Danish Yearbook of Musicology

44 • 2020-21

Danish Yearbook of Musicology · Volume 44 · 2020-21
Dansk Årbog for Musikforskning

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Each volume of *Danish Yearbook of Musicology* is published continuously in sections:
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ISBN 978-87-88328-35-6 (volume 44); ISSN 2245-4969 (online edition)

Danish Yearbook of Musicology is a peer-reviewed journal published by the Danish Musicological Society on http://www.dym.dk/

'In the Land of Dreams': Carl Nielsen's Second Thoughts about Wagner

Nanna Staugaard Villagomez

'Heard *Das Rheingold* this evening. Wonderful! Any musician who doesn't find Wagner great is themself little'.[1] This passage from Carl Nielsen's travel diary was written on an autumn day in Dresden 1890 and indicates the beginning of an intense fascination with Richard Wagner. At this point, Nielsen was away on a five-month trip to Germany and thus further from his hometown on Funen than ever before. He now found himself at the epicentre of the European music scene and his diary and letters from his time in Germany prove that Wagner's music in particular seemed to have made quite an impression on the young, aspiring composer from Denmark. Nielsen watched the entire *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle over the course of a week, for instance, which he eagerly praised with animated adjectives. The immediate excitement did not last, however, and without apparent cause, Nielsen suddenly expressed a radical change of mind in his diary in 1894 about Wagner, whose music he now considered a representation of bad taste.[2] All words of praise were now replaced by a sharp critique, and Wagner was frequently brought up as the bad example when Nielsen in future publications expressed his general opinions on music.

During the same period, Nielsen wrote some of his earliest compositions, including two cycles of art songs set to poems by J.P. Jacobsen. The fact that Nielsen chose to turn his back on Wagner had immediate consequences for his own production as a composer. In a letter to William Behrend, Nielsen confessed that he had decided to discard one of his own songs prior to publication because he sensed 'Wagner's spirit' in it.[3] The song in question was 'In the Land of Dreams' ('I Drømmenes Land'), which was originally part of opus 4, *Music to Five Poems by J.P. Jacobsen* (*Musik til fem Digte af J.P. Jacobsen*), of 1892. This song thus becomes a key to understanding Nielsen's perception of Wagner and must have contained features that Nielsen considered too Wagnerian compared to the other art songs from the Jacobsen cycles. The question I will discuss in the present article is how Nielsen's own statements about music relate to specific musical traits in 'In the Land of Dreams' as well as possible reasons behind his change of heart.

1 *Carl Nielsen. Selected Letters and Diaries*, ed. and transl. David Fanning and Michelle Assay (Copenhagen: The Royal Library / Museum Tusculanum Press, 2017), no. 23; John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven* (Copenhagen: Multivers, 2005–2015), I/54: 'Hørte iaften Rheingold. Storartet! Den Musiker som ikke finder Wagner stor er selv meget lille'.

2 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 101; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, I/513.

3 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 109; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, I/533: 'Wagners Aand'.

Nielsen and Wagner's Legacy

Based on the statements from his diary, it is evident that what enthralled young Nielsen the most about Wagner's music during his time in Germany was its captivating energy and emotional impact. About *Siegfried* he wrote: 'I find the first act the most virile, energetic music ever written; it flashes like cold steel. The second act ... is delightfully poetic and atmospheric.'[4] In teleological terms, Wagner has often been credited for following the steps of Beethoven by freeing music from its chains of formal, melodic and harmonic conventions and thereby paving the way for modern composers' chances of further exploring the true and unbound nature of music. The idea of Wagner representing a new, revolutionary wave in music was clearly shared by Nielsen at this point, who, in 1890, also spoke much less flatteringly of Mozart whom he later adored. After watching *The Magic Flute*, for instance, Nielsen wrote: 'however, he [i.e. Mozart] must be enjoyed "historically". Wagner!! Wagner!! What have you done!'[5] The comment indicates that Nielsen, too, was convinced that music through Wagner had undergone a historic transformation which made earlier composers obsolete. One of the innovative compositional tools Nielsen was already quick to criticize, however, was Wagner's use of leitmotifs, about which he wrote: 'I admire Wagner and find him the greatest spirit of our century; but I can't stand the way he spoon-feeds his listeners. Every time a name is mentioned, even of someone who's been dead and buried many years ago, the respective leitmotif pokes its head out. I find it highly naïve, and it makes an almost comic impression on me.'[6] Although this negative remark was an anomaly in an otherwise heavy stream of praise in 1890, the critique was soon elaborated.

Several years later, in many of the essays that were eventually published as *Living Music* (*Levende Musik*) in 1925, Nielsen decided to put his thoughts on music into words. At this point, he defined good music as being organic as opposed to mechanic or constructed. In the essay 'Musical Problems' ('Musikalske Problemer'), he compared the laws of music to the laws of nature, indicating an understanding of music as a pre-existing phenomenon that the composer should aim to convey as truthfully as possible.[7] Music, Nielsen believed, should be simple, clear, linear and contrapuntal

4 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 26; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, I/57: 'Jeg finder at første Akt er den mandigste og mest energiske Musik der nogensinde er skrevet; det gnistrer af Staal og Sværd. Anden Akt … er henrivende poetisk og stemningsfuld.'

5 Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, I/78: 'han skal dog nydes "historisk". Wagner!! Wagner!! hvad har Du gjort!' (transl. by the author).

6 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 27; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, I/59: 'Jeg beundrer Wagner og finder, at han er den største Aand i vort Aarhundrede; men jeg kan ikke lide at han giver Tilhørerne ind med Skeer. Hvergang han nævner et Navn blot, selv om Indehaveren er død og begravet for mange Aar siden, faar man Vedkommendes Ledemotiv stukket ud. Jeg finder det højst naivt og det gjør nærmest et komisk Indtryk på mig.'

7 John Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1999), 262–72.

whereas bad music expressed itself through unnecessary complexity, exaggerated harmonies and misconstrued counterpoint. To exemplify the latter, Nielsen often turned to the Wagner school. In regard to needless complexity, Nielsen criticized Wagner's use of oversized orchestras[8] and argued that Wagner's motifs (using Brünnhilde's leitmotif from the *Ring* as a favourite example) were 'überschwänglich',[9] meaning full of large and unprovoked intervals. In both cases, Nielsen consistently highlighted Mozart's simplicity as the superior counterexample to Wagner. Nielsen also complained that true polyphony 'through Wagner and especially his copycats has slid into a characterless quasi-contrapuntalism that doesn't express anything other than sultry sentimentality or empty, storming passion.'[10] Since music was supposed to represent all that is organic and universal, Nielsen strongly opposed a composer's active attempt to evoke emotions in the audience as their personal feelings would be anything but universal and therefore irrelevant.[11] In other words, the emotional and subjective attitude that was characteristic of late Romanticism, conflicted with the eternal, classical approach to music that Nielsen supported. Instead, he considered these passionate outbursts an expression of empty sentimentality which would eventually lead to musical decay.[12] According to Nielsen, this dreaded sentimentality was first and foremost to be found in programme music. He was of the conviction that music could never describe non-musical phenomena since a dependency on outer-musical circumstances would make music unnatural.[13] The way Wagner let leitmotifs permeate his music dramas could of course be interpreted as clear examples of the opposite considering the fact that they generally function as concrete musical representations of specific situations, characters or feelings throughout the opera. That Wagner wrote his own librettos did not redeem him in Nielsen's eyes either, since he believed Wagner then merely subjugated language to music instead.[14]

From around the mid-1890s and throughout his life, these were some of the opinions on music, for which Nielsen famously became an advocate, and that later formed the foundation for his legacy as a composer and music critic. Hence, the conflicting statements from Nielsen's youth were quickly drowned by the many letters and essays which followed, confirming that, according to Nielsen, composers such as Mozart and Brahms represented the musical ideal while Wagner was the bogeyman.[15]

8 Ibid. 77.

9 Ibid. 265.

10 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 223; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, III/218: 'gjennem Wagner og især hans Efter*følere* er gledet ud i en karakterløs Quasi-Kontrapunktik som ikke udtrykker andet en lummer Sentimentalitet eller tom, stormende Lidenskabelighed.'

11 Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 164.

12 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 655; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, X/265.

13 Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 614.

14 Ibid. 133.

15 Jan Maegaard, 'Når boet skal gøres op efter Carl Nielsen…', *Dansk Musiktidsskrift*, 40 (1965), 101.

'In the Land of Dreams'

Being aware that an unwanted resemblance to Wagner was what made Nielsen drop 'In the Land of Dreams', it is interesting to investigate which Wagnerian traits he might have found in his own song by measuring it up to comparable works which Nielsen composed around the same time, namely his other art songs set to poems by J.P. Jacobsen: opus 4 and opus 6.

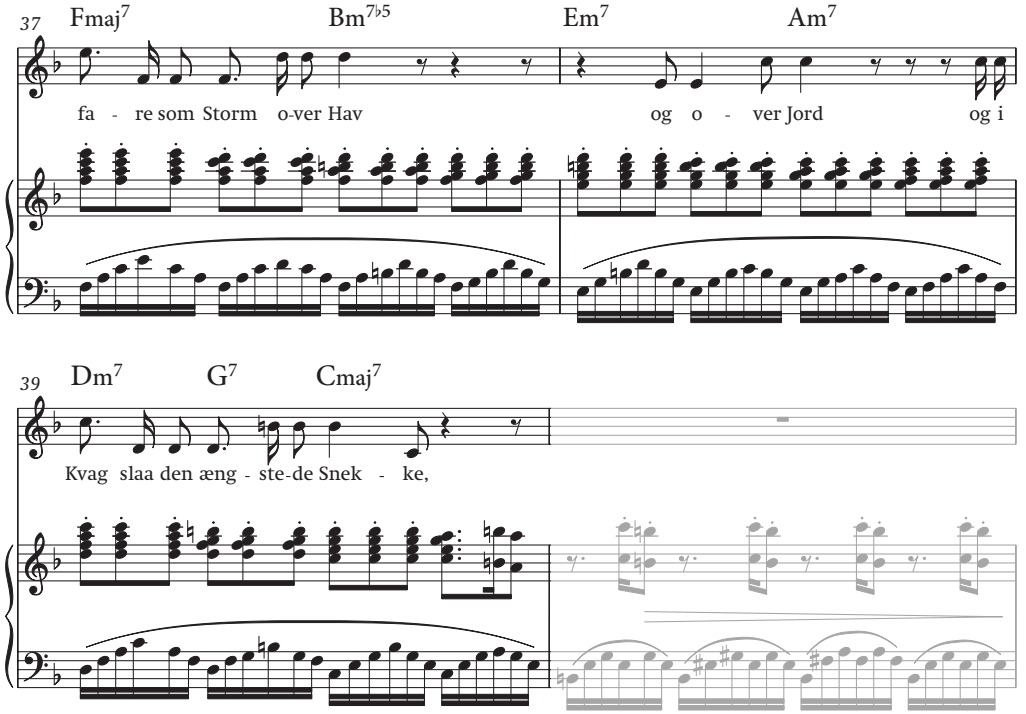
First of all, 'In the Land of Dreams' sets itself apart by being much longer than any of the other songs and, unsurprisingly, so is the poem with twenty-six lines upon which the song is based. The song is marked by variation and contains little to no repetition except for the final sixteen bars that imitate the opening of the song, thus making it hard to establish a form in the traditional sense of the word. Nielsen has instead divided the song into stylistically distinct sections each attached to two lines in general. Apart from the fact that he thus follows the rhyme pattern that dominates most of the poem, AABB, the divisions could also be interpreted as individual musical reflections on each of the dreamlike impressions described in the poem. The story of the poem follows a cyclical structure where the introductory and concluding statements are identical, namely that the Land of Dreams is a wonderful place to be, while everything in between is a row of separate examples to back up the claim. Consequently, Nielsen chose to repeat the music of the initial bars at the end while letting each of the examples of imagery be represented in an individual stylistic manner in order to musically imitate the type of open narrative established by Jacobsen.

