
CARL NIELSEN IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

By Paolo Muntoni

The first time Carl Nielsen put his foot on British soil was in 1910, when he visited the English capital together with his wife Anne Marie and his daughter Søs. His wife had decided to stay in London for a while in order to get some precious input from the many art museums and galleries that could help her in pursuing her career as an artist.¹ As such, this was a non-professional visit for the composer, but Nielsen had the opportunity to meet the conductor Henry Wood, leader of the Promenade Concerts, 'the Proms'. The two men even decided that the British legend should conduct one of Nielsen's works at the Proms in the near future.²

After some years, they agreed on a date for the Second Symphony, *The Four Temperaments*, to be played. But in the end Carl declined the invitation:³ ('I am not going to London, as I can't speak English and therefore I can't talk about the performance with Wood anyhow. Indeed he can't speak any other languages than English.')⁴ with a statement that reveals his rather cool attitude towards the British scene and displays his typical caution when talking about his career and the possibility of being successful abroad:

I expect nothing else than that my name, as much as I already can understand, probably will be respected among musicians and music people. But I don't think it is

1 Letter from Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen to Bror Beckmann, 1.10.1910, John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven* (CNB), Copenhagen 2007, vol. III no. 545.

2 *Jyllands Posten*, 11.05.1999, 'Nielsen på plakaten i London', by Elisabeth Saugmann.

3 The music critic from *Jyllands Posten* refers to a cancelled performance of the Third Symphony, *Sinfonia Espansiva*, but other sources reveal that the work on the program was the Second Symphony, namely *The Times*, 22.07.1921 and Kenneth Thompson, *A Dictionary of 20th Century Composers (1911-1971)*, London 1973, 342 ('orig. announced for 13 september 1921, Promenade Concert, but cancelled').

4 Letter from Carl Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 3.9.1921, *Brevudgaven*, op. cit., Vol. 7, text No. 120. *Jeg tager ikke til London, da jeg ikke kan Engelsk og derfor ikke kan tale med Wood om Udførelsen alligevel. Han kan nemlig ikke andet end Engelsk.*

possible to capture the interest of a big public or all in all win favour, because there is actually no interest for higher music here. But now, may it go how it can.⁵

It turned out that his fears were unjustified and the United Kingdom would soon reveal itself as a leading country in international Nielsen research, as well as one of the countries where his music is performed most often. In retrospect, his decision to try his fortune in the UK and present some of his music under his own direction just two years after cancelling the concert in 1921 could be considered quite wise. But even if the UK had had the privilege of Nielsen conducting some of his music, a privilege that many other countries hadn't had, the English would forget all about this Danish debut for nearly 20 years, until the composer was rediscovered, because of a number of favourable circumstances.

Indeed, Nielsen's debut in 1923, in a concert organized together with his son-in-law, the violin virtuoso Emil Telmányi, got quite mixed reviews, which is evident from the examination of two of the major British newspapers, *The Times* and *The Guardian*. The concert included the Violin Concerto with Telmányi as a soloist, *Pan and Syrinx* and most notably the Fourth Symphony, *The Inextinguishable*. *The Times* shows some appreciation for the Danish composer's music, especially for the symphony's *Poco adagio quasi andante*, despite the presence of 'a cold, northern feeling about the orchestration, particularly in the bare use of single instruments'.⁶ *The Guardian* is quite negative in its judgment, criticizing Nielsen's musical design, unable according to the critic Ernest Newman to put together a few discrete musical ideas in a coherent structure:

his music, like the lining of the young lady's coffin, may have a dash of eliotrophe, but that is all... Mr. Nielsen's music seems to be mostly a collection of jottings from a notebook. These are generally very good in themselves, but lack a genuine connective tissue. Some of the effects, too, are of a quite disarming naiveté.⁷

For almost two decades after this evening, Nielsen's music left no consistent tracks in British musical life. Works were seldom performed or broadcast until 1950, when the fifth symphony, with Erik Tuxen as conductor, was quite a success at the Edinburgh

5 *Brevudgaven*, text No. 509, letter from Carl Nielsen to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, 21.6.1923: *Jeg venter mig ikke noget andet end at mit Navn nok – saa vidt jeg allerede kan forstaa – vil blive respekteret iblandt Musikere og Musikmennesker. Men jeg tror ikke det er muligt at faa fat i et stort Publikum eller i det hele taget vinde Sejr, fordi der er faktisk ingen Interesse for højere Musik her. Men nu maa det gaa som det kan.*

6 Part of the review is reproduced in Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, London 1952, 80-81.

7 *The Guardian*, 28.6.1923, 'The week in music', by Ernest Newman.

Festival. This can therefore be considered as the real breakthrough for the composer's reception in Great Britain, as revealed by *The Times*: 'The Danish Radio Orchestra ... introduced Carl Nielsen's Fifth Symphony to this Country. The new acquaintance, preceded only by a recording of the Third Symphony, was well worth making'. The critic had apparently no knowledge of the 1923 concert. Going on: 'If a family resemblance to Brahms was expected, the expectation was falsified by an opening more like Sibelius. There was, however, no need to hunt for distant resemblances, as the symphony had enough features of its own to present as its credentials'.⁸ *The Observer* – *The Guardian's* sister paper – is no less enthusiastic in its musical critic Eric Blom's commentary: 'The highest [spot of the orchestral concerts] was Carl Nielsen's fifth symphony, fascinatingly interesting throughout... I can only add that if I had any urge to compose or any gift, this, living at the time I do, is the sort of music I should like to write'.⁹

The success was repeated about a year later, when the fourth symphony reappeared on the London scene eighteen years after its first performance in England. By comparing the present review from *The Times* with the almost twenty years old one from the same newspaper, Robert Simpson, the pioneer of Nielsen research in the UK, notes with pleasure the absence of any reference to Nordic coldness in the most recent account. Even more remarkable though is the discrepancy between the views expressed in *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. Eric Blom completely reverses the negative reception the symphony had received in 1923:

Carl Nielsen's fourth Symphony was hardly less enthralling than the fifth had been last year. Can there be any reason, beyond the sheer capriciousness of such things, why we should not be in for a Nielsen cultivation as ardent has that which this country has accorded to Sibelius? The Danish master's music has the endless fascination of the unexpected – the unexpected, what is more, growing with poetic spontaneity and unpredictability out of things fundamentally quite normal.¹⁰

The release of Robert Simpson's pioneering book *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist* in 1952 is further proof of the composer's rising fortune in Great Britain. Originally the monograph was scheduled to appear at same time as a Nielsen festival to be held the same year, but that event was cancelled because of economic problems.¹¹ But the

8 *The Times*, 2.9.1951, 'Edinburgh Festival'; the mentioned recording of the Third Symphony was also featured in *The Times*, 24.6.1949, 'New Scores and Records – Stravinsky and Nielsen'.

9 *The Observer*, 3.9.1950, 'Edinburgh Again', by Eric Blom.

10 *The Observer*, 30.09.1951, 'Festival Hall', by Eric Blom.

11 Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, New York 1979, 12.

enthusiasm generated by the Edinburgh and London performances, together with the energetic promotion undertaken by Simpson, were enough to grant the Danish composer a good deal of attention.

Carl Nielsen: Symphonist is also important for another reason: for years it would be the constant reference for every review, article or specialized study regarding Carl Nielsen, its influence still very much palpable today. It would be impossible for me to deal extensively with Simpson's book in this essay; it is nonetheless very important to stress some of its aspects that have been crucial in establishing a tradition for Nielsen research in the UK.

The first of these aspects is the so called 'progressive tonality'. With it the British writer presented a concept that would be considered as the keyword for the analysis of Nielsen's music for the rest of the century: 'most of his mature works treat a chosen key as a goal to be achieved or an order to be evolved, and his final establishment of the key has all the organic inevitability and apparently miraculous beauty with which the flower appears at a plant's point of full growth'.¹² The composer's use and manipulation of tonality has therefore been the main subject – and often the only one – of Nielsen analysis until the 1990s, where other factors and parameters began to be taken into serious consideration. At this point it is important to clarify that the concept of progressive tonality was slightly modified by the author during the years between the two editions of his book, and further developed later on. Already in the essay 'Carl Nielsen and Tonality', written in 1965, Simpson regrets the use of the adjective 'progressive' and replaces it with another one, 'emergent'.¹³ In an article contained in Mina Miller's anthology *The Nielsen Companion*, the writer is even more convinced of the necessity of modifying the concept: 'the term "progressive tonality" is not altogether precise – "emergent" is better, more descriptive of what it actually happens'.¹⁴ The replacement is worth mentioning because it understates the deterministic and teleological implications the word 'progressive' has in it. In this way the tonal process doesn't have to be an expression of a pre-established order but rather a natural evolution: the emergence of a certain tonality from a rather uncertain substratum, its conclusive role being one of the many possibilities suggested by the beginning and the progress of the musical work.

