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# Carl Nielsen, *Saul and David* and the Symbolist Movement: Cultural-Historical Perspectives

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In his biography, *Carl Nielsen – Danskeren* (*Carl Nielsen – The Dane*) from 1991, the Danish theologian and literary critic Jørgen I. Jensen argued the importance of symbolism in Carl Nielsen's artistic development. He stated: 'Carl Nielsen's art originates in short from a symbolist culture; it is musical symbolism.'<sup>1</sup> Nielsen never publicly associated himself with the term, in fact, he was resistant to it;<sup>2</sup> however, as we shall see, Nielsen was deeply involved in the symbolist milieu of the 1890s and shared many of the same ideas and artistic techniques as the symbolists of his time. In this study, I will explore the concept of symbolism and the artistic environment around Nielsen in the 1890s, including Nielsen's own encounters and early engagement with art – both in Denmark and on his travels to Europe – to discuss how, where and if it is possible to construct a symbolist reading of Nielsen's first opera, *Saul and David* (1898-1901).

Nielsen's *Saul and David* has only rarely been addressed by the scholarly community, or produced in the opera houses. In the few existing studies of the opera, *Saul and David* has been understood as a tragedy, as well as significantly Danish; it has been compared to Wagnerian music dramas, and the libretto to the biblical story.<sup>3</sup> However, never before has *Saul and David* been explored within a symbolist context. In doing precisely this, this study aims to offer a deeper understanding of both the opera and Carl Nielsen in a cultural-historical – and broader European – context around the turn of the century. It is not my intention, though, to draw a conclusion that tells us if the opera is or is not symbolist. Instead, the study aims to explain how the work might have elements that can make it possible to understand it as a symbolist opera.

1 Jørgen I. Jensen, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1991), 92: 'Carl Niensens kunst udgår kort og godt fra en symbolistisk kultur; den er musikalsk symbolisme.'

2 In a letter to Danish writer Gustav Wied (John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven* [=CNB], 12 vols. (Copenhagen: Multivers, 2005-15), vol. 1, 500f., letter 622, 18.4.1897), Nielsen criticises writer Holger Drachmann for shouting: 'Listen Carl Nielsen, us youths, us symbolists!' ('hør Carl Nielsen, vi Unge vi Symbolister!') Nielsen underscores his deep irritation towards Drachmann and concludes: 'That symbolist nonsense! Don't you agree?' ('Det symbolistvrøvl! Ikke sandt?')

3 Anne-Marie Reynolds, 'Nielsen's *Saul and David* as Tragedy: The Dialectics of Fate and Freedom in Drama and Music', *Carl Nielsen Studies*, 5 (2012), 236-57; Jørgen I. Jensen: 'Carl Niensens Saul og David: ambivalensen i den danske sjæl', in Jørgen I. Jensen (ed.), *Mødepunkter, Teologi-kultur-musik* (Copenhagen, 2004), 125-28; Patrick McCreless, 'Strange Bedfellows: The Hebrew Bible and Wagner, in *Saul and David*', *Carl Nielsen Studies*, 4 (2009), 107-44.

We will first consider the background to the rise of the symbolist movement of the 1890s and explore the symbolist turn both in and outside Denmark. This will help us understand the cultural-historical context around Nielsen and his contemporaries before studying the composer's own encounters with art, artists, and ideas leading up to *Saul and David* – the latter having recently been made possible with the 2015 publication of Nielsen's complete letters and diary entries in the 12-volume Carl Nielsen Letters Edition.<sup>4</sup>

When analysing symbolism in Nielsen's opera, it is essential to be able to locate the specific elements that invite such a reading. This is not an easy task, as the concept of symbolism is complex and the styles of symbolist art are varied. Furthermore, the task of analysing symbolism in *Saul and David* becomes even more complex as the art form of opera inevitably is created out of a literary text, a dramatic stage performance, and music. Therefore, when looking for symbolism in *Saul and David*, it will be necessary to draw from theory on symbolist art in various forms, including painting, literature, music, and drama.

### *Emerging modernism*

During the nineteenth century, artists and thinkers were responding to the increasingly uncertain and complex modern world. The scientific revolution had created a modern, rational approach to the natural world and to a growing faith in the scientific method and technological progress. Cities were growing as a result of a population shift from rural to urban areas. Furthermore, the discoveries of the biology of man, Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, and the growing amount of bible critique made the nineteenth century an age of increasing secularisation.

In Denmark, the literary critic Georg Brandes (1842–1927) was welcoming the profound cultural changes and, with his lectures at Copenhagen University from 1871 and the 1883 publication of his critical essays, *Men of the Modern Breakthrough*, he was reacting against romanticism in the arts, and introducing Scandinavian writers such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg and J.P. Jacobsen. Brandes called for a progressive, naturalistic art where artists would engage themselves in social issues and the concrete reality of the world. His lectures and essays were instantly translated into several languages and would not only, according to Danish writer Johannes Jørgensen in 1905, make Danish art 'aware of its own modernism' but also place Scandinavia as a starting point for a wave of modernism across Europe.<sup>5</sup>

According to Michael Fjeldsøe, the period of the 1870s and 1880s was one of optimism in relation to the early ideas of Brandes. By the end of the 1880s, however, a

4 CNB, cf. fn. 2.

5 Daniel M. Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism* (Woolbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 26, quoting Johannes Jørgensen, 'Romantikken i moderne dansk Literatur', *Tilskueren*, 22 (1905), 98.

sense of pessimism started to emerge as Brandes's discoveries of the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche led to a series of lectures in 1888, named 'aristocratic radicalism', in which Brandes would be the first in Europe to present Nietzsche's ideas to the modern world.<sup>6</sup> Through Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, Brandes proclaimed 'the death of God' and a reevaluation of man's moral values. The biological nature of man meant there was no metaphysical shield against man's inevitable death and this called for liberation in life, and for 'free spirits' ('frie Aander') to control one's own destiny and individuality in modern society.<sup>7</sup> According to the Danish literary critic Henrik Wivel, Brandes' introduction to Nietzsche would lead to enormous cultural change across the arts over the following ten years, which would position Scandinavia as the epicentre of the 1890s symbolist movement.<sup>8</sup>

A new cultural atmosphere was emerging by the 1890s. A whole generation of young intellectuals, poets, painters, and musicians were responding to this realist and naturalist vision and against the rational, 'dispirited' materialism of the science-dominated world.<sup>9</sup> Some felt a spiritual loss in modern society and wished to regain a metaphysical dimension in the arts. Artists were therefore starting to turn away from the naturalist, objective representation of the external world and instead turned inward to illuminate facets of subjective experience.<sup>10</sup> The symbolist movement is one of the most important examples of this reevaluation in the arts. It started as a literary movement in France with Jean Moréas' Symbolist manifesto in *Le Figaro* (1886). Rejecting naturalism and materialism in the arts, including the 'scientifically' investigative novels of Emile Zola, Moréas proclaimed the 'validity of pure subjectivity and the expression of an idea over a realist description of the natural world'.<sup>11</sup> Though it began as a French literary concept, symbolism soon developed into a cultural movement across the arts and quickly spread to the rest of Europe.

