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Breakthrough and Collapse in Carl Nielsen's *Sinfonia semplice*

Christopher Tarrant

Discussion of deformational procedures in the large-scale symphonic repertoire has largely ignored Carl Nielsen's music. Such an approach has in the last ten years been applied to the late-eighteenth-century Viennese repertoire, largely owing to the long-awaited publication of Hepokoski's and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory* in 2006. Hepokoski's work on formal deformations, however, can be traced at least as far back as the early 1990s with the publication of *Sibelius Symphony No. 5*, his first attempt at setting out five distinct 'reassessed compositional principles' relating to Sibelius's generation of composers.[1] He wrote that 'The 1889–1914 modernists sought to shape the earlier stages of their careers as individualistic seekers after the musically "new", the bold, the controversial, and the idiosyncratic in structure and colour.'[2] But although in 1993 Hepokoski asserted that Mahler's, Strauss's, and Sibelius's music 'should be considered the principle symphonic representatives of a generation that faced the same kinds of compositional and institutional challenges, however their individual solutions might have differed', an implied second order of composers is tagged onto this assertion: 'doubtless along with Elgar, and *probably* Nielsen and Glazunov as well'.[3] This view, it would seem, is representative of Nielsen's marginal position in 1990s scholarship as an important European symphonist. Such marginalisation is also evident in D. Kern Holoman's edited collection, *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony*, in which the later chapters address composers who were writing symphonies well after 1900, thereby including the members of Hepokoski's '1865 generation' in a 'long' nineteenth century. But while Strauss, Mahler, Sibelius, and Elgar are each treated to a dedicated chapter, Nielsen and Glazunov are given mention only *en passant*.[4] It is surprising, then, that in the intervening years theories of deformation were largely – almost exclusively – directed at a restrictedly Classical instrumental repertoire. The decision that such concepts as 'deformation' and 'rotational form' were fundamental for an understanding of Mozart's

1 James Hepokoski, *Sibelius Symphony No. 5* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 6–7.

2 Ibid. 3.

3 Ibid. 4 (my italics). He later modified his position, stating that 'Notwithstanding the substantial differences among them (including the divergent cultural politics of their music's reception history), all six, probably along with a few others, are best considered as a group facing the same kinds of compositional problems.' James Hepokoski, 'Sibelius', in D. Kern Holoman (ed.), *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony* (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 417.

4 Kern Holoman, *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony*.

and Haydn's music, and that they did not, after all, have anything particularly to do with modernism, represented a major turning point in Hepokoski's theory of form away from the 1865 generation of early modernists and towards a more homogeneous repertoire of Viennese classics. This turn was further magnified by the ongoing battle between Hepokoski who advocated his own Sonata Theory, and Caplin's opposing predilection for formal functionality.[5] Even in this exclusive context, Sibelius's music is discussed once in *Elements of Sonata Theory*, Strauss's twice, Mahler's seven times, but Nielsen's is overlooked altogether. More recently, and since *Elements of Sonata Theory* has had the time to be assimilated into the discipline (to the extent that it now represents a new orthodoxy), Nielsen has begun to emerge as an important sonata-deformation virtuoso.[6] But his place as a contributor to symphonic innovation is far from secure: Julian Horton's 2013 study of 'cyclical tonal schemes of 163 symphonies composed between 1800 and 1911' fails to mention Nielsen's first three contributions, although his contemporaries Stanford, Elgar, Mahler, and Glazunov all enjoy pride of place.[7]

There still remains a great deal of untapped analytical potential in Nielsen's symphonic sonata forms, not least in his sixth and final symphony which has suffered so much over the decades from sustained criticism from analysts and commentators for its supposed ill-conception and flawed structures. In this article I will argue that Carl Nielsen's *Sinfonia semplice* (1925) contains examples of a particular formal deformation – the 'failed breakthrough' – which generates some unusual narrative implications. Adorno's three 'essential genres' in Mahler's music ('breakthrough', 'suspension', and 'fulfilment') provide a useful point of orientation when discussing symphonic music around 1900. But whereas the breakthrough in Mahler's music is usually understood as an emancipatory agency, in Carl Nielsen's Sixth Symphony the trajectory towards fulfilment is repeatedly undermined. It is not my intention to give a full account of the symphony, but rather to nuance and contextualise our current understanding of it as an important contribution to the early modernism of 'the 1865 generation' identified by Hepokoski. With reference to recent critical responses by Monahan and Almén to Northrop Frye's narrative archetypes, the terms of which I will explain below, I argue that these collapsing passages result in effects of pathos in the first movement, and bathos in the finale. While musicologists and critics have historically expressed a dissatisfaction with these passages, deriding them as weak or anti-climactic, this article attempts analytically to situate them as important examples of expressive deformations.

5 See William E. Caplin, *Classical Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Pieter Bergé (ed.), *Musical Form, Forms, & Formenlehre* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010).

6 See Daniel M. Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism* (Woolbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 96–131.

7 Julian Horton, 'Tonal strategies in the nineteenth-century symphony', in Julian Horton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Symphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 252–59.