Besides the tonal analysis, Simpson's description of Nielsen is notable for promoting an image of the composer as a symphonist, which is explicit in the title of Simpson's book and which contains in it the implicit belief that the symphonies

12 Robert Simpson, *op. cit.*, 1952, 5.

13 Robert Simpson 'Carl Nielsen and Tonality', *Dansk Musiktidsskrift* (1965) 40:3, 92.

14 Robert Simpson 'Carl Nielsen Now: A Personal View', Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion*, London 1994, 83.

represent the highest point of Nielsen's production. This idea is in many ways still unchallenged today, and the symphonies continue to be by far the most known of Nielsen's works outside Denmark.

But the most deep and lasting nuance of Simpson's interpretation is his idea of Nielsen as a humanist, an artist that was first of all concerned with the human being. In his account of the six symphonies the British author envisions a path that mirrors Nielsen's growth as an artist and as a man. I will return to this point later on in the essay but I anticipate here that this humanistic vision is one of the most peculiar and vivid traits of the British reception of Nielsen.

This essay will follow two parallel paths. The first is a portrait of Nielsen in the press, and I should say that this portrait is in no way complete or exhaustive. First of all, I only take into consideration reviews from *The Times* and *The Guardian*; secondly I focus on two works only, namely the Fourth and the Fifth Symphonies. But I believe a selection is inescapable, because the material is vast and disparate. Moreover, *The Times* and *The Guardian*, besides being two of the most important British newspapers, are indicative of the situation in two important poles of the British reception of Nielsen, London and Manchester, the latter being the home town of the Hallé Orchestra, which did a great deal to promote the Danish composer, especially in the years when Sir John Barbirolli was its leading conductor.

My focus on the Fourth and the Fifth Symphonies is indicative of the status and reputation of the two works as the summit of Nielsen's production, a reputation that, though initially due to Simpson's point of view, is to a great extent still unchallenged.¹⁵ Even if other works since the 1990s have received greater and greater attention and appraisal, the two symphonies were – and still are – the most performed works by Danish composers, and consequently the most often reviewed, which makes them the most suitable candidates for a description of Nielsen's reception by the press. Within this same press reception I have been able to indentify several phases:

- The 'fashion', a period where Nielsen's music was very enthusiastically received (1950-55)
- The withering of this fashion, where the composer meets harsher criticism (1955-65)

¹⁵ A notable exception to this rule is the point of view of John Waterhouse, which can be found, divided in three parts, in *The Musical Times*. According to the scholar, the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies are naïve works in which Nielsen failed to express the modernistic idiom in a convincing manner, while his best contribution to twentieth century music can be found in the Clarinet Concerto. John Waterhouse, 'Nielsen reconsidered', *The Musical Times* 106:1468 (June 1965), 425-27; 106:1469 (July 1965), 515-17; 106:1470 (August 1965), 593-95.

- The revaluation, where Nielsen's music is reconsidered without the excesses of the previous phases (1965-1977)
- The revival (1977-1990), where Nielsen's status as an important composer, pivoting on the British premieres of his two operas *Saul and David* and *Masquerade*, was finally assessed, culminating with his participation as 'composer of the year' at the Promenade Concerts in 1999.

The second path is that of the specialized essays, articles and monographic studies about Carl Nielsen. Also here I had to be selective, and I decided to focus on the last decade of the twentieth century. It was namely in this period that some of Simpson's ideas, particularly the primacy of tonality as the principal analytical factor in Nielsen's works, began to be challenged. This is a fact that contributes to new analytical methods and the consideration of new parameters, both musical and extra musical, when dealing with his music.

Here I focus on a single work, the Sixth Symphony, which holds an odd position, as it is the most rarely performed of the six symphonies and at the same time the most often mentioned in Nielsen literature in the latest 10 years. Due to its complexity, the work is perfectly suited to illustrate how the new analytical methods work alongside the classical Simpsonian 'progressive/emergent tonality'. Finally the latest interpretations of the symphony will provide crucial insights for the understanding of the humanistic vision, which I believe is most typical of the British side of the Danish composer's reception.

Flourishing and withering of the 'Nielsen fashion': 1950-55 and 1955-65

Despite the 1923 Nielsen concert in London, the actual Nielsen reception in the UK began in 1950, when the composer received a great deal of attention from many sides after having being neglected for almost 20 years. The enthusiastic tone expressed by the musical critics from *The Times* and especially *The Observer*, as well as by Robert Simpson, is symptomatic of a trend that would characterize the first half of the 1950's.

This sudden burst of enthusiasm around the Danish composer is still referred to as 'the vogue' or 'the fashion for Carl Nielsen', typical of a period where the artist became an object of fashion and promotion. A similar situation had previously existed around another Scandinavian composer, Jean Sibelius, who had been the centre of a real cult especially in the 1930s, as the earlier comment by Blom witnesses.¹⁶ As

16 See notes 9 and 10. For a more comprehensive study on Sibelius' role in the first part of the twentieth-century musical life in England see for example J.P.E. Harper Scott, 'Our True North: Walton's First Symphony, Sibelianism, and the Nationalization of Modernism in England', *Music & Letters*, 89/4 (2008), 562-89.

Sibelius' fortune was slightly in decline, a new Nordic composer came into the front line, exhibiting a pattern that was very common in British reception, as was very sarcastically expressed by the composer Frederick Delius: 'the English like vogues for this and that. Now, it's Sibelius and when they're tired of him they'll turn to Bruckner and Mahler'.¹⁷

That Nielsen could be reserved a similar treatment was an option many reviewers and scholars contemplated at the time. We can understand this better if we take into consideration Blom's opinion in the already mentioned review of the Fifth Symphony from the 1950s: 'It is to be hoped that he will never be overplayed as Sibelius is in this country. But if the Finnish master's music would benefit if we had a little less of it, by all means let us now have more of the most remarkable Danish composer who has yet appeared'.¹⁸ The danger of Nielsen being overplayed appears to have been avoided one year later: 'I foretell that in a hundred years Nielsen will be, as Berlioz is now, as surprising and as unmatched. Never having been fashionable, he will not grow old-fashioned'.¹⁹ This optimistic outcome is put in doubt only one year later, though: 'It is not difficult to imagine him becoming *our next musical fashion* – which Heaven forbid – or our next widespread success – which Heaven send, if only because the popular verdict could so easily drop upon something infinitely less worthy'.²⁰

Blom was a part of a group of musical critics and scholars that strongly sympathized with Nielsen's music and did a lot to promote it. Besides him were scholars such as Simpson, Hugh Ottaway and Robert Layton, who shared the same worries about the danger of Nielsen becoming fashionable. When an artist has to rely on the public taste only, without a solid background or critical tradition behind him, it is quite likely for him to sink into oblivion.

Besides this 'group of admirers' there was a much larger group for whom Carl Nielsen was one between many composers: unlike Blom's enthusiastic comments in *The Observer*, the anonymous musical critic from *The Times* is rather indifferent to him. Even if he recognizes a certain value in his music and a certain importance in his position as Denmark's leading composer ('On his value and significance at home in Denmark there is no question') and recognizes that he deserves more attention: ('we can profitably enlarge our acquaintance with one who, if not a giant, is at any rate an intelligent, an urbane, and a distinguished member of the European community'), his final judgment is tainted by some observations and cannot be called completely positive:

17 Robert Layton, 'Nielsen and the Gramophone', Mina Miller, *op. cit.*, 124.

18 *The Observer*, 3.9.1950, 'Edinburgh Again', by Eric Blom.

19 *The Observer*, 30.9.1951, 'Festival Hall', by Eric Blom.

20 *The Observer*, 28.12.1952, 'Carl Nielsen', by Eric Blom.

Compared with Beethoven, who tackled the same kind of musical thought, with Sibelius, who lived in the same world, and with Vaughan Williams, another national contemporary composer, Nielsen appear to be defective in sheer invention ... while we find our interest caught and our respectful admiration excited by their [his themes'] energy, their sincerity of purpose and their technical features, we remain emotionally unentangled, neither charmed nor bewitched, nor left imaginatively gasping as we are by the giants.²¹

This point of view grew stronger and stronger in the next couple of years and was justified by the fact that much of Nielsen's music was at that time still unknown and his reputation relied only upon some of his symphonies, especially the third, the fourth and the fifth – too little to assure him a stable place in the repertoire. As soon as one moved from the comfort zone constituted by the Fourth and the Fifth Symphonies criticism was harsher. The Flute Concerto was for example defined as similar in its argument to the Fifth Symphony, but 'the argument was not crisp enough to carry complete conviction. And it was the same alas! In a work with which we are by now sufficiently familiar to know where the fault lay'.²² And the first performance in Great Britain of the Sixth Symphony was received with commentaries that fully reveal Simpson's position as the 'chief authority on Nielsen' – Simpson was the author of the programme note for the concert, his opinion on the symphony will be dealt with later on. Thus the work 'is really one of the few examples of sarcasm in music ... it is ... not a satisfactory symphony because its emotions are too raw and near the surface: for a work of art more complete assimilation is required'.²³

But the final blow in the period known for its fashion for Carl Nielsen was given when the works that made his fortune fell out of favour. J.H. Elliott from *The Guardian* writes for example about the Fifth Symphony:

There was a time where Nielsen's music reached our Country like a refreshing breeze ... we were all elated by a tingling new sensation ... There is a Nielsen idiom, a Nielsen tone of voice, and their impact is stimulating – for a time ... If music does not sound as though it has been shaped for all time and is emerging fully grown, the impression is one of manufacture and contrivance.²⁴

Two years later Elliott's colleague from the same newspaper comments on a performance of the Fourth Symphony with these words: 'Nielsen was undoubtedly an original

21 *The Times*, 12.12.1952, 'Carl Nielsen – The Symphonies'.

