

# The Reception of Carl Nielsen as a Danish National Composer

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## **Abstract**

Carl Nielsen, labelled as Denmark's national composer, has long been relegated to a secondary status in English-language musicology as a composer of great national significance but negligible importance outside of Scandinavia. This thesis explores the links between Danish nationalism and Nielsen's music, as well as the effects of Nielsen's status as a national composer on the reception of his symphonic music outside of Denmark. The first section of this paper is a study of Nielsen's music in the context of Danish cultural nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century, focusing on the folk influences or "Danish" aspects of his symphonic music. It also examines the extent to which the national or Nordic qualities of his music are constructions and later attributions. The following section looks at the development of Nielsen's status as a national composer in Denmark, as well as how this label has engendered the stereotyping of his music as regional in English-language musicology. Nielsen has been neglected by the Anglo-Germanic canon which privileges central European compositional styles and methods while viewing nationally inflected music negatively. Although Nielsen's Danish background cannot be ignored, his symphonic music needs to be studied in a wider European context for his universal message to be appreciated.

## Résumé

Carl Nielsen a longtemps été considéré comme compositeur national du Danemark. Même si ce titre lui a assuré une place dans la culture et l'histoire de son pays d'origine, il lui a aussi valu une réputation de compositeur nationaliste à l'extérieur du Danemark. Ce mémoire cherche d'abord à démontrer les raisons pour lesquelles Nielsen est devenu un symbole culturel au Danemark pour ensuite constater comment ceci pu avoir une influence sur la perception et l'étude de sa musique à l'étranger. La première section s'attarde aux liens entre la culture danoise et la musique de Nielsen en portant particulièrement attention aux aspects folkloriques ou « danois » de ses symphonies. La section suivante s'intéresse à l'impact qu'eut le nationalisme sur la réception de sa musique tant au Danemark que par la musicologie anglophone. Hors du Danemark, Nielsen est souvent considéré comme étant un compositeur secondaire en raison de son attachement à la culture nationale de son pays. Mon but est de démontrer que le manque d'attention porté à la musique de Nielsen est en grande partie le résultat des méthodes d'analyse propres à la musicologie anglophone qui favorisent certaines caractéristiques musicales originaires d'Europe centrale. Pour pouvoir mieux apprécier le message universel de la musique symphonique de Nielsen, celle-ci devrait être étudiée dans le contexte de la musique d'Europe centrale du tournant du vingtième siècle tout en tenant compte de l'importance de la culture danoise sur son esthétique.

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Copenhagen, Wilhelm Hansen, 1999.

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## The Reception of Carl Nielsen as a Danish National Composer

### Introduction

Carl Nielsen, Denmark's national composer, is held up as a symbol of Danish culture by Danish musicologists, cultural historians, and the public alike. His music has been placed within a Danish tradition of music making and he has been pigeon-holed as a "Danish" composer by both Danish and English-language musicology. Nielsen grew up at a time when the Danes were intent on creating a national cultural identity and he was consequently surrounded by nationalistic rhetoric throughout his life. His identity was in many ways a "Danish" one as it embodied qualities promoted by Danish nationalism; he identified with peasant lifestyles and cultures, with the local landscape, and with the country's newly established socialist ideals. His career in many ways reflected his cultural and political heritage: he wrote over 200 songs for the "common Dane", many of which had patriotic texts, and composed a few large-scale works with nationalistic overtones. Yet as a composer of art music, Nielsen cannot be described as a nationalist.<sup>1</sup> He is best known outside of Denmark for his symphonies and concertos, all of which were written for the musical elite of Europe. Although certain stylistic elements of his symphonies indicate a folk influence, there is little evidence to suggest that Nielsen wanted these works to have explicit connections to Danish nationalism. In

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<sup>1</sup> The terms national and nationalism will be treated as separate entities throughout the paper. The first refers to music held up by a given country as its own while the second implies music of a patriotic nature, self-consciously composed as music for the nation. Many of Nielsen's works that have been termed national compositions cannot be described as nationalistic. A good example of this is his comic opera, *Maskarade*, which bears the epithet "Denmark's national opera" without having nationalistic elements in either the text or the music.

many cases, the associations between Nielsen and local musical traditions may be constructions mapped onto his symphonies by Danes and musicologists.

Labelling Nielsen as a nationalist has had far reaching implications for the study of his work and has resulted in a skewed perception of his music. The second section of this paper examines Nielsen's Danish reception as a national composer, and the effects of this label on English-language Nielsen research. I will begin by tracing how and why Nielsen gained the status of Danish national composer, looking at the contradictions and inconsistencies of his popular and critical reception. Nielsen's reception has varied as different musical factions first in Denmark and later in English-speaking countries appropriated, commended, or criticised his music depending on their values and ideological needs.<sup>2</sup> This will be followed by a study of how Nielsen's position as a national composer has affected British and North American studies of his symphonies. Exploring Nielsen's symphonic music in this context provides a case study in which the issues surrounding musical nationalism can be rethought in a manner similar to that undertaken by Richard Taruskin in his revisionist studies of nationalism in Russian music.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997).



## Part 1: The Rise of Nationalism and Danish National Culture

### The Development of a Danish Identity

Throughout the nineteenth century, most European countries witnessed a burgeoning of nationalistic ideologies centred on establishing political and cultural cohesion among the people of a given nation. This resulted in numerous attempts at creating national identities, usually based on a common history, language, and culture, which made their way into the collective consciousness of the nation. Although there had been some building of nationalist sentiment in Denmark at the beginning of the nineteenth century, nationalist feelings rose steeply after the wars with Germany of 1848 and 1864. The war of 1864 had a particularly deep and lasting effect on Denmark and acted as a rallying call for the solidification of Danish nationalism. Denmark, which once ruled much of Northern Europe, was forced by Germany to give up the Duchies of Schleswig, Holstein, and Lauenberg, thereby losing one third of its territory and one third of its population.<sup>4</sup> The now unilingual nation was the smallest it had ever been,