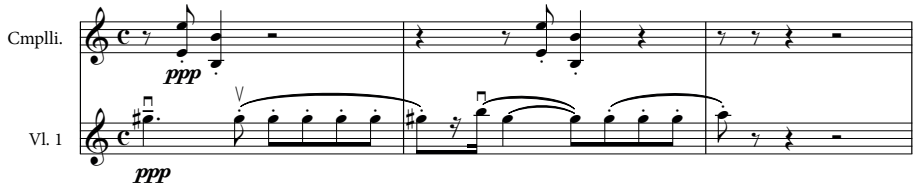
While it is hoped that this article will help to enrich the theoretical and analytical debates and recent controversies surrounding large-scale sonata composition in the twentieth century by claiming a more central place for Carl Nielsen's music in those debates, it is also hoped, conversely, that a discussion involving sonata form theory, voice leading, and narrative theory will engage and contribute to current trends and agendas in Nielsen scholarship. Principal among these for the present article is the notion of a late style in Nielsen's music that began to emerge during the First World War, and of which the Sixth Symphony is an important example. This can be broadly identified in structural and technical features such as a return to formal concision, an emphasis on contrapuntal textures (especially fugue), more soloistic use of orchestral forces, and an increasingly ambitious treatment of dissonance at different levels in the structure, among others. Such examples of late style might also include the *Chaconne*, Op. 32 (1917), the *Theme and Variations*, Op. 40 (1917), the Wind Quintet, Op. 43 (1922), the Fifth Symphony, Op. 50 (1922), the Clarinet Concerto, Op. 57 (1928), and the *Three Motets*, Op. 55 (1929).

First, though, I would like to situate Nielsen's engagement with the breakthrough in context. While Arnold Whittall is, perhaps, right to say that Carl Nielsen was 'in various productive respects, independent of the German late romantic symphonic mainstream, culminating in Mahler,' the breakthrough which is typically attributed to Mahler's music, especially after Adorno, is the subject of an innovative reinterpretation by Nielsen.[8] The orthodox view of the breakthrough as an emancipatory musical agency rings true in many cases in Mahler, especially in his First Symphony, but also in the music of Sibelius: the breakthrough in the Fifth Symphony is probably the most famous example, and in such cases it typically has the effect of hastening tonal closure. For Mahler, in the first movement of his First Symphony the breakthrough comes at the moment of recapitulation, but what follows, as Adorno observed, functions more as a coda than an orthodox recapitulation.[9] In Sibelius's Fifth Symphony the breakthrough emerges in the slow, meandering first movement, propelling the music directly into the contrasting Scherzo, which is far more tonally directionalised. For Nielsen, however, the effect is far less clear. Some elements of the Mahlerian breakthrough are conserved in the first movement of the *Sinfonia semplice*: notably, the premonition, which occurs near the beginning of the development section (b. 129), ex. 1a, and which recurs at the moment of breakthrough just before the recapitulation (b. 171), ex. 1b.[10]

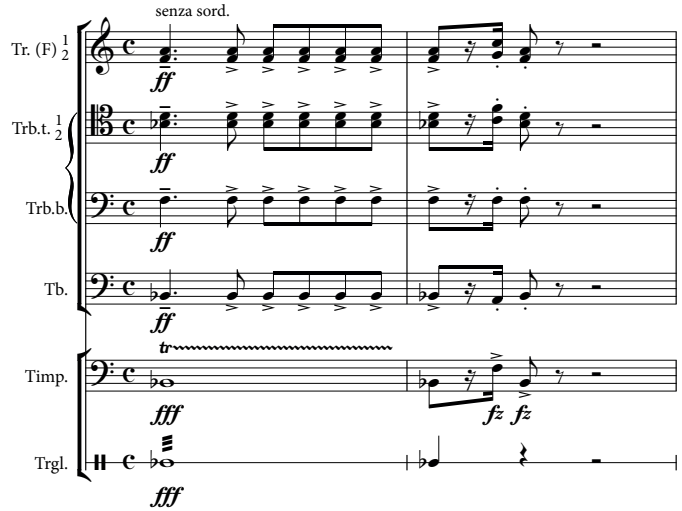
8 Arnold Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.

9 Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, transl. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 13.

10 The full score is available as PDF in the critical edition of Carl Nielsen Works, vol. II/6, at http://www.kb.dk/en/nb/dcm/cnu/download.html



Ex. 1a, Premonition, the new theme, *Sinfonia semplice*, I, bb. 129–31.



Ex. 1b, Breakthrough, *Sinfonia semplice*, I, bb. 171–72.

In Mahler's case, this premonition is originally heard quietly as a horn fanfare – a sonority that, as Scheinbaum has observed, is inextricably linked with the breakthrough topic:

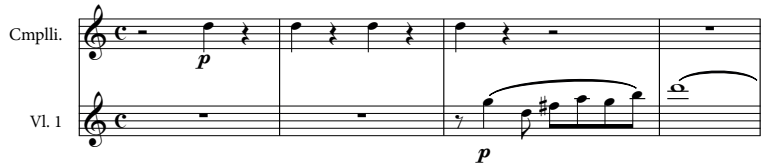
> Adorno consistently locates a breakthrough when a movement seems intruded upon by massed brass instruments playing fanfare figures and chorale-like melodies; these topics and their sudden harmonic swerves are set with an instrumentation that is more or less fixed.[11]

In the *Sinfonia semplice* the premonition is heard as a new theme delicately scored for strings (ex. 1a). It is here that we can detect some of the innocence that David Fanning has identified, which he argues is to be lost or corrupted later in the movement.[12] Where

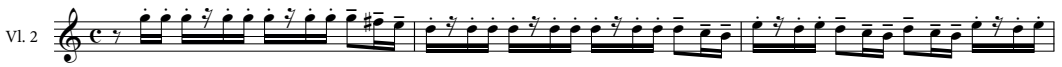
11 J. J. Scheinbaum, 'Adorno's Mahler and the Timbral Outsider', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 131/1 (2006), 49.