Many symbolists were expressing the same *fin-de-siècle* feelings of alienation, anxiety, and emotional crisis toward modern life – a cultivation of Nietzsche's metaphorical night-side in *Zarathura's* 'Midnight Song', the dark side of the German philosopher on the brink of mental breakdown.<sup>12</sup> This led to a strongly subjective artistic approach with intensely personal emotion and expression. Edvard Munch's *The Scream* of 1893

6 Michael Fjeldsøe, *Kulturradikalismens musik* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), 61.

7 Henrik Wivel, 'Det sjælelige gennembrud – dekadence, idealisme og vitalisme i 1890ernes kultur', in Lise Busk Jensen (ed.), *Dansk Litteraturs Historie*, vol. 3: 1870–1920 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2009), 269; Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, 29–31.

8 Wivel, 'Det sjælelige gennembrud', 266.

9 Fjeldsøe, *Kulturradikalismens musik*, 62–64.

10 Nicole Myers, 'Symbolism', in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 1.

11 Ibid.

12 Jens Brincker, Finn Gravesen, Carsten E. Hatting, and Niels Krabbe, 'Fremtidstro og pessimisme', in Knud Ketting (ed.), *Den europæiske musikkulturs historie 1740-1914* (Gyldendals Musikhistorie vol. 2; Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1990), 287.

exemplifies these torn feelings of isolation, disillusionment, and psychological anguish with its distorted forms and expressive colours.<sup>13</sup>

Young artists from Denmark, including painters J.F. Willumsen (1863–1958), Mogens Ballin (1871–1914), Agnes Slott-Møller (1862–1937), Harald Slott-Møller (1864–1937), and poet Sophus Claussen (1865–1931), were travelling to Paris to follow the latest innovations in modern art and literature. Many would find inspiration in the French artistic environment and the symbolist movement was quickly growing in Denmark as both an alternative to and a continuation of Brandes's progressive modernist project. Sophus Claussen spoke of a 'significant difference between the young generation of today and the realist writers who followed Brandes' in an interview published in the avant-garde periodical *Taarnet* in 1894:

Who believes now that a poet should represent the elements that anyone can see and hear every day? ... Our time – our youth – has returned to the ancient idea that a poet should be spiritual [*beaandet*], an advocate of the obscure, strange relation of things.<sup>14</sup>

The Danish writer and founder of *Taarnet*, Johannes Jørgensen (1866–1956), was writing in a similar manner in his Danish symbolist manifesto 'Symbolisme' (1893) in which he proclaimed:

All genuine art is and becomes symbolic. Throughout our great masters, one finds Nature conceived as an outer sign of inner spiritual life. Therefore, many of their products appear dark and obscure: their works are like those painted window panes with which Goethe compares his poetry: they must be seen from inside.<sup>15</sup>

Quoting from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, Jørgensen concluded: 'It is my firm conviction that a true view of the world must necessarily be mystic. The world is deep. And only the shallow minds fail to perceive that.'<sup>16</sup>

13 Julius Kaplan, 'Symbolism', *Oxford Art Online*; and Myers: 'Symbolism', 2.

14 Sophus Claussen (1894) in Wivel, 'Det sjælelige gennembrud', 287: 'Der er – ser jeg nu – alligevel en dyb Forskel paa Nutidens Unge og paa de realistiske Skribenter, som fulgte Georg Brandes. Hvem tror vel nu mere, at det for Digteren gælder om at efterligne, genfortælle de Ting, som Hvermand hver Dag kan se og høre? ... Vor Tid – de unge – er vendt tilbage til den ældgamle Opfattelse, at en Digter helst bør være beaandet, en Forkynder af Tingenes dunkle og forunderlige Sammenhæng.'

15 Johannes Jørgensen, 'Symbolisme' (Nov. 1893), in *Taarnet: En Antologi af Tekster*, ed. Carl Bergstrøm Nielsen (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1966), 58: 'Al ægte Kunst er og bliver symbolsk. Overalt hos de store Mestre finder man Naturen opfattet som et ydre Tegn paa et indre sjæleligt Liv. Derfor synes saa mange af deres Frembringelser den Udenforstaaende dunkle og ufattelige; deres Værker er som hine gemalte Fensterscheiben, hvormed Goethe lignede sine Digte: de maa ses indenfra.'

16 *Ibid.* 59: 'Det er tilmed min faste Overbevisning, at en sand Verdensanskuelse nødvendigt maa være mystisk. Verden er dyb. Og kun de flade Aander fatter det ikke.'

*Nielsen's artistic milieu in the 1890s*

It is unclear whether Carl Nielsen himself was attending Brandes's lectures. However, Emilie Demant Hatt<sup>17</sup> recalled in her memoirs of the composer how Nielsen and his circle of friends from the conservatory in the late 1880s actively discussed the critical topics of the time: 'They read both old and new literature. They were all musical. They interested themselves in art, philosophy and religion. They practiced 'free thinking' in all domains.'<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Nielsen would be conversing with Brandes in the 1890s. In a diary entry from 1893, for example, we read that Nielsen visited Brandes, talking 'for a long time about Napoleon, Voltaire, Christ and the Inner Mission.'<sup>19</sup>

However, it was clear that the young Nielsen might have been more sceptical about the technological progress of the time, stating, just two months before: 'Inventions and discoveries do not bring man's spiritual development one bit forward.'<sup>20</sup> This statement was written during his visits at the *Free Exhibition* in Copenhagen in 1893, an annual exhibition of art works by modern Danish and international artists, including Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh. The *Free Exhibition* was arranged by Danish painters Johan Rohde, Vilhelm Hammershøi, J.F. Willumsen, Agnes and Harald Slott-Møller, as well as Nielsen's own wife, the sculptor Anne-Marie Carl-Nielsen.

Agnes and Harald Slott-Møller, as well as J.F. Willumsen, are seen by many scholars as key figures of the symbolist movement in Denmark and would share life-long friendships – and, arguably, mutual artistic inspiration – with Carl Nielsen and his wife. Harald Slott-Møller painted several portraits of Anne Marie, one of them exhibited at the *Free Exhibition* in 1891, which was greatly inspired by medieval art and symbolism through its simplified representation and intense colours.<sup>21</sup>

Carl Nielsen's deep interest in art began at a young age and was partly influenced by his teachers Niels W. Gade and Orla Rosenhoff who, during his conservatory years

17 Painter, writer and anthropologist, Emilie Demant Hatt (1873–1958). Nielsen met the 14-year-old Emilie Demant Hansen (married: Hatt) in 1887 just after graduating at the conservatory when he was 22 years old. The two began a romantic relationship which lasted three years.

18 Emilie Demant Hatt, *Forårsbølger: erindringer om Carl Nielsen* (Spring Torrents: remembrances of Carl Nielsen), ed. John Fellow (Copenhagen, 2002), 84: 'Der læste man baade gammel og nyt Litteratur. Der var alle musikalske. Der interesserede man sig for Kunst, Filosofi og Religion. Der praktiseredes "fri Tænkning" paa alle Omraader.' Nielsen's conservatory friends included Margrete Rosenberg and (cousins of Brandes) the brothers Albert and Emil B. Sachs; Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, 48.