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<sup>4</sup> It seems hard to believe that Denmark, now such a small and comparatively powerless country, was once one of the most politically and economically powerful nations in Europe. At the height of the Danish Empire, under the rule of Queen Margrethe (fourteenth century), the Danish kingdom held sway over all of Scandinavia and Finland, the Northern German States, and Iceland. Denmark ruled the Baltic, levying duties on freight ships and governing trade. But most of these lands were gradually lost or repatriated by their citizens through a series of wars, the last of which took place in 1864 between Denmark and Prussia. Denmark's troubles with her southern lands, Schleswig, Holstein, and Lauenberg, date back to the eighteenth century and came to a head in the mid 1800s. Denmark's southern states had historically been tied to the Danish crown but the people were predominantly German speaking. When the confederation of German States was established, King Frederick VI of Denmark allowed Holstein to join the German confederation while retaining control over political and economic matters. In 1864, Prussia and Austria invaded Denmark, who, without help from other countries, could not defend her territories. Denmark was forced to renounce all rights to the three duchies with the proviso that a referendum be held in Schleswig which would allow the people to decide to which country they would belong. This compromise was annulled when Prussia won the war against Austria in 1866 and decided to keep Schleswig for herself. Denmark would have to wait until after the first World War for the referendum and subsequent repatriation of the Northern portion of Schleswig. Summarised from Glyn Jones, *Denmark: A Modern History* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1986).

either before or since, and its political and economic powers were negligible. As a result, the country turned in on itself, proclaiming the motto “what has been outwardly lost must be inwardly won.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the most visible changes in the country’s cultural production was the development of artistic styles aimed either at reflecting the ideals of the nation or at creating a new body of works that would be recognisably “Danish.”<sup>6</sup> As with nationalist movements in Germany, folk traditions and lifestyles became the focus of attention for artists, and writers, while folk songs became a focal point for cosmopolitan composers and musicologists. However, as nationalism was a relatively recent phenomenon, it was often less problematic to create a new national music that could be recognised as such than to find old musical traditions that could speak to a large and diverse group of people. This new “folk” music was often easier to disseminate since a “national” sound could be created to suit current ideologies. Although many people tried to revive a local music tradition by collecting the folksongs of rural communities, the melodies were often not regionally distinct enough to be recognised as “Danish” by all Danes. As will be discussed later, the folk music collected in the nineteenth century was in a sense reinvented and packaged to suit the expectations of its largely cosmopolitan public.

### **The International Origins of Danish Music**

Prior to the nineteenth century, the shared musical heritage of western European countries made it difficult to pinpoint distinct and audible national musical styles.

While this was especially true of art music produced in Germanic countries, folk

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<sup>5</sup> Jack Lawson, *Carl Nielsen* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), 40.

<sup>6</sup> As will be discussed later, the best example of this is a national style of painting that developed in the mid nineteenth century and gained for itself the title of “Golden Age” of Danish painting.

traditions of these nations were also closely connected. Few specific characteristics can be attributed exclusively to the folk songs of Denmark, the German states, or Austria. John Yoell, writing about Scandinavian folk music in *The Nordic Sound*, cautions against referring to a given piece of art music as being typically Danish or typically Norwegian as such references bear no relationship to specific folkloric content. He notes that many of the musical traits associated with folk music are not geographically distinct but are rather “part of a general European cultural complex.”<sup>7</sup> With a composer such as Nielsen, who did not quote directly from folk music, the folk-like qualities ascribed to his art music are vague. In addition to this, what is often labelled as folk-like in Nielsen’s symphonies is not specifically Danish, nor is it derived from specifically Scandinavian folk music. The musical characteristics most frequently associated with the “Danish” sound in Nielsen’s large-scale works include appoggiaturas or acciaccaturas, dotted rhythms and off-beats, and the use of modal scales. These are clearly not native to Denmark and thus cannot adequately describe a distinctly Danish sound. As Carl Dahlhaus wrote: “despite countless efforts to do so, it is still difficult to grasp the musical substance of a national style using tangible criteria. The open fifths of a bagpipe drone, the Lydian fourth, a rhythmic-agogic pattern—how often have these been claimed as attributes of Polish music only to appear Scandinavian in other contexts.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Yoell, *The Nordic Sound: Exploration into the Music of Denmark, Norway, Sweden* (Boston: Crescendo, 1974), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 38.

Various attempts have been made to establish what a Nordic musical style consists of but they are far from all-encompassing and are at best vague.<sup>9</sup> Many of the characteristics associated with Scandinavian music and attributed to the leading Scandinavian composers, Franz Berwald (1796-1868), Niels Gade (1817-1890), Johan Svendsen (1840-1911), Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), and Nielsen (1865-1931), appear to have arisen after they wrote their major works. These composers thus created rather than followed what has come to represent a Scandinavian musical tradition. As one musicologist noted, what we now hear as being a “Norwegian” sound only came into being after Grieg; there is in fact no specifically national colour beyond what has been associated with late nineteenth-century, self-consciously nationalistic compositions.<sup>10</sup> Nielsen’s place in Danish music history provides a clear illustration of this phenomenon. While Nielsen’s symphonies do in some ways build on the symphonic style of earlier Danish or Scandinavian composers such as Svendsen and J.P.E. Hartmann, these influences were not necessarily specifically Nordic in tone or style.<sup>11</sup> Danish music has been historically closely linked to the musical trends of continental Europe, with Germany undoubtedly having the single largest cultural influence on the Scandinavian countries.

Denmark’s folk music, like its art music, was deeply marked by German styles and genres, and the two countries continue to have remarkably similar folk traditions. Although folk songs and dances existed within rural communities while Nielsen was

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout this paper, Nordic will imply the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, along with Finland, while Northern will refer to the above with the addition of the U.K. and Russia.

<sup>10</sup> The source for this paraphrase is untraceable.

<sup>11</sup> J.P.E. Hartmann’s compositions may be called Nordic in that they rely heavily on Norse mythology for subject matter. John Horton, *Scandinavian Music: A Short History* (Westport: Greenwood Publishers, 1975), 124. Svendsen, originally Norwegian, rarely made references to Norwegian folk music in his symphonies, which remain closely linked to German traditions. Robert Layton, *A Guide to the Symphony* (New York: Oxford University Press), 333.

growing up, this music was not in fact specifically Danish in origin. The folk songs that were collected in Denmark during the nineteenth century fall under two broad categories: medieval ballads and Lutheran chorales. Although Denmark's rural tradition of singing ballads dates from the medieval era, these ballads were neither originally folk songs, nor Danish. The medieval ballad was a courtly tradition likely brought North in the thirteenth century by travelling French and German poets and singers. As John Horton wrote, although the ballad became "closely interwoven with the traditional lore of the Scandinavian peasantry, and embodied...much national legend and history, it was not an entirely indigenous literary or musical form."<sup>12</sup> When the court lost interest in ballads during the seventeenth century and turned instead to opera and ballet for entertainment, many of the old ballads filtered down through court workers to peasant populations, which adopted them as their own, retaining the heroic and courtly subject matter.<sup>13</sup> Few of these ballads were written down prior to the nineteenth century when a surge in nationalist feeling propelled unprecedented numbers of musicians and educators to collect Danish folk songs. Unfortunately for today's scholars, early methods for collecting folk material were far from systematic, and few, if any, of the ballads in these collections were notated in their authentic form.<sup>14</sup> By the time they

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<sup>12</sup> John Horton, *Scandinavian Music*, 31. The first phrase of one of the only surviving notated medieval ballads was used as the radio signal for the Danish national radio for many years. Horton, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Vagn Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers Against the Background of Danish Musical Life and History* (Copenhagen: Det Danske Selskab, 1967), 10-11. According to Kappel, there is no indication of a musical culture in peasant communities prior to the seventeenth century.