22 *The Times*, 23.2.1954, 'Royal Philharmonic Orchestra – More Nielsen'.

23 *The Times*, 30.3.1954, 'Nielsen's Sixth Symphony – First Performance in London'.

24 *The Guardian*, 7.2.1957, 'Hallé Concert', by J.H.E.

and interesting composer who was very unlucky to miss the boat in his lifetime, but he is not quite good or important enough to be worth turning back for'.²⁵ *The Times* is even more severe towards Nielsen: 'compared with the early composition by Brahms, featured in the same concert, the work of the Danish composer, though written in his mature years, is much more naïve than Brahms's concerto, written when the German composer was 20 years old'.²⁶ The worries expressed by Blom and Simpson were confirmed to be true and a significantly cooler climate was created around the Danish composer. Reviews from the early 1960's show that his calibre and his significance had been cut down in size. In a commentary on the Fourth Symphony in 1963 we read: 'an axe is being ground; the music is newly discovered and not yet integrated into the enthusiast's total musical experience; behind the fire there is, at any rate, some smoke' and again: 'The performance made a stimulating reintroduction to the work, and we will be glad to hear it again, but perhaps not too often'.²⁷

About the same concert, Neville Cardus from *The Guardian* continues in the same style: 'Like Sibelius, Nielsen has been elevated by criticism in this country to a position rather too lofty for him to hold on to for any great length of time', expressing clearly the dominant view of the period: Nielsen was a regional composer, an interesting one indeed, but nothing more: 'There is maybe a certain short-circuitism in Nielsen. He tries to escape from musical regionalism by bold orchestral gestures and attitudes, but in the end we feel a curious anonymity'.²⁸

Revaluation: 1965-1977

The celebration of Nielsen's centenary was a considerable event not only in Denmark, but also in the UK. The collection of essays written for the occasion by Danish scholars was translated into English shortly after its publication to witness a continuing interest in the Danish composer in Great Britain. But the point of view had changed significantly since the 'fashionable years' and the artist had been put into a new perspective. Many claims were made on Nielsen's behalf by his admirers, and whoever was outside this small circle found their assertions exaggerated, which ultimately created a hostile climate around the composer. This point of view can be found in some articles from 1965, when both *The Times* and *The Guardian* reflect on the British reception of Nielsen up to date. In *The Guardian* Cardus comments:

²⁵ *The Guardian*, 26.3.1959, 'Nielsen Symphony and Brahms Concerto at The Hallé', by Colin Mason.

²⁶ *The Times*, 14.4.1959, 'Visiting Mancunians - Music Making of Style and Distinction'.

²⁷ *The Times*, 28.9.1963, 'Nielsen Creeps Back'.

²⁸ *The Guardian*, 25.10.1963, 'LPO Concert at the Royal Festival Hall', by Neville Cardus.

We need the chance to live constantly with Nielsen's music, to have it in the air and in the permanent musical scene. It is to be hoped that during the Nielsen centenary celebrations we don't hear too many excessive claims on his behalf. Reaction in opinion – critical or other – is often brutally equal and opposite.²⁹

A similar point of view is given by *The Times*, which comments on Nielsen's position in the European circle of music with a comparison to the English composer Vaughan Williams:

Others of this group [of composers that came from peripheral lands] who once seemed, from limited standpoints, bigger men than they do now are Vaughan Williams and Carl Nielsen ... It is for his symphonic music that Nielsen's place, among the secondary figures of the early twentieth century, is secure ... perspective is badly needed in assessing Nielsen; there has been a conspicuous lack of it in the absurdly extravagant claims put forward on his behalf during the sudden vogue for his music some ten to fifteen years ago ... He is a provincial by the standard of the European musical tradition. But this need not deter us from enjoying the music of such a likably fresh and original composer.³⁰

It is clear from these assessments that a more reflective approach to Nielsen was beginning to emerge. Not the impulsive and enthusiastic approach prompted by the discovery of something new that had characterized the period known as 'the Nielsen fashion' in the first half of the 50's; and not even the hostile climate that was generated as a reaction to this excess of enthusiasm in the last part of the same decade. At this point the composer was considered a very original artist from the European outskirts, a secondary figure who was geographically and stylistically cut out from the music mainstream – a situation that, as we have seen, he shared with his English colleagues, as Great Britain was also a part of the European periphery.

This kind of attitude was partly due to the emergence of modernism in the UK after decades of hostility towards the new directions of European music, but it would not last long. Soon we would witness a gradual but constant appreciation for Nielsen's music, one based on the discovery of some of the works that until then were neglected in Great Britain and at the same time on the reassessment of the works that had made him a name in the early 1950's. A comparison between the reviews of the Fifth Symphony from the 1959 concert with this from 1967 can be helpful to clarify this new situation.

²⁹ *The Guardian*, 5.7.1965, 'Carl Nielsen Centenary', by Neville Cardus.

³⁰ *The Times*, 4.6.1965, 'The originality of Carl Nielsen'.

Whereas the previous reviewers wrote about the naïve and immature character of the symphony, the new commentaries are far more indulgent. The work is, according to Neville Cardus, 'perhaps his most powerful and potential ... Nielsen must command every musician's respect in fact: he kept aloof from the merely subversive fashions of his time'.³¹ The other newspaper is even more flattering and for once we can identify the writer, Stanley Sadie: 'It is temptingly easy to be superior about Nielsen, to dismiss him as a minor local figure over-exalted by the cult of his music which flowered in the early fifties (and duly withered in the late ones). A performance like this [LSO conducted by Seiji Ozawa] gives a true measure of his big, clumsy, turbulent genius'.³²

This positive development in the reception of Nielsen reception is even more palpable during the 1970's when a good number of releases came out. In an article from *The Times* Christopher Ford comments on this newfound enthusiasm around the Danish composer. About the similarities between him and Mahler, Ford writes:

His humanism, his conviction of the ultimate worthiness of man and all the things on-going and positive, lasted a great deal longer into his life than into Mahler's [...] These days Mahler's bitterness and pessimism are more the public taste, but perhaps the time will yet come when, spiritually the sun will rise again, when the urge is for confidence and optimism.³³

And again:

Save for the intrinsic worth of the music, which of course has been there all along for those with ears to hear, it's hard to say what accounts for this sudden burst of interest among the record companies. It certainly contrasts strangely with the comparatively neglect of Nielsen's symphonies in Britain until now.³⁴

Revival: 1977-1999

At the end of the 70's the opera *Saul and David* got its first British performance, receiving substantial attention from the press. This was symptomatic of the newfound interest for the less known part of the composer's output, a trend that began after his centenary in 1965. Ford's words would reveal themselves as prophetic, his point of view being indicative of a new direction in the reception of Nielsen that pivoted

31 *The Guardian*, 1.5.1968, 'John Pritchard and the LPO at the Royal Festival Hall', by Neville Cardus.

32 *The Times*, 2.6.1967, 'Electrifying playing of Nielson [sic]', by Stanley Sadie.

33 *The Guardian*, 25.4.1974, by Christopher Ford (untitled).