19 CNB 1, 297, diary entry 413 (28.5.1893): 'Vi talte længe sammen om Napoleon, Voltaire[,] Christus og den Indre Mission.'

20 CNB 1, 295, diary entry 406 (31.3.1893): 'Opfindelser og Opdagelser bringer ikke Menneskenes aandelige Udvikling et eneste Gran fremad.'

21 Harald Slott-Møller: *Anne Marie Brodersen* (1891), painting at the Carl Nielsen Museum, Odense, Denmark. Claudine Stensgaard Nielsen: 'Harald Slott-Møller', *Den Store Danske*, downloaded 11 June 2015 from [www.denstoredanske.dk/Kunst\\_og\\_kultur/Billedkunst/Danmark\\_1850-1910/Harald\\_Slott-M%C3%B8ller](http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Kunst_og_kultur/Billedkunst/Danmark_1850-1910/Harald_Slott-M%C3%B8ller).

in 1884–86, had encouraged him to seek out a wider artistic experience than purely a musical one.<sup>22</sup> His interest became especially clear during his long study tours in Europe in the 1890s, firstly in 1890–91 when he visited major artistic centres in Europe, including Dresden, Berlin, Leipzig, Paris, Milan, Florence, Rome, and Venice; and secondly, on his second extended tour in 1894 when he visited Berlin, Leipzig, Nuremberg, Munich, Salzburg, and Vienna. His diary entries and letters are full of lengthy descriptions of the pictures and sculptures he would encounter, as well as the many artists he would meet.

During his stay in Berlin in 1890, Nielsen wrote a remarkable letter to his old friend Emil B. Sachs (1855–1920):

The old paintings suffer more than the modern from being reproduced in photo-gravures and woodcuts, I think; perhaps that is because their spiritual content is somewhat foreign to us; they are not our feelings and thoughts that the pictures are an expression of, not our ideal which is portrayed; but the way in which it is done is, I think, exactly the same.<sup>23</sup>

In this letter, Nielsen describes the idea of a ‘spiritual’ dimension in an artwork, as well as the feelings expressed and ideals portrayed in art. A month later, he considered whether music could be composed like the modern impressionist paintings – swimming in clouds of mood [*Stemningstaage*].<sup>24</sup> As I shall discuss below, the merging of ‘moods’ and emotional expression, as well as the idea of a spiritual dimension in art, were defining features of symbolism during this decade.

Nielsen would often write in a far more detailed and positive manner on the subject of painting and sculpture than he would about music. A clue to this might be found in a letter from Carl Nielsen to his wife, while in Berlin in 1894:

It is like my soul’s pores are open when I am travelling. It isn’t true with music, though. There I am always sceptical and rather cold and feel no enrichment, because I always feel that I can both conduct and compose better than these people.

22 Colin Roth, ‘Carl Nielsen’s Cultural Self-Education. His Early Engagement with Fine Arts and Ideas and the Path towards Hymnus Amoris’, *Carl Nielsen Studies*, 5 (2012), 302–4.

23 CNB 1, 138f., letter 109 to Emil B. Sachs from Berlin (30.10.1890): ‘De gamle Malere taaler mindre end de moderne at gjengives i Fotogravueres og Træsnit, synes jeg; maaske har det sin Grund deri, at deres aandelige Indhold er os noget fremmed; det er ikke vore Følelser og Tanker de Billeder ere et Udslag af, ikke vort Ideal som bliver fremstillet; men Maaden det er gjort paa synes jeg er akkurat den samme.’

24 CNB 1, 159, diary entry 145 (Berlin, 30.11.1890): ‘Mon der ikke kunde tænkes en Musik der havde Lighed med impressionistiske Malerier; hvor Conturerne svømmer ud i Stemningstaage?’

The gallery had acquired two new Italian pictures by an old artist whose name I cannot remember. They were very strange and had their own personality behind them. He lived before Raphael. Tomorrow I will go back again.<sup>25</sup>

In this letter, we find Nielsen's interest in an Italian artist who 'lived before Raphael'. In fact, we repeatedly read in his letters and diary entries of his interest in the old masters of early renaissance art, the ancient classics, and medieval art.<sup>26</sup> As we shall see, this interest in archaism was shared by many symbolists during this decade, including Agnes and Harald Slott Møller, as well as the Pre-Raphaelites before them. Furthermore, Nielsen's fascination in antiquity was a part of the broader Hellenic movement in late-nineteenth-century Europe with a rebirth of ancient Greek ideals in modern life and art.<sup>27</sup>

Carl Nielsen was also fascinated by the modern art of his contemporaries, including the works of Vincent van Gogh, Max Klinger, Auguste Rodin, and Paul Gauguin.<sup>28</sup> Although the artists Nielsen engaged with on a personal level were mostly Danish, scholars have noted Nielsen's encounter with Edvard Munch in Berlin in 1894.<sup>29</sup> Four years later, Munch would exhibit four artworks at the *Free Exhibition* in Copenhagen. However, there are no records of Nielsen visiting the exhibition in 1898, nor experiencing Munch's work at any other occasion during this decade.

Of modern writers, we read of Nielsen's fascination with the French symbolist writer Maurice Maeterlinck during his trip to Paris in 1891, in particular the work *Les Aveugles*

25 CNB 1, 338f., letter 479 to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen (Berlin, 14.10.1894): 'Det er ligesom alle min Sjæls Porer er aabne, naar jeg er paa Rejse. Det gjælder dog ikke overfor Musik. Der er jeg altid skeptisk og temmelig kold og føler ingen Berigelse, fordi jeg føler bestandig at jeg kan baade dirige[re] og componere bedre end disse Folk. Galleriet har erhvervet to nye italienske Billeder af en gammel Kunstner hvis Navn jeg ikke husker. De var meget ejendommelige og havde sin egen Personlighed bagved. Han levede før Raphael. Imorgen skal jeg atter derhen.'

26 CNB 1, 345, letter 483 to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen (Berlin, 19.10.1894): 'Jeg gaar hver Dag i Gallerierne. Idag har jeg atter været i den italienske Afdeling og i den gamle tyske; men det var mest Skulptur idag. Tingene fra Pergamon blev grundigt gennemgaaet. Naturligvis er det godt; men bagefter var jeg ovre i Skuret og saa "Olympiafundene"!! Hvad er dog det! Hvilken Magt og Storhed!'

27 On the Hellenic movement in Denmark, cf. Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen, 'Hellas under Northern Skies', in Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner (eds.), *The Spirit of Vitalism: Health, Beauty and Streg in Danish Art 1890-1940* (Fuglsang Kunstmuseum & Odense Bys Museer / Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2011), 58–87.

28 CNB 1, 214, dairy entry 253 (Paris, 7.3.1891): 'saa Billeder af Gauguin og Rodin, som synes at være vor Tids Mestre'; CNB 1, 215, dairy entry 255 (Paris, 8.3.1891): 'Saa for første Gang Billede af Vincent (van Gocken) [van Gogh] der gjorde det stærkeste Indtryk paa mig'; CNB 1, 394, letter 523 to Georg Brandes (19.11.1894): 'har bl.A. været i Leipzig hvor jeg saa et plastisk Arbejde, Salome, af Max Klinger, som interesserede mig i høj Grad.'