Compared to a more traditional functional harmonic approach, Nielsen's approach was generally rather advanced and experimental. In order for music to move freely and naturally, as Nielsen believed good music should, he wished to obtain freedom to experiment with harmonic progressions unbound by the limitations of tonal norms. This included an insistence on moving music forward through other means of progression than the dominant seventh chord.[16] This also multiplied the ways in which he could modulate, which is expressed no better than in 'In the Land of Dreams', containing more changes of key than any of the other Jacobsen-songs.

Modality has often been used as a keyword to describe much of Nielsen's music in general – including his art songs in which the use of a low seventh and an increased focus on the subdominant have often been emphasized as common compositional choices of his.[17] 'In the Land of Dreams' is similarly affected by plagal tendencies. In several instances, it alternates between chords a fourth apart such as F sharp major and B major in the beginning and ending of the song as well as C and F major (bars 29–36) or E and A major (bars 42–45), leaving the interpretation of the tonic out in the open, depending on whether the relationship of the chords is to be understood as IV–I or

16 Anne-Marie Reynolds, *Carl Nielsen's Voice* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010), 42–43.
17 Ibid. 87–90.

V–I. Apart from the use of plagal cadences, Nielsen also emphasizes how the fifth step of the scale comprises other functions than that of the dominant. He goes so far as to include a full sequence of fifths of the kind one would find in any modern-day textbook on popular music to prove his point (Ex. 1).

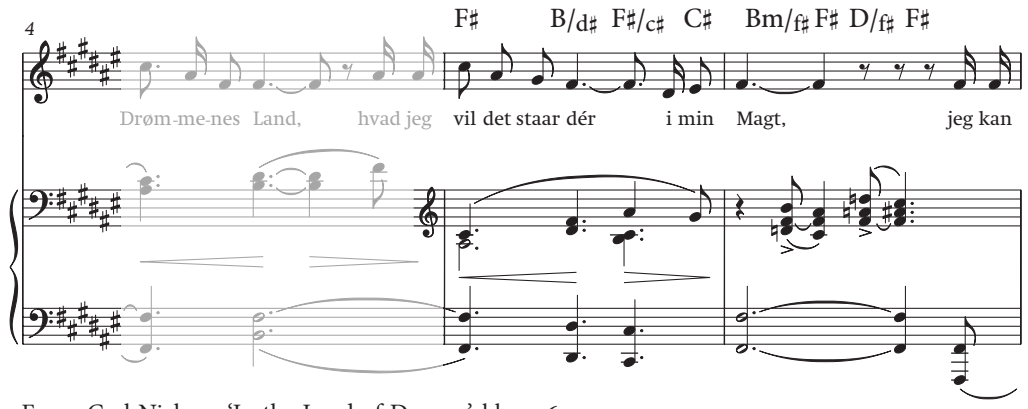


Ex. 1. Carl Nielsen, 'In the Land of Dreams', bb. 37–39. This and the following examples © Carl Nielsen Edition, 2009. Reproduced by kind permission of the Carl Nielsen Edition.

Nielsen also challenges harmonic traditions by creating alternative leading notes through chromaticism as a way of establishing a connection between two chords by other means than the driving force of the third and the seventh of a dominant. Mediants can be examples of this where a shared note between two chords can connect them while the chromatically foreign notes create impetus. This effect can pave the way for modulation as in bars 46–48.[18] It may also be used as harmonic ornamentation as in bar 6, where Nielsen does not avoid the tonal cadence but rather prolongs it by postponing the tonic F sharp major with a minor subdominant and its major parallel that all share the note F sharp (Ex. 2).

It should be pointed out that these more alternative harmonic approaches are also found in other art songs of Nielsen's and are therefore by no means unique to this one.

18 For the complete edition of the song, see *Carl Nielsen. Works* III/5, *Songs 2* (Copenhagen: The Royal Library, 2009), No. 222, http://www5.kb.dk/export/sites/kb_dk/da/nb/dcm/cnu/pdf/CNU_III_05_songs_2.pdf#page=109; see also appendix.



Ex. 2. Carl Nielsen, 'In the Land of Dreams', bb. 5–6.

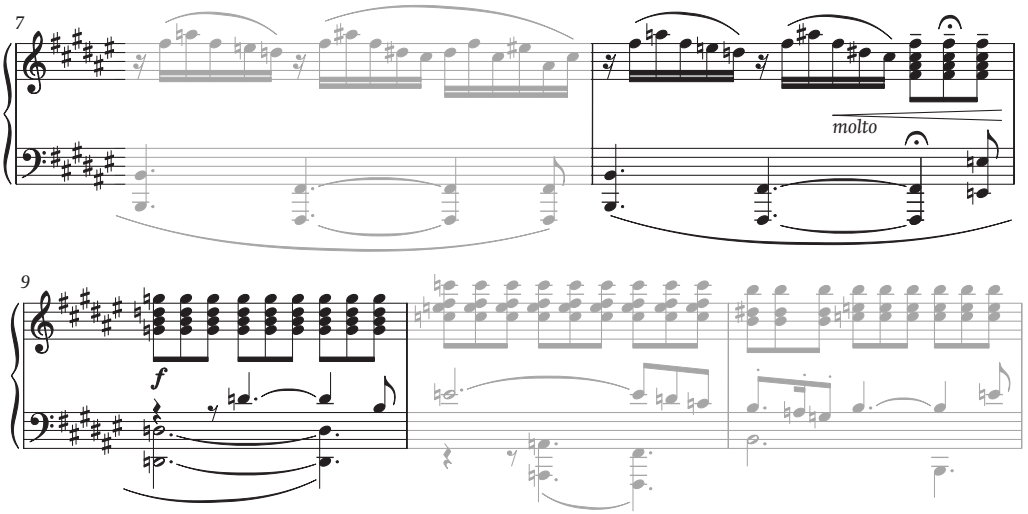
Nevertheless, the sheer amount of harmonic strategies and changes of key combined in this one song does make 'In the Land of Dreams' stand out from the other songs of the cycles. As previously mentioned, Nielsen's rapid changes of style are likely to be a result of his interpretation of the poem, and it could be argued that Nielsen's determination to create an organic musical development is exactly what is at play here. Daniel Grimley defines Nielsen's understanding of organicism as unrelated to the otherwise common notion of thematic coherence; rather, it is based upon a musical idea of succession and not on progression like an 'improvisatory spinning-out akin to a stream of consciousness',[19] which may explain the structure of this song. However, one might argue that in 'In the Land of Dreams' there are different passages reflecting not only alternative types of expressions but also different modes of composition altogether, which at times result in a kind of harmonic hodgepodge. One example illustrating this issue is bars 8–9 (Ex. 3), where Nielsen moves from a calm, pentatonic section into a sudden and dramatic crescendo through repeated F♯ and F♯^{7} chords functioning as a tritone substitution to the rather surprising G major in second inversion in the following bar.

Another example is bar 15, where Nielsen prepares for a modulation through chromatic leading notes in the bass and tenor, thus automatically creating a strong tension and an urge for a resolution that never comes: without further ado, the C sharp minor in second inversion in bar 15 simply continues as the new tonic in the following section, leaving us feeling somewhat bereft of a real dominant or harmonic turning point (Ex. 4).

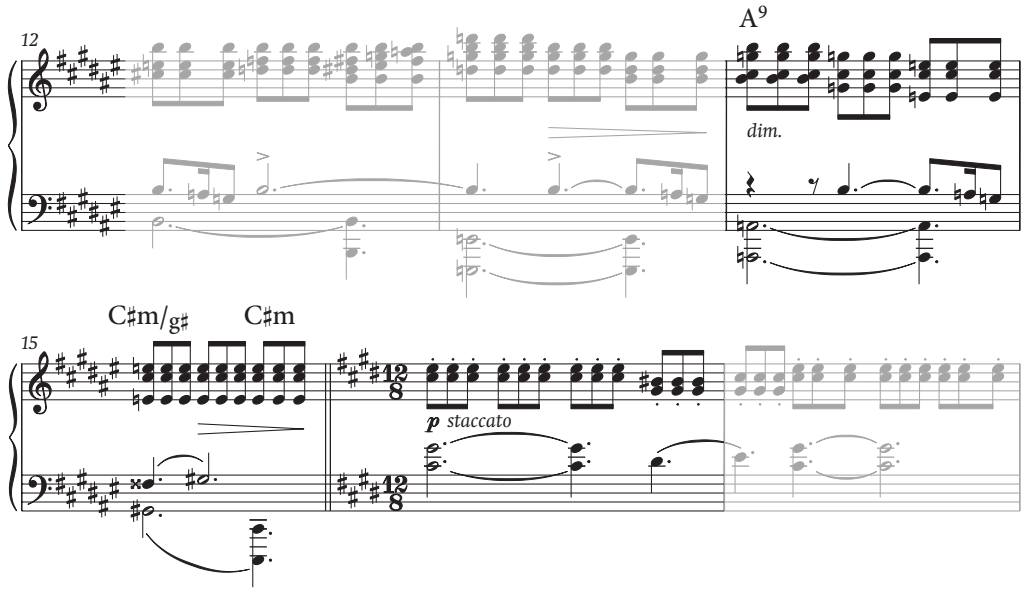
From a critical viewpoint, one might therefore reproach 'In the Land of Dreams' of being slightly harmonically inconsistent, and it is perhaps not unthinkable that Nielsen himself found parallels between his own song and the excessive and inscrutable harmony he considered a trademark of Wagner's.[20]

19 Daniel M. Grimley, 'Organicism, Form and Structural Decay: Nielsen's Second Violin Sonata', *Music Analysis*, 21/2 (2002), 185–86.