12 'The quality of brutalisation seems to arise from a combination of melodic, dynamic and timbral intensification, while rhythmic identity is preserved … In the Sixth Symphony brutalization is elevated to a structural and expressive principle, compensating for downgraded harmonic means of intensification and conveying an underlying message of corrupted simplicity.' David Fanning, 'Progressive Thematicism in Nielsen's Symphonies', in Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion* (London: Faber, 1994), 196–200.

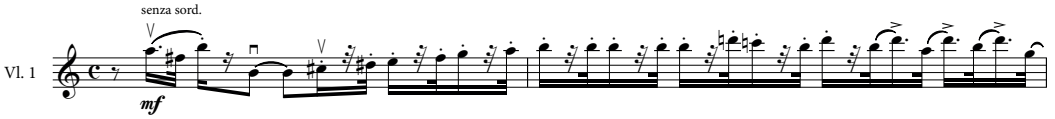
these two examples differ is at the moment of breakthrough itself. In Mahler's case, it brings with it the triumphant return of the tonic, and the bypass of the symmetrical recapitulation. In Nielsen's Sixth Symphony we are presented with the opposite, a collapse followed by a recapitulation that is barred from reattaining the tonic.



Ex. 2a, Lyrical theme, *Sinfonia semplice*, I, bb. 1–4.



Ex. 2b, March, *Sinfonia semplice*, I, bb. 8–10.



Ex. 2c, Fugue theme, *Sinfonia semplice*, I, bb. 54–55.

The symphony begins in G major with a lyrical theme (ex. 2a) that could be an example of the 'narrator frame', somewhat redolent of other 'semplice' symphonies in the same key, notably Dvořák's Eighth and Mahler's Fourth. Adorno's observation that, in Mahler's G major Symphony, 'everything is composed within quotation marks – because the music says: Once upon a time there was a sonata', could be equally applicable to Nielsen's music.[13] The 'new theme' (ex. 1a) which emerges near the beginning of the development section presents one of the few relatively uncomplicated musical statements in the movement – a period of respite E major. This, in my view, is an example of the 'hypothetical music' that Seth Monahan has referred to in Mahler's symphonies.[14] It is presented as an idealised and childlike proposition, bracketed off from the brutal present tense of the fugue. It proposes a situation in the sonata process where such an ideal state might be presented in the tonic. When this new theme reemerges later in the movement at b. 171, however, its role is reversed as it shatters the thematic framework of the movement, and is presented in B flat, a tritone away from its original appearance, and mirroring E major from the other side of the original tonic of the piece, G.

13 Adorno, *Mahler*, 96.

14 Seth Monahan, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), 26.

Adorno's and Hepokoski's characterisations of the breakthrough hold true, in my view, for Nielsen's Sixth: Adorno wrote that the breakthrough, 'shatter[s] the walls of the securely constructed form', and Hepokoski has written that it, 'radically redefines the character and course of the movement … typically render[ing] a normative, largely symmetrical recapitulation invalid.'[15] But in this work it is enacted in a radically different way. In terms of narrative trajectories, the first movement of Sibelius's Fifth charts a path from the difficult, dark, cadenceless opening to the energetic, directionalised Scherzo. In the case of Nielsen's Sixth, the opposite is the case as the movement seems to have been barred from reattaining either the uncomplicated G major tonality or the child-like march (ex. 2b) with which it began, and eventually is compelled to settle on a degraded A flat. This invites some speculation as to whether the breakthrough itself, in its original, positive sense as it has been directed at the music of Mahler and Sibelius, may not be the focus here. Rather, it may be advantageous to consider Adorno's lesser-known category of 'collapse', since this is what the music does after its bungled breakthrough attempt, and which can be traced to a particular harmony on which the music comes to rest (b. 185) – a harmony which contains all the notes of E major, looking back to the innocence of the premonition, and all the notes of the enharmonic equivalent of A flat major, the remote destination of the movement (see Fig. 1).[16] Rather than breaking out into a new, more fulfilling and emancipatory musical form, the collapse disables the movement from attaining its proper tonal goal. This is clearly audible on the surface of the music as the 'new theme', now presented as a brass bombardment, tumbles into a complex harmony which, when thinned out, comes to rest on a bare semitone between B and C at b. 187. Furthermore, the combination of E major and A flat major is a collision of two tonal stations which are then forcibly torn apart, leading to the abandonment of the childlike innocence of E, buoyed up by its four sharps, and the eventual acceptance of the rather more experienced A flat, heavily laden with its four flats.[17]

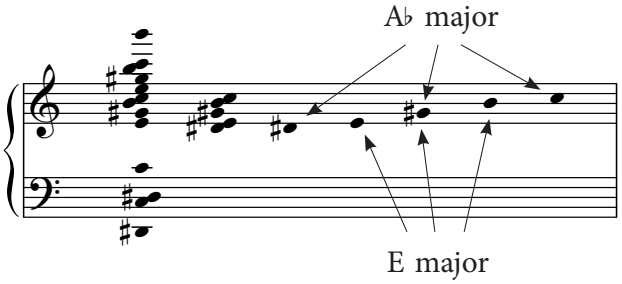


Figure 1. The 'collapse' chord which appears at b. 185 in its original orchestral spacing and in a reduced form showing its pitch content.