29 CNB 1, 343–45, diary entry 482 (19.10.1894): 'Vi traf dør den norske Maler Munck [Edvard Munch] som jeg spillede Billard med.'

(1890) which ‘in all its simplicity left a strong impression’ on Nielsen.<sup>30</sup> During Nielsen’s stay in Paris, he met several Danish artists who were studying modern art, including J.F. Willumsen, Mogens Ballin, and his future wife, Anne-Marie Brodersen. In 1895, we read of Nielsen’s interest in the Danish writer Viggo Stuckenberg and his *Romerske Scener*.<sup>31</sup> Stuckenberg broke from realism with the drama *Den vilde Jæger* (1894), of which the first scene was included in *Taarnet* with the title ‘Medieval’ (‘Middelalder’).<sup>32</sup> Stuckenberg would become a part of Nielsen’s circle of friends and acquaintances during the 1890s, along with many young symbolist artists and critics associated with *Taarnet*, including Johannes Jørgensen, Sophus Claussen, Sophus Michaëlis, Mogens Ballin, as well as J.F. Willumsen. According to Willumsen’s memoirs, the three men, Carl Nielsen, Sophus Claussen, and J.F. Willumsen, supposedly enacted Claussen’s comic play *Frøken Regnvejr* (*Miss Rainy Weather*) as a private puppet theatre performance in 1894, which suggests the trio must have been very close indeed.<sup>33</sup> Although Nielsen never actually set Claussen’s poetry to music, he did collaborate with other symbolist writers, including Johannes Jørgensen on the cantata *Søvnen* (*The Sleep*) in 1903, as well as Sophus Michaëlis on the cantata *Hymne til Livet* (*Hymn to Life*) in 1921 and the play *Amor og Digteren* (*Cupid and the Poet*) in 1930.

We have established that Carl Nielsen was an integral part of the Copenhagen avant-garde scene, actively engaging with the circle of painters, writers, and academics associated with the *Free Exhibition* and *Taarnet* with whom he would discuss art and share many of the same ideas and interests. Furthermore, Nielsen would seek wider artistic inspiration on his study travels to Europe at a time when symbolism was dominating modern art and ideas. In the next chapter we will explore how Nielsen might have been inspired by the symbolist movement in his own work as we consider his first opera *Saul and David* in a symbolist context.

### *Symbolism in Saul and David*

Nielsen began to plan an opera by the end of 1896 when he had just finished the choral work *Hymnus Amoris*.<sup>34</sup> His choice to compose an operatic work was not surprising; Nielsen showed a great interest in opera during his European travels in the 1890s, and

30 CNB 1, 216, dairy entry 259 (Paris, 12.3.1891): ‘Læste “Les Aveugles” af [Maurice Maeterlinck] færdig. Denne mærkelig, uhyggelige Bog gjør i al sin Simpelhed et stort Indtryk.’

31 CNB 1, 427, letter 551 to Viggo Stuckenberg (28.12.1895): ‘Efter at have læst “Romerske Scener” maa jeg sige Dem at jeg var forbavset over at finde saa megen Evne og Villie og en saadan prægnant og sluttet Gjennemførelse hos en ung dansk Forfatter, og jeg tror ikke at nogen anden af vores Forfattere er istand til at skabe Karakterer af et saa tungt og stærkt Stof.’

32 Ursula Fugmann, ‘Viggo Stuckenberg’, in *Den Store Danske* (downloaded 11 June 2015 from [www.denstoredanske.dk/Kunst\\_og\\_kultur/Litteratur/Dansk\\_litteratur/1870-1900/Viggo\\_Stuckenberg](http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Kunst_og_kultur/Litteratur/Dansk_litteratur/1870-1900/Viggo_Stuckenberg)).

33 Jens Ferdinand Willumsen, *Mine erindringer fortalt til Ernst Mentze* (Copenhagen: Berlingske, 1953), 108.

34 Niels Bo Foltmann, Peter Hauge, and Niels Krabbe, ‘Preface’, in Carl Nielsen, *Saul og David, Opera in four acts* (The Carl Nielsen Edition, I/4; Copenhagen, 2002), xi.

was especially fascinated by the music dramas of Richard Wagner.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, he would become familiar with a wide range of operas in the orchestral pit of the Royal Danish Theatre where he had been employed as a violinist since 1889. During 1898, Nielsen agreed to collaborate with Danish librettist Einar Christiansen on an opera following the Old Testament narrative of Saul and David. Christiansen was an experienced man of the theatre, both as a dramatist and opera librettist, collaborating with P.E. Lange-Müller<sup>36</sup> on the opera *Vikingeblood* [Viking Blood] from 1900 and translating many operas into Danish. At the time, Christiansen was also the editor of the magazine *Illustreret Tidende* and would become the artistic director of the Royal Danish Theatre in 1899. As a writer, Christiansen broke from realism in the 1890s into a more introverted and intimate style in his dramatic works.<sup>37</sup>

Christiansen's libretto of *Saul and David* was created in January 1899 and the opera composed over the following two years. It was composed both in Denmark and during Nielsen's six-month stay in Rome between December 1899 and June 1900. Like many Danish artists and scholars, Nielsen's wife was studying art in the ancient capital as part of the archaic revivalism of the time.<sup>38</sup> Nielsen finalised the composition of his *Saul and David* in Copenhagen in April 1901 and the opera premièred at the Royal Danish Theatre in November 1902.

### *Choice of subject matter*

In an interview for *Berlingske Tidende* in 1929, Nielsen recalled the following incident in connection to the choice of the opera's literary subject:

- 35 Nielsen was deeply interested in Wagner's works on his first Europe trip in 1890–91: 'Studying "Siegfried" every day and admiring Wagner more and more for each day, if it is even possible to admire as much as I do.' ('Studerer hver Dag "Siegfried" og beundrer Wagner mere Dag for Dag, hvis det overhovedet er muligt at beundre i højere Grad end jeg gjør.'). *CNB* 1, 194, dairy entry 219 (Leipzig, 3.2.1891). On his second Europe trip in 1894, however, we read of Nielsen's first critique of Wagner's abilities as a music dramatist: 'As a dramatic poet he is nothing and as a dramatic composer likewise nothing. When he tries to force life and passionate movement, it becomes bad.' ('Som dramatisk Digter er han intet og som dramatisk Componist heller ikke[,] saasnt han forsøger at fremtvinge Liv og lidenskabelig Bevægelse, bliver det skidt.'). *CNB* 1, 384f., dairy entry 513 (Vienna, 9.11.1894). Nielsen does have a lifelong fascination with Wagner, as he continues to comment on his works, both negatively and positively.
- 36 Danish composer P.E. Lange-Müller (1850–1925) composed music to many symbolist dramatic works, including Drachmann's *Middelalderlig* (Medieval, 1896) and *Renaissance* (1901).
- 37 These works include *Cosmus* (1897), *Fædreland* (1910) and *Thronfølger* (1913); Uffe Andreassen and Hans Strange, 'Einar Christiansen', *Dansk Biografisk Leksikon*, third edn. (1979–84).
- 38 Anne Marie was studying with the French sculptor Victor Ségoffin while Nielsen was working on his opera. Other Danish artists and scholars living in Rome at the time included Vilhelm Wancher, Hans Nikolaj Hansen, and Thomas Laub (*CNB* 2, 10). Nielsen composed large parts of Act Two during this stay.