20 Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 79.



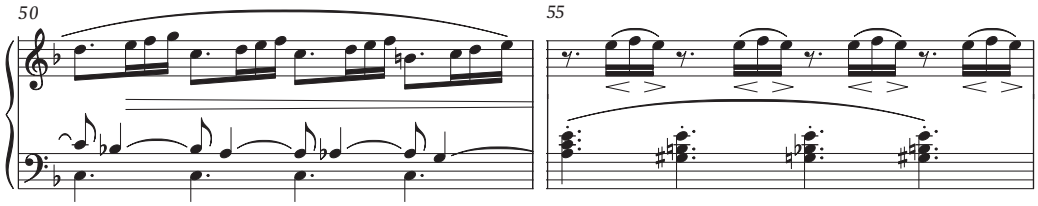
Ex. 3. Carl Nielsen, 'In the Land of Dreams', bb. 8–9.



Ex. 4. Carl Nielsen, 'In the Land of Dreams', bb. 14–16.

The rather contrastive musical expressions of 'In the Land of Dreams' also occur in its melody and accompaniment. The melody is marked by large intervals and countless octaves on one hand and small chromatic movements on the other, whereas diatonic stepwise motions are scarce. Many of the leaps are in fact arpeggios, proving that Nielsen had at times a tendency to let the harmony dictate the melody, as Reynolds has also pointed out.[21] This way of composing might of course seem odd when taking

21 Reynolds, *Carl Nielsen's Voice*, 86–87.



Ex. 5. Carl Nielsen, 'In the Land of Dreams', bb. 50 and 55.

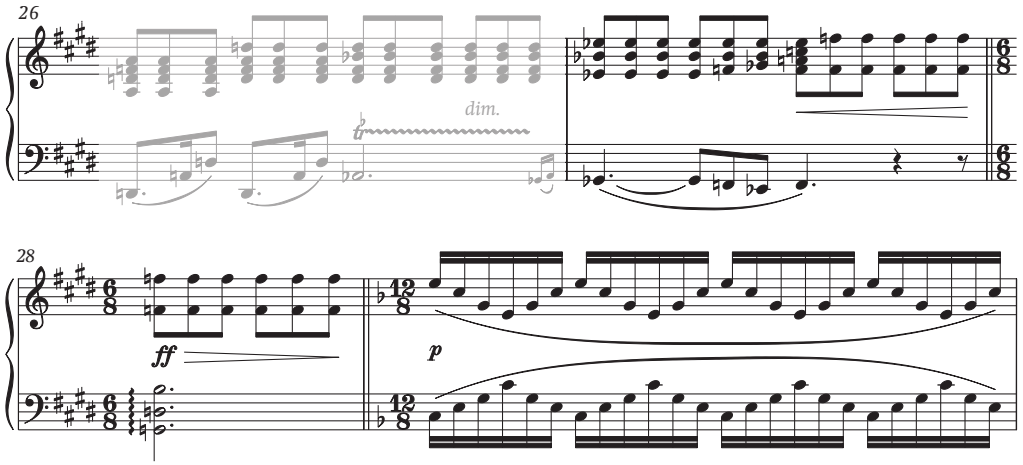
Nielsen's critique of Wagner misusing the intervals into account, but it is worth noting that this melodic strategy is not entirely unique to 'In the Land of Dreams'. The melody of 'Has the Day Gathered All Its Sorrow' ('Har Dagen sanket al sin Sorg') also consists of C minor and E flat minor arpeggios, and both melody and accompaniment in 'In the Harem Garden' ('I Seraillets Have') are heavily loaded with chromaticism. As was the case with the harmony, also the sheer amount of contrasts and the utilization of the melodic boundaries set 'In the Land of Dreams' apart from the other songs. The melody's range is larger than that of any of the other Jacobsen-songs, for instance, and it contains such a varied mix of note values that it almost makes the song resemble speech at times.

Furthermore, it could be argued that 'In the Land of Dreams' is the only Jacobsen-song where no type of accompaniment or motif can be said to unify the song. Only rarely does a specific motivic figure reoccur in the song as seen from bar 49, where we are introduced to a motif of three ascending semiquavers that could be interpreted as a nod to the trills of the lark mentioned in the poem. This motif (see Ex. 5, b. 50) is then transformed from bar 53 (see Ex. 5, b. 55) before returning to its original form in bar 56, thereby connecting the two sections.

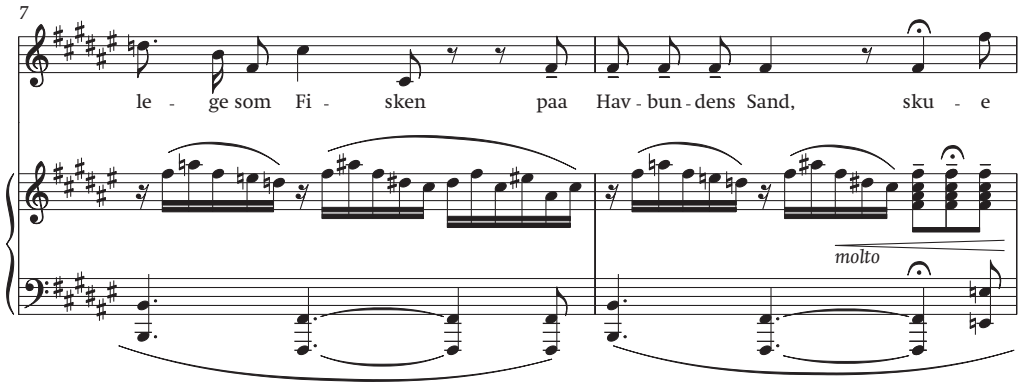
These more clear-cut motifs are exceptions, though, as most are cut off almost as soon as they are initiated by small contrastive passages or other rhythmic figures before they are given the chance to solidify themselves. Moreover, the transition from one section to another is often very abrupt as seen in bars 27–29 for instance (Ex. 6). Here, a section full of heavy minor chords are interrupted by a single unison bar, which then again without warning is replaced by a sequence of rapid, wide arpeggios in major in the following bar, thereby immediately eradicating any memory of the previous section.

While this absence of motivic red threads and the abrupt transitions between different passages could of course be justified by the same notion of organicism that could explain the lack of repetition and harmonic continuity, it does result in an overall slightly inconsistent auditory experience. Since there are no motifs to bind the various harmonic patterns and senses of pulse together, 'In the Land of Dreams' could be perceived as somewhat fragmented.

The rather distinct structure of the song is, as previously mentioned, probably caused by Jacobsen's poem. Nielsen took the poems he chose for his music very seriously and



Ex. 6. Carl Nielsen, 'In the Land of Dreams', bb. 27–29.



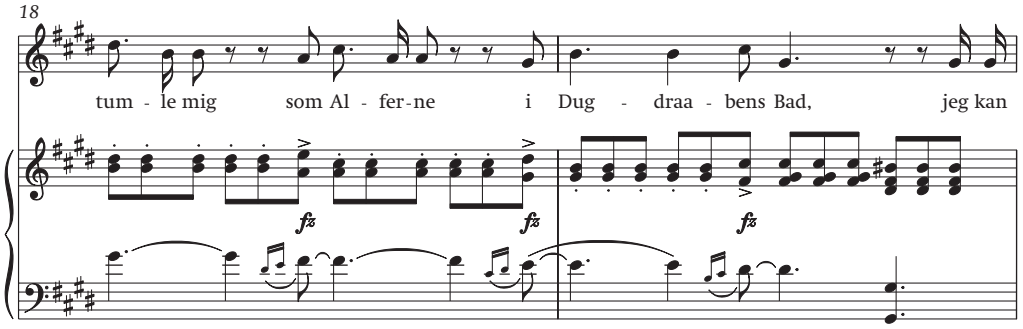
Ex. 7. Carl Nielsen, 'In the Land of Dreams', bb. 7–8.

made great efforts to stay as faithful to them as possible.[22] Since the poem is built upon an array of metaphors from the narrator's experience of a realm of dreams, it must undoubtedly have seemed natural to Nielsen to also express these descriptions in his music. When all of these images described by Jacobsen portray anything from beauty and playfulness to fear, it must have seemed nonsensical to Nielsen to try to fit all of these into the same key, for instance, or one stylistic expression.

It also resulted in some rather explicit depictions of Jacobsen's words. Apart from the aforementioned trills of the lark, another example could be the passage from bars 7–8, where Jacobsen explains: 'I can play like the fish on the sandy bottom of the sea' (see Ex. 7). Here, the melody literally illustrates a playful fish, once again jumping freely from one note value to another in a phrase full of disjunct motions followed by a seabed of accentuated, repeated quavers. Meanwhile, a row of underlying 'waves' in the piano

22 Ibid. 67.

accompanies the singer so that the associations to the sea could not possibly be misinterpreted. A similar example may be found in bars 18–19 (Ex. 8). This line rhymes with the previous one, which is why the same stylistic features are preserved. However, this time Nielsen expands the accompaniment with off-beat semiquaver grace notes in the bass, which is an obvious reference to the lively fairies mentioned in the poem.



Ex. 8. Carl Nielsen, 'In the Land of Dreams', bb. 18–19.

'In the Land of Dreams' thus becomes an almost stereotypical example of the kind of programme music Nielsen later so strongly opposed, where music evidently attempts to imitate or represent non-musical situations as he believed Wagner did with his leitmotifs. Wagner's approach was also criticized by Heinrich Schenker, who believed Wagner let the leitmotifs dictate the music from above, which deprived it of its *Urlinie*.[23] Similarly, it is likely that the explicit imagery of 'In the Land of Dreams' seemed unsatisfactory to Nielsen upon revisiting, even though it in this case is the *lack* of motifs rather than the excess of them that has contributed to creating the feeling of fragmentation. The missing motifs also complicate an understanding of the song from the analytical perspective which Reynolds has otherwise argued most accurately describes Nielsen's art songs in general, namely that of Rudolph Réti.[24] It is hard to identify the diachronic, motivic development process which, according to Réti, is the key to understanding the inner, organic development of music. Interestingly, Reynolds' analytical observation indicates that Grimley's deduction that organicism from Nielsen's viewpoint was not motif-related might be a misconception, since the other Jacobsen-songs (including the 'Arabeske' from *Five Piano Pieces* (*Fem Klaverstykker*), also based on a Jacobsen poem) that were not discarded by Nielsen all represent a different motivic approach and are more harmonically consistent.

