms. After placing Nielsen’s counterpoint in the context of Vitalism and elementalism, Grimley summarizes Nielsen’s statements and practices as follows:

Nielsen’s counterpoint ... evokes counterpoint’s familiar historical associations of mastery, control, discipline, and compositional maturity, the canonical figures of Palestrina, Bach, and late Beethoven. But it also challenges and problematizes such associations, not least through Nielsen’s frequent tendency towards dissonance, gestures of collapse, or textural and chromatic saturation. Nielsen’s counterpoint is thus often angular, thorny, and difficult. ... The idea of counterpoint in [certain works of Nielsen] refers to a creative dissonance, a characteristically modernist sense that things constantly threaten to fall apart. [...]

[Nielsen’s is a] characteristically early twentieth-century notion of counterpoint as Vitalist life-force; the melodic line’s energetic struggle and conflict to emerge, develop, and evolve in its full richness and complexity, a process that constantly threatens to spin out of control.²⁸

In the Fourth Symphony, as in his symphonies more generally, Nielsen’s frequent use of fugue and other forms of imitative counterpoint follows practices consistent with the dynamic of symphonic expression as established especially within the Germanic tradition, in which such passages express, among other options, intensification, growth, accumulation, disruptive conflicts, and conflicts leading to alignment. The timpani duel in particular, although not as obviously fugal as other passages in the movement, is actually consistent with Nielsen’s characteristic contrapuntal practices, as it emerges in contentious imitation during all of its ‘dueling’ episodes, and then

26 As quoted in Grimley, *op. cit.*, 239, after Torben Meyer and Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen: Kunstneren og Mennesket*, 2 vols., Copenhagen 1948, vol. 2, 271: *Ja, vi aner jo ikke, hvor vi ender!*

27 Grimley, *op. cit.*, 225.

28 *Ibid.*, 235 and 236.

falls back into conventional timpanic modes of support for large-scale orchestral arrivals and culminations (see Fig. 1). It is important to note that every facet of war's representation in the Fourth Symphony is from the beginning carefully controlled according to Nielsen's contrapuntal and symphonic practices. Even the configuration is carefully chosen, with opposed tritones carrying the strongest possible balance of antagonistic forces, but arranged so as to form, in combination, a sonority that can be easily resolved within traditional harmonic structures. And further, as Grimley details, those practices – far from following some abstract, essentialized sense of music – are both historically grounded and responsive to modernist sensibilities.

This background suggests that we consider also the wider context for what might be termed the 'program problem' in Nielsen's generation. To help set this context, two composers present themselves rather vividly, although both had died before *The Inextinguishable* was conceived: Gustav Mahler, born about five years before Nielsen, and Alexander Scriabin, born about six and half years after Nielsen.²⁹

Mahler's symphonic explorations, like Nielsen's, also included a confrontational notion of counterpoint, a penchant for reconfiguring and repurposing established instrumental topics as well as inventing new ones, a philosophical bent that led him to pursue metaphysical speculation through his music, and a 'progressive' approach to tonality. Mahler struggled in the first part of his career with the 'program problem,' detailing but ultimately withdrawing programs for his symphonies and then, in his symphonies after 1900, continuing to use material highly suggestive of referential content without providing much of a roadmap for that content.³⁰

29 For a discussion of the parallels between Mahler and Nielsen that reads the former through Adorno and (by extension) Bakhtin, see Grimley, *op. cit.*, 237-238, 254-256, and *passim*. Reynolds, in *op. cit.*, 2010, 45-48, discusses parallels between and among Nielsen, Mahler, and Charles Ives. See also Jørgen I. Jensen, 'Carl Nielsen: Artistic Milieu and Tradition: Cultural-Historical Perspectives', in Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion*, Portland 1988, 58-77; Jensen briefly considers Nielsen's parallels with Mahler, Ives, and Scriabin, among others of his generation, 63-64.

