
NIELSEN'S SAUL AND DAVID AS TRAGEDY:

The Dialectics of Fate and Freedom in Drama and Music

By Anne-Marie Reynolds

In previous studies of Nielsen's opera *Saul and David*, Einar Christiansen's libretto has been compared to the biblical story, and the similarities and differences duly noted.¹ Recently, Patrick McCreless made the tantalizing suggestion that, beyond the biblical narrative, *Saul and David* might constructively be viewed as a tragedy.² Indeed, writers have long identified King Saul as 'the most tragic character in the Old Testament records.'³ I decided to pick up the gauntlet, and in this essay, shall demonstrate that viewing *Saul and David* as a tragedy illuminates not only Christiansen's take on Saul's demise, but also Nielsen's methods of underscoring it musically.

Tragedy

I began by researching the biblical story⁴ and compiling the following list of six basic criteria for tragedy, loosely based on Aristotle's definition and stages of tragedy, as

1 These include Jürgen Balzer, 'The Dramatic Music,' in Jürgen Balzer (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Centenary Essays*, Copenhagen 1965, 75-102; Noel Clegg, *The Writing of Carl Nielsen's Saul og David*, 2 vols., Leeds: University of Leeds Master's thesis, 1989; Karen Bernard, *The Operas of Carl Nielsen: Saul og David (1992) and Maskarade (1906)*, College Park: University of Maryland Ph.D. dissertation, 2001; Preface to *Saul og David* in Niels Bo Foltmann, Peter Hauge and Niels Krabbe (eds.), *Carl Nielsen Works I/4*, Copenhagen 2002, vii-xxx; and Pat McCreless, 'Strange Bedfellows: The Hebrew Bible and Wagner, in *Saul og David*,' in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 4 (2009), 107-144.

2 McCreless, *ibid.*, 143.

3 James Hastings, 'Saul,' in James Hastings (ed.), *The Greater Men and Women of the Bible*, III, New York 1914, 63.

4 Sources include James Hastings, 'Saul,' 'Jonathan,' 'David,' in *ibid.*, 63-160; Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by Emerson Buchanan, in the *Religious Perspectives Series*, XVII, Boston 1967; David Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*, in the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 14, Sheffield, England 1980; J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty*, Cambridge 1992; Yairah Amit, 'The Delicate Balance in the Image of Saul and Its Place in the Deuteronomistic History,' in Carl S. Ehrlich and Marsha C. White (eds.), *Saul in Story and*

described in his *Poetics*.⁵ My aim was to determine the extent to which the opera *Saul and David* meets them, and whether Einar Christiansen's changes to the biblical story served to make it still more tragic.

1) *The tragic figure must be someone in a high position so that he has further to fall than an ordinary person would.*

In the biblical story, Saul does indeed demonstrate that he was a successful leader but, significantly, Christiansen chose to take up his account only at the point that Saul's luck begins to turn.

2) *He cannot be completely evil or his demise will seem entirely justified.*

Saul is not evil personified, for that would make it too easy to write him off. The audience needs to sympathize with him to some extent in order to care what happens to him. Saul's punishment is unfair in that its severity seems disproportionate to what is essentially an error in judgment. He blunders to be sure, but has good intentions. The Philistines are closing in, Saul's army is desperate to do battle, and Samuel is late, so Saul makes the sudden, ill-considered decision to offer the sacrifice himself. He is guilty of impatience and pride, but is neither spiteful nor scheming.

In trimming the story to fit the constraints of an opera libretto, Christiansen managed to avoid reducing it to a simple tale of good versus evil. In the original story, offering the sacrifice is actually Saul's *second* act of disobedience, but Christiansen doesn't mention that – perhaps for the sake of economy, but surely also to make Saul that much more sympathetic. Likewise, Christiansen does not have Saul stalking David, as in the biblical version, so that it is not possible to dismiss him as simply a madman.

3) *He is often the last to know he's doomed.*

For the audience, the unhappy consequences of Saul's actions are intensified by the fact that, watching the events unfold, they understand sooner than he how pointless, and thus pathetic, his protestations against his fate are. He is less aware than they are of the inevitable outcome, because his pride and ego blind him to what is happening. Knowing from the outset that Saul is doomed, it is all the more painful for the audience to witness his stubbornness, and to watch him resist in vain, even as they may appreciate why he feels wronged by God's decision to replace him with the younger,

Tradition, Tübingen 2006, 71-79; Rüdiger Bartelmus, 'Handel and Jennens' Oratorio 'Saul': A Late Musical and Dramatic Rehabilitation of the Figure of Saul', in *ibid.*, 284-307; and Sarah Nicholson, 'Catching the Poetic Eye: Saul Reconceived in Modern Literature', in *ibid.*, 308-333.