15 Hepokoski, *Sibelius*, 6.

16 See Adorno, *Mahler*, 44–46.

17 My sincere thanks go to Julian Horton for his help in making this observation.

It is possible here to identify an ironic response to the nineteenth-century symphonic inheritance, and to Nielsen's own earlier work. The trend in his pre-war symphonies (by which I mean Nos. 1–4, and not the Fifth) is to set a 'problem' in the exposition which inevitably is solved. The Sixth Symphony is different because of the collapse which permanently shatters the movement's form, as well as the tonal symmetry of the symphony as a whole. Although directional tonality, as Krebs and others have pointed out, is a commonplace in Nielsen's music, it is typically treated as a positive musical narrative, often outlining the interval of a fifth. This is the case, for example, in both outer movements of the *Sinfonia Espansiva*, which trace a path from D to A – an aspirational gesture in line with much of Nielsen's early and mature music. The first movement of the *Semplice*, which rises by a semitone between beginning and end, is a different beast entirely.[18] Although A flat minor is converted to A flat major at the very end, there is a particular sense of irony in its conclusion as the two contrapuntal bassoon parts come to rest on the Neapolitan, A flat, in the final bars of the movement.

This begs a comparison with the narratives generated in some of Hans Christian Andersen's stories, which finish on a darkly moralistic note and with a kind of double result – the story reaches a conclusion, but not the happy ending we may have anticipated. The action comes to rest, but in an unexpected place owing to circumstances beyond the characters' control. The adventure has changed the complexion of the protagonist's worldview, and disturbed their previously innocent existence. An example of this can be found in the case of the toy sweethearts, the Top and the Ball, who, when reunited, find that their child-like love has faded. The story concludes: 'And the Top went back to the living room and was made much of, but nothing was heard of the Ball, and the Top never mentioned his old love again. Love dies when your sweetheart has lain soaking in the gutter for five years – in fact, you take care not to recognize her again when you meet her in the dustbin.'[19] The End. Colin Roth has argued for a fairytale reading of the symphony, noting, importantly, that the Danish word for fairy tale, *eventyr*, stands between such an incomplete translation and the modern English word 'adventure'.[20] H. C. Andersen is notoriously cruel to his characters. If we are to accept, as Susan McClary suggested, that sonata form after around 1800 is an unfolding tonal drama negotiated by an implied subject, and that this still holds true in Nielsen's music, then I would suggest that the events of the first movement's sonata form are readily compa-

18 Krebs writes that 'The last two symphonies … move beyond late nineteenth-century tonal practice … the Sixth in particular, might well repay investigation from analytical vantage points other than those employed in Simpson's book and in this [Krebs's] chapter.' Harald Krebs, 'Tonal Structure in Nielsen's Symphonies: Some Addenda to Robert Simpson's Analyses', in Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion*, 247.

19 Hans Christian Andersen, *Fairy tales: A Selection*, trans. L. W. Kingsland (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959, reissued 2009), 213.

20 Colin Roth, 'Carl Nielsen and the Danish Tradition of Story-Telling', *Carl Nielsen Studies*, 4 (2009), 172.

rable with common tropes found in fairytales.[21] These include narrative ideas such as the ostracised protagonist (The Old House, Thumbelina, The Ugly Duckling), topical ideas such as tin soldiers (The Steadfast Tin Soldier, The Old House), and especially the brutally desolate conclusion (The Little Match Girl, The Top and the Ball, The Flying Trunk). The first movement of the *semplice* exhibits all three of these: the tin soldiers hardly require explanation, but the idea of the ostracised protagonist and the pathetic conclusion (marooned on the Neapolitan) I hope will become clearer as a result of the analysis presented below.

It is instructive to consider where this form sits in relation to Northrop Frye's four narrative archetypes. Studies of musical narrative fell into decline from around the mid-1990s, largely, according to Byron Almén's account, owing to the influential critiques of Carolyn Abbate and Jean-Jacques Nattiez.[22] In the last decade, however, narrative seems to have undergone a musicological renaissance and has in some cases become an important condition for theory and analysis, not least in Hepokoski's and Darcy's *Elements Sonata Theory* where they state that 'Metaphors of narrativity are not inevitably implied – the external narrator and the tale told – but in some cases they can spring to mind and appear to be hermeneutically relevant.'[23]

For now, though, I draw more specifically on Seth Monahan's employment of Frye in his work on Mahler's sonata narratives, partially refracted through Byron Almén's critical responses which paved the way for specifically musical narrative approaches during the 2000s. Since musical narratives tend to be more 'slippery' than literary ones, it will be useful briefly to rehearse the terms of Frye's narrative archetypes before attempting to employ them. There are two axes that we must first consider, and through whose combination Frye produced the four basic narrative types. The first axis concerns the presence of an order (social, cultural, political, musical) on the one hand, and a disruptive agency (however defined) on the other. The second axis concerns the focalisation of the narrative, i.e., with whom the reader is invited to sympathise. So, if the reader's sympathies lie with the order which is being put in jeopardy by a disruptive external agency then this results in a romantic narrative (should the order prevail) or an ironic one (if the order is defeated). On the other hand, if the reader sympathises with the disruption in the face, perhaps, of an evil or oppressive status quo, then a comic narrative is produced (if the disruption succeeds in reforming or overturning the order) or a tragic one (if the emancipatory agency is defeated by the order). Almén reproduces these four narrative types in short form as follows:

21 See Susan McClary, 'Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music', in Philip Brett, Gary Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood (eds.), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 205–34.

22 See Byron Almén, 'Narrative Archetypes: A Critique, Theory, and Method of Narrative Analysis', *Journal of Music Theory*, 47/1 (2003), 1.