23 Warren Darcy, 'A Wagnerian Ursatz; or, Was Wagner a Background Composer after All?', *Intégral*, 4 (1990), 1–2.

24 Reynolds, *Carl Nielsen's Voice*, 69.

An Altered View on Wagner

Nielsen's radical change of mind must have taken place somewhere between 1891 and 1892, that is after he came back home from Germany but before the publication of opus 4. So, what could have led to this? In Germany 1890, Nielsen found himself immersed in a divided musical society where Wagner and Brahms in particular were eagerly debated. Because the two at that time (and arguably even so today) were considered musical antitheses, and since Nielsen was unafraid of taking a stand, it is not unlikely that the Wagner enthusiasm shared by most of his fellow students in Germany influenced and encouraged his appreciation of him.[25] It is also worth noting that Nielsen only spoke poorly of Brahms when comparing him to Wagner. Furthermore, his first open condemnation of Wagner was written just a few days after his meeting with Brahms in 1894 – a meeting which made a huge impression on Nielsen.[26] It is reasonable to assume that this could have intensified his aversion to Wagner later on, too, although at the point in time, he had already rejected 'In the Land of Dreams'.

There are, in other words, indications that Nielsen's disregard of Wagner was based on more than professional disagreements, so relating it to Nielsen on a more personal level might be beneficial in order to understand his motivations. For instance, it is quite plausible that Wagner's celebrity status as the creator of revolutionary musical trends must have been a cause of envy to an ambitious man from a humble background like Nielsen's, who could only dream of such success. Nielsen also admitted several times that the mere thought of fame gave him butterflies.[27] However, a trend is only groundbreaking the first time it is presented, and Nielsen was quick to discover that, in order to achieve what Wagner did, he had to leave Wagner behind. Nielsen expressed his expectations of a time post Wagner in a letter to Henrik Knudsen: 'then the time will be near when we will once again see the emergence of a new, healthy and ruddy style. If only one could even be the frontrunner of something like that!'[28] This idea is also motivated by the fact that Nielsen's refraining from imitating Wagner was not a spontaneous but a *conscious* choice as was the case with 'In the Land of Dreams'. This is perhaps unsurprising considering that Nielsen lived in a Wagner era where he played, conducted and listened to Wagner's music on a near daily basis and consequently must have found himself inculcated by it. As Patrick McCreless points out, it is evident how Nielsen felt challenged by Wagner's inescapable influence when composing *Saul and David* as these mythical operas more than anything undoubtedly were Wagner's domain.

25 Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, I/109.

26 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 99; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, I/510.

27 Jørgen I. Jensen, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1999), 107.

28 Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, II/307: 'saa vil den Tid vist ikke være helt fjern hvor man atter kan se en frisk, sund og rødmusset Retning tone frem. Kunde man endda blot blive til en Forløber for noget i den Retning!' (transl. by the author).

As a result, Nielsen made a conscious decision to exclude anything that even remotely resembled a leitmotif to avoid comparison.[29]

As Nielsen grew older, his desire for fame gradually vanished, and he now considered his former thirst for acclaim immature and naïve. Instead, he sympathized with Mozart's desire to be understood rather than praised and simultaneously criticized Wagner and more modern composers' worship of progress as the goal itself. According to Nielsen, Mozart on the other hand 'did not *want* anything new, it came on its own. He did not want anything *else* than the others, but he could give and gave *more*. He did not remove what already was but added to it the many treasures he had found, partly in dreams, partly in play.'[30] This last remark could also be interpreted as a reflection of Nielsen's appreciation of Mozart as a person. His playful approach to music must have appealed to Nielsen in the same way that his personal interaction with Brahms could have increased his affection for Brahms' work. On the other hand, it is not unlikely that Nielsen would have found certain aspects of Wagner's personality unattractive. Apart from the aforementioned jealousy, it is reasonable to assume that he would have disliked Wagner's notorious arrogance and narcissism.[31] There are several other instances where Nielsen's opinion of a composer is directly reflected in his evaluation of their musical production. He did not like Richard Strauss, for example, neither as man nor composer,[32] whereas he expressed great sympathy with the mission of humorous and humble Schoenberg even though their musical approaches in many ways were miles apart.[33]

It is therefore not unlikely that Nielsen's disdain for musical sentimentality and extravagance could in part stem from the haughtiness associated with Wagner himself (and Beethoven, too, for that matter). The more Nielsen opposed popularity and revolutionary tendencies, the more unjust he seemed to find the glorification of Wagner.

Were Nielsen and Wagner Musical Opposites ...

To affirm his own independence as a composer, Nielsen evidently did everything he could to distance himself from Wagner, and one may argue that contemporary Danish music critics helped him reinforce the differences between the two of them.

29 Patrick McCreless, 'Strange Bedfellows', *Carl Nielsen Studies*, 4 (2009), 107–9.

30 Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 86: '*vilde* ikke noget nyt, det kom af sig selv. Han vilde ikke noget *andet* end de andre, men han kunde give og gav noget *mere*. Han tog ikke bort af det, der var, men lagde til af de mange Kostbarheder, han havde fundet, halvt i Drømme, halvt i Leg.' (transl. by the author).

31 Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (London: Allen Lane / Penguin Group, 2012), 296–97.

32 Torben Meyer and Frede Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen. Kunstneren og Mennesket* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1947), vol. 1, 146–48.

33 Fjeldsøe, *Den fortrængte modernisme,* 141.

In the late 1890s, that is during the early stages of Nielsen's career, music was facing a period of change. The Modern Breakthrough had left its mark on Denmark, and Danish literature had now consequently turned its back on romantic Golden Age depictions and made the transition to harsher realism. At this point in time, J.P. Jacobsen was one of the most notable Danish authors representing the new ideals of the Modern Breakthrough, where, as a poet, he portrayed a hard-hearted reality from which one could either distance oneself through dreams or come to terms with it through irony.[34] Danish music, however, had not yet joined the literary movement, and thus the more conservative Denmark initially disregarded Nielsen's art songs to poems by Jacobsen. According to the critics, they were too international, and, regarding the tonal treatment, the composer took too many liberties.[35]

Since Nielsen only wrote through-composed songs in the late 1800s, it was easy for critics to excuse the songs as early experiments by a young composer who had not yet found his own musical identity. In his biography, Torben Meyer entitles the chapter on this period of Nielsen's life 'Maturation', and Nils Schiørring explains that Nielsen wrote the art songs simply because as a young, upcoming composer he had felt obliged to do so. When describing the art songs, Schiørring focuses exclusively on the musical features that also characterized Nielsen's later songs to prove how the art songs could be explained as precursors.[36] For a long time, Nielsen's early art songs were thus habitually ignored, while his later songs were accentuated as good, Danish music, which, along with other major works of Nielsen's, were considered an important part of Danish cultural heritage.

Later, however, new interpretations appeared that managed to place Nielsen's 'modern' art songs in a Danish cultural context as well. Jørgen I. Jensen was perhaps the first to assert that the art songs were just as Nielsenian as his later works by pointing out that they could be interpreted from another perspective which would make sense to a Danish composer: Symbolism. This understanding placed Nielsen on par with Danish thinkers of the Modern Breakthrough where previously his art songs had been overlooked as mere copies of international trends.[37] That Nielsen's art songs might have been inspired by symbolist movements could explain the way Nielsen, unlike the typical Romantic composers who intended to express themselves through their music, wanted to create musically stylized tableaux in order to match the style of Jacobsen's poems. In several of the songs, including for instance the medievally inspired 'Irmelin' or 'Genre Piece' ('Genrebillede'), it is clear that Nielsen attempts to set a musical scene that matches the story of the poem rather than imitate the words too directly, thus explaining perhaps

34 Daniel M. Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 25–31.

35 Meyer and Schandorf, *Carl Nielsen. Kunstneren og Mennesket*, vol. 1, 99.

36 Nils Schiørring, 'The Songs', in Jürgen Balzer (ed.), *Carl Nielsen 1865–1965 Centenary Essays* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1965), 118–22.

37 Jensen, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren*, 92–93.

why Nielsen himself would not necessarily have considered the songs as examples of the type of programme music he later so despised. Arguably, this would also have been his intention with 'In the Land of Dreams' although the imagery found in this song is, in Nielsen's view, likely to have overstepped the boundaries as it is much more explicit than the other songs.

The fact that the poem itself defines the form of 'In the Land of Dreams' could also be interpreted as a symbolist idea, although Jacobsen's free approach to rhyme and metre evidently caused Nielsen some trouble, as bars 37–45 and 57–60 indicate, where the effect of the rhymes is slightly lost due to Jacobsen's change of rhyme scheme. Ironically, the irregularities in metre and rhyme patterns in Jacobsen's poetry was praised by Georg Brandes, who compared Jacobsen's prose-like resistance to poetic norms to the modern compositional and lyrical freedom that Wagner's works were so renowned for.[38]

Vitalism later reoccurred as a more optimistic counterpart to symbolism,[39] fitting perfectly with Nielsen's own descriptions of good music as something organic, natural and healthy. The vitalistic ideas strengthened the image of Nielsen as the 'common man' in the best possible sense of the word. His rural upbringing and liberal belief in the equality and potential of humankind reflected core values found in Danish society at the time, when sympathy had moved from the learned aristocratic upper class to the ordinary, hardworking craftsman.[40] Understanding Nielsen from a vitalistic point of view thus widened the gap between Nielsen and Wagner. What could possibly be further from an elitist, controversial sophisticate such as Wagner than a happy, down-to-earth lad from Funen? The division becomes even more pronounced if one considers the optimistic vitalism as a contrast to the pessimistic symbolism, since the latter was a philosophy represented by one of Wagner's greatest idols, Arthur Schopenhauer,[41] whose sombre worldview became the source of inspiration for many of Wagner's later works.[42] If the two philosophies were each other's opposites then, naturally, so were Nielsen and Wagner, and any suggestion that Nielsen would have been influenced by Wagner could thus easily be dismissed as incongruous.

After World War II, it was undoubtedly important for Denmark to distance itself from Germany in general and anti-Semitic Wagner in particular.[43] During and after German occupation, Denmark felt a strong need to define its own cultural values and Nielsen quickly became a symbol of these. This new understanding, which suddenly enabled an interpretation of Nielsen's earlier, more modern songs from a Danish perspective, thus strengthened Carl Nielsen's mythical status as a unique national icon.