5 Aristotle, *Poetics*, Perseus Digital Library edition, sections 1450a-1455b, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, 23, trans. by W. H. Fyfe, Cambridge 1932.

less experienced, David. Especially poignant is Saul's naïvely thinking that if only he can plead his case well enough, justice will be served and he will be exonerated, when the audience knows full well there will be no last-minute reprieve. Perhaps this is why Christiansen opted not to start the opera nearer the beginning of the story, during the time that Saul was successful; to do so would have made his decline quicker and less wrenching, and thus not as tragic.

4) *He is defined in conflict with other people.*

In Christiansen's account of the biblical story, Saul is the most complex figure, and we come to know his various sides through his interactions with the other, less multi-dimensional, characters. Christiansen chose to have David personify goodness, omitting the humanizing character flaws of the original, so that David has less depth than the older king. Even Samuel, whom one might expect to show remorse or compassion towards Saul, is unrelenting in exercising his duties as God's messenger, announcing Saul's fate unequivocally not once, but three times during the course of the opera.

5) *Like the multiple stages of grief, tragedy follows an inexorable series of steps. These are, in essence:*

- 1 the fateful mistake (in Saul's case, the decision to make the sacrifice himself instead of waiting for Samuel)
- 2 the reversal (there are actually several sudden turns in the opera, but Samuel's announcement that God is deposing Saul and anointing David is the catalyst for the rest)
- 3 the realization (Saul realizes he can't compete with David, who has slain tens of thousands to his mere thousands)
- 4 the negative consequence (Saul's despair and suicide)⁶

These are the very points in Saul's transformation from ruler to ruin that Christiansen and Nielsen chose to underscore dramatically and musically.

6) *The tragic figure must have a hand in his downfall.*

Saul's fate seems unfair, to be sure, but it is even more tragic that he's responsible, at least in part, for bringing misfortune upon himself – that through his own actions, he makes matters worse. It is this tension between fate and free will that, more than anything else, makes Saul a tragic figure. Indeed, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur states: 'Without the dialectics of fate and freedom, there would be no tragedy.'⁷ In

⁶ See Amit, *op. cit.*, 72-73.

⁷ Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, 220.

other words, tragedy depends on the tension between forces beyond a person's control, and actions taken of his own volition that may postpone, but ultimately cannot alter, his fate. Saul feels the 'intolerable burden of God's presence,'⁸ even as he is tortured from within by insecurity and jealousy. He has no say in his fate, but he does have a choice in his reaction. As Ricoeur puts it, 'the freedom of the hero introduces into the heart of the inevitable, a germ of uncertainty, a temporary delay, thanks to which there is drama.' This sets the stage for the tragedy's *denouement*, which he goes on to describe this way: 'the unstable mix of certainty and surprise is turned to terror by the drop of transcendent perfidy that falls upon it. Fate must first feel the resistance of freedom before tragic emotion can be born.'⁹

Since Christiansen chose to make Saul's struggle the focal point of the libretto, it is clear that he recognized and sought to develop its dramatic potential, whitening away unnecessary subplots and streamlining the story. Saul's fall from grace through the heroic but ill-fated battle between his human nature and God's will is precisely what qualifies this story as a tragedy.

The Opera

Readers familiar with Nielsen's music may have noticed that some of the terms Ricoeur uses to describe Saul's plight might be applied just as aptly to his compositions, for instance: 'germ of uncertainty, temporary delay, unstable mix of certainty and surprise,' and especially the 'dialectics of fate and freedom.' This is because Nielsen's music unfolds in much the same way as Saul's struggle against the inevitable. Particularly in his large-scale compositions, Nielsen typically establishes some sort of tonal ambiguity or opposition in the first measures, prolonging a state of flux and tension for as long as possible, and resolving the conflict only at the end of the piece, usually in a different key. One of Nielsen's most telling observations is that 'conflict is necessary in order to achieve clarity,'¹⁰ and his music bears this out. In choosing the subject of Saul and David for his first opera, Nielsen surely realized that this paradigm would be the perfect musical means of underscoring the dramatic conflicts among the characters, sudden reversals in the plot, Saul's torment, the pervasive sense of turmoil, and the inevitability of Samuel's prophecy. 'Fate' is the tonal goal, and 'freedom' is the volatile harmonic language and serpentine voice-leading

8 George Steiner, 'Verse in Tragedy,' in *George Steiner: A Reader*, New York 1984, 166, quoted in Exum, *op. cit.*, 6.

9 Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, 221.