Out in the lobby, when [Einar Christiansen] was putting on his coat, he suddenly turned to me and exclaimed: ‘Well, what do you think of my old idea “Saul and David”?’ In a flash, I then experienced the Bible story of my childhood and was gripped by its Old Testament mood. The sublime in it, all that was so far from ‘reality’ and everyday life, captivated me in a special way. Yet neither was it so unfamiliar for me to give it expression; in *Hymnus Amoris* I had just been enthralled by something of a similar vein.<sup>39</sup>

Although we must be cautious of holding onto a quotation uttered 30 years after the opera was composed, it is indeed a remarkable one when reading it within a symbolist context. As we have seen, Nielsen’s fascination with ‘all that was so far from “reality” and everyday life’ was a crucial part of 1890s symbolist thought, shared by many artists at the time who were distancing themselves from realist art. The symbolists often found their imagery in mythical figures from biblical stories, Greek mythology, and the Middle Ages to create works with themes far from reality and to imbue their works with spiritual value.<sup>40</sup> According to Jørgen I. Jensen, Johannes Jørgensen referred to how the symbolists found inspiration in old expressions and forms without, however, moving away from the artwork’s connection with its own age.<sup>41</sup> Agnes Slott-Møller’s paintings of medieval pages, Sophus Claussen’s Hellenic hexametric poems, and J.F. Willumsen’s Egyptian ceramics, as well as Oscar Wilde’s tragedy of Salome, are just some examples of the symbolists’ archaic interests. As we have seen, Carl Nielsen was greatly interested in this archaic subject matter and in the artworks of the old masters. He even used archaic elements in his own compositions. The music and choice of text of his Opus 4, *Music to Five Poems by J.P. Jacobsen* (1892), for example, was strongly inspired by medieval motifs which are likewise present on the title page: a copy of the gobelin tapestry *The Lady and the Unicorn* (La Dame à la licorn) which Nielsen and his wife had encountered in Paris at the museum of medieval art, *Musée de Cluny* in 1891.<sup>42</sup>

The choice of an ancient biblical story was therefore not surprising when considering the archaic tendencies in the arts of the time. Furthermore, Nielsen had often been drawn

39 ‘Carl Nielsen om “Saul og David”’ (*Berlingske Tidende*, 26.2.1929), in John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, vol. 2: 1926-1931 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1999), 518: ‘Da han ude i Entréen var ved at tage Frakken paa, vender han sig rask imod mig og udbryder: “Naa, hvad mener De saa om min gamle idé ‘Saul og David’?” Som i et Lyn oplevede jeg da min Barndoms Biblehistorie og følte mig grebet af dens gammeltestamentlige Stemning. Det ophøjede deri, alt det, der var saa langt borte fra “Virkeligheden” og Hverdagen, fængslede mig paa en særlig Maade. Og heller ikke stod jeg helt fremmed over for at udtrykke det; i “Hymnus Amoris” havde jeg nyligt været optaget af noget lignende.’

40 Myers, ‘Symbolism’, 1.

41 Jørgen I. Jensen, ‘Carl Nielsen: Artistic Milieu and Tradition: Cultural-Historical Perspectives’, in Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 60–61.

42 The two works of art are *Carl Nielsen Opus 4: Music to Five Poems by J. P. Jacobsen* (1892), title page, at the Carl Nielsen Museum, Odense; and *The Lady and the Unicorn*, c. 1480 (unknown artist), gobelin, wool and silk at the Musée de Cluny, Paris. They are compared in Anne Christiansen: *Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen – født Brodersen* (Odense: Odense Bys Museer, 2013), 62–63.

to the mystical mood of the biblical stories. In 1892, for example, he wrote to Anne-Marie of his experience of the beginning of the Gospel of John, comparing it to the mystery of the Early Renaissance painting *Primavera* (1482) by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510):

Do you not think it is remarkably deep and mystical? Just the first verses. I am especially fond of this: 'And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.' But there is overall a strange dim mystery over it. It reminded me of the forest in Botticelli's *Primavera*. The trees are half plant half human and when they speak together, it sounds like a mixture of wind and human voice.<sup>43</sup>

But why, then, were Christiansen and Nielsen especially drawn to the Old Testament story of Saul and David? We cannot know for sure, as there are no existing correspondences between Nielsen and Christiansen. However, there are many reasons why they might have been drawn to this subject in particular. Firstly, they might have been intrigued to write an opera on Saul and David to continue the project of Hans Christian Andersen and the Danish composer J.P. Hartmann who were writing a *Saul* opera in 1864–66 but, to the great regret of Andersen, would never finish it.<sup>44</sup> There is no evidence of Nielsen knowing about Hartmann's opera project; however, Nielsen did attend a dinner party with Hartmann in 1897 at the time when he was looking for a suitable subject for an opera.<sup>45</sup> Christiansen, on the other hand, must have known about Andersen's opera libretto as his choice of episodes from the biblical account very closely reflects Andersen's text.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Nielsen might have remembered his deep fascination with an Italian painting of David and Goliath that he had encountered in Berlin in 1894.<sup>47</sup> In addition, as we shall see below, the characters, themes, and situations of this story in particular reflect some of the predilections of the symbolist movement.

43 CNB 1, 263, letter 345 to Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen (27.8.1892): 'Synes Du ikke det er forunderlig dybt og mystisk? Blot de første Vers. Især synes jeg om det: Og Lyset skinnede i Mørket. Mørket begreb det ikke. Men der er i det Hele taget en sær dæmpet Mystik over det Altsammen. Jeg kom til at tænke på Skoven i Botticellis Foraaret. Træerne ere halvt Mennesker halvt Planter og naar de taler sammen lyder det som en Blanding af Susen og Menneskerøster.'

44 Foltmann, Hauge, and Krabbe, 'Preface', xiii.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 CNB 1, 340, diary entry 480 (Berlin, 16.10.1894): 'Men især husker jeg et Billede af en Maler jeg slet ikke kjender noget til forud, nemlig Piero Pollajuolo. Det er en David som har fældet Goliath. Kompositionen er saa enkel som muligt. David staar ret op og ned skrævende lidt ud med Benene og den ene Haand i Siden, omtrent som Verocchios bekjendte Broncestatue. Hans Holdning er ungdommelig, kjæk og sejerstolt. Mellem hans Ben på Jorden ligger Goliaths afhuggede Hoved. Baggrunden er ensfarvet, saavidt jeg kunde se var det en Slags Mur af Farve nærmest sortegrøn.' The work is the *Antonio del Pollaiuolo*, David Victorious (c.1472), Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