23 James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 305.

Emphasis on victory:
Comedy – victory of transgression over order
Romance – victory of order over transgression

Emphasis on defeat:
Irony/satire – defeat of order by transgression
Tragedy – defeat of transgression by order[24]

This is all well and good at the level of broad strokes, even for complex symphonic sonata forms such as those that Monahan analyses in *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas*.[25] A textbook major-mode sonata, for example, in which the secondary theme in the (transgressive) dominant is brought into the tonic order in the recapitulation seems to be an uncontroversially romantic narrative (assuming that the listener does not have a perverse desire for the dominant to prevail at the end). Examples of particular narratives do not have to become particularly nuanced before the situation becomes considerably more difficult to navigate, though. Frye noted that *The Merchant of Venice* 'seems almost an experiment in coming as close as possible to upsetting the comic balance … If the dramatic role of Shylock is ever so slightly exaggerated … it is upset, and the play becomes the tragedy of the Jew of Venice with a comic epilogue.'[26] This is to say, oftentimes productions will invite us to sympathise with Shylock and therefore radically reshape our experience of narrative in the play.

Carl Nielsen's music continued to engage the basic points of semiotic reference that prevailed in the nineteenth century. The minor mode, for instance, was still something that a piece of music could aim to 'overcome', or, in the tragic narrative, be overcome by.[27] Nielsen continued to rely on important moments of structural closure and confirmation to underwrite these points of reference, and therefore their presence on the one hand, or conspicuous absence or failure to materialise on the other, continue to be important considerations for a close reading of his music. However, at a deeper level of structure, considerable care and nuance is required in order to comprehend the complex musical narratives that are in evidence in his symphonies. These questions of narrative are the result of a collection of innovations and aspects of Nielsen's idiolect which are too numerous for an exhaustive discussion here. I will, however, discuss those that I consider to impact most profoundly on what we hear in Nielsen's music and, just as importantly in such a discussion of musical narrative, how Nielsen invites us to hear it.

24 Almén, 'Narrative Archetypes', 18.
25 Monaghan, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas*.
26 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957), 165.
27 Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements*, 306, argue this in the context of the late-eighteenth-century sonata.

The treatment of tonality in the Sixth Symphony is quite unlike the kind of directional tonality we find in Schubert, Bruckner, Wagner, or Mahler, in that the two keys are not treated as a single tonal focus. But nor is it similar to Elgar's treatment as Paul Harper-Scott has observed in the First Symphony, in which an overarching 'immuring' tonic (i.e., one that frames another key area, thereby 'imprisoning' it) is returned to after most of the action has taken place in the orbit of an 'immured' tonic (i.e., the 'imprisoned' key area which is closely associated with the desire to break free). Like Elgar's music, Nielsen's is not conventionally tonal, but nevertheless relies on many inherited conventions of tonality, and in my view demands an adapted form of Schenkerian theory in which different forms of the *Ursatz* are operative in different parts of the movement, not least because of the key structures in operation: although tonal unity has been demonstrated in pieces which modulate from beginning to end between keys related by consonant intervals, this has not yet been demonstrated in a piece, such as the first movement of Nielsen's Sixth, which modulates through a dissonant interval such as a semitone. It is therefore important to consider some of the challenges that such a structure poses for a voice-leading analysis. Grimley has noted that in Nielsen's idiolect, from at least as early as the Third Symphony, there is some kind of rupture in the middle-ground and that 'chromatic progressions ... cannot ultimately be heard as diminutions of underlying diatonic structures, and it is difficult to construct models of voice-leading that demonstrate complete coherence between foreground and upper middleground levels.'[28] While this may be one of the main analytical challenges of the *Espansiva*, in the context of the *semplice* it presents an analytical opportunity, since, as I shall argue below, the first movement is largely *about* a broken structural order.

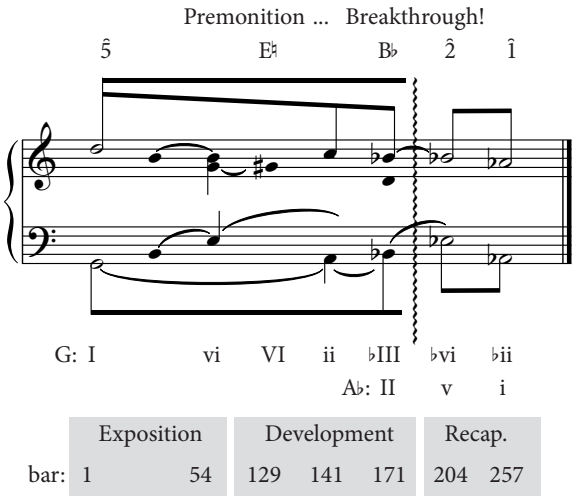


Figure 2. A Schenkerian reduction of the first movement.