10 *Der maa altsaa strides, for at faa Klarhed*. Review of Thomas Laub, *Tolv Viser og Sange af danske Digtere*, in *Politiken*, 10.4. 1921, and in *Levende Musik*, in John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, Copenhagen 1999, 248.

that thwart progress toward that ineluctable end. This is perhaps why many reviewers have noted the opera's symphonic nature; Nielsen's instrumental works depend on these same techniques precisely because he infused all of his compositions with drama. He once admitted as much, saying 'I have always felt strongly attracted by the "dramatic" in art, for is not all art actually dramatic?'"¹¹

In light of what is known about the so-called emergent tonal structure of Nielsen's symphonies, it is not surprising that the first three Acts of *Saul and David* begin and end in different keys, especially considering the propulsive nature of the plot. The opera begins with the chorus parroting the query, 'Has Samuel come?' in the key of D minor, established more by its dominant proxy than the tonic, just as Samuel's persona is conveyed through the people's anxious state of anticipation rather than his actual presence. Likewise, the pastoral key of F major is alluded to, but will not be fully realized until the shepherd David arrives later in the Act to soothe Saul with his singing, accompanied by harp and horn fifths. This first Act, in which Saul's fate is announced, ends in the most distant key possible, A flat major, making abundantly clear that things will never be the same again.

When Samuel arrives too late to offer the sacrifice, he is introduced in a clear, if modal, C major and homophonic texture, in stark contrast to the chromatic tonal language and agitated presentation of Saul's defensive interjections (see *Ex. 1*). This key will ultimately end the opera, the final Act serving as something of an elaborated IV-I cadence, the sacred progression most often associated with Samuel's character, as God's surrogate on earth. C major also figures prominently in the second Act, which turns on David's victorious battle against the Philistines, causing many writers to describe it as his associative tonality.¹² Yet David sings just as often in other equally robust keys (especially D and F major), and C major is not restricted to his appearances. Its increasingly ubiquitous presence over the course of the opera and primacy as the tonal goal suggest that it may more generally represent the fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy: David's star rises in inverse proportion to Saul's decline, and their individual fates are gradually realized, until Saul dies, David replaces him as king, and the opera ends in C major.

If C major represents both the dramatic and tonal goal of the opera, D minor's placement at the beginning may serve as a warning of Saul's downfall, much as the D minor overture to *Don Giovanni* foreshadows the Don's demise. In both cases, the point is brought home with a chromatically-descending lament bass. This inter-

11 *Jeg har altid følt mig stærkt tiltalt af det 'dramatiske' i Kunsten, thi er nu ikke al Kunst dramatisk?* 'Carl Nielsen om *Saul og David*,' interview in *Berlingske Tidende*, 26.2. 1929, in *ibid.*, 518.

12 Examples include Clegg, *op. cit.*, vols. 1, 4, and Robert Simpson, in *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, London 1979, 178.

pretation is supported by parallel encounters of dramatic intensity that also recall Mozart's opera – specifically the two times Don Giovanni and the *Commendatore* meet, which the composer links with reminiscences of the overture. In Nielsen's opera, the first encounter is at the end of Act II, just after Saul realizes his feats in battle are no match for David's, that his thousands killed are mere gnats to David's lions of ten times as many. In a fit of jealous rage, Saul reneges on his offer to allow his daughter to marry, accuses David of being vainglorious, and pitches his spear at him. Stunned, David threatens 'Revenge is God's! We'll meet again, King Saul!'¹³ and flees the scene. Though the key is E flat minor here, the complete chromatically-descending bass line from the Introduction recurs on precisely the same pitches (Bb to Bb) to close the Act. The second encounter is at the climactic finish to Act III, just after Samuel anoints David king. Once again, Saul responds furiously, this time in the key of D minor, singing a rhythmically-augmented version of what Jürgen Balzer calls his 'defiance theme,'¹⁴ and once more angrily flings his spear at David, accusing him of trying to steal the throne, and repeating his refusal to give his daughter's hand in marriage. After David counters that he's stolen nothing, that these were gifts from God (briefly, in C major), the Act closes in D minor, recalling not just the introduction's key but also the melodic gesture that accompanied the raising of the curtain. The ominous warning in the opera's first measures thus proves true: these crucial exchanges seal Saul's fate, and Nielsen highlights their tragic significance by relating them musically. After this, there's no turning back for Saul, Samuel's prophecy is one step closer to being realized, and there's an expressive tonal shift from D to C for the fourth Act.

Within the bounds of this tonal frame, Nielsen's harmonic language is fluid and ambiguous – a byproduct, it seems, of the melodic thread spanning the length of the opera. Chromatic voiceleading (usually in parallel motion), modal mixture, and enharmonicism typically smooth the transitions from key to key. When combined with the composer's characteristic rhythmic drive, the result is a sense of forward momentum, a state of nearly constant flux. 'If my music has any value at all,' Nielsen once said, 'then it is in one thing: that it has a certain current, a certain motion.'¹⁵ Robert Simpson recognized this about *Saul and David*: 'The circumstances are not simply created by the differences of temperament between Saul and David, but by a larger current that carries them.'¹⁶ From the view of the opera as tragedy, this current may be an analogue for the pull of fate in Saul's undoing, a tide against which he is powerless to resist.