34 *Ibid.*

on the sudden discovery of the two dramatic works, *Saul and David* and *Masquerade*, works that received a good deal of attention in the last two decades of the 20th century. It is not possible to report the critique of the operas here. It is enough to say that *Masquerade* was a revelation for the British public and press, and it was hailed as a masterpiece by Edward Pearce, who would later emerge as one of Nielsen's fiercest admirers ever:³⁵ 'Let me endorse Gerald Larner. *The Guardian's* critic has nothing but admiration for Carl Nielsen's opera *Masquerade* ... a masterpiece, nothing more, nothing less'. The extent of Pearce's enthusiasm towards the Danish artist is fully understood when he places him in the Olympus of the best composers of all times:

On my list, Schubert, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven pick themselves, with Haydn, Bruckner and Debussy not far behind. The three greatest composers of this century are Shostakovich, Richard Strauss and Nielsen. That makes ten (and is unfair to Palestrina, Handel and Schumann).³⁶

It is interesting to note that this discovery was not paralleled by a fall in appreciation for the better known Fourth and Fifth Symphonies. On the contrary these two works were still capable of generating enthusiasm, as is evident from this review from *The Times*, when Stephen Pettitt commented on the Fifth Symphony: 'What a wonderful composer Carl Nielsen [sic] is', especially approving of 'the breath-taking dramatic roll he assigns to the two timpanists in the finale'.³⁷ It appears that Nielsen has finally been assessed as an important composer of international value and that the time has passed for crusades on his behalf. Most of the major works and many of the lesser as well were known to the musical critics and their artistic value was no longer contested, as had happened in previous decades. The composer's position was reinforced by his presence at the Promenade Concerts, where in 1999 he was announced as the composer of the year.³⁸

But while Carl Nielsen's reputation can now be considered as established within the press, so much so that practically nothing new can be added, the situation is reversed when we look at his reception in the specialized field. It is exactly when the musical critics get to the point where they don't have anything new to say about his music, that the scholars begin to propose new analytical and hermeneutic methods to understand it, after decades where the Simpsonian approach had been treated as a creed.

35 *The Guardian*, 4.7.1990, 'Hearing the fried pigeon's vibrant song', by Edward Pearce.

36 *The Guardian*, 24.11.1994, 'Two over the eight', by Edward Pearce.

37 *The Times*, 12.09.1984, 'Music in London - CBSO/Rattle' by Stephen Pettitt.

38 *Jyllands-Posten*, 11.5.1999, by Elisabeth Saugmann (untitled).

The 'revolution' is still in process. Its first substantial development found place in the 1990's, where many of the new essays, and in some cases new books, were written by British authors. Many works were taken into consideration, but one in particular captured my attention because of the number of new analytical studies and interpretation dedicated to it during the 1990's and the first decade of the third millennium. And because of the wide range of opinions on and interpretations of the work, it is perfectly suited to illustrate the substance and the spirit of the scholarly reception of Nielsen in Great Britain. This work, the 6th Symphony, *Sinfonia Semplice*, will be discussed in the following part of this essay.

Sinfonia Semplice: a 'reception case'

The Sixth Symphony holds a strange position within Nielsen's symphonic output, being the least performed, outclassed even by lesser non-symphonic works, and at the same time the most discussed in recent times. Surely it is the composition that has the most complex reception history, both in the UK and in Denmark, where the work for a long time was looked at with scepticism if not hostility. Indeed the symphony was until recently considered as the least successful of all, disappointing both in form and content, and it suffered from comparison with the Fifth Symphony, often considered the summit of Nielsen's production.³⁹

The return to a four-movement traditional symphonic scheme, after the more adventurous two-part structure of the Fifth, gave the impression of the composer going a step back; besides, the content was utterly ambiguous and ill-suited to the habitual Nielsenian symphonic pattern of the 'victory-through-struggle' symphony, to quote an expression used by David Fanning in his study on the Fifth;⁴⁰ the work conveyed for many commentators a negative message of resignation and decadence.

Today this opinion has been strongly challenged by more than one author and *Sinfonia Semplice* has been reinterpreted as one of the key works by Nielsen. An examination of the different and disparate readings of it will provide very interesting insights into the nature and peculiarity of the Danish artist. In other words, the symphony is gradually being considered as the closest to a summary, a compendium, of Nielsen's musical thought and praxis. But even more relevant to this essay, the symphony is the best way to follow the scholarly reception of Nielsen in the UK because of the complexity and variety it contains. The wide range of opinions and voices do not prevent some common features being illuminated, which despite the variety of indi-

³⁹ This is a point of view that was pioneered by Simpson, who in the first edition of his book considers the sixth symphony as a step behind the achievements of the Fifth. See Robert Simpson, *op. cit.*, 1952, 105-6.

⁴⁰ David Fanning, *Nielsen's Symphony nr. 5*, Cambridge 1997, 1.

vidual approaches to the work delineate the general character of the British concept of Nielsen, and thus help us understand the reason for his popularity in this country.

The analysis, methods and points of view have been divided into three parts in order to allow us to follow the development in Nielsen research in different areas, such as musical analysis, contextual reading and hermeneutics. Each category shows a linear development, a widening of the interpretative horizon; at the same time each category is an extension of the previous one, as we move from merely musical matters such as tonality, thematicism and harmony towards some more broadly cultural problems, where music is in dialogue with other arts and its cultural context, and ultimately touches cosmic arguments like life and death, decadence and regeneration.

All the new ideas and interpretations are in dialogue with the first English assessment of the symphony, that of Robert Simpson, which is in two parts. The first part was published in 1952, when the work's reputation suffered a serious blow from the writer's negative commentaries, especially directed against the second movement, *Humoresque*, commentaries that would influence future analysis of the symphony. Meyer and Petersen's reading of the same movement as the 'problem child' in Nielsen's production similarly had a negative influence on the Danish reception of the composition.⁴¹ The second interpretation of the symphony is a reversal of the first one and gives new significance to the classical Simpsonian concept of emergent tonality. Above all it transfers the musical argument to a symbolic and metaphorical level that ultimately leads us to entering the extra-musical dimension of the work. Just the fact that all the new studies on the symphony are related to Simpson's gives us an idea of the importance of his work for the Nielsen cause. Nevertheless, his approach and methods appear outworn or in need of revision and integration, and this is exactly what the successive studies on the symphony have done.

Beyond emergent tonality

Simpson's reading of the symphonies in *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist's* first edition is of both musical and ethical character, but it is the first aspect that I am going to consider now. From this point of view his analysis is almost completely dominated by the tonal element, that is, the way Nielsen uses tonality dynamically. To clarify this procedure he employs the concept of progressive tonality, as it has been previously defined.

At first Simpson is not able to identify a similar procedure in the Sixth Symphony, and from this we can understand how important and vital this element was

41 The idea of the *Humoresque* as the 'problem child' ("problembarn") of Nielsen's production can be found in Torben Meyer, Frede Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen: Kunstneren og Mennesket – en biografi*, Copenhagen 1946-47, II, 241, and is also quoted by Daniel Grimley in his recent book on Nielsen. See Daniel Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, 2010, 271.

for his analysis. The lack of it leaves him with a void that is filled up with a negative reading, the negativity not only being in terms of judgment, but also of analytical method: instead of dealing with other constituent parameters of the musical language, such as thematicism, rhythm or melody, Simpson simply registers – and laments – the absence of others, especially the progressive tonal model. In other words, he searches for what is not in the symphony instead of concentrating on what is in the symphony, which is evident from this description of the *Humoresque*:

It cannot have needed much strength to compose the *Humoresque*, but it gives the appalling impression of having absorbed every ounce of nearly exhausted resource; it thus has a horrid power. Analysis is scarcely what it requires here, for disorganization is its essence ... it is in the nature of an exasperated attack on stupidity and viciousness; it is evidence that even a great artist can be brought so low as the level of his petty adversaries, though by its very contrast it throws into relief the greatness of his best work.⁴²

As a result, Simpson, satisfied only with the first movement, judges the work to be the least successful symphony written by Nielsen: ‘Carl Nielsen’s last symphony ... is, taken as a whole, bitterly disappointing in more senses than one’.⁴³ This opinion was to be overturned in Simpson’s second edition, but his method wouldn’t change. Simpson simply reversed his paradigm: the emergent tonality is here not something towards which the whole music process tends, but rather something the music tries at every cost to avoid, only to accept it at the end. The opinion on the symphony is completely changed, not because the writer discovered the richness of its musical argument, but because the new analysis, which employs the reversed emergent tonality, rehabilitates the symphony from an ethical point of view. I will return to this later.

