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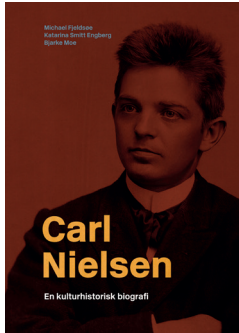
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Michael Fjeldsøe, Katarina Smitt Engberg and Bjarke Moe

*Carl Nielsen: En kulturhistorisk biografi*

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Given that the final sentence of the impressive new Carl Nielsen biography follows nearly 700 pages of thorough research conducted by three musicologists over several years, it may seem surprisingly unremarkable: ‘Carl Nielsen is a European composer.’

Well, Denmark has always been part of Europe, has it not? However, Nielsen has often been perceived as exclusively Danish. In response to this oversimplification, musicologists Michael Fjeldsøe, Katarina Smitt Engberg, and Bjarke Moe take every opportunity to highlight the fact that Nielsen lived and worked within a European musical common culture where repertoire and musical practices crossed borders. Musicians also travelled, but Nielsen did not need to go to Germany or France (though he certainly did) to be part of Europe, because, as the authors put it, he was already there. Musically, Denmark was an integral part of Europe.

*Carl Nielsen: En kulturhistorisk biografi* is an extensive volume, and the authors aim to do far more than presenting Nielsen as a European figure. In fact, their goal is to examine all the activities he engaged in, and, for the most part, they succeed in fulfilling this ambition. The result is a remarkably comprehensive overview, complemented by numerous in-depth explorations.

Early on, the reader is introduced to chapters exploring Nielsen’s earliest musical education, his work as a military and (likely) theatre musician in Odense, and Funen as a musical environment with strong connections to Northern Germany. The chapters covering Nielsen’s time as a student at the Copenhagen music conservatoire not only provide a detailed account of his formal training but also offer insights into his expanding networks and his freelance activities across the diverse musical venues of a capital undergoing significant social and physical transformation.

Further themes are (among others) Nielsen’s role as a violinist in Det kongelige Kapel, his involvement in the radical ‘århundredeskifteskultur’ (turn-of-the-century culture) with Georg Brandes as a central figure of strong, international influence, Nielsen’s stays in Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, Paris, Rome, and Gothenburg, and his encounters with

Theodor Kirchner, Joseph Joachim, Johannes Brahms, Wilhelm Stenhammar, and, notably, the celebrated sculptor Anne Marie Brodersen, who became both his wife and his artistic equal. Nielsen's work as a conductor and his role as a teacher and mentor to younger composers are also explored.

In examining Nielsen's compositions, the authors highlight his curiosity, versatility, and relentless artistic renewal – qualities that have often been overlooked, as they do not align with the standard nationalist image of him as the great man of the Danish tone in music, as an anti-Romantic, and as a simple man from the countryside. While the authors acknowledge that these characteristics were indeed part of Nielsen's identity, they aim to address and rectify the unfortunate marginalisation of other characteristics and of works, such as the Sixth Symphony, that fall outside the traditional narrative.

Nielsen took all his compositional projects seriously, and so do the authors when they discuss his small folk-style songs, his music written for events such as the inauguration of the Studentersamfundet building and a commemoration of the Titanic disaster (a rather grotesque piece of programme music, it seems), his music for young piano students, his music for spoken theatre, his hymns, his organ music, his symphonies, his operas, and much more. Throughout the book, the music is interpreted as Nielsen's creative response to tasks he was given or chose for himself – tasks that were, in turn, linked to the practical or ideological concerns of the time.

The authors wisely refrain from offering thorough analyses of every work. Such an endeavour would have required even more pages and made the book inaccessible to large parts of the intended readership. Instead, they exemplify their analytical approach to a work and propose one or more interpretations of the work's meaning, set against the backdrop of cultural-historical contexts.

Nielsen's artistry is characterised by stylistic diversity and constant renewal, but the authors demonstrate that there are also principles that recur throughout his compositional output. One of these principles is the idea of writing music that expresses 'the great cycle of life and death' and to do so in accordance with the 'vitalist' reverence for the fundamental forces of earthly life.

For example, the authors convincingly argue that when Nielsen, writing in 1920 about his Fourth Symphony (*The Inextinguishable*), speaks of 'stærke og fine Kræfter' (strong and fine forces) embedded in the 'Stoff' (substance) from which nature is made, his phrasing mirrors the way he describes how music develops organically from the forces inherent in a musical theme or motif. Indeed, in Nielsen's view, music does not merely *represent* life; it *is* life when it allows the forces within its 'Stoff' to develop according to the laws of nature.

The notion of 'vitalism' certainly helps to shed light on several of Nielsen's works, but it remains unclear whether Nielsen himself was acquainted with the concept. This ambiguity does not, of course, disqualify the authors from interpreting Nielsen's works in 'vitalist' terms. However, it does highlight the need for a more thorough investigation

into Nielsen's discourse – whether verbal or musical – on 'Stoff', 'Kraft', and 'Liv', as well as how this discourse relates to the philosophy and science of his time.

Friedrich Nietzsche is mentioned in passing, but I also wonder if Nielsen, like so many of his contemporaries, may have read *Die Welträtsel* (1899) or some of the other fairly accessible works by the German biologist, Darwinist, and natural philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919). Haeckel, who chose the term 'monism' for his worldview, argued that at the heart of everything lies an inextinguishable 'substance' made up of matter (filling space) and force (originating from the sun). Indeed, Nielsen's reference to 'stærke og fine Kræfter' embedded in the 'Stoff', as well as his notion of musical development governed by natural laws embedded in the musical substance itself, seem, at least at first glance, to be clearly monist and so to be linked to the metaphysical biologism of the turn of the nineteenth century.