<sup>14</sup> The first substantial collection of medieval ballads is an anthology titled *Selected Danish Songs from the Middle Age* that dates from 1812-14. The first four volumes contain texts alone but the fifth is a collection of monophonic melodies. Sung in strophes, these songs had narrow ranges and largely conjunct contours. Although originally modal, many were altered to be tonal or nearly tonal; some retain a slight modal feel (these sound strange since they were clearly based on modal melodies but have had their leading tones raised). Although rhythms were fit into regular patterns with time signatures, the number of measures in different sections is often odd. Werner Hans Frederik Abrahamson, Rasmus Nyerup, and Knud Lyne Rahbek, *Udvalgte danske viser fra middelalderen* (Copenhagen: J.F. Schulz, 1812-1814).

were recorded, some had already become altered under the influence of new seventeenth and eighteenth-century conceptions of harmony. However many were simply “mis-transcribed” to fit nineteenth-century ideas of tonal “correctness.”<sup>15</sup> These collections of ballads, now recognised by the Danes as their national folk music, were therefore a new form of folk songs.

Nineteenth-century collections of folk songs in turn became models for composers attempting to create a new Danish national music by building on the ballad style. As most musicians working in Denmark during the nineteenth century lived in cosmopolitan centres, they became familiar with Danish folk music through published collections rather than through actual peasant traditions, many of which had died out as communities became increasingly less isolated. Their songs, like their folk music models, were therefore often far removed from real folk traditions. One of the best examples of this is C.E.F. Weyse’s 1930s collection of *Harmonized, Ancient, Nordic Ballads* which, according to the Danish musicologist Vagn Kappel, “succeeded...in establishing the character of the Danish national music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>16</sup> Using these ballads as models, Weyse created a genre of song which is particular to Denmark, the Danish *romance*. Many Danish composers continued to write romances based on a ballad style which was not authentic, or, as Kappel succinctly put it, “which, from a scientific point of view, was entirely wrong.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*, 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 12. Kappel later defines Weyse’s romances as being more classically oriented than lieder by Schumann, Mendelssohn, or Schubert and showing an affinity for Mozart. Kappel, 17. Weyse’s songs tend to be simple and strophic with four-bar antecedent-consequent phrasing and a harmonic language more in keeping with the late eighteenth century than the mid nineteenth.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12.

While ballads and romances were the most prevalent forms of folk singing in the nineteenth century, prior to that, and beginning again in the early twentieth century, ecclesiastical music had a significant impact on Danish folk music. The first notated musical relics of Denmark were Catholic sequences from the twelfth century. As Christianity was Denmark's official religion throughout the Middle Ages, chants were imported from France and Flanders, and Danish scholars went to study at Notre-Dame in Paris. Thus the few chants that were composed in Denmark were often indistinguishable in style or structure from those found on the continent.<sup>18</sup> In some respects, until the sixteenth century, this constituted a "national" music to a greater extent than ballads as most Danes were familiar with liturgical chants while only a few sang ballads in court. However, their impact on nineteenth-century Danish folk music was less pronounced than that of the German Lutheran chorales imported after Denmark's Lutheran reform in the sixteenth century.

Now called the Church of Denmark, the Danish religion is a modified version of Lutheranism, though many Danes today prefer to ignore its German origins.<sup>19</sup> Lutheran chorales were quickly and widely disseminated, accounting for a large proportion of what would become Danish folk music and providing models on which nineteenth and early twentieth-century composers would base their new "folk songs." Many Lutheran

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<sup>18</sup> So many Danes studied in Paris that a Collegium Dacicum was founded for them in the thirteenth century opposite Notre-Dame. Angul Hammerich, *Medieval Musical Relics of Denmark*, Translated by Margaret Williams Hamerik (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1912; reprinted New York: AMS, 1976), 17-18. This international outlook in the arts persisted for centuries and was at one time promoted by the monarchy who sponsored Danish-born musicians to study abroad and learn to reproduce the music they heard on the continent. Susan Lewis, "Creating capitals: The Italian Madrigal in Christian IV's Copenhagen," paper, McGill University, March 4, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> This is true of most cultural manifestations of German origin. It is not surprising given the number of conflicts with Germany over the past hundred years. These sentiments became especially strong after the Nazi occupation in World War II. Conversation with Hans Møller, fall 2002. It is interesting to note that the English pronunciation of Copenhagen changed after World War II to sound less German, though some still use the former version.

chorales were imported and psalm books were printed containing a mix of Danish and German chorales.<sup>20</sup> Many Danish chorales were written in the same style as those of Germany, and to this day most of the chorales and folk tunes found in Danish song books, both sacred and secular, are either identical or similar.<sup>21</sup> Another form of twentieth-century folk-song writing, instigated by the theologian Thomas Laub (1852-1927), was a synthesis of Gregorian chant and medieval ballad. Laub wanted to revive medieval folk songs which he felt had originally been similar to plainsong. He did so by removing the rhythmic and tonal idioms that had been added in the nineteenth century and came up with a new form of monophonic song based on church modes. Though controversial at the time, these melodies became influential in creating a new Danish national music in the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> While all of these songs are Danish in the sense that they were written by a Dane to Danish texts and have been adopted by Danes as their national music, their musical idioms are not markedly different from those of their southern neighbours.<sup>23</sup>

Danish instrumental music was, and remains, closely connected to that of Germany. Much of the music being performed in Denmark in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was either of German origin or heavily influenced by German music of the past. During the nineteenth century, almost all Scandinavian composers went to

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<sup>20</sup> Horton, *Scandinavian Music*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> German Lutheran chorale tunes were sometimes used to set Danish texts. There are dozens of Danish song books that contain Danish texts while indicating that they be sung to old German melodies. One such book is a pocket-sized collection of texts by Søren Beck, Gunner Engberg, Johannes Christensen, Kama Kermann, and Svend Rehling, *De Unges Sangbog* (Århus, De Unges forlag, 1928).

<sup>22</sup> Vagn Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*, 14. As will be seen later, Nielsen was involved with this project for many years.