*The pained king and a joyous nature boy*

The libretto adheres relatively closely to the Biblical account although the character of Saul is more prominent than David in the libretto than in the Bible.<sup>48</sup> We follow King Saul's despair and inner turmoil from his disobedience to God and conflicts with the young David to his moral collapse and lonely suicide on Mount Gilboa. David is less emotionally complex. He is described as a beautiful, young shepherd boy, loved by the Israelite people and especially Saul's young daughter, Michal. David's character is more boyish and untroubled than in the Bible with added traits from the male lover in the Song of Solomon. He lives harmoniously with God, life, and nature. Saul's character, however, is darker than in the Bible and is reminiscent of the brooding figure of Job. He is implacable towards God, is constantly conscious of his own death and feels that his suffering is unjustified.<sup>49</sup>

It is the emotionally complex psychological characterisation of Saul which leads the drama in Einar Christiansen's libretto. Saul's demise frames the drama – from his impatience and sinful offerings to his death – and the drama progresses in tandem with his psychological reactions (see Figure 1):

**ACT 1:** Saul's disobedience (→ offerings → 1st prophecy) → Saul's defiance (→ David's comforting song) → Saul's contentment (→ love duet of David and Michal)

**ACT 2:** Saul's dreariness (→ Michal awaiting David who is fighting Goliath → David's victory) → Saul's joy (→ praise from the people) → Saul's jealousy and anger

**ACT 3:** Saul's remorse (→ reconciliation of Saul and David → 2nd prophecy) → Saul's anger

**ACT 4:** Saul's irresolution (→ consulting the Witch of Endor → 3rd prophecy) → Saul's downfall and suicide (→ David's mourning and the people hailing David as their King)

Fig. 1: Summary of Einar Christiansen's *Saul and David* libretto with an emphasis on Saul's psychological state.

The pessimistic *fin-de-siècle* feeling of alienation and anxiety is clearly depicted in the tragic figure of Saul. This psychological characterisation might not only have been of deep interest for Einar Christiansen – as well as many other young artists of the time

48 For a direct comparison of the libretto and its Biblical source, see Patrick McCreless, 'Strange Bedfellows', 122–27.

49 Bodil Ejrnæs has contributed to this reading of the relationship with the Biblical account in her talk at the Saul and David seminar on 15 April 2015, The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen: 'Einar Christiansens libretto og Det gamle Testamente'.

– but also for Nielsen, who led an emotionally turbulent life and was often concerned with the inner world of man. We often read of Nielsen's sufferings in his letters and diary entries. In 1889, for example, the young Nielsen writes to Emilie Demant Hansen of his painful condition, explaining his flaws, emotional swings and unbalanced state of mind which he connects to being a real artist.<sup>50</sup> Nielsen even plans to commit suicide, writing in his farewell letter to her: 'I suffer so much but now I must end it. – If I cannot die spiritually, I must kill my body.'<sup>51</sup> According to John Fellow, 'Nielsen's old crisis was always just around the corner and his longing for death never far away.'<sup>52</sup> Art historian Herschel Chipp suggests that many young artists of the 1890s 'turned away from the exterior world and inward to their own feelings for their subject matter' which might explain Nielsen's interest in this story and in Saul in particular.<sup>53</sup>

According to art historian Michelle Facos, symbolism enabled artists to confront the increasingly uncertain modern world, to which pessimists responded with themes of decadence and degeneration and optimists with idealism and reform.<sup>54</sup> I would argue that both pessimism and optimism, decadence and idealism – the decay of the pained king and the beauty of the joyous nature boy – are indeed present in the story of Saul and David, both in the biblical account and in Christiansen's and Nielsen's dramatic and musical interpretation of the story.

The mythic figure of the mentally unstable king has been used many times in the arts, from Richard Wagner's wounded Amfortas in *Parsifal* (1882) to Johannes V. Jensen's irresolute Christian II in *Kongens Fald* (1901). The Danish symbolist poet Sophus Clausen was also drawn to the figure of Saul and the king's encounter with the Witch of Endor in the decadent poem *Hos Hexen i Endor* (1898) from his 1904 collection *Djævlerier*.<sup>55</sup> It is highly possible that Claussen, who was a part of Nielsen's circle of close friends, might have been inspired by Nielsen's choice of subject matter. In Claussen's version, the witch is a sinful temptress, leading the decadent Saul in to a bed 'made of [her] flowing hair'.<sup>56</sup> Claussen often depicted women as liberated *femme fatales* – in the style of Charles Baudelaire, J.K. Huysman, Paul Verlaine, and many other decadent symbolists – destroying men with their dangerous sexuality.<sup>57</sup> Nielsen's Witch, however,

50 CNB 1, 75–79, 90–96, letters 16 (17.1.1889) and 25–28 (23.10.1889 and Nov. 1889) to Emilie Demant Hansen.

51 CNB 1, 92, letter 26 to Emilie Demant Hansen (Nov. 1889). However, his attempt is foiled at the last minute after meeting an old friend.

52 John Fellow, 'Carl Nielsen – The Human Crisis, Then and Now', *Carl Nielsens Studies*, 5 (2012), 54.

53 Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 48.

54 Michelle Facos, *Symbolist art in context* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 5.

55 Sophus Claussen, *Hos Hexen i Endor* (1889), in Sophus Claussen, *Djævlerier* (København og Kristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, 1904), 123–24.

56 *Ibid.*, verse 23–24: 'Hør Hex, jeg er søvngig, red mig en Seng i dine udslagne Lokker!'

57 Wivel, 'Det sjælelige gennembrud', 277–79.

is mild and kind, helping Saul to communicate with the deceased Samuel. The women in *Saul and David* – the Witch and Michal – are pure and virgin-like. They are counter-images to the decadents' females, in the style of the Pre-Raphaelites and their successors – including symbolists Agnes and Harald Slott-Møller – greatly inspired by the figures of courtly love poems and medieval ballads. The characters of the pure, young lovers, David and Michal, could also be seen in this light.

### *Symbolist strategies*

Until now, we have explored Nielsen's choice of subject matter and analysed some chosen characters in the libretto in connection to symbolism and the general artistic interests and tendencies of his time. However, as we are exploring an opera, it is also important to consider how both the dramatic and musical elements can be understood in terms of symbolism.

### *Mood*

In his tribute to *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* from 2005, British musicologist Philip Weller discusses symbolist opera around the turn of the century, especially drawing on Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1898), based on the symbolist play by Maeterlinck. Weller argues that symbolist opera composers could convey human content 'more directly and authentically, with greater subtlety and complexity, by ignoring the lure of realism and illusionism and concentrating instead on finding a language of atmosphere and evocation'.<sup>58</sup> It is noteworthy that Nielsen expressed his interest in the operatic subject of Saul and David specifically in terms of its 'Old Testament' *mood*, i.e. atmosphere. In 1911, Nielsen also refers to his use of mood as a vital compositional strategy in opera:

You put the text forward and read it carefully. Then you navigate; choose your direction. From here to there, you must be within *one* mood [*Stemming*]; then, it must be succeeded by one more. In the first act of *Maskarade*, I let the disgruntled bassoons portray the dark, muggy room until Leander opens the shutters and the light pours through and makes the music bright as day.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Weller, 'Symbolist opera', 62.