38 Michael Fjeldsøe, *Kulturradikalismens musik* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013), 45.
39 Michael Fjeldsøe, 'Carl Nielsen and the Current of Vitalism in Art', *Carl Nielsen Studies*, 4 (2009), 31.
40 Reynolds, *Carl Nielsen's Voice*, 47–48.
41 Fjeldsøe, 'Carl Nielsen and the Current of Vitalism', 32.
42 Carl Dahlhaus, 'The Music', in Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski (eds.), *Wagner Handbook* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 303.
43 Reynolds, *Carl Nielsen's Voice*, 20.

... or Comparable Musical Idealists?

Because of this discourse, it is reasonable to assume that specific statements of Nielsen's have historically been favoured and others ignored in order to strengthen that narrative. More recent Nielsen research has therefore generally had a desire to open up for alternative interpretations of the composer and – rather than focusing on Nielsen as an indisputable opponent of Wagner – has tended to conclude that throughout his life Nielsen's opinion of Wagner was fickle. Fjeldsøe, Jensen and Balzer among others reach that same conclusion by referring to a single letter of 1912, in which Nielsen once again expresses enthusiasm about Wagner to Royal Theatre director A.P. Weis.[44] Too much focus on such a single statement might, however, lead to premature conclusions. The letter's positive appraisal of Wagner significantly stands out from any other statement in almost four decades. Moreover, there are many reasons for assuming that Nielsen could have had other intentions with the letter than praising Wagner (one being that he speaks of *Tristan and Isolde*, whose upcoming Danish premiere Nielsen strongly wished to conduct). Instead, I would argue that while Nielsen's own opinions on Wagner were quite consistent from around the early 1890s, it is rather his own and other Danish music critics' perception of the two as incompatible opposites that has been slightly exaggerated.

Since Danish music critics tended to emphasize Nielsen's later, popular songs (his 'højskolesange') as ideal examples of his love of simplicity which strongly contradicted Wagner's exorbitance, it is easy to fall into the trap that Nielsen by 'simple' meant stepwise, diatonic, tonal melodies. It is therefore important to emphasize that Nielsen and Wagner often moved within similar musical spheres and shared the understanding of music as a natural being with an inherent will. As a result, they both wanted to renew or rather free music from its previous tonal boundaries without radically breaking with the tonal system itself by using alternative formal and harmonic approaches. This same belief drove them to embrace similar strategies such as alternative understandings of form, an avoidance of tonal cadences and the use of chromaticism as previously mentioned. In the letter to Behrend, Nielsen also makes it clear that it is not Wagner's technical skills that he opposes, but his way of feeling and thinking.[45] In other words, when Nielsen preferred simplicity over complexity, he did not oppose stylistic features such as expanded tonality and more modern harmonic trends; it also explains why he never abandoned this approach in his symphonic works. Instead, Nielsen believed that Wagner's eagerness and ambition to revolutionize was what made him forget the wisdom of the past, resulting in a perverse and sentimental understanding of music.[46] On this

44 Fjeldsøe, *Den fortrængte modernisme*, 131; Jensen, *Carl Nielsen. Danskeren*, 119; Jürgen Balzer, 'The Dramatic Music', in Balzer (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Centenary Essays*, 76. Cf. *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 302; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, IV/500.

45 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 109; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, I/533.

46 Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 342–45.

notion, which any admirer of Wagner of course would not hesitate to dismiss, it is also worth mentioning that both Nielsen and Wagner seemed to agree that Ancient Greece represented the peak of humanity in regard to high arts, both claiming to have been heavily inspired by them.[47]

Furthermore, it is ironic how Nielsen's critique of Wagner's alleged sentimentality strongly resembles Wagner's own critique of Italian opera as he similarly accused it of ignoring music's real purpose in order to obtain cheap thrills and emotional reactions through catchy melodies and vocal brag. Interestingly, both Nielsen and Wagner seemed to distance themselves from these attitudes, not because of personal distaste but out of principle. When Nielsen occasionally attempted to defend parts of Wagner's production (mostly *The Master-Singers of Nuremberg*), he always used his intuition to defend its quality which eventually forced him to cast it aside as it could not be rationally justified.[48] Similarly, Wagner admitted that bel canto had appealed to him in his early years though his musical principles also compelled him to turn his back on it.[49] In terms of sentimentality, Nielsen and Wagner also both proudly renounced programme music while somewhat paradoxically sharing the conviction that music and poetry could easily assist each other in conveying a message. Nielsen believed music to be a separate entity that could enhance the meaning of words and compared it to the sun bringing life to worldly objects.[50] On the other hand, he disparaged Wagner for wanting his music to imitate the poetry too literally. This was never Wagner's intention, however. While Wagner initially believed that music and poetry could point to the same poetic idea and therefore completed each other when united,[51] he later became an even stronger advocate for absolute music as his love for Schopenhauer's philosophy grew stronger. Schopenhauer believed music was the highest of art forms as it better than anything else could portray its own inner will, which drove Wagner, who previously considered music and poetry equals, to admit that a story always must stem from the music itself and not the other way around as this was the only way for opera to reach its fullest potential.[52]

The fact that Nielsen and Wagner shared more musical ideals than Nielsen himself would want us to think comes as no surprise perhaps. It is both predictable and understandable that a young composer would deal with a musical icon such as Wagner with equal amounts of admiration and disdain; but the idea that Nielsen could have avoided Wagnerian influence altogether seems somewhat flawed. In his analysis of *Saul and David*, McCreless points out that although Nielsen made great efforts to avoid

47 Ibid. 100–3.

48 *Nielsen. Selected Letters*, no. 494; Fellow (ed.), *Brevudgaven*, VII/272.

49 Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera*, 298–99.

50 Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 129.

51 Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 21.

52 Dahlhaus, 'The Music', 303.

employing any intertextual references such as leitmotifs, the opera contains, ironically, clear intertextual references to other works by Wagner.[53]

As Meyer puts it, Wagner was to Nielsen 'a phenomenon that fascinated him greatly and – an experiment with both merits and errors'.[54] As Nielsen grew older and able to view his own production more retrospectively, he once again seemed more lenient towards Wagner. In an interview in 1927, as Nielsen had reached his sixties, he amenably acknowledged the doors that Wagner had opened to his successors like himself (after he had slated the even newer jazz music compared to which Wagner might have seemed like a musical paragon): 'However you choose to interpret my opinions you can rest assured that I, as Wagner somewhere puts it, feel a deep connection to my spiritual ancestors. The musical giants: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner and all the other great composers I am gratefully indebted to, even though I allow myself to criticize them now and then.'[55]

Conclusion

In spite of his previous enthusiasm, Nielsen chose to draw a line between his own musical production and Wagner's somewhere between 1891 and 1892. Since Nielsen believed good music should be simple, clear and organic – and Wagner's music was anything but that – he felt forced to discard 'In the Land of Dreams' due to its overt harmonic complexity, strong stylistic variations and heavy imagery compared to his other art songs. That Nielsen's determination to distance himself from Wagner might have been driven by other factors than purely professional disagreements is plausible since both Nielsen himself, as well as Danish society in general, seemed to have found it advantageous to liberate his name from any associations to Wagner specifically. However, this narrative has tended to create a slightly one-sided interpretation of their relationship as they were perhaps not as musically incompatible as often portrayed.

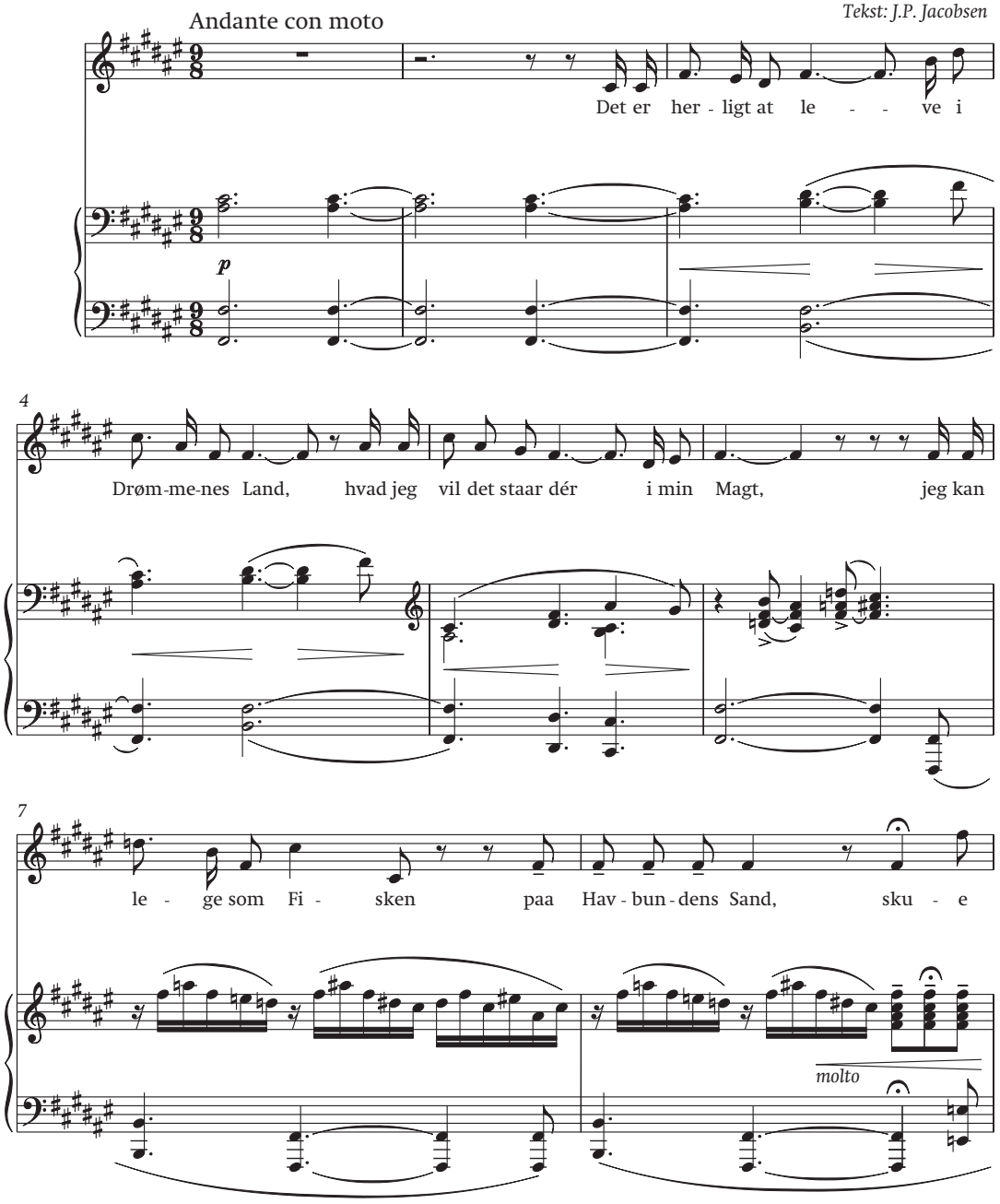
53 McCreless, 'Strange Bedfellows', 137.