13 *Hævnen er Herrens! Vi mødes igen, Kong Saul!* Act II, bb. 1034-1041.

14 Balzer, *op. cit.*, 82.

15 Torben Meyer, 'A Biographical Sketch,' trans. by Harald Knudsen, in Simpson, *op. cit.*, 228.

16 Simpson, *op. cit.*, 177.

306 **Allegro moderato** (♩ = 100)

SAMUEL

Mod dig, o Saul, mod dig _____ hans Haand er
 On you, King Saul, on you _____ God's hand has

310

SAUL

Ha! Sa-mu-el!
 Ah, Sa-mu-el.

SAMUEL

løf - tet, for - di du bi - ed ej; men
 fal - len, be - cause you did not wait, but

313

SAUL

18

Du kom ej hid til den be -
 You did not come at our ap -

SAMUEL

vo - ved selv at brin - ge Her - ren Of - fer.
 dared your-self to bring the Lord burnt of - frings.

Ex. 1. Act I, bb. 306-324

316

SAUL

stem - te Tid.
point - ed time.

SAMUEL

Jeg kom med Her - ren, Saul,
I came with God, King Saul,

319

SAUL

Fi - li - stre - ne drog op fra
The Phil - is - tines rode here from

SAMUEL

da Her - ren vil - de!
when God com - mand - ed.

322

SAUL

Gath. Da vo - ved jeg der - paa; jeg of - red
Gath, and so I forced my - self to sac - ri -

SAMUEL

Stad - Je -

The musical score consists of three systems, each with vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 316-318) shows SAUL's vocal line with lyrics 'stem - te Tid. point - ed time.' and SAMUEL's vocal line with lyrics 'Jeg kom med Her - ren, Saul, I came with God, King Saul,'. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand, with dynamics *f* and *pp*. The second system (measures 319-321) shows SAUL's vocal line with lyrics 'Fi - li - stre - ne drog op fra The Phil - is - tines rode here from' and SAMUEL's vocal line with lyrics 'da Her - ren vil - de! when God com - mand - ed.' The piano accompaniment continues with dynamics *mp*, *p*, *f*, and *p*. The third system (measures 322-324) shows SAUL's vocal line with lyrics 'Gath. Da vo - ved jeg der - paa; jeg of - red Gath, and so I forced my - self to sac - ri -' and SAMUEL's vocal line with lyrics 'Stad - Je -'. The piano accompaniment includes triplets and dynamics *f* and *trinq.*

Ex. 1 continued

And yet, paradoxically, no sooner is this current established than Nielsen aims to disrupt it, for the sake of creating drama. He employs many of the same techniques as in his symphonies to counter and redirect the flow, but here they serve specific illustrative ends, underscoring the situation, character, and text. Examples abound on every page of the score, but a few will have to suffice here. Saul and Samuel's initial meeting (refer again to *Ex. 1*) provides a typical instance of cadences being undermined (in this case by diminished chords) in order to represent the characters' cross purposes: Samuel describes God's displeasure in no uncertain terms, while Saul interjects, trying to justify having made his own decision about the sacrifice. Samuel, then, represents the current of fate, while Saul tries to exert his will against it.

The best example of harmony's being used to thwart progress occurs during the Act II chorus celebrating David's victory over the Philistines and his marriage to Mikal (see *Ex. 2*). The homophonic texture and even some of the progressions are reminiscent of Nielsen's *Festival Prelude* for piano (from the same time). Despite the major key, a sense of unease is suggested by the displacement of the harmonic rhythm between the outer voices (duple accents, within the prevailing triple meter) in bb. 851-853. The tonal center meanwhile strays from A major to C-sharp minor, and must be reined in by the dominant repeatedly, showing that, despite the joyous occasion, something is definitely amiss. Soon, the dominant isn't strong enough to withstand Saul's insecurity at learning about David's disproportionate success on the battlefield, and is derailed by the addition of the seventh in the bass (in b. 862), a single D natural that acts as the 'germ of uncertainty' mentioned in Ricoeur's definition of tragedy. Saul's defiance motive rumbles in the orchestra beneath his grousing, its obsessive circularity representing his all-consuming jealousy (bb. 862-864). The chorus makes repeated attempts to resume the rejoicing, but each time Saul interrupts, overcome with toxic envy.

Throughout the opera as here, the dominant seventh chord in third inversion is one of Nielsen's two favorite means of both suggesting unsettling thoughts or events, and diverting the tonal direction. It recurs so often in his music generally, that David Fanning has called it a Nielsen fingerprint.¹⁷ In Act II, a descending series of 4/2s suggests the gradual encroachment of the Philistine armies (see *Ex. 3*).