Following Simpson’s example, analysis of Nielsen’s works has for a long time insisted on tonality and neglected the other musical parameters. The first significant study that takes formal and thematic elements into consideration appeared in the 1980’s in Ballantine’s *Twentieth Century Symphony*,⁴⁴ a volume in which Nielsen is given a good deal of attention. The scholar analyses the last three symphonies, showing a new approach to the symphonic problem. Ballantine considers the Sixth Symphony to be a radically new work from the point of view of its musical form, because its apparently traditional four movement scheme conceals a thematic elaboration of great innovation. The twentieth century symphony has, according to the author, abandoned at first the dualism between first and second subject, a feature that was of pri-

42 Robert Simpson, *op. cit.*, 1952, 116.

43 Robert Simpson, *op. cit.*, 1952, 122.

44 Christopher Ballantine, *Twentieth Century Symphony*, London 1983.

mary importance for the classical sonata form and is called by Ballantine ‘manifest dualism’. The dualistic nature has, though, not at all disappeared: it is often present within the symphony’s first subject that is, in this way, made up of a positive, constructive element and a negative, destructive one. This is what the scholar calls ‘immanent dualism’. Works that operate in this way present a discrete degree of formal innovation, operating the procedure called by Ballantine ‘partial externalisation’. But Nielsen’s symphony goes further, as the destroying elements contained in the first subject are capable of such a coherence that it allows them to recreate a second subject, activating the classical dualism not only at the level of the content, but also at the level of the form, representing therefore a situation of ‘total externalization’.⁴⁵

A similar attention to the thematic element can be found in David Fanning’s reading of the symphony, presented in his essay ‘Progressive Thematicism in Nielsen’s symphonies’, which is contained in Mina Miller’s anthology *The Nielsen Companion*.⁴⁶ Fanning has dealt extensively with another work, the Fifth Symphony,⁴⁷ and as a result has written very little about the Sixth, but he has exploited a concept that has been quite influential in the symphony’s later reception and is indicative of the work’s thematic development, the concept of brutalisation.

Similarly to the perversion of the positive element of the first subject which Ballantine described as partial externalization, the ‘brutalisation’ was also present in the Fifth symphony, but its use is much more extensive in *Sinfonia Semplice*: ‘In the Sixth symphony brutalisation is elevated to a structural and expressive principle, compensating for downgrading harmonic means of intensification and conveying an underlying message of corrupted simplicity’.⁴⁸

An application of this concept can be found in Daniel Grimley’s reading of the symphony, which occupies a whole chapter in his new book, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*.⁴⁹ Reversing its historical reception, Grimley regards the symphony as a central work in Nielsen’s production, a work whose complexity and ambiguity is strength rather than a weakness. Grimley’s analysis is lengthy and exhaustive and deserves to be read complete. I can only remind the reader of some key points.

Characteristic of Grimley’s approach is the attention to gestural and structural elements, together with an analysis of all the musical parameters. From a merely musical point of view, his reading of the Sixth Symphony distinguishes itself in two aspects: the application of the Adornian concept of ‘breakthrough’, evident in the sympho-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 151-59.

⁴⁶ Mina Miller, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ See David Fanning, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ David Fanning, ‘Progressive Thematicism in Nielsen’s symphonies’, Mina Miller, *op. cit.*, 167-203.

⁴⁹ Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, ‘Cosmic Variations’, 237-88.

ny's first movement; and the acknowledgment of the composer's constant dialogue between different styles and tradition, evident especially in the composition's finale.

From a formal point of view, Grimley agrees with Ballantine regarding the *Tempo Giusto* as a modified sonata form, but he integrates this model with another one that he developed when analysing *Sinfonia Espansiva*. The latter consists of a rotation of episodes, each constituted by different energy phases that can be synthetically referred to as energy in motion, energy at its peak, and energy in relaxation.⁵⁰ The rotation model corresponds to the sonata form, as each rotation of three phases is equal to an area (exposition, development and recapitulation), which also is made up of three parts: first subject, transition and second subject, the only exception to this correspondence being the development, which is made up of two rotations.

The second of these two rotations is particularly significant. It is at this phase that the breakthrough appears, in the return of previous material in such a deformed and altered way – in other words the brutalisation of previous material – that it is hardly recognizable. In this symphony the brutalisation is particularly extreme, as it involves the most crystalline and innocent passage in the movement, the transition from b. 129, which is transformed in a mechanistic and highly dissonant episode, where the brutalisation operates at every level of the music's texture.⁵¹

And while the massive unbalance created by this episode is still to be resolved at the end of *Tempo Giusto*, the rest of the symphony has the 'mission impossible' of restoring this balance. The finale manages to do that thanks to its subtle game of allusions, whose irony conceals a positive and resolving intent. The *Theme and Variations* is constantly in dialogue with traditional styles and compositional procedures, constantly challenging the audience's expectation by playing a game of contradiction with the established tradition.⁵² Its dialogic texture leads us to the next level, where the music alone is not enough for us to grasp the complexity of the symphony.

Beyond the 'purely musical problems'

A great deal of attention has been dedicated in the latest ten years to those layers of significance within Nielsen's works that go beyond matters of musical language, despite Nielsen's statement that the symphony was about 'purely musical problems'.⁵³

50 Grimley refers here to the German energetic theory of authors such as Kurth, Halm and Mersmann. For an extensive coverage of the topic see the chapter 'Energetic', 96-131, Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, or Daniel Grimley, 'Nielsen's Symphonic Waves', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 43-54.

51 Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, 266.

52 *Ibid.*, 282-87.

53 *Kun rent musikalske problemer*, 'Carl Nielsen om sin lystige symfoni', Interview by Clerk, *Nationaltidende*, John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, Copenhagen 1999, 375-77.

Part of this approach is exemplified by the already mentioned attention to gestural, textural and structural procedures, which are of capital importance in Grimley's reading of the Danish composer's work. These are in fact some factors that music has in common with other kinds of artistic expressions, such as literature or figurative art, for example. In other words Nielsen creates his pieces not only with the musical elements but also with broader artistic devices that show the importance of the dialogue between the various cultural and artistic disciplines.

These issues are especially important for Colin Roth, who in an essay published in *Carl Nielsen Studies* deals with musical and extra-musical problems within *Sinfonia Semplice*. The point where Roth's reading overlaps with Grimley is in their identification of a dialogic texture in the work. According to both scholars this texture has different levels, and ultimately leads to the statement according to which parts of Nielsen's symphony are a kind of musical theatre. The first agents of this dialogue are the instruments, which in the latest phase of Nielsen's compositional career, as we will see more in detail later, acquire a strong individual voice. This allows the composer to use them as characters, a fact that justifies the comparison made between the most theatrical of the symphony's movements, the *Humoresque*, with its instruments 'entering the scene' one by one like characters from a theatre play, and Stravinsky's ballet *Petrushka*.⁵⁴ This use of instruments as 'musical characters' is also present in the finale in a way that recalls the first time the Danish composer made use of such a device, in the last movement of the Wind Quintet of 1922, also a theme with variations, although preceded by a prelude.

But the dialogic level of the symphony is not limited to the instruments' roles being strongly suggested, most evidently in the finale, by the continuous confrontation between different styles and compositional procedures. And far from being exclusive to the theatre world, these characteristics are largely present in literature, especially in the novel.

The novelistic texture of the works invites both Grimley and Roth to suggestive comparisons. In Roth's analysis the reference is the fantasy novel, with its many-sided levels of truth and its immediate approach to the readers.⁵⁵ In Grimley's reading it is the fairy tale whose atmosphere is immediately palpable thanks to the chimes at the beginning of the piece, and again evoked in the moment of most striking simplicity in the whole movement. It is the violation of this atmosphere, operated by the brutalisation of the episode that constitutes the most dramatic – even tragic – aspect of the movement.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 243-44.

⁵⁵ Colin Roth, 'Carl Nielsen and the Danish tradition of storytelling' in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 172-73.

But the literary and theatrical references are not the only ones. Both Grimley and Roth invite a comparison with painting. So the *Humoresque* becomes either a musical representation of what the Dadaists had depicted in their works – but also an embodiment of the spirit of this subversive multicultural movement⁵⁶ – or the musical equivalent of a cubist collage.⁵⁷ And the *Proposta Seria*, despite being one of the best candidates to represent purely musical arguments in the symphony,⁵⁸ contains a central episode of landscape painting, something that Grimley calls ‘a Mahlerian window’, an open space where an imaginative far away landscape is evoked.⁵⁹ The relationship between Nielsen’s music and the landscape, one of the key points in Grimley’s analysis of Nielsen *tout court*, will be taken in consideration again later on.

Despite the similarities, the two scholars’ approach is ultimately different. Even their insistence on the dialogic aspect presents different nuances. Where Grimley focuses on the internal dialogue between Nielsen, the twentieth century-composer, and the compositional styles and procedures of the past, Roth is more concerned with the external dialogue between Nielsen the artist and his public. And it is in this relationship that we are allowed to move another step further. Beyond the merely musical and even the musical contextual-cultural, we approach now matters of most intimate and at the same time cosmic character, where the categories of personal and individual become universal.

A humanistic parable

At the beginning of this essay I was rather explicit in saying that the British Nielsen critique has distinguished itself for having notably enlarged the analytical and methodological horizon. From a purely musical point of view it moved from the monothematic tonally orientated Simpsonian reading towards a more integrated approach where the different musical parameters are in dialogue with each other; but we have been able move even further just by virtue of this dialogic element, crossing the line between the purely musical, which of course is an abstraction, and the contextual level, where music is in dialogue with other arts.

The only border we now have to cross is the border between art and experience, or art and life. The first one to cross this line was Simpson. As I mentioned before, the first reading of *Sinfonia Semplice* by the British writer was negative. But this was not only because the tonality didn’t behave as usual, but because what this use of tonality symbolizes, the struggle of a man who does his best to find a positive solution to his

56 Colin Roth, *op. cit.*, 171.

57 *Ibid.*, 182.