28 Grimley, *Carl Nielsen*, 101.

The graph in Figure 2 shows that in the first place, G major is prolonged, with the secondary zone outlining E minor. E continues to be prolonged into the development section, after which we begin to see further elaboration of a stepwise ascent to the dominant. At the halfway point, however, the elaboration of G major collapses into G minor as B flat is reached. This is the moment of the breakthrough, and accompanying collapse, which is the catalyst for the abandonment of the *Ursatz* and the defection to a new one which elaborates the final tonal station, A flat minor. This involves the radical and catastrophic reinterpretation of B flat from functioning as the flattened mediant of G major to the supertonic of A flat minor, and which underpins the sense of abandonment and rupture which is often attributed to the piece. Also of interest here, taking Adorno's Mahlerian categories even further, is the immediate fallout of the breakthrough which could be an example of a suspension field. Although considerably shorter than those found in the first movements of Mahler's Sixth and Seventh symphonies, the passage beginning at b. 187 which rests on the bare semitone between B and C creates a strange stasis, after which the tonal argument, beginning with the recapitulation in E flat minor, never recovers. While Mahler's categories of breakthrough, suspension, and fulfilment were intended for a particular repertoire of symphonic music, they were used, at least by Adorno himself, as a means of discussing separate, however interrelated, features in Mahler's symphonies. Monahan and others have drawn extensively on these topics in their discussion of Mahler's symphonies, especially in terms of musical narrative, but Nielsen presents us with a new problem to address. An understanding of narrative in nineteenth-century sonata forms will generally rely on fixed points of tonal and structural reference. If, for example, the oppressive minor mode is not escaped, we might interpret the structure as a tragic narrative (i.e. a failure), but the rules of the sonata game are essentially still observed. The extra layer of failure in Nielsen's Sixth Symphony is a symptom of the fact that the emphasis on defeat penetrates through the organising structures of tonality: the very fabric of tonal syntax (not normally in question in nineteenth-century tragic and ironic sonata narratives) is undermined, and the guarantees of tonal resolution and formal coherence are no longer reliable. This therefore begs the question: what are the ramifications of a narrative that stages the overturning of a set of musical conditions which do not simply define the environment or status quo within the music itself (as in nineteenth-century symphonic practice), but the very fabric of its symbolic order?

Section	Bar	Theme	Key
Exposition	1	Lyrical Theme (P)	G major
	8	March (P)	G major
	33	March (P)	E flat major
	54	Fugue (S)	E minor
	81	Discursive Codetta (C)	
Development	110	Lyrical Theme (P)	F sharp major
	129	PREMONITION ('New Theme')	E major
	141	Fugue (S)	A minor
	152	Lyrical Theme + March (developmental)	
	171	BREAKTHROUGH ('New Theme')	B flat major
	185	Collapse Chord	E major/A flat major
	187	Retransition, energy loss	
Recapitulation	204	Lyrical Theme (P)	E flat minor
	237	Fugue (S)	F minor
Coda	257	Lyrical theme (P)	A flat minor/major

Table 1. A table showing the first movement's sonata form.

This is a challenge to the analyst owing to the extreme complexity of the music. In Almén's 2003 article, the case study that he used to illustrate an application of narrative archetypes was the C minor *Prèlude* from Chopin's Op. 28 – a conveniently brief example, and considerably less complex than a symphonic movement.[29] Monahan suggested some potential ways of reading sonata form along these lines in *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas*, but the rules of engagement in this case are far from set, and demand some creativity and poetic imagination on the part of the reader. I must therefore invite you to share my view of what, in Nielsen's Sixth Symphony, comprises an order and a transgression, and from which perspective we might experience he narrative.

At the beginning of the first movement, G major is presented as a happy home for the march theme, although our suspicions might be raised by its inability to sustain the key for more than six bars. Although we might hear the fugal theme at b. 54 as a transgressive intrusion, it does not produce the main structural moment of antagonism that is arrived at in b. 171. The breakthrough is the result of the formerly harmless 'new theme' that was heard earlier in the development section. We therefore might hear this theme, rather than something that has been 'corrupted' as Kramer argued, or had

29 Almén, 'Narrative Archetypes'.

its innocence taken away, as the music that *does the corrupting*.[30] This, arguably, is the source of the narrative downfall in the movement. The theme is focalised early in the development: we, as listeners, are invited to 'take the side of' this theme when we first hear it nestle subdominantly into E major at b. 129, to hear it from its own perspective, to sympathise with it. It is only later in the development that it reveals itself to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, or, to continue Frye's Blakean analogy, a tiger in lamb's clothing. The theme, initially endearing us to sympathise with it, later emerges as the music of the breakthrough – a malevolent or repellant agency – causing the listener to reverse their perspective. This tipping point in the narrative, at which sympathy with the new theme is rendered no longer tenable, results in a combinatory effect regarding Frye's archetypes. There is a kind of double-failure. The narrative is not merely 'tragic' because the governing order, one might say, is at least partially brought down in the course of the movement (the tonal language prevails to the end but is somehow 'damaged' and unable to reattain the tonic key). But it is not merely 'ironic' either: in such a case, a transgressive agency would have to be seen to prevail and, moreover, the undoing of the order would ordinarily come from within (and it would be difficult to hear the E major theme as coming 'from within', especially in the way Nielsen presents it). While much of this movement (and the rest of the symphony) does seem to show elements of Frye's conception of the ironic mythos 'as a parody of romance: the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content', this alone cannot account for the important tragic motion of the movement.[31] It may be advantageous, therefore, to read the movement as an example of a 'double failure' or 'failed tragedy', i.e., the order is defeated by a disruption with which we can no longer sympathise. The movement can therefore be heard as an important and unusual example of narrative hybridity, and specifically an example of narrative *pathos*, i.e., a combination of elements of tragedy and irony.

Humoreske and Proposta Seria

The 'toy music' and 'twilight music' of the inner movements are also instructive from a narrative perspective. Grimley argues that Nielsen's 'description of the *Humoresque* in particular becomes a *Petrushka*-esque ballet sequence or pantomime, a carnivalesque procession.'[32] The Scherzo has largely been seen as Nielsen antagonising the then-established Schoenberg generation of self-styled Austro-German high modernists. My impression is that it is an example of toy music, and that, rather like a pixar film such

30 'The process of destruction of innocence, of loss of (rather than just contrast to) simplicity, is the essence of this fundamentally dark work.' Jonathan D. Kramer, 'Unity and Disunity in Nielsen's Sixth Symphony', in Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion*, 322.