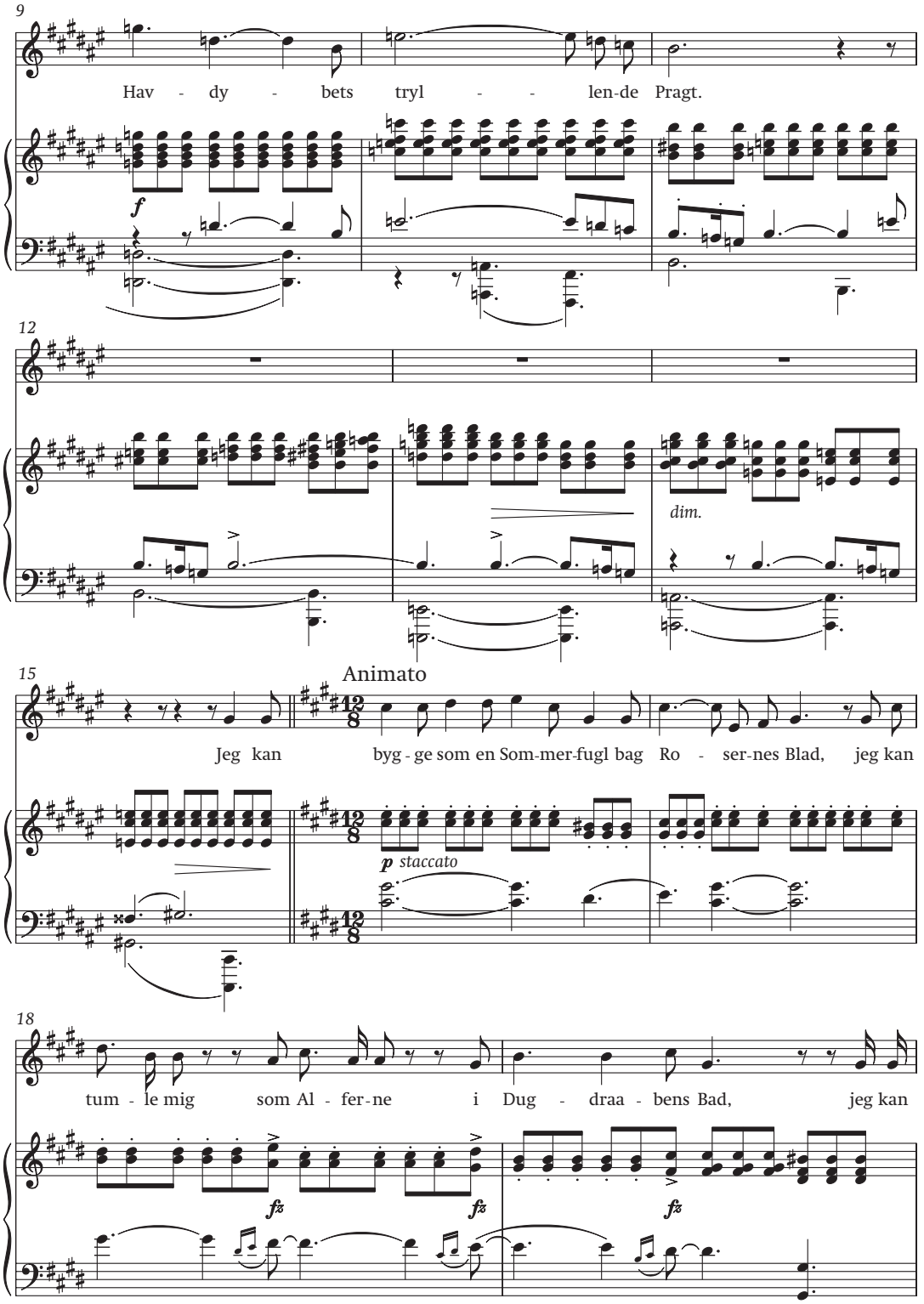
54 Meyer and Schandorf, *Carl Nielsen. Kunstneren og Mennesket*, vol. 1, 104: 'et Fænomen, der optog ham stærkt, og – et Eksperiment med baade Fortrin og Fejl.' (transl. by the author).

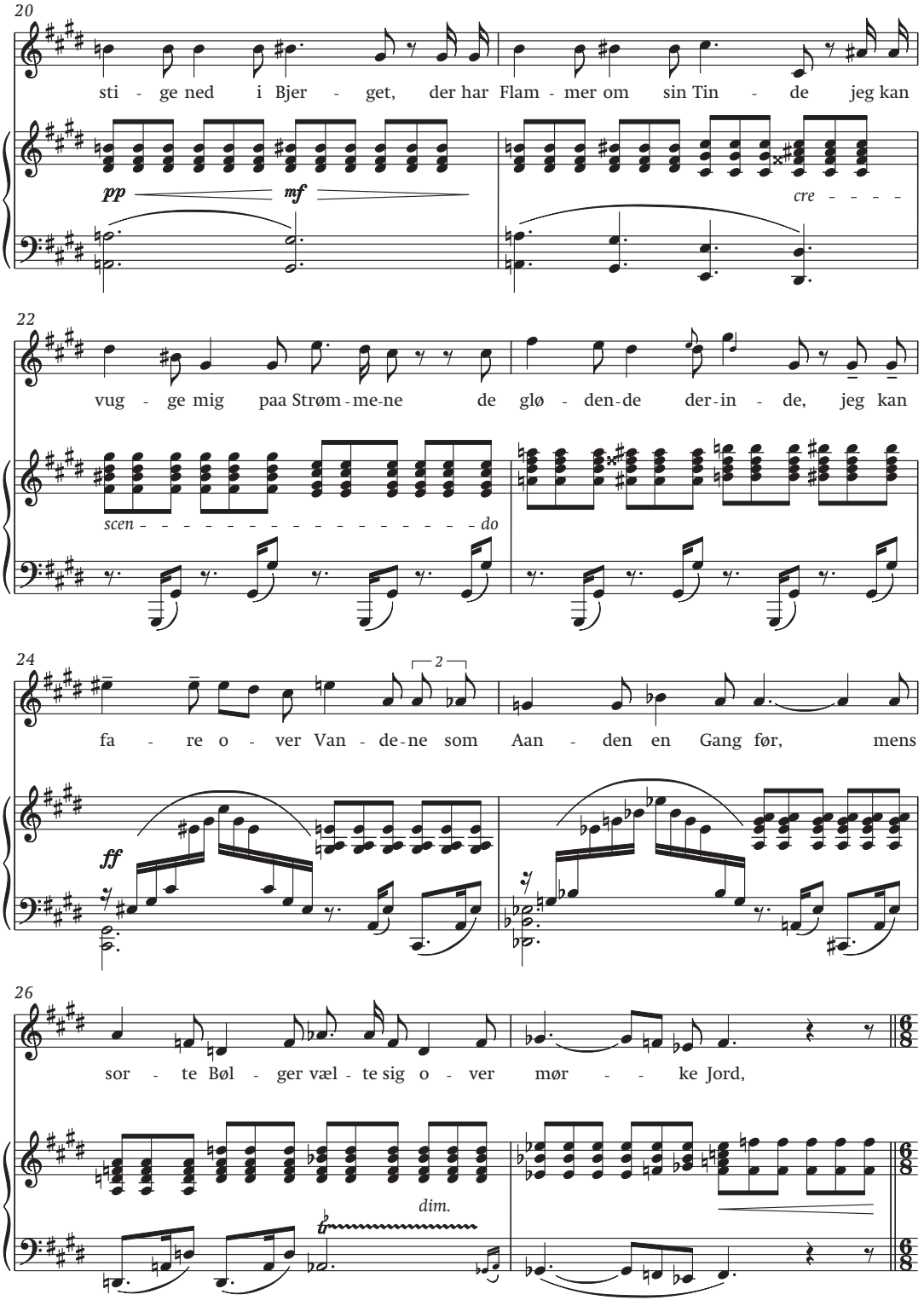
55 Fellow (ed.), *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, 442: 'Hvorledes man end udlægger mine Meninger, saa kan De være rolig for, at jeg, som Wagner etsteds udtrykker sig, føler mig inderligt bunden til mine aandelige Aner. Musikens Giganter: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner og alle de andre store Tonekunstnere føler jeg mig i taknemmelig Gæld til, selv om jeg kan tillade mig her og dér at øve Kritik mod dem.' (transl. by the author).