<sup>23</sup> The German origins of Danish national songs collected in the Danish folk high school songbooks (see below) was pointed out to me by Claus Røllum Larsen, though he maintains that they are Danish folk songs nonetheless. Danish Royal Library, 22 August, 2002.



study in Berlin or Leipzig resulting in a fairly homogenous “classical-romantic” compositional style “occasionally varied with tints derived from folk-music.”<sup>24</sup>

Berwald, a renowned Swedish symphonist and an important influence on Scandinavian orchestral music, also spent a considerable amount of time in Germany and Austria.<sup>25</sup>

Of the better known Danish composers who came into contact with Nielsen at different times of his life, Gade and Norwegian-born Svendsen both studied in Leipzig and remained as popular in Germany as in Denmark.<sup>26</sup> Gade and Svendsen were also the principal conductors in Copenhagen during the second half of the nineteenth century and both favoured German and Viennese composers. According to Reginald Spink, Gade, who had become the head of Copenhagen’s musical establishment by the time Nielsen arrived there in 1884, caused a musical stasis in the capital by conducting almost solely works by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, himself, and by J.P.E. Hartmann, his father-in-law.<sup>27</sup> Despite rising nationalist sentiments, the fact that the majority of the music being performed in Denmark was German does not seem to have been questioned. Ironically, when Nielsen’s works were first performed, they were highly criticised for not being composed in the mid-nineteenth-century Leipzig-influenced idiom the Danes were used to.

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<sup>24</sup> John Horton, *Scandinavian Music*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 117, 122.

<sup>27</sup> Reginald Spink, *Denmark: An Official Handbook* (Copenhagen, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 819. Nielsen was guilty of the same in his later years as he chose to conduct German works of earlier periods including much Mozart and some Brahms.

## Nationalism in Danish Musicology

Although Denmark had a long tradition of music making, much of it was not indigenous to the immediate area, nor was it uniquely Scandinavian in sound and structure. The country's proximity to the European continent, which ensured an almost continuous exchange of culture, meant that its musical history was complex, varied, and closely tied to that of its German-speaking neighbours.<sup>28</sup> However, with the rise of nationalism, the desire to have a distinct national body of music, or a distinct set of musical characteristics, became more important. As will be discussed later, one response to this was to generate a national music, whether by building on old folk traditions or creating a new "folk" music. Another response was to write about Danish music in a way that enhanced its "Danishness." A few musicologists did so, creating a cohesive "Danish musical style" through academic writing.

In an early attempt to reclaim Danish music history, the scholar of medieval music, Angul Hammerich, in his 1912 treatise on Danish medieval music, singles out the sequences which he feels were early examples of a Danish style in music. He describes one surviving sequence as having a "Nordic" sound which he thinks indicates an early regional difference in musical style. According to Hammerich, this particular sequence, "Diem festum veneremur martyris" composed in honour of St. Canute, has a less "international" order than other sequences found in Denmark. He writes: "All of them [previous St. Canute sequences] had foreign models. This is not the case with this

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<sup>28</sup> The cultural exchange did not flow only from German countries to Scandinavia. One example of this is Dietrich Buxtehude, who was brought up and trained in Denmark but worked in Germany. Both the German and Danish musical establishments have claimed him as their own. The same was true of folk cultures: German ballads were, according to Taruskin, Scandinavian in origin. Richard Taruskin, "Nationalism," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed., Stanley Sadie. (New York: MacMillan, 2001), 17: 693.

St. Canute sequence, [sic] we have the feeling that we are no longer in a foreign atmosphere. The Dorian mode with *b* [6], (expressly indicated), is the same as the later Aeolian mode, our present minor scale without the leading-note, which mode was characteristic of Danish folk song of the Middle Ages.”<sup>29</sup> Hammerich goes on to point out its melodic similarities to Danish folk song, citing its “warm repressed feeling [and] softly rounded melodic lines” as proof of its indigenous nature. Yet he also notes that this does not imply that this sequence was Danish, i.e. composed by a Dane. Given that chants were an early source of music in Denmark, it is hardly surprising that some folk music should be reminiscent of these melodies, but his attribution of influence appears to be inverted. Rather, the close relationship between Danish medieval folk song and chants noted by Hammerich was in large part due to the dissemination of Catholic church music to the masses for four hundred years.

One of the more nationalistic accounts of Danish music, the first edition of which was written a few years after World War II, is Vagn Kappel’s short history titled *Contemporary Danish Composers Against the Background of Danish Musical Life and History*.<sup>30</sup> This short volume, centred around Nielsen, highlights what he feels are quintessential Scandinavian musical qualities. He makes references to “Danish” characteristics in compositions which were not considered specifically Danish prior to the late nineteenth century, and which probably had a negligible Scandinavian significance either for the composers or the public at the time these pieces were created. According to him, one of the first Danish composers to incorporate a “national flavour”

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<sup>29</sup> Hammerich, *Medieval Musical Relics of Denmark*, 96.

<sup>30</sup> For this discussion, I will look at the 1967 edition which is slightly expanded. It has also emphasised Nielsen’s place in Danish music history by making him the focus of the book. The first edition is more straightforward with a brief history of Denmark followed by short biographies of fourteen composers, no one more emphasised than another.

in his music was Weyse. In a sense, this was accurate. As the creator of the Danish *romance* based on nineteenth-century transcriptions of ballads, Weyse was familiar with cosmopolitan constructions of Danish folk music and was therefore instrumental in the development of a new “Danish” music. His songs were simple, straightforward, strophic tunes, anachronistic in their reliance on the tonal idioms and phrase structures of an earlier generation. However, the Danish qualities attributed to them and to their successors are more representative of Danish ideals than of the musical content of these songs. Kappel remarks that:

A certain gentleness and flexibility, even where high pathos is expected, a dislike of everything sentimental, bombastic or obscure, are characteristics both of our [Danish] language and of Weyse’s music. This note is echoed not only in the works of the Romantic era, but also in the songs of Carl Nielsen, which, within a limited emotional scale, open on to worlds of beauty, expressing the new ideals of our century.<sup>31</sup>

These characteristics were commonly recognised and valued by the Danes, and Kappel may have used them in order to help make these works identifiably Danish.

Kappel also claims that Gade was the first composer to “introduce a national [Danish] style into absolute music, through his symphony in C minor [1841-42].”<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, this symphony was initially not accepted for performance in Copenhagen; Gade sent it to Mendelssohn who was impressed and had it performed in Leipzig.<sup>33</sup> The Scandinavian inflection in Gade’s First Symphony is in fact slight. Although named “On the fair plains of Zealand” and based in part on a Danish folk melody of the same

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<sup>31</sup> Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*, 17. Nielsen’s biographers Torben Meyer and Frede Schandorf Petersen noted that Nielsen’s songs were entirely different from Weyse’s in that they were not “sentimental” romantic songs. Torben Meyer and Frede Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen kunstneren og mennesket* (Copenhagen: Busk, 1947), 99.