<sup>59</sup> 'Regnormen' (interviewer) and Carl Nielsen (interviewee), 'Hos "Maskarades" Komponist' (*Riget*, 18.1.1911), in Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 156–59: 'Man tager en Tekst for sig og læser den grundigt igennem. Saa navigerer man, tager sit bestik. Herfra og dertil maa man være inden for én Stemning, dér skal den afløses af en ny. I "Maskerade"s første Akt lader jeg gnavne Fagotter skildre den mørke, lumre Stue, indtil Leander aabner Skodderne og Lyset strømmer ind og gør Musikken dagklar.'

According to Danish musicologist Esben Tange, symbolist works of music ‘find expression in moods [*Stemninger*],’ the musical ‘mood’ being the ‘perceivable symbols.’<sup>60</sup> Therefore, these works are also often characterised by ‘violation of the traditional logic of musical development ... leading to essentially different stylistic modes of expression.’<sup>61</sup> This way of composing is clearly present in *Saul and David* which indeed incorporates a mixture of musical styles and moods. The music of the opera transforms the moment-to-moment psychological action into free musical form, continuously unfolding, following the characters, emotions and situations on stage. This becomes especially clear in the contrasting characterisations of Saul and David. The musical mood around David is lyrical, pure, and bright, whereas Saul’s music is clearly darker and more complex. Another clear example of Nielsen’s musical characterisation is found at Saul’s and Samuel’s initial meeting in Act 1 (see Ex. 1). Here, the contrast between Saul’s complex and unstable mind and the strong, authoritative stature of the Prophet Samuel is clearly underscored musically, both in the accompaniment and vocal lines. A sense of unease is present in Saul’s music, both harmonically and melodically, with unstable chromatic language and anxious sixteenth-note rhythms. Samuel’s music, on the other hand, is characterised by strict diatonicism, stable metre, and shrill tritones (bb. 316–17), underscoring his dispassionate and stable mind.<sup>62</sup>

### Stylisation

Weller speaks of the symbolist’s use of ‘continuous unfolding of orchestral materials,’ enabling a ‘rapidity and responsiveness to nuance in the psychological texture of the piece which stands at the heart of both the symbolist and expressionist vision.’<sup>63</sup> Although the orchestra plays continuously from scene to scene in *Saul and David*, Nielsen distils any excessive orchestral substance, contrasting the ‘hyper-sensuous’ timbre and texture of the ‘endless melody’ of Wagnerian music dramas, as McCreless points out in his analysis of the opera.<sup>64</sup>

According to Weller, this reduction of orchestral and dramatic excess is indeed characteristic of symbolist opera – a form of *stylisation*, one of the other main artistic techniques the symbolist artists used to express a subjective vision through a simplified and non-naturalistic style. Through stylisation, the artist simplifies the symbolist work of art with physical characteristics treated selectively and in greater isolation than within a fuller, more cluttered realist context. In this way, there is an intensity of focus on the important themes and images.<sup>65</sup> Paul Gauguin’s works, with their pure, vibrant colours applied in broad flat surfaces, are an example of this technique.

60 Esben Tange, ‘Musikalsk symbolisme’, *Danish Yearbook of Musicology*, 29 (2001), 56.

61 Ibid.

62 Saul’s music is heard at bb. 310, 315–16 and 320–25 and Samuel’s music at bb. 307–9, 311–14 and 317–320.

63 Weller, ‘Symbolist opera’, 75.

64 McCreless, ‘Strange Bedfellows’, 142.

65 Weller, ‘Symbolist opera’, 70, 72, 79.

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

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.

18

cresc.

Ex. 1, Carl Nielsen, *Saul and David*, Act 1, bb. 306–24.  
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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 is presented in three systems. Each system includes vocal lines for SAUL and SAMUEL, and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The time signature is 4/4. The score includes various dynamic markings: *f* (forte), *pp* (pianissimo), *mp* (mezzo-piano), *p* (piano), and *fp* (forzando). The piano part features complex textures with triplets and slurs. The vocal parts are in bass clef. The lyrics are provided in both Danish and English.

This stylised technique is not only present in the music of *Saul and David*, but also dramatically. The opera lasts just two hours and the action unfolds quickly. Christiansen creates a shortened and simplified version of the biblical story with clearer characters, themes, and situations which are underscored musically by Nielsen.

### Archaism

Previously, we have looked at archaism in connection to subject matter, namely the symbolists' inspiration from ancient tropes and myths as well as Nielsen's choice of the Old Testament story for his opera. We will now consider how archaic elements might similarly be present in the music and drama of *Saul and David*.

When considering the dramaturgical methods and character choices of Christiansen, it is clear that archaism is present in the drama of *Saul and David* when noting its affinities with the tragedies of ancient Greece. Anne-Marie Reynolds has identified Nielsen's opera as a tragedy against Aristotelian criteria.<sup>66</sup> Reynolds not only makes the suggestion that Christiansen changed the biblical story to highlight its tragic elements, but also demonstrates that Nielsen underscores Saul's demise and torment musically.

I would furthermore argue that a shared trait between this opera and the ancient dramas is clearly found in the large chorus parts which enact the vital role of the Israelite people. Just as the choruses of the Greek tragedies comment on the events of the plot, the chorus in the opera comments with a collective voice on the drama on stage. In addition, the Biblical story of Saul can be traced back further to the Homeric poems. In a mythological comparison of the *Odyssey* and Bible, Saul's consultation with the Witch of Endor to raise the deceased Samuel, for example, clearly parallels Odysseus's consultation with Circe to raise the deceased Teiresias.<sup>67</sup> Shortly after the turn of the century, Nielsen's interest in Hellenism grew considerably to engage ancient Greek music, which resulted in his *Helios* overture composed in Greece in 1903 and a lecture on the subject at the Greek Society in Copenhagen in 1907.<sup>68</sup> Given Christiansen's and Nielsen's interest of Hellenism, it is highly probable these connections to Greek tradition would not have been lost on them.

Nielsen's use of archaic techniques is also clearly present in *Saul and David*. One of the clearest examples is found in the choral celebration of Saul and David's momentary reconciliation in Act 3 (see Ex. 2).

66 Reynolds, 'Nielsen's *Saul and David* as Tragedy', 236–39.

67 Teresa Carp, 'Teiresias, Samuel, and the Way Home', *California Studies in Classical Antiquity*, 12 (1979), 65–76.

68 Thomas Michelsen, 'Carl Nielsen og den græske musik – nogle kilder til belysning af den musikæstetiske konflikt mellem komponisten og hans samtidig i begyndelsen af århundredet', *Fund og Forskning*, 37 (1998), 231.