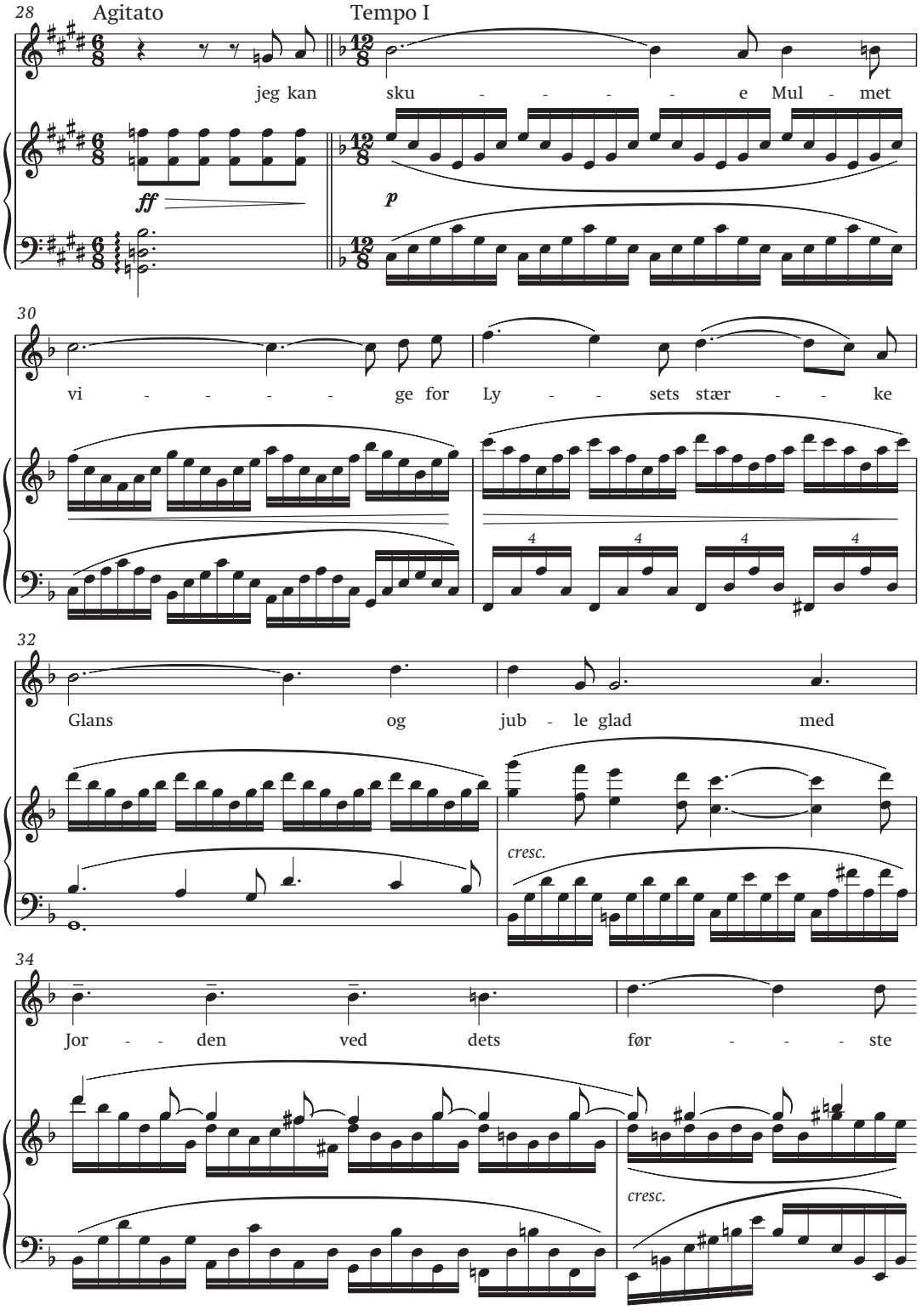
Appendix

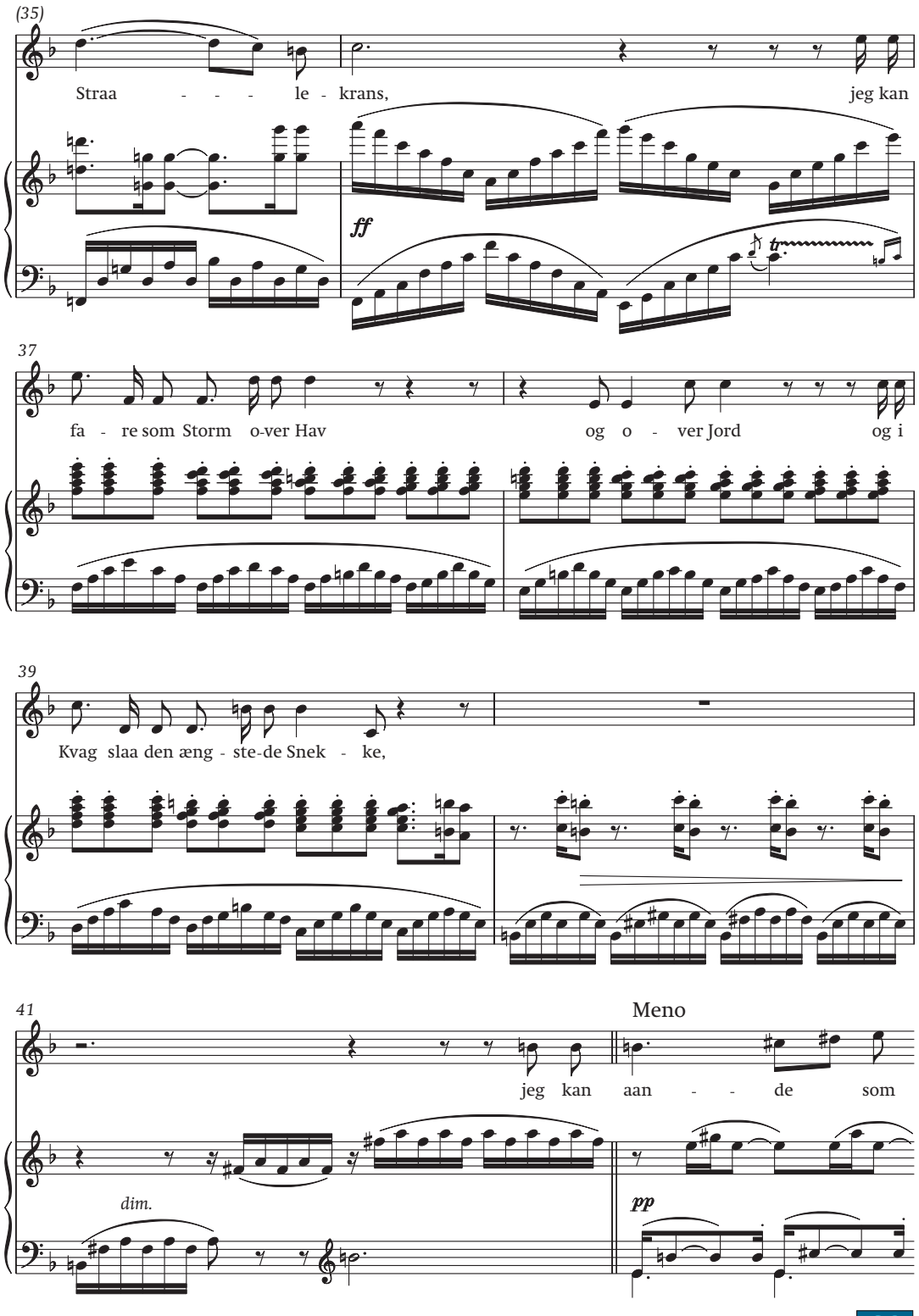
222 I DRØMMENES LAND

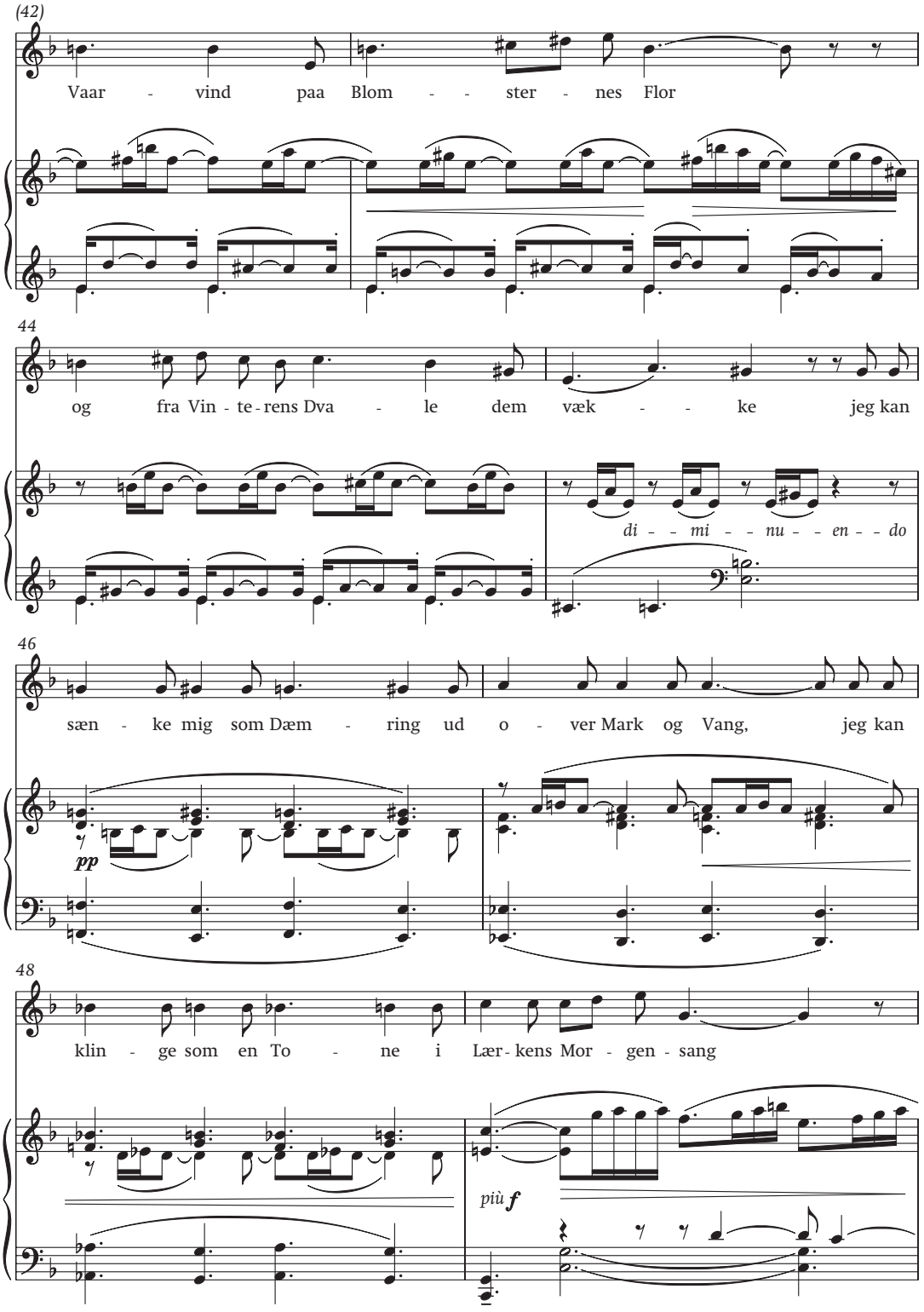


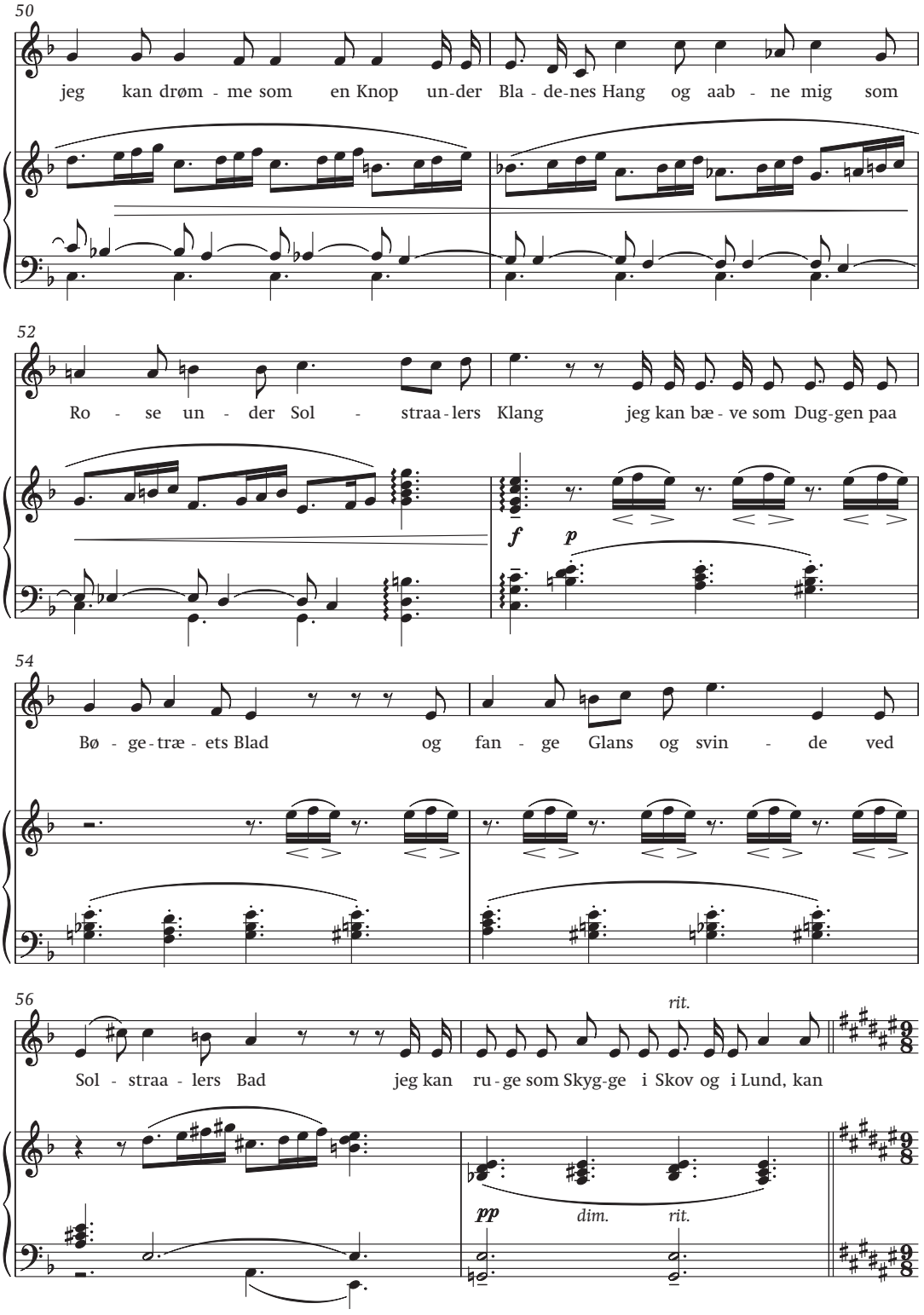

9
Hav - dy - bets tryl - - len-de Pragt.
f
12
dim.
15
Animato
Jeg kan byg - ge som en Som-mer-fugl bag Ro - ser-nes Blad, jeg kan
p staccato
18
tum - le mig som Al - fer-ne i Dug - draa - bens Bad, jeg kan
fz
fz
fz

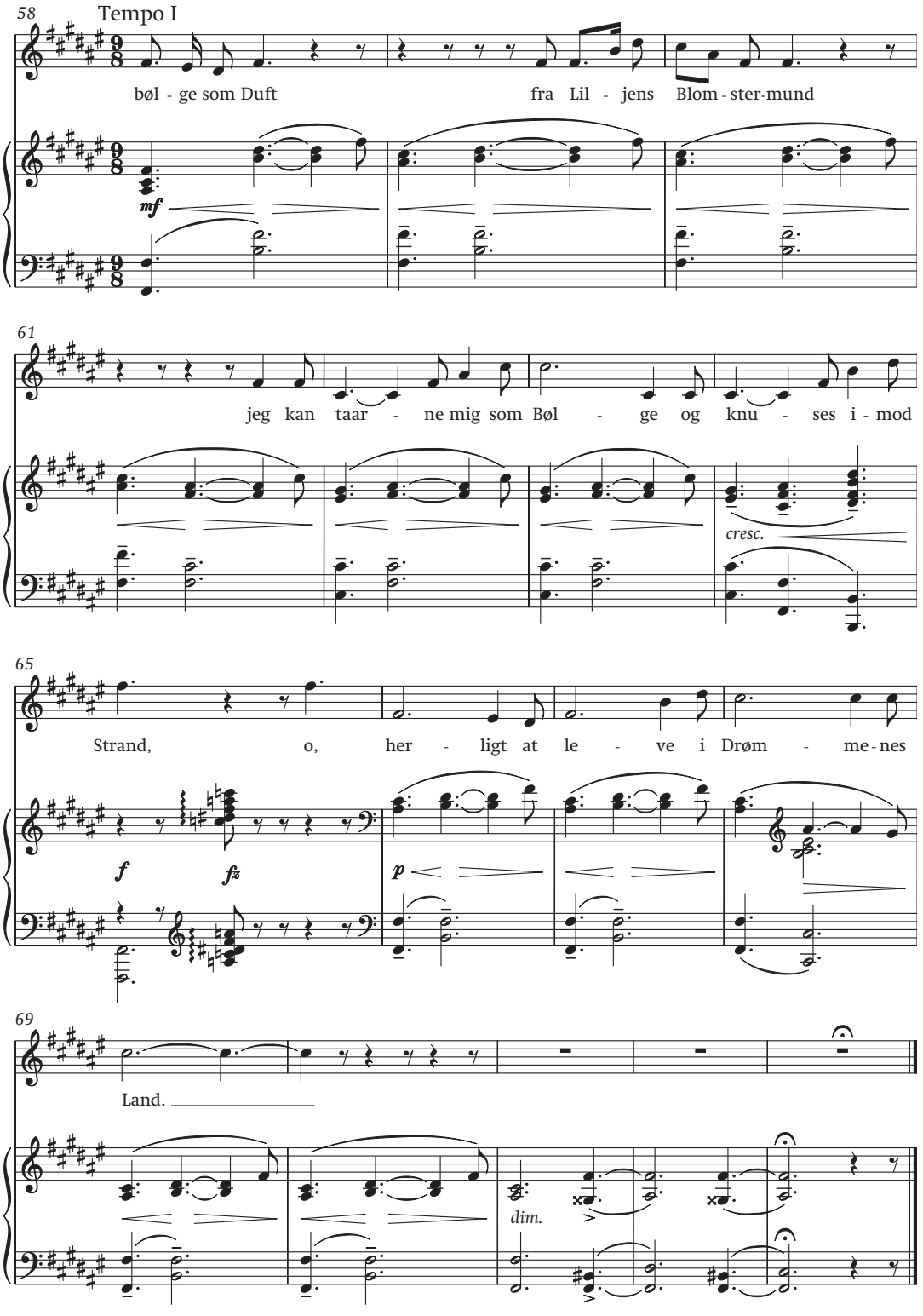

20
sti - ge ned i Bjer - get, der har Flam - mer om sin Tin - de jeg kan
pp
mf
cre - - - - -
22
vug - ge mig paa Strøm - me-ne de glø - den-de der-in - de, jeg kan
scen - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - do
24
2
fa - re o - ver Van - de-ne som Aan - den en Gang før, mens
ff
26
sor - te Bøl - ger væl - te sig o - ver mør - - ke Jord,
dim.


28
Agitato
Tempo I
jeg kan sku - - - - e Mul - met
ff
p
30
vi - - - - ge for Ly - - sets stær - - ke
4 4 4 4
32
Glans og jub - le glad med
cresc.
34
Jor - - den ved dets før - - - ste
cresc.


(35)
Straa - - - le - krans, jeg kan
ff
tr
37
fa - re som Storm o-ver Hav og o - ver Jord og i
39
Kvag slaa den æng - ste-de Snek - ke,
41
Meno
jeg kan aan - - de som
dim.
pp


(42)
Vaar - vind paa Blom - - ster - nes Flor
44
og fra Vin - te - rens Dva - le dem væk - - ke jeg kan
di - - mi - - nu - - en - - do
46
sæn - ke mig som Dæm - ring ud o - ver Mark og Vang, jeg kan
pp
48
klin - ge som en To - ne i Lær - kens Mor - gen - sang
più f


50
jeg kan drøm - me som en Knop un-der Bla - de-nes Hang og aab - ne mig som
52
Ro - se un - der Sol - straa-lers Klang jeg kan bæ - ve som Dug-gen paa
f
p
54
Bø - ge-træ - ets Blad og fan - ge Glans og svin - de ved
56
rit.