The other ubiquitous means of representing everything from uneasiness to terror is the half-diminished seventh chord, comprised of the two intervals Nielsen favors in this opera, both harmonically and melodically: the minor third and minor seventh. Because the half-diminished chord is built on a diminished triad and the seventh wants to resolve downward, it is inherently unstable and enharmonically

¹⁷ David Fanning, 'Carl Nielsen Under the Influence: Some New Sources for the First Symphony,' in *Carl Nielsen Studies* 3 (2008), 18.

844 **Tempo giusto** (♩ = 96)

S. Fry - de - sang, Pau - ke - klang! Blom - ster - væld
Shout for joy, sound the drums! Blossoms bring,

A. Fry - de - sang, Pau - ke - klang! Blom - ster - væld
Shout for joy, sound the drums! Blossoms bring,

CORO

T. Fry - de - sang, Pau - ke - klang! Blom - ster - væld
Shout for joy, sound the drums! Blossoms bring,

B. Fry - de - sang, Pau - ke - klang! Blom - ster - væld
Shout for joy, sound the drums! Blossoms bring,

Tempo giusto (♩ = 96)

848

S. o - ver Hu - sets Gulv! Da - lens Løv om dets
strew the house with flowers. Hang green boughs on the

A. o - ver Hu - sets Gulv! Da - lens Løv om dets
strew the house with flowers. Hang green boughs on the

CORO

T. o - ver Hu - sets Gulv! Da - lens Løv om dets
strew the house with flowers. Hang green boughs on the

B. o - ver Hu - sets Gulv! Da - lens Løv om dets
strew the house with flowers. Hang green boughs on the

Ex. 2. Act II, bb. 844-865

852 39

S. *f*
 Støt - ter! Saul slog Tu - sin-der!
 pil - lars! Saul slew thou - sands.

A. *f*

T. *f*
 Støt - ter! Saul slog Tu - sin-der!
 pil - lars! Saul slew thou - sands.

B. *f*

str. *f^z* *f^z*

857

S. *f* *p* *cresc.*
 Da - vid ti Tu - sin-der!
 Dav - id ten - thou - sands!

A. *f* *p* *cresc.*

T. *f* *p* *cresc.*

B. *f* *p* *cresc.*

f *p* *cresc.*

Ex. 2 continued

862 (grubblende) (brooding)

SAUL

Saul slog Tu-sin-der, Da-vid ti Tu-sin-der!
Saul slew thou-sands, Dav-id ten-thou-sands!

f *p* *pp* *molto*

Ex. 2 continued

141

ABNER

Stren-ge-ne ti-e! Fi-li-ster-hæ-ren har slaa-et Lejr hin-si-des
no time for sing-ing. The Phil-is-tines have pitched their camp o-ver the

di - - - mi - - - nu - - - en - - - do

Ex. 3. Act II, bb. 141-143

ambiguous, capable of suspending or redirecting the tonal focus. Sometimes it even appears in the vocal line, as at the dramatic moment in the first Act when Samuel sings 'But Saul shall be cast out from [God] forever',¹⁸ to a descending melody that highlights the pitches D, B, A^b and F[#] (see Ex. 4).

At other times the half-diminished chord involves repetition in quick succession, as when Saul perseverates on David's ten thousands. The orchestra mirrors his obsession by incessantly repeating one of David's tunes, nearly unrecognizable at this point, because it has grown more distorted with every repetition, as Saul has grown progressively more deranged. Each statement is punctuated by a half-diminished chord (see Ex. 5). The most striking instance involves two half-diminished seventh chords a

18 *Men denne har han udstødt fra sit Aasyn!*

(Folket viger forfærdet.)
(The people begin to turn away,
frightened.)

408

SAMUEL

Men den - ne har han ud - stødt fra sit Aa - syn!
But Saul shall be cast out from Him for - ev - er.

Ex. 4. Act I, bb. 408-410

step apart in quick succession (bb. 197-198), as the chorus calls for Saul to kill Goliath, and Saul replies, discouraged: ‘God has forsaken my house; his spirit has left me in anger.’ (see Ex. 6). The many such chords peppered throughout the opera tend to occur at moments of dramatic significance relating to Saul’s fate, their ambiguity serving to underline the negative emotion he’s feeling, and to deflect the established tonal direction.

46

(i stigende Vrede)
(in mounting anger)

926

SAUL

Tu - sin - der slog jeg!
Thou - sands have I slain!

Tu - sin - de
Thou - sands of

1
2

S.

slog!
slain!

A.

CORO

T.

slog!
slain!

B.

vc. *fp*

woodw. *fp*

Ex. 5. Act II, bb. 926-933

928

SAUL

Myg mod Da-vids ti Tu - sin - de Lø - ver,
gnats for Dav-id's ten - thou - sand li - ons.