30 Mahler's flirtation with programs has been much discussed in the literature; see, for example, Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* (trans. Vernon Wicker, Portland 1993); originally publ. as *Gustav Mahler III: Die Symphonien*, Wiesbaden 1985; Stephen E. Hefling, 'Mahler's "Totdenfeier" and the Problem of Program Music', *19th-Century Music*, 12, (1988), 27-53; Donald Mitchell, 'Swallowing the Programme': Mahler's Fourth Symphony', in Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson (eds.), *The Mahler Companion*, Oxford 1999, 187-216; Anthony Newcomb, 'Narrative Archetypes and Mahler's Ninth Symphony', in Stephen Paul Scher (ed.), *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, New York 1992, 118-136; John R. Palmer, *Program and Process in the Second Symphony of Gustav Mahler* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Davis, 1996); and my *Symphonic Metamorphoses: Subjectivity and Alienation in Mahler's Re-Cycled Songs*, Middletown, Connecticut 2003.

As with Nielsen's distinction between 'program' and 'signpost into music's own domain,' there seems to be in Mahler's wary flirtation with programs a deep suspicion that they will tie music too firmly to the real world, deflecting attention away from music's real work, which takes place at a remove from that world, despite music's dependence on referential material.

The relationship between Scriabin's musical practices and Nielsen's is a bit more complicated, but entails, probably most importantly for our purposes, the rather sticky question of how literally to take his fervent beliefs regarding his music, and regarding the capacities and nature of music more generally. Scriabin's 'Mystic Chord,' for example, was apparently meant to evoke the divine source of everything, and his unfinished 'Mysterium,' was intended, through its proper performance, to bring about the end of the world, through a return to that divine source.³¹ Obviously, we *must* take some account of such beliefs if we are to make sense of Scriabin's music, yet, just as obviously, most of us will have a bit of trouble taking those beliefs seriously on their own terms. Arguably, Nielsen's 'music is life' carries a milder form of this paradox, although in Nielsen's case it is a bit easier to read his statement as an elaborate metaphor.

And yet, in fundamental terms, such speculations about music can *not* simply be taken as metaphors. The context for understanding music developed by certain strands of German Idealist thought – most importantly, through the writings of Fichte, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Wagner, and Nietzsche – seems irretrievably to imbue music with the power to bridge the gap between the material world and whatever forces – most often deemed eternal – that are thought to have brought that world into existence, to sustain it, and to endure beyond it.³² Through such beliefs music

31 Regarding the relationship between Scriabin's musical language and his philosophical ideas, see Mitchell Morris, *Musical Eroticism and the Transcendent Strain: The Works of Alexander Skryabin, 1898-1908* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1998); Simon Morrison, 'Skryabin and the Impossible', in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51:2, (Summer 1998), 283-330; and Anatole Leikin, 'From Paganism to Orthodoxy to Theosophy: Reflections of Other Worlds in the Piano Music of Rachmaninov and Scriabin', in *Voicing the Ineffable: Musical Representations of Religious Experience*, ed. Siglind Bruhn, Hillsdale, New York 2002, 25-44.

32 Although my claim here is more about the intellectual climate surrounding music than about Nielsen's more direct philosophical influences, there has been considerable speculation about the latter, perhaps most usefully by Michael Fjeldsøe concerning Nielsen's affinities with Vitalism, a lead that has been taken up by Grimley, among others (see Fjeldsøe, *op. cit.*, and passages from Grimley, *op. cit.*, quoted and cited earlier). For other speculation about influences on the philosophical basis of Nielsen's art, see Lewis Rowell, 'Carl Nielsen's Homespun Philosophy of Music', Mina Miller, *op. cit.*, 31-57; Jørgen I. Jensen, *op. cit.*; Finn Mathiassen, *op. cit.*, and David Fanning's 'Carl Nielsen and Early Twentieth-Century Musical/Aesthetic Theory', in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 1 (2004), 9-17. Of these, the latter accords particularly

was elevated to the highest of the arts, and its creators raised to a station equivalent to high priests.³³ And we, as musicians and musical academics, all benefit from, partake of, and are implicated in this relatively new but now firmly established hierarchy. Would any of us who inhabit this wonderful realm where music is *everything* be willing to let it go? Probably not. And yet, we do live in a real world, and we, no less than those outside our temple, need those musical features that connect music to that real world. Thus, the paradox is locked within a kind of *rigor mortis*, immobilized on the cusp between this world and whatever lies beyond.