58 *Ibid.*, 182-83.

59 Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, 271.

problems, was lacking. Conversely, the positive reading offered in the second edition of the book is so because the re-appropriation of the paradigm allows Simpson to find positive elements in Nielsen's work. This is in turn possible if we allow the music to signify something beyond itself, in this case Nielsen's sickness, his suffering from *angina pectoris* that weakened him to a great extent. The tonality of G at the opening of the symphony represents thus a state of innocence that is never regained and it is tainted by the hostile tonality of B flat, which represents sickness. Nielsen struggles with this tonality but at the end must accept it.⁶⁰ We are in front of an ethical life-lesson, one where Nielsen elevates himself to a hero who, thanks to irony, is capable of accepting his own fragility and of moving on. With one strike Simpson recovers the ethical principles that made Nielsen's work a convincing humanistic account.⁶¹

The reference to this autobiographical layer of the symphony is suggested by Thorvald Nielsen in an essay written for the composer's centenary,⁶² which reported a statement of the composer who meant to represent Death with the finale's ninth variation. Since then the symphony has always been interpreted as a concealed autobiographical document. This vision is present both in Roth and in another British writer, Jack Lawson. They reflect among other things upon the ambiguity of Nielsen's own statements on the symphony, those in which the composer comments on the work's purely musical character.⁶³

Jack Lawson's biography about Carl Nielsen,⁶⁴ which is addressed to a larger public, dedicates a whole chapter to the Sixth Symphony in the belief that an autobiographic content is concealed behind its 'purely musical surface'. The work is in other words itself part of the biography, it is just not written in words, but in notes. Though missing the analytical and hermeneutic profundity of other accounts, Lawson touches some interesting questions relative to the symphony's ambiguity:

The first riddle of Nielsen's final symphony is its intention of simplicity, yet it was complexity that initially struck its first audience (who saw it as an unsuccessful symphonic experiment from a master of the genre). The second enigma is that the composer seems to have concealed a programmatic content, while describing the work as 'absolute music'.⁶⁵

60 Robert Simpson, *op. cit.*, 1979, 112-36.

61 See also Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, 286-87.

62 Thorvald Nielsen, 'Nogle personlige erindringer', *Carl Nielsen i hundredåret for hans fødsel*, ed. by Jürgen Balzer, Copenhagen 1965, 16-17 (English version: *Carl Nielsen. Centenary Essays*, Copenhagen 1965).

63 Interview by Andreas Vinding of Carl Nielsen, 'Carl Nielsen om sin lystige symfoni', reproduced in John Fellow (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1999, I, 378-79.

64 Jack Lawson, *Carl Nielsen, 20th Century Composers*, London 1997.

65 *Ibid.*, 192.

The arguments of the Scottish writer's description are mainly the symphony's autobiographic level, concealed in a musical frame, and its final message, and in both respects he offers some interpretations that at first seem to contradict each other. Compare for example the following two statements. The first one says:

Nielsen's 'purely musical matters' are the work's extra-musical meaning – the first movement is a statement on the currents of European music. Music talking about music. And in the second movement Nielsen is not defeated and unwell, but he portrays modern music as such; this is a grotesque, but mercifully brief, parody [...] By his juxtaposition of allusions to his own symphonies and the contrasting musical styles of his rivals, the symphony is a statement on music itself.⁶⁶

On the other hand in the second statement the author observes: 'the composer seems to have concealed a programmatic content, while describing the work as "absolute music" ... The fourth movement is the most thinly concealed autobiographical statement'.⁶⁷

Lawson's constant indecision whether to regard the symphony as a musical or an autobiographical problem is not shared by Roth. He is quite convinced that the work can be read in both ways, but that it is far more rewarding to consider the deeper implications of the music, its relation to personal experience. The scholar's reference to the novelistic genre can now be elaborated. As I mentioned before, the various levels of truth and the immediate relationship created between the author and the public (thanks to the game of allusions and references the author plays) prompt Roth to a comparison between *Sinfonia Semplice* and the fantasy novel. One of the layers of truth inside this genre is intelligible to the public only if they allow themselves to abandon their scepticism. The same happens in the symphony: one of its deepest meanings, the link to the composer's personal experience, is detectable if the audience decides to go beyond the musical texture and reach a meaning that in fact is in the work; it is only deeply concealed.⁶⁸

The answer is in the music. Roth carries out an interpretation of the work that is based on its motivic net and individuates two 'melodic and rhythmic motives in families which might be characterised as either Beethovenian ... or "rocking"'.⁶⁹ Roth's argument is not reproducible here but its essence is the affinity of the first

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Colin Roth, *op. cit.*, 171-73.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

family of motive with the Beethovenian ‘faith motive’, which in Nielsen represents the inevitability of faith rather than the victory of the hero over faith, especially in its treatment in *Proposta seria*.⁷⁰

In this way we are able to understand another of the literary references of the symphony: the existential novel, where everyday life, the writer’s personal experience, is shared with the public in a way that invites them to reflect about their own life. In this way the personal and individual become collective, and thus universal.⁷¹ The work is in other words, at least partly, a popular work.

With this later statement Roth’s reading comes even nearer Grimley’s, who also regards *Sinfonia Semplice* as the composer’s closest approach to that Popular Symphony Nielsen had planned but never had the opportunity to write.⁷² Both authors agree in identifying a strong comic element in the symphony, which is ultimately liberating. Roth comments on the final episode made up of the fanfare and the last note played by the bassoon with the following words: ‘If there was any risk that we might take this symphony or its composer seriously, he seems to be saying, we should think again: he wants to have fun, and he wants us to have fun too’.⁷³ And the notoriously nihilistic *Humoresque* becomes for Grimley ‘a ludic ritual, rather than merely an ironic tragedy: a theatrical inversion of polite convention that ultimately serves a liberating purpose, the powerful adoption of a popular musical voice’.⁷⁴

But here the similarities stop. Because if Roth looks at the symphony as a sort of memoir in music, the sonic equivalent to Nielsen’s autobiography *Min fynske barn-dom*,⁷⁵ and as such an intimate and personal document that the author decided to share with an audience, Grimley views the work as a representation of the cosmic powers, a reflection about universal and natural laws.

The latter scholar develops his argument with a comparison between the symphony and another central work in Nielsen’s output, the comic opera *Masquerade*.⁷⁶ Both works are, in his view, a representation of the cycle of life and stress the moment of passage between life and death. The death in *Masquerade*, personified by the character of Corporal Mors, is a symbolic death, the end of the celebration. But it is also the return to everyday life, which is at first accompanied by melancholy, but is subsequently celebrated by the final *Kehraus*. The same progression is presented in the finale of the symphony where the infamous ninth variation, with its *Danse Maca-*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 182-83.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 171-73.

⁷² Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, footnote, 277-79, originally in John Fellow (ed.), *op. cit.*, 496-98.

⁷³ Colin Roth, *op. cit.*, 184.

⁷⁴ Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, 275-76.

⁷⁵ Colin Roth, *op. cit.*, 171.

⁷⁶ Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, 260-63, 283-93.

bre, calls forth Death, while the final Fanfare defies it and ultimately celebrates the cosmic regeneration, the beginning of a new cycle.

This trajectory is for Grimley proof that despite being constantly on the edge, with its music menacing to collapse at every critical moment, the work addresses itself more to regeneration than to decay, a fact that allows the scholar to rename the work as Nielsen's Spring Symphony.⁷⁷

With this twist the normal reception of the symphony as a cynical and resigned work is completely reversed and we come close to Beethovenian heroism, one where sarcasm and irony, but also laughter, are the hero's most powerful weapons. But at the same time the symphony is brought back to those values that the British reception of Nielsen always had insisted on stressing: it is another genuine expression of his humanism.

It is the insistence on Nielsen's humanism that unifies all these different approaches and visions of the work, but also of the composer as a whole. Simpson's revised point of view on the symphony not only changed his usual paradigm because of musical issues, but also, and above all, brought the symphony back on track to that ethical system of values that had always characterized the composer's output. In this way the nihilistic and pessimistic nuances of the work are gone, and it becomes a symbol of heroic humanism; Lawson has a hard time in taking a stand on *Sinfonia Semplice*. At times the work appears pessimistic to him: 'Consciously, or otherwise, the eventual symphony was to be Nielsen's most biographical and least optimistic symphonic document'⁷⁸ but in the end he chooses to look at it in a more positive view: 'the powerful message of the *Sinfonia Semplice* invalidates the dismissal once made by Nielsen's contemporaries that the Sixth was a miserable failure. Perhaps the Sixth is not pessimistic, but rather realistic and thus progressive',⁷⁹ a work about man and his possibility to overcome obstacles. Roth's analysis, with its emphasis on the autobiographic element and the connection between the artist and his public, reads the symphony as a tale of a man's experience which, shared by his fellow human beings, becomes universal; and Grimley's vision of *Sinfonia Semplice*, with its insistence on Nielsen's openness and democratic spirit, reverses the work's pessimistic and nihilistic reputation, even going as far as renaming it Spring Symphony.