930

SAUL

og bed - ske - re Haan er i Ven - te!
What more can he have but the king - dom?

932

SAUL

Le - ver han læn - ge, da vor - der mit Ri - ge vis - se - lig hans!
While he is liv - ing, what fur - ther con - tempt can light up - on me?

Ex. 5 continued

196 (sætter sig mismodig)
(sitting down, discouraged) **Lento**

SAUL Her - ren har mær-ke-t mit
God has for-sak - en my

T.1 Skam ved dit Sværd!
shame with your sword!

T.2 Bort-tag vor Skam ved Sværd!
A - venge it with your sword!

CORO

B.1 Bort-tag vor Skam!
A - venge our shame!

B.2 tag vor Skam ved dit Sværd!
venge our shame with your sword!

Lento (♩ = 72) *col canto*

ff *fp*

199

SAUL Hus, hans Aand har for-ladt mig i Vre-de, og Spi-ret er brudt i min Haand.
house, His spir - it de-par-ted in an-ger, and shat-tered the sword in my hand.

ff

Ex. 6. Act II, bb. 196-201

Scholars have looked for Wagner's influence on *Saul and David*, and it certainly may be found in the orchestration (especially Samuel's music), and occasionally in the association of motives with specific characters.¹⁹ Saul's 'defiance theme' and some of David's melodies do recur with variation, but scholars have rightly noted that these motives are not subjected to development as thoroughgoing as in Wagner's music.²⁰ There are also allusions to specific Wagner operas, though again, these are rare and fleeting. Surely the most striking instance is when Samuel anoints David (see Ex. 7a). In a deep voice much like Wotan's, Samuel sings the phrase 'He lays his Word upon your lips,'²¹ referring to God and his commandments. At just that moment, the music takes a deceptive turn, the supporting Neapolitan progression remarkably similar to one in 'Wotan's Farewell' at the end of *Die Walküre* (see Ex. 7b, p. 296), when Wotan sings about giving Brunhilde one final kiss. Lips figure in both lyrics, and these are sung by father figures having to say good bye to the person in their charge – Wotan to Brunhilde, who will soon be asleep on a rock, and Samuel to David because, now that his work is done, Samuel has just minutes to live. The affecting reference surely must have been intentional on Nielsen's part.

640

SAMUEL

Fyr - ste for - sit Folk, han læg - ger si - ne
noint His peo - ple's King. He lays up - on thy

644

SAMUEL

Ord paa di - ne Læ - - ber! Og dæk - ker dig med
lips all His com - mand - - ments. The shad - ow of His

Ex. 7a. Act III, bb. 640-647

19 See especially McCreless, *op. cit.*

20 See, for example, Balzer, *op. cit.*, 78.

21 *han lægger sine Ord paa dine Læber!*

zum letz - ten Mal letz es mich heut mit des

Le - be - voh - les letz - tem Kuß

poco rall. *piu p* *sempre p*

m.s. *pp dolce*

Ex. 7b. 'Wotan's Farewell,' *Die Walküre*, Act III

Beyond these superficial similarities, I believe that the deeper influence Wagner had on Nielsen's *Saul and David* was his reliance on the half-diminished seventh chord, perhaps better known as the Tristan chord, but which also appears throughout the *Ring*. Mark DeVoto has observed that, beyond exploiting its special harmonic properties, '[m]ore than any other composer, Wagner elevated the half-diminished seventh chord to a special psychological status,' and notes that in the *Ring*, 'it generally suggests dramatic tension associated with treachery and betrayal.'²² As a violinist in The Royal Theatre orchestra during the 1890s, performing several of Wagner's operas numerous times, Nielsen had ample opportunity to learn from the master about the half-diminished seventh chord's harmonic and dramatic potential, and to consider how he might use it, in his own way, to underscore the tension between freedom and fate in his first opera.

Scrutiny of the specific half-diminished seventh chords Nielsen employs in *Saul and David*, yields certain compelling observations. Those that recur tend to have pitches that match the roots of some of the most prominently-featured tonal areas, as though these were gathered up into a single referential chord. Certainly

²² Mark DeVoto, 'The Strategic Half-diminished Seventh Chord and the Emblematic Tristan Chord: A Survey from Beethoven to Berg,' *International Journal of Musicology*, 4 (1995), 142-43.

it is even more difficult in Nielsen's music than in Wagner's to determine the logic in his choice of keys, since the harmonic rhythm is so quick and chords are enharmonically reinterpreted seemingly at whim. Because of the pervasive side-slipping chromaticism (what I call 'shifting diatonicism' and Daniel Grimley describes as a 'fractured musical surface'),²³ numerous keys are traversed and cadences might happen anywhere, though the musical current seldom stops for long. In Nielsen's music, as in Wagner's, key signatures provide a false sense of security when it comes to identifying keys – they often turn out to be more a matter of convenience than meaning. More telling, since they are so rare and Nielsen's music is goal-directed, are the perfect authentic cadences accompanied by changes in texture. It was in tracing these that I discovered a connection to the many half-diminished seventh chords.