Sol - straa - lers Bad jeg kan ru - ge som Skyg-ge i Skov og i Lund, kan
pp
dim.
rit.


58
Tempo I
bøl - ge som Duft
fra Lil - jens Blom - ster-mund
mf
61
jeg kan taar - ne mig som Bøl - ge og knu - ses i - mod
cresc.
65
Strand, o, her - ligt at le - ve i Drøm - me-nes
f
fz
p
69
Land.
dim.

Abstract

The article investigates Carl Nielsen's views on Richard Wagner in order to understand what might have driven him to discard one of his own songs, 'In the Land of Dreams' ('I Drømmenes Land'), for having a Wagnerian sentiment. Nielsen's varying opinions of Wagner are accounted for as well as Nielsen's understanding of the nature of music. Based on these statements, a musical analysis of 'In the Land of Dreams' focuses on discovering and pointing out similarities between Nielsen's idea of Wagner's musical style and specific musical features in the song. Possible reasons behind Nielsen's changing points of view are discussed, including to which extent Danish society could be said to have influenced and encouraged the discourse of Nielsen as anti-Wagner. It is concluded that both Nielsen and Danish society had multiple reasons for wanting to separate Nielsen from Wagner, such as Nielsen's personal ambition to make a name for himself as a composer and Denmark's need of a national hero, which only grew stronger following the German occupation. However, because of these agendas, the differences between Nielsen and Wagner have tended to be exaggerated as they do in fact share more musical ideals than one might assume, including a desire to liberate music's own inner will through alternative harmonic approaches and an aversion for musical sentimentality and programme music.

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