31 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 223.

32 Grimley, *Carl Nielsen*, 252.

as *The Incredibles* or *Wall-E*, the narrative counterpoint between the adult story of irony, pathos, bathos, and so on and so forth, and the children's one of toy music, sensory experience, fun tunes, surprises, and so on, is one of its most simultaneously charming and pathetic features. This is especially the case as we hear it as an 'escape' into a simpler mode of being immediately after the tragic-ironic 'reality' of the first movement.

Nielsen's music can often be heard in terms of its polarisation of mood (for example, the utter darkness of the *Andante malincolico* from the Second Symphony followed immediately by the brightness and optimism of the *Allegro sanguineo*) as a symptom of the Nordic condition. Peter Davidson has argued as much in his analysis of painting and literature from the region, with the contention that extremes of light and dark as a result of the region's proximity to the arctic circle has had a profound and demonstrable effect on creative activity from at least as long ago as the early nineteenth century.[33] Just as important to the Nordic experience are the marginal spaces of the varying gradations of twilight – civil, nautical, and astronomical – which have been the setting for a considerable amount of Nordic and Scottish painting in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Davidson, however, downplays important musical examples of this phenomenon, one of which occurs in the third movement of Nielsen's Sixth.

As with visual depictions, it is also difficult to distinguish between evening twilight (the period between sunset and dusk) and morning twilight (the period between dawn and sunrise) in musical ones. In some cases this may seem an arbitrary distinction to make, especially in instances where certain geographical and seasonal conditions mean that twilight never fully cedes to daylight (in winter) or night (in summer). However, there are some important metaphorical considerations which demand attention – sunset with its predominantly negative connotations of decay, the unknown, and the sense of time running out, and morning twilight which is associated with the positive connotations of rebirth and renewal. My own view is that the Proposta seria is an example of dawn music, something along the lines of the opening of the *Helios* overture. The use of the horns is a clear signal for this, along with the quartile harmonies resulting in a building up of minor 7th sonorities. There is also a narrative context for this: the previous movement could be (and, I think, should be) read as a whimsical portrayal of 'bedtime' music – the toys are getting tired, hence the yawning trombone, and eventually nod off at the end of the movement, which peters out quite unceremoniously. Moreover, much of the Proposta Seria up to this point is not dissimilar in instrumental colour and harmonic flavour to much of Bartok's so-called night music: the textures are generated from a continuous knit of chromatic figurations in the strings with a restricted compass and an irregular rhythmic profile. The sunrise is followed, at the end of the movement, with the broad daylight of the finale which is sparked into life by a fanfare in the woodwinds: the sun is up and the carnival may begin.

33 Peter Davidson, *The Last of the Light: About Twilight* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015).

Grimley has written widely on music and landscape, and his approach is a compelling one.[34] But just as important as the landscape that is being depicted – here a specifically Danish one, flat, expansive, still, peaceful, and largely deserted – is the nature of its illumination: the rays of sunlight gradually escaping over the horizon, and the spectrum of colours that is produced, from deep indigo through purples, greens, yellows, and oranges, until the clear blue and white of the day sky can be seen. Of course, unlike the *Helios* overture, Nielsen's Proposta Seria never reaches this point, which is deferred to the following movement, conditionalising the movement's meaning as a self-contained structure, with its last note (moving from a settled D flat to a disruptive C in the bass) calling its sincerity into question.

Tema og Variationer

The theme-and-variations finale also contains a breakthrough, which Jonathan Kramer has described as 'a fanfare worthy of Hollywood' and an 'incredible non sequitur', which occurs at b. 325, just before the final variation.[35] Again, this movement buys into a strong tradition of variation-form finales which find their roots in Haydn, but whose main exemplars are the finales of Beethoven's third, Brahms's fourth, and Dvorak's eighth symphonies. The movement takes a similar shape to these earlier models, opening with a fanfare before presenting a low-intensity theme which is progressively intensified before a central lull. This is then sparked back into life with a high-intensity ending. In Nielsen's case, this is the moment of the breakthrough, announced by a customary fanfare and an electrifying passage for violins and side drum which introduces, finally, the full version of the theme. It is, however, doomed to failure. We are promised here a eucatastrophic ending (i.e., one which turns decisively toward something happier, or freer, or even utopian)[36] which is soon rendered impossible by an allusion to the breakthrough chord from the first movement, derailing the music and leading to yet another collapse. This time, however, the collapse is of an even more complicated and conditional nature: the theme is presented by the horns, significantly in A flat minor (the resting place of the first movement) and gets to about its halfway point before completely disintegrating, rendering any triumphant eucatastrophe beyond its reach. After the return of the collapse sonority (b. 361) there is a move from the sublime to the ridiculous as we are presented with a sort of polka theme which dies away, even presenting the wrong harmony with the accompanying bass line at the end, before, out

34 See Grimley, *Carl Nielsen*, esp. chapter 5, 'Funen Dreams', 132–77; *Grieg: Music, Landscape, and Norwegian Identity* (Woolbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006); 'Music, Landscape, Attunement: Listening to Sibelius's *Tapiola*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 64/2 (2011), 394–98; 'The tone poems: genre, landscape and structural perspective', in Daniel M. Grimley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 95–116.