When I looked closely at the climactic pair of half-diminished seventh chords in *Ex. 6*, I realized that the pitches in the first chord were familiar to me as the main keys emphasized in the second half of Act I. Likewise, the pitches in the second chord matched the primary tonal areas in the second half of Act II. I then took stock of all of the keys in the opera that were clearly articulated through perfect authentic cadences, and discovered two things. First, when lined up from low to high, the pitches comprised a modal scale. For example, Act I includes keys that, taken as pitches, comprise an acoustic scale (Lydian with a flatted seventh) beginning on D, the key in which the opera commences (see *Fig. 1*). This is the only scale that could account for A flat and A major, both of which are featured in the first part of the opera. From here, everything initially progressed well, until I noted a change. At a certain point – the unusually long instrumental interlude between measures 526 and 545, to be precise – this mode no longer included the keys being emphasized. In other words, different keys appear to be featured in each half of the Act.

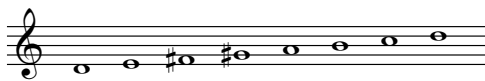


Fig. 1. Act I Operative Mode (1): Acoustic Scale on D

Next I worked backward from the end of the Act, and found that the keys articulated in the second half formed a different mode: specifically, Lydian, beginning on A flat, the key in which the Act ends (*Fig. 2*). When I compared the moment of modal shift to the Act's dramatic structure, I made another discovery. The change from one mode to the other takes place at the very instant that Saul renounces God and sings his Iago-

23 Anne-Marie Reynolds, *Carl Nielsen's Voice: His Songs in Context*, Copenhagen 2010), 42; and Daniel Grimley, 'Organicism, Form and Structural Decay: Nielsen's Second Violin Sonata,' *Music Analysis*, 21, No. 2 (2003), 178.

like monologue about God being evil and having made Saul in his image (b. 542ff). In other words, Nielsen matched this crucial tragic reversal with a shift to a different set of harmonies, drawn from a mode a tritone away, as though to show how far Saul had strayed at this point from his former self.



Fig. 2. Act I Operative Mode (2): Lydian Scale on A^b

While the Prologue to Act II traverses several keys, it ultimately serves to establish C as the new tonic. From here, the tonal areas in Act II appear to articulate the Dorian mode, beginning on C (see Fig. 3). This scale accommodates the featured keys until Jonathan suddenly breaks off David's victory celebration, and the chorus sings 'The King is sick; the old affliction preys on his spirit'²⁴ in an equally abrupt move to dark key of E-flat minor, a tritone from the original, cheerful A major (b. 941ff). From this point to the end of the Act, the Dorian scale beginning on E flat – the key in which the Act ends – encompasses the primary tonalities (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Act II Operative Mode (1): Dorian Mode on C

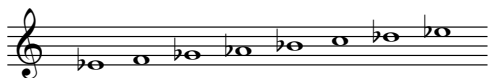


Fig. 4. Act II Operative Mode (2): Dorian scale on E^b

The climactic third Act is a bit more complicated because it involves so much action. Again two modes are emphasized, but this time in alternation. The first is an Ionian (or major) scale beginning on D flat (see Fig. 5), as the Act commences in C-sharp minor. The second is an Aeolian (or natural minor) scale on D, the key that will end the Act (see Fig. 6). The first modal shift occurs when David sneaks up on Saul's camp in D minor (b. 111ff), and the second when Samuel returns (b. 553ff). Finally, the last shift happens just after Samuel anoints David and then expires, at the point when Saul sings 'Mine is the Power!'²⁵ and, blind with fury, turns on David and Mikal in D minor (b. 699ff).

24 *Kongen er syg! Det gamle Tungsind omskyr hans Pande!* Act II, bb. 941-943.

25 *Magten en min!* bb. 699-700



Fig. 5. Act III Operative Mode (1): Ionian on D^b



Fig. 6. Act III Operative Mode (2): Aeolian on D

Act IV begins in C, and unfolds with harmonies that comprise the Dorian scale on C (see Fig. 7).²⁶ Keys drawn from the Phrygian scale on the same tonic close the Act (see Fig. 8). The shift from one to the other takes place when Saul sees the dead body of his son Jonathan and shrieks in anguish (b. 536ff). Throughout the opera, then, each modal shift introduces a different complex of keys and marks a significant event. This usually involves a misguided attempt on Saul's part to assert his will, whether he turns on God, the people celebrating David's victory, Samuel, or David himself.