In light of vitalist (or perhaps monist) works such as the powerful Third and Fourth Symphonies, it is somewhat startling to learn that Nielsen and his friend Thomas Laub (also a composer) sought to emulate J.A.P. Schulz's eighteenth-century ideal of the 'Schein des Bekannten' when working on the folk song collection *En snes danske Viser* (1915–17). In an interview ahead of a performance, Nielsen even spoke of a 'præg af noget hjemligt, noget borgerlig-hygge' (a sense of something homely, something bourgeois-cosy)! Here, a very different Nielsen emerges – though Haeckel, of course, would insist that 'substance' is the foundation not only of love and hate but also of the most bourgeois *hygge*. Nielsen's remarks about these and other songs he wrote for schools, churches and homes further suggest (even though the authors do not emphasise this) that he was participating in a project of social and aesthetic disciplining through 'improvement' and standardisation of the tastes and diverse singing traditions of the population.

One of the most intriguing and potentially far-reaching topics addressed in the book is the question of modernism. Following Daniel M. Grimley (author of *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, 2010), the authors present musical modernism in the early twentieth century as being stylistically open. While after the First World War, 'modernism' became closely associated with the musical innovations of Arnold Schönberg and Igor Stravinsky, before the War, the impulse to create music suited to the new century could take many different forms.

Nielsen certainly shared this impulse. Having previously admired Wagner, he now came to despise both Wagner and Wagnerism, instead turning to Mozart and the classicism he identified in Palestrina's counterpoint. The authors emphasise that Nielsen sought inspiration in this older music not to imitate it, but because he found in it a vital source of renewal. However, in practice, the book sometimes makes it difficult to discern the crucial differences between the music Nielsen regarded as exemplary and the music he himself composed.

In a particularly intriguing correspondence with Nielsen (generously quoted in the book), Thomas Laub discusses a certain type of transitional music that initially appears

new but, upon closer examination, reveals itself to be merely an extension of the past. Nielsen replies that the new must grow out of the old, like a shoot breaking through the soil. The metaphor is striking, but what does it mean in practice? To what extent, if at all, does Nielsen go beyond simply dressing old forms in new clothing when composing symphonic works influenced by Beethoven, solo songs inspired by Schubert, or vocal polyphony shaped by Palestrina?

In other respects, the authors have no difficulty presenting Nielsen as a true visionary. This is particularly evident in their discussion of his fascination with everyday sounds. In Nielsen's view, the essence of music lies in 'Lyd, Liv og Bevægelse der hugger Stilheder istykker' (sound, life, and movement that shatter silences), and the task of this shattering is to awaken 'andre Menneskers Opmærksomhed, Forundring og Begejstring' (the attention, astonishment, and enthusiasm of other people).

On the very day his Sixth Symphony premiered – December 11, 1925 – Nielsen declared in *Politiken* that 'Music is sound' and recounted how he and his son-in-law, the violinist Emil Telmányi, had entertained themselves by creating popping sounds with packaging resembling today's bubble wrap. (What a haunting image!) And it is precisely in the Sixth Symphony (*Sinfonia semplice*) that the sounds of the percussion and several other instruments begin to take on lives of their own, in a manner strikingly similar to what occurs near the conclusion of Dmitri Shostakovich's Fifteenth Symphony, composed half a century later. Here, Nielsen was far ahead of his time and, indeed, far removed from conventional notions of down-to-earth Danishness.

So, how did Nielsen come to replace Niels W. Gade as Denmark's one and only 'nationalkomponist' (national composer)? The authors are able to trace and document a straightforward process of canonisation: spectacular performances sparked interest, well-known musicians took up his works, major publishers printed and distributed them in Denmark and abroad, and musicologists and other professional music writers authored articles and books about his music.

For Nielsen, this canonisation was a double-edged sword, the authors argue. For while it secured him a dominant position at home and marginalised his competitors, it also resulted in the sidelining of parts of his own compositional output that did not align with the increasingly rigid notion of his character and music. The image of Nielsen as emphatically Danish further posed a barrier to the highest level of canonisation: his potential elevation to the Pantheon of the greatest masters of Western music.

So perhaps it is now time for the next step? Complementing the bilingual, open-access *Carl Nielsen Works*, the rich, online *Catalogue of Carl Nielsen's Works*, the *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven* (a twelve-volume, open-access edition of Nielsen's letters and diaries), and the journal *Carl Nielsen Studies*, Fjeldsøe's, Smitt Engberg's, and Moe's 1.8-kilogram magnum opus (soon to appear in English as *Carl Nielsen: A Cultural Biography*) may certainly help propel Nielsen into the realm of international genius. If so, the authors may not only have enhanced his global reputation but also have solidified his status as

a national idol in the twenty-first century. The spirit of Rued Langgaard will surely look down from his cloud with more rage than ever.

In any case, the Danish and English editions of this comprehensive, perspective-rich, and thoroughly researched biography will undoubtedly become essential references for scholars wishing to contribute to research on Nielsen or Danish musical life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book also represents a significant contribution to European music and cultural history. That the book, despite its 43 chapters, cannot account for all contexts or answer all the questions it raises is entirely natural. What matters is that the gaps and loose threads appear against a backdrop of such intriguing and well-structured knowledge that the reader is left eager to explore them. The conditions for research on Carl Nielsen have never been better than they are right now.

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