35 Kramer, 'Unity and Disunity', 340.

36 See J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *Edward Elgar, Modernist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 179.

of the rubble, the music builds back up to an aspirational but ultimately flawed ending with the bassoons having the final say on their bottom note.

The effect here, in my view, both contrasts and complements that generated in the first movement. Perhaps, in terms of the Danish story-telling tradition, the 'sardonic humour' that Simpson referred to is comparable with the sort found in stories such as Little Claus and Big Claus, or The Emperor's New Clothes.[37] The A flat tonality is transformed from its resigned, alienated state to a show of defiance, and the collapsing passage is humorous rather than pathetic. But, I would argue, the effect is yet more complex. Neither movement concludes entirely positively or entirely negatively: there is a conditionality to their respective conclusions. Truly dyscatastrophic finales are relatively uncommon: rare examples can be found in the sixth symphonies of Mahler, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius. There is no eucatastrophe in Nielsen's Sixth, but dyscatastrophe does not satisfactorily characterise the effects of the outer movements. The reality is messier, and might be better understood as comic irony or *bathos*, especially when understanding the first movement's narrative as tragic irony or *pathos*. The common ironic tropes identified by Almén abound in this movement. These include 'fragmentary or chaotic' music;[38] 'distortions of musical convention'; and 'Romantic musical gestures unsupported by tonal structures'.[39] To add to this, the target has been lowered from the initial G major to the 'second best' B flat major, and even the attainment of this modest goal is in question until only a few bars from the end of the work. But it is remiss to ignore the essentially positive motion of the movement, in which Nielsen's glass is always half full, from small beginnings (the unaccompanied bassoon theme) through struggle (the lamenting Variation 8 and the 'Dead March' of Variation 9) toward a new and more desirable condition, albeit a clownish one.[40] It is as if the subject of comedy itself is being treated ironically here, and the guarantees of tonal coherence that were removed in the first movement are not fully reinstated, even at the very end.

Returning to the current standing of Nielsen scholarship as we inherit it from a revived Anglo-American tradition of *Formenlehre*, I am sure that Hepokoski was right

37 See Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, 1st edn. (London: The Temple Press, 1952); rev. edn. (London: Kahn & Averill, 1979), 122. Grimley has written that 'the Sixth … assumes a peculiarly mythic quality, to which the key lies in its forcefully comic vision.' Grimley, *Carl Nielsen*, 288.

38 Kramer has written of the finale variations that 'Their timing and their order of succession give the music coherence but little consistency', Kramer, 'Unity and Disunity', 336. Roth has similarly argued, 'Rather than follow the route laid out by Brahms in his fourth symphony's "Passacaglia", which aims to develop a fully coherent symphonic argument while also tying itself to a continually repeating ground bass, Nielsen seems to me to be seeing how far he can get from his theme, how wildly he can extend the emotional and textural range of the movement and still keep it together', Roth, 'Carl Nielsen and the Danish Tradition', 184. This finds a precedent in Beethoven's Third and Dvořak's Eighth, but in Nielsen's case it does seem especially to lend itself to the ironic mythos.

39 Almén, 'Narrative Archetypes', 30.

40 Grimley, *Carl Nielsen*, 280.

in the 1990s to declare that the 1865 generation of self-styled early modernists, which included Mahler, Strauss, Sibelius, Elgar, Glazunov, and Nielsen, did share common institutional and compositional problems, to which they each responded with different solutions. But it is inadequate to make this declaration only then to focus on the solutions of two or three of them. To my mind, Glazunov remains the most neglected of all six (at least the six that Hepokoski drew our attention to), and it will be up to Glazunov scholars to nuance our understanding of his contribution to the survival of the symphony into the twentieth century. Nielsen's impact on the history of the genre is far from representative if we are to take the anglophone scholarship of the past thirty years as a measure, and his solutions to the compositional problems that Hepokoski referred to appear, at least in the Sixth Symphony and probably elsewhere, to be strikingly different from the ones pioneered by Sibelius, Mahler, and Strauss.[41] It may even be possible to position Nielsen's as an opposing voice to the 'nature mysticism' of Sibelius's late style, in which he achieves an uncanny tonal stasis in works such as *Tapiola* and *The Swan of Tuonela*.[42] The suspension of tonal guarantees in Nielsen's *Sinfonia semplice* stands as evidence of the way in which Nielsen used tonality as a genuine tool for modernism, and the denial of straightforwardly comic or tragic narrative trajectories in this work, I argue, offers further insight into the contribution to interwar modernism that can be found in his late style.

41 The important exceptions to this trend include (but are not limited to) David Fanning's *Nielsen Symphony No. 5* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), Grimley's *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, and the individual contributions to Mina Miller (ed.), *The Nielsen Companion*.

42 See Hepokoski, 'Sibelius', 417–49.

Abstract

The tension between Carl Nielsen's status as a modernist and his engagement with symphonic form has been a point of sustained scholarly interest in recent years. His *Sinfonia semplice* (1925) has posed some of the most searching questions for musicologists, formal as well as hermeneutic. Although the work's title alludes to its straightforwardly conventional layout in four movements and its sometimes childlike thematic materials, the events that occur in the course of the symphony, formal, tonal, and narrative, are far from simple. This article offers a reading of the *Sinfonia semplice* which draws on Adorno's categories of 'breakthrough' and 'collapse', Sonata Theory, and Northrop Frye's theory of narrative. The denial of straightforwardly heroic or tragic narrative trajectories, I argue, offers further insight into the contribution to interwar modernism that can be found in late Nielsen.

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