<sup>32</sup> Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Bo Marschner and Finn Egeland Hansen, “Niels W. Gade,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed., Stanley Sadie (New York: MacMillan, 2001), 9: 405.

name [På Sjølund's fagre sletter], the symphony was heavily influenced by German music. Gade was primarily educated in Denmark but at Mendelssohn's invitation he went to work in Leipzig where he remained for several years. Gade's symphonies are strikingly similar to Mendelssohn's—his later symphonies are often indistinguishable from his mentor's—and during his lifetime they remained as well received in Germany as in Denmark.<sup>34</sup>

Other musicologists have made attempts at defining a Nordic symphonic style, and while many of the orchestral works by Scandinavian composers do share a few general characteristics, it is difficult to describe a distinctly Nordic style as so many orchestral works of that era incorporated similar traits.<sup>35</sup> Some of the stylistic features shared by late nineteenth-century Scandinavian orchestral composers include long, flowing melodies, an overall major-mode tonal scheme that gives an effect of bright optimism, and up-beat rhythms or rapid changes of harmony that give an impression of movement and life. Orchestration also tends to be lighter than their German counterparts, with winds and high brass predominating. Robert Simpson used similar terms for describing Danish folk music, but the characteristics he associated with it could fit the folk music or folk-inflected orchestral music of many countries. He hears “Danish” music as having a “very individual flavour; it is uncomplicated; though often irregular in meter, its melody is naturally of Teutonic cast, but it never plods — it always strides or flows; it has the true Nordic clarity of outline, with a certain bluntness

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<sup>34</sup> Spink, *Denmark: An Official Handbook*, 819. Horton, *Scandinavian Music*, 117-120.

<sup>35</sup> Mendelssohn's *Scotch Symphony* is often taken as a model for the “Nordic” symphony. Horton, *Scandinavian Music*, 120. This emphasises the links between the Nordic and German symphony and illustrates to what extent the idea of a specifically Nordic symphony was a later construction.

[and] one quality almost never found in it is sentimentality.”<sup>36</sup> While none of the “Danish” characteristics listed in the passages above adequately describe a distinctly Nordic or Danish sound, they are all typical of the identity the Danes have constructed or defined for themselves. In describing Danish music as gentle, uncomplicated, optimistic, unsentimental, direct, restrained—all adjectives that appear repeatedly in literature by and about the Danes—musicologists are at the same time making use of a previously established identity to appeal to Danish audiences, and creating the idea of a national music.<sup>37</sup>

Musicologists such as those discussed above may have somewhat exaggerated the Danish qualities of the music they were discussing, but since many nineteenth-century composers lived during a period of intense nation building, it is likely that some self-consciously tried to develop a Nordic sound. Although the promotion of Nielsen as a “Danish” composer was in part the outcome of Danish constructions of cultural nationalism, Nielsen lived and worked in this environment and probably espoused these ideals to some extent. Between a rural, peasant upbringing that brought him into contact with old and new folk songs, and his familiarity with and interest in Denmark’s developing socialist ideals that promoted equality of opportunity for all Danes, Nielsen’s participation in the creation or propagation of Danish folk culture seems almost inevitable.

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist* (London, Kahn & Averill, 1979), 18.

<sup>37</sup> The Danish anthology of essays, literature, and poetry by Danes about Denmark that has been collected under the title *Danskernes Identitetshistorie* [The Danes’ History of Their Identity] is a fascinating example of this constant search for their identity. Thorkild Borup Jensen, *Danskernes Identitetshistorie: Antologi til belysning af danskernes selvforståelse* (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1993).

## Nielsen and Danish Nationalism

One of the most important influences on Danish nationalism both in the nineteenth century and today was N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), a Danish poet, theologian, politician, historian, and educational reformer. Grundtvig's lasting contribution to Danish society is undoubtedly his system of folk schools, called *folkehøjskole* [folk high school], through which he sought to teach Scandinavian history, Northern mythology, Danish folk song, and Christianity to all Danes. Grundtvig felt that "if a Dane were to realize his fullest Danishness, he must come into possession of his full Danish heritage. Therefore, the history of Denmark, its language, its geography, its nature life [sic], its social evolution, its economic conditions—all Denmark in short—must be the central subject of a school for the people."<sup>38</sup> Grundtvig felt that the most important aspects of this education were the sagas, legends, folk tales, and ballads that lay "at the heart of the nation", many of which he translated into colloquial Danish.<sup>39</sup> These schools were originally intended for adults and were not meant to replace formal academic institutions or trade schools, though some schools later differed from Grundtvig's original idea. The first such school was opened in 1844 in Northern Schleswig, followed by another ten in as many years throughout rural Denmark.<sup>40</sup> These were experimental and many closed, but they paved the way for the folk school movement which began after the war of 1864 and which still thrives today.<sup>41</sup> Between

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<sup>38</sup> Olive Dame Campbell, *The Danish Folk School: Its Influence in the Life of Denmark and the North* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 63.

<sup>39</sup> Grundtvig was instrumental in "purifying, dignifying, and re-establishing the Danish language in Denmark." Campbell, *The Danish Folk School*, 52.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>41</sup> There are over 300 *folkehøjskole* in Denmark and a few in Southern Norway, Sweden, Germany and Switzerland. Though the subjects taught have changed somewhat from Grundtvig's original ideas, they

1865 and 1870, thirty folk high schools were opened, with a further sixty-five established before 1900. Although not all survived, they were instrumental in spreading nationalist sentiments among the Danish masses through cultural and theological teachings, and through the communal singing of Danish folk songs and hymns. The teaching of Danish history and mythology, and the promotion of Danish-centred musical and artistic practices became common tools for national unification. This ideological mission had tangible repercussions on art, literature, and music produced in the nineteenth century, all of which inevitably affected Nielsen and his music. By the time Nielsen came into contact with the folk high school movement, Grundtvigianism, with its combined love of Nordic folklore and Christianity, had become entrenched in the folk ideology of rural Denmark.<sup>42</sup>

Nielsen's love of rural Denmark and his deep respect for the common folk may stem from his early exposure to Grundtvig's nationalistic school of thought. As a youth, Nielsen became familiar with the Grundtvig movement through meetings at Højby held by Klaus Berntsen, a local school teacher, politician, and promoter of Grundtvig's theories.<sup>43</sup> Nielsen's views on education and society were influenced by those of Berntsen, whom he greatly admired, and his career was marked by associations with Grundtvig's followers and the folk high school movement. Berntsen labelled himself as a supporter of "the little Dane [Det lille danske folk]," working all his life to improve education in rural areas.<sup>44</sup> He was also instrumental in promoting Danish folk culture,

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remain centred on an arts-based extra-curricular education for all, and most schools are to be found in rural areas.