So how, then, might we understand the explanatory labyrinths that result from this 'inextinguishable' paradox? One path might be to borrow from Richard Dyer's discussion of the attraction of the musical, as a genre, to utopianism, when he suggests that musicals let us know 'what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized... [working] at the level of sensibility...'³⁴ Perhaps if we substitute for 'utopia' whatever the particular aims, views, and sensibilities that inform a composer's inception of a work, and allow that work to let us know how all that would feel, we will have a useful mode of reception for not only *The Inextinguishable*, but also a wide range of works that are caught between programs and Idealist reconceptions of music – beginning, perhaps, with Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, recalling his concern to redirect attention from description to feeling.³⁵ We need not believe that 'mu-

well to my own view; thus, regarding affinities between Nielsen's expressed attitudes and those of his contemporaries, Fanning argues, 'Their roots are chiefly in German philosophy, notably in the thoughts of Schopenhauer on Beethoven's symphonies' (10), and then goes on to assess the contributing importance of Hegel. Rowell traces the lineage of Nielsen's 'fusing of contradictions' to Hegel (40; see also Note 18 above), but finds an antipathy between Nielsen and Kierkegaard (36-37). Jensen briefly considers parallels to Wagner and Nietzsche (73). For his part, Matthiassen finds little resonance between Nielsen's expressed attitudes and German Idealism, although he acknowledges a possible 'inverted' link with Nietzsche. Regarding Nielsen's relationship to the thought of Kierkegaard, see Colin Roth's contribution to this volume.

33 Regarding the general impact of German Idealism on musical practices and discourses, see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford and New York 1992; David Gramit's *Cultivating Music: The Aspirations, Interests, and Limits of German Musical Culture, 1770-1848*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 2002; Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music*, Princeton and Oxford 2004; Mark Evan Bonds, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven*, Princeton and Oxford 2006; and chapter 1 of my *Surviving Absolute Music: Haydn, German Idealism, and the Persistent Dualities of Music in the New World* (in process).

34 Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in *Only Entertainment*, ed. Richard Dyer, London 1992, 17-34, 20.

35 Beethoven famously urged that the apparent programmatic dimension of his *Pastoral* Symphony 'be recognized as a matter more of feeling than

sic is life' in order to explore, through music, what that equation might allow us to feel, no more than we need believe in fairy tales to enjoy and learn from the worlds they create for us. As with fairy tales, and fiction more generally, we need those referential bits of the familiar world, which provide the stuff from which the fantasy is made, if we are to generate real feeling through them.

Returning more specifically to the problem that Nielsen has left us, it may now be easier to understand why, in his descriptive account of the symphony, he neglected to mention its evocation of war. The problem centers on how war is to be perceived, and the timing of those perceptions. While, abstractly, war might well be construed as one of the obstacles that the will to life must overcome in the symphony's ontological demonstration that life is, indeed, inextinguishable,³⁶ that construal is not consistent with Nielsen's deployment of the topic in the Fourth Symphony. Rather, he presents war, in musical terms, as an integrated dimension of the will to life, arising out of life's (music's) struggle and in the end supporting its survival. As a philosophical position, this integration may well be defended – most comfortably, to be sure, in times of peace (remembering that Nielsen conceived the symphony be-