Anglo-Danish affinities

Even if the British were late in discovering Carl Nielsen, they soon let him enter their hearts. Many British orchestras and conductors began to be interested in his music

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁷⁸ Jack Lawson, *op. cit.*, 183.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 193, 194.

and this is one of the reasons behind the fact that Great Britain is one of the countries where his music is most often performed.

And if we talk about the number of articles, essays and books dedicated to the artist, Great Britain is clearly ahead. The existence of such a well-established research tradition, clearly the strongest alongside the Danish one, is probably explainable to some extent with historical facts: Simpson's fierce promotion in the 1950's, both as a writer and as a radio producer; the journeys of the Danish Radio Orchestra in 1950 and 1951, which allowed the British public to discover the Fourth and the Fifth Symphonies; the interest of some orchestras and conductors in the same period, the so called Nielsen fashion (the Hallé and sir John Barbirolli, for example) and also much later until our day (Douglas Bostock, Sir Colin Davies); the collaboration between British directors and Danish orchestras or vice versa (Ole Schmidt and LSO).

But are there any deeper reasons that help to explain this interest? What is it that the Englishmen find so fascinating about Nielsen's music? Why are they attracted to it? These questions are of course hardly easy to answer, and I don't intend to do so. But I want to offer some points of reflection, arguing that there may be affinities between Nielsen's music and the British nature on different levels, and suggesting some factors that in interplay with each other can help us understand this interest.

The first fact I would like to reflect upon concerns the geography of music, a factor that since the second part of the 19th century is at least of some relevance. Denmark and the British islands shared, together with other countries, the position of peripheral lands, situated outside the centre of European musical life, which was made up of Germany, Austria, France and Italy. Their composers were as such and to a certain extent far from that second Viennese school modernism which constituted the mainstream of European music in the first part of the 20th century. That the UK has long been resistant to this movement is a matter of fact. Therefore the country looked at composers from its peripheral position and Scandinavia is probably the closest not only geographically but also 'spiritually'. It is not by accident that the greatest contemporary composer in the 1920's and 30's British reception was Sibelius. This situation is reflected in the position of Vaughan Williams, an English composer who was often compared to Carl Nielsen. The two had in fact a similar position in their country's musical life, but their role in the European scene was regarded as marginal, as we can remember from the article 'The originality of Carl Nielsen' which is only one of many examples.⁸⁰

However, the comparison with another English composer, Edward Elgar, is more significant and can be founded in two different sources. In his book *Carl Nielsen*

80 See note 30.

and the idea of modernism Grimley reflects on the double, split aspect of Nielsen's nature, a characteristic that gives him a modernistic edge. This duplicity manifests itself in various ways: in the artist's musical expression, that embraces both local Danish and broader European features; in his looking back to the musical past but always keeping an eye to the contemporary music scene; and, most relevant to this discussion, in his longing for the urban life of the city after a childhood and adolescence spent in the countryside.

This last aspect, but maybe all of them, is shared by the English composer Edward Elgar, together with other minor but still interesting coincidences (most relevant the fact that they both were introduced to the classics through experiences in youth orchestras).⁸¹ But even more striking is the fact that both composers, though longing for the city and its life, often came back to the countryside landscape they loved, both physically, as they repeatedly retired to estates out of the city in order to find quiet and peace, and metaphorically, as some moments of their music happen to be a sonic embodiment of this landscape.

This last statement can be read in Edward Pearce, music critic for *The Guardian*, one of Nielsen's strongest admirers in the 1990's. In part of their music Nielsen and Elgar share the same subject. Not only that, but this actually happens to be one of the dearest subjects to English art, landscape. 'Nielsen looking back at what he loves has exactly Elgar's nostalgia for something cherished and imperilled; tranquillity recollected in emotion'.⁸²

Grimley reflects a great deal upon Nielsen's relationship with the landscape as a place of memory and of cultivation by men, a humanized landscape. But the landscape for Nielsen is also a thing to be experienced with the senses, and in this case with his ears. His childhood and adolescence in the countryside together with an innate curiosity made him very sensitive to sounds: 'as a small child, Carl noted the sounds of insects, animals, humans and machines with keen interest', sounds that not only could be heard but also seen, like that time Carl saw a piano for the first time:

This was something quite different. Here the notes lay in a long shining row before my eyes. Not only could I hear them; I could see them. And I made one great discovery after another. First of all that the deep notes went to the left and the high ones the other way.⁸³

81 Daniel Grimley, *op. cit.*, 16-18.

82 *The Guardian*, 22.4.1992, 'Green thought in a green shade', by Edward Pearce.

83 Jack Lawson, *op. cit.*, 19. *Men dette var noget helt andet. Her laa Tonerne i en lang skinnende Række for mine Øjne. Jeg kunde ikke alene høre dem, men jeg kunne se dem, og jeg gjorde den ene store Opdagelse efter den anden. Allerførst at de dybe Toner gik til venstre, og de høje til den anden Side.* From *Min fynske Barndom*, Copenhagen 1925, 23.

This attitude goes on until late in Nielsen's compositional life and finds its best expression in the works of the 1920s, where the single instruments' idiomatic voices assume a leading role. The best expressions of this are the *Wind Quintet* and the two wind concertos, where Nielsen's empiric interest for sheer sound is found in interplay with his interest for human types, as we will see more in detail later.

These feelings towards the landscape are a subject of both Danish and English art; when Nielsen composes a piece that refers to a landscape, it is a kind of music the British are likely to grasp, as they are used to it from their own composers. But even if we accept the idea that part of Nielsen's music conveys an image of one of the favourite subjects of British as well as Danish art, we cannot possibly think that this affinity alone can explain Nielsen's popularity in Great Britain. What about the music and its linguistic components? Are there specific similarities that allow us to say that Nielsen sounds in a certain way like the British composers?

One of the most widespread stereotypes about Nielsen's music is that it is distinctively Danish because it is based on the qualities of Danish folk music. This is a statement that the composer himself authorized when he commented on his own music, saying that popular melodies would always be the root of his musical writing. But there is a problem in this assertion, as Danish folk music and its most distinctive fingerprints – two over all: the horn calls and the flattened seventh – are as much a nationalistic construction as a genuine local trait.⁸⁴

Moreover these traits were not Danish exclusively, but rather traits of folk music overall that ultimately came from the church modes.⁸⁵ It is nevertheless interesting to discuss at least one episode. In analysing the First Symphony, Simpson noticed that two of its characteristics are the tendency to move from a G minor scale to a C major scale with the Mixolydian seventh grade. A reversed use of this technique is according to Simpson typical of the English Pastoral School, which tends to move from a Mixolydian to a Doric scale, but it is not according to the writer a natural feature,

84 The argument is complex and long; it will be enough to remember that the instrumental popular folk-music was in Denmark closer to German folk-music than to the stereotyped characteristics that were considered features of Danish – or more broadly Nordic – popular song. See Jens Henrik Koudal, 'Folkemelodiernes særegne tonefald – Om skabelsen af en dansk nationalmusik', *Musik og Danskhed – Fem faglige bidrag til debatten om nationalitet*, ed. by Jens Henrik Koudal, Copenhagen 2005, 21-24. This subject is also discussed in Anne-Marie Reynolds, 'Carl Nielsen's folk-like songs and the "Danish national tone"', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 145-163, especially 145-47 and 160-62; see also Daniel M. Grimley, 'Horn calls and flattened sevenths: Nielsen and Danish musical style' in Harry M. White and Michael Murphy (eds.), *Musical Constructions of Nationalism: Essays on the history and ideology of European musical culture, 1800-1945*, Cork 2001, 123-141.