<sup>42</sup> Campbell, *The Danish Folk School*, 57. Although most Danes belong to the Church of Denmark, they are not by and large religious people.

<sup>43</sup> Carl Nielsen, *My Childhood*, Translated by Reginald Spink (Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen, 1972), 93.

<sup>44</sup> Jørgen I. Jensen, *Carl Nielsen—Danskeren* (Copenhagen, Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1991), 44.



both through Grundtvig's teachings, and by encouraging the production of new "Danish" art and music.<sup>45</sup> Nielsen directly participated in the promotion of Grundtvig's values through the dozens of songs he wrote for the folk high school song books and for the Danish public.<sup>46</sup> His most overtly nationalistic composition, *Fynske forår* [Springtime in Funen, 1922], was set to a text by Aage Berntsen, the poet son of Klaus Berntsen.<sup>47</sup> This cantata musically depicts the rural life of Funen which Nielsen later described in his memoir *Min fynske barndom* [My Childhood in Funen]. In a letter to a friend, Nielsen mentioned that he was working on *Springtime in Funen*, writing "I've amused myself by trying to give it a flavour of Funen humour and 'feeling'."<sup>48</sup> Vagn Kappel described *Springtime in Funen* as being full of "the splendour and charm, humour and geniality of Funen, which were essential components of [Nielsen's] personality, and which we Danes recognize so often in his music."<sup>49</sup> Nielsen may well have identified with these characteristics as he described Funen in similar terms in *My Childhood in Funen*. This cantata, like many of his songs, suggests that Nielsen was consciously trying to create a musical link with his Danish homeland.

Nielsen's involvement with writing folk and church songs suggests that he was interested in Danish nationalism and the values prescribed by this ideology. He began writing songs soon after graduating from the conservatory and published three collections between 1891 and 1894. These early songs, or *romances*, are similar in style

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<sup>45</sup> Bertsen helped Nielsen in a direct way through financial support and by introducing him to Niels Gade, Denmark's foremost musician and the director of the Royal Conservatory in Copenhagen. Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> In *My Childhood*, Nielsen discussed the need for universal education and mentioned the deep impression made upon him at an early age by Berntsen and his teaching. Carl Nielsen, *My Childhood*, 93.

<sup>47</sup> Nielsen also wrote the song *Havet omkring Danmark* [The Sea around Denmark] for a play by Peter Willemoes, the cousin of Grundtvig.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Thorvald Nielsen "Some Personal Reminiscences" in Jurgen Balzer, *Carl Nielsen: Centenary Essays*. (London: Dobson, 1966), 14.

<sup>49</sup> Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*, 39.

to Brahms's, and are set to contemporary Danish verse by poets such as Ludvig Holstein (1864-1943) and Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847-85).<sup>50</sup> Although Nielsen's first songs do not seem overtly nationalistic in orientation, the very fact of their being settings of Danish texts is important as one of the agendas of Danish national rhetoric was to raise the Danish language, stigmatised as the language of the peasants, to one worthy of the arts and all Danes. In the early years of the twentieth century, Nielsen, in collaboration with Thomas Laub, began his crusade to simplify Danish song writing, making it accessible to the general populace. He felt that the *romance* had become an élite genre, the "musical language [of which] was progressively obscuring the sound and structure of the poetry."<sup>51</sup> In writing songs for the Danish public, Nielsen was following a Danish *folkelige* song tradition established by J.A.P. Schulz in the late eighteenth century, and later encouraged by Grundtvig.<sup>52</sup> As noted previously, although Denmark had a history of musicians collecting and writing folk songs, many of these collections were romanticised and embellished to suit nineteenth-century cosmopolitan tastes. By the end of the nineteenth century, Grundtvig was calling for a renewal of ancient folk song practices which favoured simple strophic settings of poetry accompanied by sparse harmonies. These nationalistic songs were to be used in churches and schools, and especially in Grundtvig's new folk high schools.

Nielsen's *folkelige* song writing is usually said to have begun in 1914 when he was asked by Thomas Laub to collaborate in the writing of a book of simple Danish

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<sup>50</sup> Anne-Marie Reynolds, *The Songs of Carl Nielsen* (Ph.D. dissertation, Rochester University, 1999), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Schulz was the music director of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen between 1787 and 1795 and is credited with beginning the Danish *folkelige* song tradition despite his being German. Reynolds, 120-22. As the term *folkelige* implies folk-like qualities as well as being written for the folk, I will use the Danish term throughout this paper. See Reynolds, *The Songs of Carl Nielsen*, 118, for a full definition of the term *folkelige*.

songs for broad distribution. However, Nielsen had already been leaning toward this type of song writing.<sup>53</sup> In 1911, Nielsen was asked by the director of one of Grundtvig's folk high schools to write a set of melodies to hymns by Grundtvig, but only a handful of songs came of this.<sup>54</sup> A few of his melodies were published in a *Sangbog for den danske folkehøjskole* [Song book for the Danish Folk High School] in 1912, and in the following year, he wrote another collection of *folkelige* songs not published until 1919.<sup>55</sup> Nielsen also wrote a number of popular songs for the people, including *Sang bag ploven*, *Jens Vejmand*, and *Havet omkring Danmark*, the last of which still serves as an alternate national anthem.<sup>56</sup> Nielsen never expressed an interest in collecting or arranging old folk songs, preferring instead to write new music "for the folk." These songs have since become part of the Danish cultural consciousness and are now considered Danish folk music.

Nielsen's involvement in *folkelige* song-writing is the best indication we have that he was influenced by Denmark's nationalist movement. Even if, as Nielsen averred, his songs were written for purely musical reasons—Nielsen stated that he was primarily interested in Laub's project as an exercise in recreating medieval song writing—the fact that he wrote them for the commoner and for inclusion in the folk high school songbooks reveals the extent to which he had absorbed the national socialist values promoted during his formative years. With such deeply imbedded feelings for his country's ideals, it would seem natural for his art music to be equally marked by

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<sup>53</sup> Reynolds notes that Nielsen's interest in writing *folkelige* songs peaked during the years 1914-1922 when Nielsen and his wife were living apart and while Nielsen was working in Sweden. Nielsen's apparent nostalgia for happier times was combined with "the patriotic sentiments born of viewing one's homeland from afar." Reynolds, *The Songs of Carl Nielsen*, 8. It may also have been influenced by World War I patriotism, though Denmark was not directly involved in the war.

<sup>54</sup> Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 143.