of painting in sounds' (as quoted in Elliot Forbes's *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, Princeton 1967, 436). This may be compared to Nielsen's account of his own intentions regarding what would become his Fourth Symphony, from his letter of April 5, 1915 to Julius Röntgen: 'In other words, what I have wanted to describe is all that has the will and the urge to life that cannot be kept down. Not in the sense of demeaning my art to mere nature imitations, but of letting it try to express what lies behind the call of birds, the cries of sadness and joy of animals and human beings, their hungry murmurings and shoutings, fighting and mating, and whatever all the most elementary things are called' (John Fellow (ed.) *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven*, vol. 5, Copenhagen 2009, 221: *Det er altsaa alt hvad der har Villien og Trang til Liv som ikke kan holdes nede, jeg har villet skildre. Ikke saaledes at jeg vilde nedværdige min Kunst til Naturefterligning, men lade den forsøge at udtrykke hvad der ligger bagved Fuglenes Skrig, Dyrenes og Menneskenes Jammer- og Glædeskrig, deres Knurren og Raaben under Sult, Kamp og Parring og hvad alt det elementæreste nu hedder*). For more on the programmatic 'balance' of Beethoven's *Pastoral*, see F. E. Kirby, 'Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony as a *Sinfonia Characteristica*', in *The Musical Quarterly* 56 (1970), 605-623; Owen Jander, 'The Prophetic Conversation in Beethoven's 'Scene by the Brook'', in *The Musical Quarterly* 77 (1993), 508-559; David Wyn Jones, *Beethoven: Pastoral Symphony*, Cambridge 1995; Richard Will, 'Time, Morality, and Humanity in Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50 (1997), 271-329; and my 'A Tale of Two Symphonies: Converging Narratives of Divine Reconciliation in Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth', in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53 (2000), 291-343.

³⁶ This seems to be Robert Simpson's view, who sees *The Inextinguishable* as an implicit statement that life would 'survive' the 'manmade calamity that had struck Europe'; see his 'Carl Nielsen Now: A Personal View', in Mina Miller, *op cit.*, 78-95, 80.

fore the outbreak of 'The Great War').³⁷ However, two years into what then seemed to many to be the most horrific and devastating war ever waged, at the time that the 'music is Life' description was prepared and the symphony premiered, discussing the role of war in the symphony could have seemed highly problematic. Indeed, calling attention to the finale's evocation of war could have invited an uncomfortable comparison of war's destructive, inhuman realities with the manner in which it is incorporated into the symphony, where it arises from the will to life rather than posing a threat to that inextinguishable impulse, and in the end helps fuel the final celebration. It is in the context of this conflict, between war's actual face and its more sympathetically rendered role in the symphony, that we can best understand Nielsen's otherwise puzzling circumspection.

37 Yet, even as late as 1920, 'war' does not make it on to Nielsen's list of the forces that threaten life on earth, as represented in *The Inextinguishable*: 'if the whole world was destroyed through fires, floods, volcanos, etc., and all things alive were destroyed and dead, even then would Nature resume growing new life, begin thriving and pushing with those strong and fine forces which are found in matter itself. [...] These forces, which are 'inextinguishable,' I have tried to show' (*ifald hele Verden blev ødelagt gennem Brand, Vandflod, Vulkaner o.s.v. og alle levende Ting var ødelagte og døde, saa vilde dog Naturen atter begynde at avle nyt Liv, begynde at trænge paa med de stærke og fine Kræfter der findes i selve stoffet [...]* *Disse Kræfter der er "uudslukkelige" har jeg søgt at skildre*. Letter to Julius Röntgen, February 15, 1920, in John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven*, Copenhagen 2010, vol. 6, 383, as quoted and translated by Michael Fjeldsøe, *op. cit.*, 31.

A B S T R A C T

Carl Nielsen has left us in an odd predicament. He “explains” his music in ways that defy being taken literally despite their tone of frank earnestness. At the same time, he works within established idioms and tropes that evoke meanings hard to reconcile either with his explanations (even taken figuratively) or, in some cases, with their host works. Thus, for example, his timpani duel in the Fourth Symphony may reasonably be understood, given its use of established representational tropes and its historical situation, to evoke a naval battle. As such, however, it articulates only awkwardly with Nielsen’s explanation for the symphony, including the famous claim, “Music is Life, and, as life, inextinguishable.”

Drawing on this and similarly perplexing episodes in Nielsen’s symphonies, and considering as well his distinctive contrapuntal practices, I suggest a framework for understanding this explanatory labyrinth. I base this framework in part on Nielsen’s intuitive manner of working with his musical ideas and materials, which derives from and is coupled with his sense of music as a mysterious and powerful force that (to paraphrase Francis Bacon regarding nature) to be commanded, must be obeyed. Comparing Nielsen’s claims and practices with those of roughly contemporary figures such as Mahler and Scriabin, I then argue for a shared basis for these composers’ attitudes and approaches in German Idealism.