85 This point of view can be found in Karen Vestergård and Ida-Maria Vorre, 'Danishness in Nielsen's folkelige songs', *Carl Nielsen Studies* 3 (2008), 80-101.

but rather the searching of an effect. But is it really the whole story? According to Cecil Sharp this characteristic of the Pastoral School is on the contrary in accordance with one of the most typical features of English folk melody:

there are [...] mixolydian tunes in which the third of the scale is occasionally flattened, thus, technically at any rate, changing the mode from mixolydian to dorian ... This inflection of the third in mixolydian and dorian airs is the only constant and systematic instance of an apparent change of mode to be found in English folk-tunes.⁸⁶

We can therefore say that there are some similarities between Nielsen's music and English popular music. But there are surely many other composers who employ modal features like the flattened seventh interval in their musical writing, and that reason alone is not sufficient to grant them acknowledgment. It is fascinating though to think of the coincidence that the flattened seventh together with the interchangeable role of the major and minor third interval appear to be both two characteristics of the English popular song as well as being two of the so called Nielsen fingerprints.⁸⁷

Empirical humanism

Until now I have reflected upon some factors that can help explain Nielsen's popularity in Great Britain. A historical factor, the promotion of the composer undertaken first by the Danish orchestra and then by Robert Simpson, followed by other scholars and musicians; a geographical factor, Nielsen sharing the same destiny as British composers, outside the mainstream of European music and therefore exhibiting the same unfamiliarity – to a certain extent – with German-Austrian modernism; an artistic-cultural factor, Nielsen showing in his music an artistic attitude towards landscape as a place of memory comparable to Elgar's; and finally a musical factor, Nielsen's supposedly folk-derived fingerprints also being important features of the English popular song analysed by Sharp in his study.

But all these singular factors are nothing taken alone; it is only the interplay between all of them that invite us to reflect. Moreover, there is a factor which I believe is the most crucial: the temperamental one. Robert Simpson stated: 'It was his [Nielsen's] symphonic power, his humour, energy, clarity – and also his willingness to face up to human facts, not to romanticize but not to be cynical either. *The affinity is on a human plane rather than a purely musical one*'.⁸⁸

86 Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs: Some Conclusions*, London 1907, 69-71.

87 For a more extensive treatment of the topic see Paolo Muntoni, *Den britiske reception af Carl Nielsen*, MA-thesis, Copenhagen 2011, 59-63.

88 *The Guardian*, 23.10.1974, 'Plain and Simpson', by Christopher Ford.

Nielsen's interest in human beings has been noticed before. In the closing section of my previous remarks on *Sinfonia Semplice*, I mentioned how all the different approaches to the Sixth Symphony are unified by a single frame: the humanistic parable. This can easily be extended to the whole Nielsenian opus. According to Daniel Grimley, 'The musical conflict that motivates the *Theme and Variations* is a broader trend that can be heard within many, though not all, of Nielsen's later works. For Nielsen, the experience of such conflict became a fundamental structural principle in his music. Ethical power: musical humanism'.⁸⁹ In a similar way, Nielsen's humanism is stressed by Jack Lawson:

Across the broad spectrum, from his high art to his popular songs, the only common thread to be found is its individuality, and the central focus of the phenomenon of Man. He was a man of the soil who formed a spontaneous view of the spiritual world and *his music reflected what he observed rather than what people might be speculating*.⁹⁰

As such, Nielsen made up his own system of beliefs, one that I propose to call empirical humanism, an expression that points to the artist's interest in human beings and at the same time reveals the origin of this interest: the composer's humanistic attitude is not the product of a pre-ordered system of values or a philosophy but a consequence of his observing, curious and searching attitude. Man is revealed as the most fascinating and interesting being in nature, and therefore the most significant inspiration source for Carl Nielsen's music. An early example of his interest in human characterization is the second symphony, *The Four Temperaments*, with its musical description of four human types. This early tendency is still carried on by Nielsen in late works such as the Wind Quintet, *Sinfonia Semplice*, and the two concertos for flute and clarinet in which it is further developed, as human characters are here expressed through a specific sonic quality, the voice – or the voices – of the singular musical instruments. In this way the instruments not only become theatrical or novelistic characters, as it has been suggested above, but sonic portrayers of a human personality. And it is here that Nielsen's empirical humanism is fully revealed.

That many of the compositions from the 1920's show a development in the composer's sensibility for the empirical, sonic quality of the instruments has been already stated. In his Ph.D. dissertation *Den fortrængte modernisme: den ny musik i dansk musikliv 1920-1940*, Michael Fjeldsøe analysed this aspect with specific reference to

89 Daniel Grimley, 'Tonality, Clarity, Strength: Gesture, Form and Nordic Identity in Carl Nielsen's Piano Music', *Music & Letters*, 86/2 (2005), 225.

90 Lawson, *op. cit.*, 220-22.

Nielsen's use of percussion instruments, which are, beginning with the Fourth Symphony, fully dignified members of the composer's orchestra, having even been given solo parts. Moreover, the use of these instruments on equal terms with the more canonical orchestral ones shows the composer's interest in their specific sonic quality, one that is very close to noise.⁹¹In this way the artist fully justifies his claim 'Music is sound'.⁹² I believe the treatment of the instruments as individual voices, each with a distinctive sonic quality, is not only applicable to his use of percussion instruments, but can be extended to his attitude towards instruments *tout court*, which is evident in compositions such as the wind concertos. At the same time Nielsen is aware of the associations that were traditionally established between instruments and geographical, temperamental and literary *topoi*, evident in an interview quoted by Daniel Grimley. Here Nielsen enlists the stereotypes related to some instruments, such as the oboe in relation to Arcadia or a pastoral mood, the horn in relation to Northern Europe, the trumpet to Southern Europe. He uses these associations to his advantage and, as usual, in a very original way, so much so that, together with their bodily, empirical quality, that is, their sound, allow the instruments to describe and characterize. It is with this in his mind that the composer created the Wind Quintet and the wind concertos, works in which every instrument was intended to portray the personality of a player.

The final period of Nielsen's career unites two very strong tendencies: the human characterization whose first evident instance is the Second Symphony; and his interest in the sonic body, which in turn is not only typical of Nielsen the composer but also of Nielsen the human being, as the above mentioned passage from *Min fynske barndom* shows. It is in the meeting of these two directions that Nielsen's empirical humanism is most evidently displayed. It finds its most powerful appearance in the last period of the composer's life after having been latently present, like a connecting thread, during his whole compositional journey.

Nielsen's artistic emphasis on humanity and human types, together with the great value he attributed to experience are all ideal characteristics to make a splash in Great Britain, a country with a great tradition for humanism, but also the homeland of empirical philosophy. Nielsen's temperament is comparable in this respect to another British composer's, one that is explicitly defined as empirical:

91 Michael Fjeldsøe, *Den fortrængte modernisme: den ny musik i dansk musikliv 1920-1940*, Copenhagen 1999, 158-60.

92 *Musik er Lyd. Ibid.*, 160; the statement is taken from an interview to Carl Nielsen by Andreas Vinding from the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, 'Carl Nielsen og instrumenternes sjæl' (Carl Nielsen and the soul of the instruments), reproduced in John Fellow (ed.), *op. cit.*, I, 378-79.

Tippett's individualism sets him in a tradition extending back to early 19th-century Romanticism; but it also derives from equivocations that both define and qualify his English temperament. While his creative attitude displays an *indigenous empiricism*, it is nevertheless informed by a developed intellectual sensibility and an openness to other cultural traditions.⁹³

Empiricism is here clearly defined as a feature of the English temperament. The same feature is present in Carl Nielsen, together with his humanism, which according to Lawson is his substitute for religion:

It is the humanist ideology, or what may be termed as 'the phenomenon of Man'. Nielsen's music grew from behavioural traits he had directly observed, in contrast to the central European soul-searching of many of his contemporaries. He was also often inspired by poems and paintings but not by religious or philosophical system of works.⁹⁴

In 1952 Simpson could predict:

It is quite likely that British music will find in Nielsen a real generating force: not only do his techniques and styles provide much that is still new, but his cast of mind, full-blooded yet utterly free from exaggerations, ranging from kindly humour to stern grandeur, capable of taut and compelling cogency of thought, powerfully constructive yet direct and uncomplicated, has all the qualities that appeal to most Englishmen.⁹⁵

We can now certify that he wasn't mistaken.

93 David Clarke, 'Sir Michael Tippett, (Kemp)', *Oxford Music Online*: www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ep.fjernadgang.kb.dk: author's emphasis.

94 Jack Lawson, *op. cit.*, 10.

95 Robert Simpson, *op. cit.*, 1952, 182.

A B S T R A C T

The United Kingdom has always been receptive to the Danish composer Carl Nielsen. For a long time Great Britain was the only country outside Scandinavia to show interest in his works, which met both the favour of the public and the appreciation of critics. No other country has produced such a comprehensive list of articles, studies and reviews about Nielsen's music.

An overview of the commentaries on Nielsen's most performed works, namely the Fourth and Fifth Symphony, published on two major British newspapers – *The Times* and *The Guardian* – documents how the opinion on his music constantly changed. Critiques range from an initial enthusiastic acclaim to a half-hearted appreciation, and later to reevaluation and revival. An analysis of a selected work, the Sixth Symphony, sheds light on the breadth and variety of what can be now considered a well-established research tradition. Robert Simpson pioneered such research in the 1950's, but it was during the last decade of the 20th century that the most interesting developments unfolded.

Despite the wide range of interpretations, it is possible to track within British research on Carl Nielsen some underlying features that, in interplay with other factors, can help to explain the composer's popularity in the UK.