<sup>55</sup> Reynolds, *The Songs of Carl Nielsen*, 136-137.

<sup>56</sup> Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 120.

nationalism. To some extent, it was. Nielsen's philosophies about art music were in some ways similar to those of other Scandinavian composers, perhaps indicating a common Scandinavian attitude in the late-nineteenth century. Nielsen felt that tonality, clarity, and strength were the most important attributes of music, these being best expressed in "simple, tonal melodies without any harmony."<sup>57</sup> This is reminiscent of Grieg's comments on the differences between contemporary German and Norwegian music recorded in an interview for the Leipzig magazine *Signale für die musikalische Welt* in 1907:

[Norwegians] have always loved that which is clear and to the point; even our daily speech is clear and precise. We strive for a similar clarity and precision in our own art. Notwithstanding the boundless admiration that we have for the depth of its brilliant products, it is hard for us to get excited about some of its modern expression, which we often find heavy and somewhat ponderous.<sup>58</sup>

Grieg was committed to Norwegian nationalism, writing collections of folk song arrangements.<sup>59</sup> Nielsen, a friend of Grieg's and well acquainted with his music and politics, would probably have been aware of the significance of remarks such as these. By identifying himself with what could be described as a "Nordic" musical style, Nielsen may have been attempting to distance himself from continental music.<sup>60</sup> However, in contrast to Grieg, Nielsen's symphonic production as a whole cannot be described as nationalistic.

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Daniel Grimley, *Nielsen, Nationalism and the Danish Musical Style* (NNDMS) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1998), 56.

<sup>58</sup> Finn Benestad and Dag Schelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist*, Translated by William Halverson and Leland B. Sateren (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 397. Quoted in Grimley, *NNDMS*, 54-55.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

## The National in Nielsen's Symphonies

None of Nielsen's symphonies can be placed in a single stylistic category. His symphonic style has at different times been described as neo-romantic, neo-classical, symbolist, or modernist, and inflected by a national sound.<sup>61</sup> While some folk-like elements can be identified in his early symphonies, the later ones contain remarkably few of these characteristics. This national sound is often spoken of as an indefinable quality or mentioned with an almost mystical reverence by Danish Nielsen enthusiasts and some musicologists. As it is hard to pinpoint or define what the national or "Danish" aspects are, few references are made to concrete musical material when alluding to these qualities in Nielsen's symphonies. There are, however, a few musical elements that have been construed as having a folk-like, nationalistic, or Danish quality.<sup>62</sup> These include characteristics such as the use of flat sevenths and modal scales, open-fifths and pedal tones, up-beat syncopated rhythms, and stepwise melodies, as well as more abstract qualities such as evocations of the Danish landscape or

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<sup>61</sup> Nielsen has been described as neo-classical and modern by Grimley, *NNDMS*, "Modernism and Closure," and "Tonality, Clarity, Strength"; and F. K. Smith, *Nordic Art Music*; modern by David Fanning, *Nielsen: Symphony no. 5* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Christopher Ballantine, *Twentieth Century Symphony* (London: Dobson, 1983); Jan Maeggard, "Den sene Carl Nielsen," and John Yoell, *The Nordic Sound*; nationalist and modern simultaneously by Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen: En Musikografi* (Odense: Fyns Boghandels Forlag, 1949); J.C. Waterhouse, "Nielsen Reconsidered," *Musical Times* 106 (June-Aug 1965); and Mathiassen *Livet, musiken og samfundet: En bog om Carl Nielsen* (Århus: Publimus, 1986); symbolist by Jensen, *Carl Nielsen: Danskeren*; nationalist by Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*; and Hugo Seligmann, *Carl Nielsen* (Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen Forlag, 1931); romantic by Dolleris; and tinged by a national sound by Torben Meyer and Frede Schandorf Petersen, *Carl Nielsen kunstneren og mennesket* (Copenhagen: Busk, 1947); Grimley, Ottaway, "Carl Nielsen," in *The Symphony vol. 2: Mahler to the Present Day*, ed. Robert Simpson (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972), and nearly all of the above mentioned aside from F.K. Smith, and Yoell, who think Nielsen is distinctly not nationalistic. The Danes most often put him in the nationalist and modernist camps simultaneously.

<sup>62</sup> I was told about, but have not been able to get a copy of, a radio broadcast that described the "Danish" elements of Nielsen's Third Symphony. Conversation with musicologists Niels Krabbe, head of the music department and Nielsen Edition at the Royal Library, Copenhagen, August 2002.

suggestions of a Danish or Scandinavian orchestral colour. Interestingly, the three symphonies written prior to the beginning of Nielsen's folk song writing career display a more noticeable folk influence than the three late symphonies. As Nielsen's folk-song writing career evolved, his symphonies grew increasingly modern and inaccessible, and contained fewer folk-like qualities.

In the following section, I will examine the musical material of Nielsen's symphonies that have been most frequently associated with folk music or nationalism. While few and far between, some passages or themes in Nielsen's symphonies may appear folk-like. These tend to include simple, conjunct melodies with equally simple dotted rhythms accentuated by syncopations, off-beats, and acciaccaturas. These characteristics are vague partially because of the tenuous nature of describing specific, local qualities of folk music from European countries which historically shared a common culture. In a discussion of Sibelius's symphonies, Robert Morgan looks at the connection between Sibelius's melodic material and the folk traditions which inspired them. His description of the folk influence on Sibelius's melodies aptly depicts a large number of works by other composers from all over Europe, many of whom were supposedly influenced by local folk traditions. It is also a remarkably good description of the folk-like characteristics typically ascribed to Nielsen's symphonies. Morgan wrote: "the melodic material [of his symphonies] shares certain general structural similarities with much folk music: a predominance of stepwise motion, adherence to diatonic and usually modal scales, highly restricted melodic ranges, and a tendency to circle continuously around a single note that serves as a tonal focus. These features are

supported by the harmony which is essentially triadic and modal in conception and often tonally ambiguous.”<sup>63</sup>

Although there are a number of vaguely folk-like, up-beat tunes woven into Nielsen’s symphonies, most are short and, when developed, are accompanied by twentieth century harmonic idioms, therefore sounding more like a stylised folk inflection than an appeal to folk audiences. Although this could be said of Bartók or Stravinsky, Nielsen’s folk inflection is less directly associated with the folk culture of his country as he never directly quoted or made allusions Danish folk songs. While Nielsen’s symphonies contain some stereotypical folk-like idioms—rhythmic characteristics such as off-beats, accented weak beats, and acciaccaturas recur on a regular basis in all of his symphonies, though to a lesser degree in later works—it seems unlikely that he used these in order to create a national sound.<sup>64</sup> One example of a passage that contains folk-like qualities is the main theme of the second movement of Nielsen’s Fourth Symphony. This theme is made up of a lightly orchestrated conjunct melody with duple or dotted rhythms and acciaccaturas accenting the weak beat of the bar in the first half, and quintessentially Nielsenesque melodic oscillations and harmonic wandering to more distantly related keys for the second part. The whole theme is repeated with a different combination of wind instruments and with slight melodic variations.