461 *mp*

CORO T. Her - ren er Vid - ne! Pag - ten er slut - - - tet paa -  
 God is our wit - ness, vows have been plight - - - ed a -

463

A. Her - ren er Vid - ne! Pag - ten er slut - - - tet paa -  
 God is our wit - ness vows have been plight - - - ed a -

CORO T. ny. Her - ren er Vid - ne! Pag - ten er  
 gain. God is our wit - ness, vows have been

465

T. ny. Pag - ten er slut - tet paa - ny. Her - ren er Vid - -  
 gain, vows have been plight - ed a - gain. God is our wit - -

CORO B. slut tet paa -  
 plight - - - ed a -

467

A. - - ne! Her - ren er Vid - - - ne!  
 - - ness, God is our wit - - - ness!

CORO T. ny. Her ren er  
 gain. God is our

B. Her - ren er Vid - ne! Pag - ten er slut - - - tet paa -  
 God is our wit - ness, vows have been plight - - - ed a -

469

A. Pag - ten er slut - - tet paa - ny. Her - ren er  
 Vows have been plight - - ed a - gain. God is our

CORO T. Vid - - - ne! Fav n i Fav n staar  
 wit - - - ness. Face to face the

B. ny. Her - ren er Vid - ne! Fav n i Fav n staar  
 gain. God is our wit - ness. Face to face the

Ex. 2, Carl Nielsen, *Saul and David*, Act 3, 'Herren er Vidne', bb. 461–76 (choral part only).  
 Reproduced by kind permission from the Carl Nielsen Edition.

472 24

S. Her - ren er Vid - ne! Pag - ten er slut - - - tet paa -  
God is our wit - ness, vows have been plight - - - ed a -

A. Vid - - - ne! Favn i Favn staar Kon - gen og Kon - gens Søn.  
wit - - - ness. Face to face the King stands be - fore his son.

T. Kon - gen og Kon - gens Søn, ja, Favn i Favn staar Kon - gen og Kon - gens Søn.  
King stands be - fore his son, yes, face to face the King stands be - fore his son.

B. Kon - gen og Kon - gens Søn, ja, Favn i  
King stands be - fore his son, yes, face to

475 *cresc.* *cresc.*

S. ny, og Favn i Favn staar Kon - - gen og Kon - gens Søn,  
*cresc.* gain, and face to face the King *cresc.* stands be - fore his son.

A. Favn i Favn staar Kon - - gen og Kon - - gens  
*cresc.* Face to face the King *cresc.* stands be - for his

T. Favn i Favn staar Kon - - gen og  
*cresc.* Face to face the King *cresc.* stands be -

B. Favn staar Kon - - gens Søn, ja, Favn i  
*cresc.* face, King Saul doth stand, yes, face to

478 *f*

S. beg - ge Is - rael's Før - ste, beg - - ge  
Both are cap - tains of Is - rael, both are

A. Søn, beg - ge Is - ra - els Før - ste, beg - ge Is - ra - els Før - ste,  
son. Both are cap - tains of Is - rael, both are cap - tains of Is - rael.

T. Kon - gens Søn, beg - - ge  
fore - - - his son. Both are

B. Favn staar Kon - gen og Søn, beg - ge Is - ra - els Før - ste,  
face be - fore his son. Both are cap - tains of Is - rael.

The musical celebration is composed as a fugue. The melody itself is reminiscent of the Danish composer Thomas Laub's (1852–1927) vast output of hymns in the old Reformation style and triple time, specifically the hymn 'Alt, hvad som fuglevinger fik' (1915) in which the melody follows Nielsen's theme with astonishing similarity (see ex. 3). Nielsen met Laub during his stay in Italy in 1899 and would later collaborate with him on a selection of Danish songs in the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>69</sup>



Ex. 3, Comparison of Thomas Laub, 'Alt, hvad som fuglevinger fik' (1915), bb. 1–3 (above) and Carl Nielsen, *Saul and David*, Act 3, 'Herren er Vidne' (1901), tenor part, bb. 461–63 (below).

Nielsen's revival of old contrapuntal forms clearly resonates with Tange's characterisation of musical symbolism. 'In musical symbolism,' he suggests, 'stylistic permutation occurs when various stylistic expressions – often from different historical periods – are combined in one musical composition.'<sup>70</sup> Although most of the music in *Saul and David* is largely contemporary, including the extensive use of diminished-seventh chords and other means of expression typical of the time, there are clear examples of archaism in the opera. Nielsen's use of these compositional techniques, furthermore, clearly emphasises his vision of an archaic 'Old Testament' mood.

### A European Symbolist Work

I have aimed in this article to offer a deeper understanding of both Carl Nielsen and his first much-neglected opera *Saul and David* in a wider cultural-historical and pan-European context.

The idea of Nielsen's 'Danishness' – a film all too often wrapped around the composer – has been challenged by treating Nielsen and his works as inherently European.<sup>71</sup> The vast treasure trove of Nielsen's diary entries and letters has shown us that he was deeply inspired by the artistic developments in modern Europe, having travelled extensively

69 *En Snes danske viser I and II* (1915 and 1917) and *Folkehøjskolens Melodibog* (1922). Carl Nielsen and Thomas Laub would begin their collaboration in the autumn of 1914. See Birgit Bjørnum & Klaus Møllerhøj, *Carl Niensens Samling. Katalog over komponistens musikhåndskrifter i Det Kongelige Bibliotek* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Bibliotek and Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 1992), 289.

70 Tange, 'Musikalsk symbolisme', 47.

71 Daniel Grimley offers an insightful discussion of Nielsen's Danishness in Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, 10–21.

and engaged himself in art and with artists at the time. Nielsen travelled throughout Europe at a time when symbolism was dominating the modern art scene. In Copenhagen, he actively met with symbolist artists, writers, and thinkers associated with the *Free Exhibition* and *Taarnet*. It is also evident that Nielsen shared many of the same ideas and artistic interests as his circle of symbolist acquaintances in and outside Denmark.

In my analysis of *Saul and David*, I presented elements in Nielsen's work that correspond to different ideas of symbolism – both in terms of the opera's literary subject, the dramaturgical elements, and the musical composition. Just as the symbolists of his time, Nielsen concentrated on creating a language of mood, in expressing a subjective vision through simplified and non-naturalistic styles, and in a fusion of archaic materials and forms with contemporary musical techniques. Given these considerations, I would argue that it is instructive to view *Saul and David* through a symbolist lens, and as an important product of the symbolist movement.

This has been the first symbolist reading of *Saul and David* so far, and one of the few symbolist readings on Nielsen's works in general.<sup>72</sup> However, I hope I have shown that such a reading is indeed fruitful and could be considered as a research strategy when dealing with Nielsen's compositions from the 1880s to the turn of the century.

72 Grimley discusses Nielsen's symbolism with readings of 'Har Dagen sanket al sin Sorg' (1892) from *Musik til fem Digte af J. P. Jacobsen*, op. 4/5, 'Genrebillede' (1893) from *Viser og Vers af J. P. Jacobsen*, opus 6/1 and 'Arabesk', *Fem Klaverstykker (Five Piano Pieces)*, op. 3/3. See Grimley, chap. 'Carl Nielsen: Symbolist', in *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, 25–47.

## Abstract

This article explores the position of the Danish composer Carl Nielsen (1865–1931) and his first opera *Saul and David* (1898–1901) in the European symbolist movement of the 1890s. Through a study of Nielsen's published letters and diary entries from the period, it is possible to present the composer's wide interest in art and engagement with artists – both in Denmark and on his extensive European travels – at a time when symbolism was dominating the modern art scene. Furthermore, one can trace artistic strategies in Nielsen's early work – in this case, the opera *Saul and David* – that correspond to different ideas of symbolism. This includes combining archaic materials with contemporary techniques, as well as creating a subjective expression through mood and simplified, non-naturalistic styles.

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