Fig. 7. Act IV Operative Mode (1): Dorian on C



Fig. 8. Act IV Operative Mode (2): Phrygian on C

Returning to the half-diminished seventh chords, I made a final observation, that each chord is embedded in at least one of the modes. For instance, the half-diminished seventh chord in Ex. 4 (A^b-B-D-F[#]) may be derived from the first mode of Act I. Not long after, at the beginning of Saul's diatribe against God but after the modal shift occurs (p. 46ff of the piano score), a different half diminished seventh is heard (D-F-A^b-C), this one relating to the second mode of Act I.

²⁶ It's interesting that this Prelude quotes the distinctive ascending sequence in Nielsen's *Genrebilleder*, a song also referenced in his first symphony. Perhaps Nielsen identified with the page in the poem, struggling to find his voice, and intended the quotations – appearing in the first work of a new genre in both cases – to have a special significance.

In conclusion, it appears that the unity provided by the modes, and the half-diminished seventh chords they engender, may account for the opera's consistently tense and vaguely ominous soundscape, a Verdian *tinta* of sorts, representing Saul's inescapable fate. At the same time, the shifts from one mode to another may symbolize freedom, in that they accompany actions Saul takes of his own volition, which paradoxically precipitate his undoing.

What I am positing here is just a theory, and yet I am convinced that Nielsen had a plan that involved emphasizing certain keys in one part of an Act and different keys in another, depending on the dramatic reversals. Perhaps this is not so farfetched – I learned only after making this discovery, that James Hepokoski suspects something similar of the second Act of Verdi's *Otello*. He writes, 'On the one hand, we find at the most general level an F major/minor system (including related keys) and on the other an E-major system (again including related keys). That there are contrasting tonalities throughout the Act is beyond doubt.'²⁷

Lastly, it is tempting to consider the dialectics of fate and freedom in *Saul and David* in reference to Nielsen's life at the time that he was writing the opera. He was just over thirty when he began, yet already had one illegitimate child, a wife, and three children depending on him. His compositional career was in its early stages, and the critics were not yet sure what to make of his unconventional music. Attempting an opera was a big step into the unknown, and he surely felt the pressure of Wagner's formidable presence as he sat down to write. Perhaps he even felt a sort of competitive anxiety comparable to Saul's, worried that he would produce 'gnats' to Wagner's 'lions.' Such a massive project demanded undivided attention he could not give it, because of having to play in The Royal Theatre orchestra to make ends meet. Attempting to develop a career that requires imagination and inspiration, while burdened with the mundane necessities of making a living and raising a family, he may have identified intuitively with Saul's sense of entrapment, and viewed him more sympathetically than the less complicated David. Saul's humanness surely resonated with Nielsen's own. The following quote about Saul might as well have been written about Nielsen at that time: 'He was a soul of noblest endowments and highest aspirations, struggling against and overborne by surroundings, duties, and claims, to which his nature was unequal.'²⁸

27 James Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi Otello*, *Cambridge Opera Handbooks*, Cambridge 1987), 143.

28 Hastings, *op. cit.*, 63.

A B S T R A C T

In previous studies of Carl Nielsen's opera *Saul og David*, Einar Christiansen's libretto has been compared to the biblical story, and the similarities and differences duly noted. Recently, Pat McCreless suggested that, beyond the biblical narrative, *Saul and David* might constructively be viewed as a tragedy. Indeed, in this paper I will demonstrate that this perspective illuminates not just Christiansen's take on King Saul's demise, but also Nielsen's methods of underscoring it musically. My title alludes to Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil* in which the author states: 'Without the dialectics of fate and freedom, there would be no tragedy.' In other words, tragedy depends on the tension between forces beyond a person's control, and actions taken of his own volition that may postpone, but ultimately cannot alter, his fate. I will argue that Nielsen was drawn to this subject for his first opera in part because Saul's struggle against the inevitable unfolds in much the way his music does: 'fate' is the tonal goal, and 'freedom' is the volatile harmonic language and serpentine voice-leading that thwart progress toward that ineluctable goal. This is perhaps why many reviewers have noted the opera's symphonic nature; Nielsen's instrumental works depend on these same techniques precisely because he infused all of his compositions with drama. He once admitted as much: 'I have always felt strongly attracted by the 'dramatic' in art, for is not all art actually dramatic?' It is also tempting to consider the dialectics of fate and freedom in regard to Nielsen's life at the time that he was writing *Saul og David*. He was just over thirty when he began, yet already had one illegitimate child, a wife and three kids depending on him. Attempting to develop a career that requires imagination and inspiration, while burdened with the mundane necessities of making a living and raising a family, he may have identified intuitively with Saul's sense of entrapment, and viewed him more sympathetically than the less complicated David. Saul's humanness surely resonated with Nielsen's own.