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<sup>63</sup> Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth Century Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 122.

<sup>64</sup> I will return to this idea later.

Poco allegretto (♩ = 69 a 72)      rall.      a tempo

416 Vl. I (A) 2  
426 Vl. I (A) 2  
432 Fl. I 2  
437 Fl. I 2  
442 Fl. I 2

ppp  
pp  
pp  
ppp  
pp  
mp  
dim.  
calando  
muta in Bb  
muta in Bb

Example 1: Nielsen, *Symphony No. 4*, Movt II: Opening.

This theme in many ways resembles Morgan's characterization of a folk-influenced melody. However, it also calls to mind a neo-classical sound, as twentieth-century idioms are combined with Mozartian textures and orchestration, and to some extent phrasing.

While the theme from the second movement of Nielsen's Fourth Symphony displays characteristics that are stereotypically folk-like, they are placed in a context that



does not seem to make reference to folk cultures or to nationalism. In contrast, the melody which serves as the main theme of the Third Symphony's fourth movement uses similar devices in a more folk-like manner. Like the theme from the second movement of Symphony No. 4, it is made up of very simple rhythms, conjunct melodic contours, acciaccaturas, and accented weak beats. Uncharacteristically, it is wholly diatonic and is lacking the inflections of twentieth-century harmony present in most folk-like passages of Nielsen's symphonies. As Simpson puts it, this theme is "a thumping honest tune...replete with highly original platitudes."<sup>65</sup>

Flauto (A)

Fagotto

Fagotto 3  
contrafagotto

Oboe (F)

Clarinete (F)

Violino 1

Violino 2

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabbasso

Allegro (♩ = 76)  
sul G

div.

f

Example 2: Nielsen, *Symphony No. 3*, Movt IV: Opening.

<sup>65</sup> Simpson, *Carl Nielsen, Symphonist*, 71.

The use of flattened sevenths is probably the feature of Nielsen's writing most frequently discussed in association with nationalism. His symphonies are permeated by flattened sevenths as his essentially diatonic tonal idiom is combined with modal mixture and melodic modal inflections. The modes he uses most frequently are Mixolydian, Phrygian, and Aeolian, all of which contain the flattened seventh degree. This modal inflection, perhaps the most recognisable trait of Nielsen's "sound," is part of what makes his writing appear to have a nationalistic quality. This association of modal writing with nationalism has been made because of the historical use of modal writing in Danish folk music, long based on ecclesiastical musical traditions. What is less clear is whether Nielsen's use of modes was the result of a desire to appeal to Danish folk traditions or to obscure tonality.

Flattened sevenths appear both in small-scale melodic and harmonic contexts, and in large-scale tonal plans. The Fourth Symphony's overall tonal layout is based on flat seventh relationships. The goal key of the symphony is E major; it is reached at the end of the first movement and only returns at the end of the Finale. The opening key of the symphony, D major/minor, functions as the flat seventh degree of the symphony's final key of E major. There are numerous instances of flat sevenths in the Symphony No. 1 despite its tonal structure being fairly traditional. The symphony begins in the key of G minor and ends in C major. At a background structural level, the B flat of G minor also acts as the flattened seventh of C Mixolydian. On a smaller scale, the sonata form of the first movement of Symphony No. 3 is also based on flat seventh relationships. While the movement begins and ends in G minor, both the first and second themes end in F major (dominant of B flat, the goal key of the exposition and the

relative major of the tonic key); F natural is the flat seventh degree of G minor. As Simpson wrote, Nielsen's "long and close proximity with folk-music made the major scale with a flat seventh (the so-called Mixolydian mode) quite familiar to him, and it is also typical of his sunny disposition that when he composes in a minor key, the minor third may behave without warning as if it were a flat seventh in a major key."<sup>66</sup>

At a local level, melodic uses of flattened sevenths add an occasional modal flavour which serves the double purpose of creating a vaguely archaic sound and blurring the tonality of a given passage. For example, in the first movement of the Symphony No.1, the opening motive of the development, which begins in the key of B flat, is made up of the repeated figure F—G—A flat—G—F, the A flat being the flat seventh degree in B flat major. As will be discussed later in greater detail, in some instances the modal inflections which blur tonality can also have the effect of creating a pastoral sound. At figure 7 in the first movement of Symphony No. 3, a lyrical theme is played by the woodwinds over a pedal tone E flat. This passage, which rotates around an E flat, could either be in A flat Mixolydian or E flat Mixolydian. The tonal ambiguity of this section is caused by the use of two flattened seventh degrees. When a D flat appears in the fourth measure, it can either function as the flattened seventh of E flat, or as the missing component of A flat major. However, seven measures later, the key of A flat is put into question with the introduction of its flat seventh, G flat. This passage has a pronounced modal sound which, combined with the spacious and calm wind writing over a horn drone, does suggest a slightly folk-like or rustic feel.

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<sup>66</sup> Simpson, *Carl Nielsen, Symphonist*, 24. Simpson again associated Nielsen's orchestral style with his stereotyped 'genial' personality.

**7**  
138 molto tranquillo (quasi  $\text{♩} = 76$ )

Fl. 1 *mp*

Ob. 1 *p*

(Bb) 1 *p*

Fg. 1 *p*

Trb. 1 *ppp*

Timp. *ppp*

Fl. 1 *p* *poco f* *dim.*

Fl. 2 *a2* *p* *cresc.* *poco f* *p*

Ob. 1 *1.* *cresc.* *poco f* *dim.*

1. (Bb) 1 *pp* *cresc.* *poco f* *dim.*

Fg. 1 *pp* *cresc.* *poco f* *dim.*

Cor. (F) 1 *pp* *cresc.* *poco f* *dim.*

Trb. 1

Timp. *Ab, Eb muta in G, C*

Example 3: Nielsen, *Symphony No. 3*, Movt I: Figure 7.

Nielsen's use of flattened sevenths was as much the result of a modern outlook that used modal mixture to obscure tonality as a salute to his folk heritage.<sup>67</sup> As Daniel Grimley writes: "Flattened sevenths in Nielsen's music are usually treated in two ways: firstly as an ethnic modal flavouring from Danish folk music, and secondly as a result of modal mixture. The first interpretation stresses Nielsen's supposed relationship with a collective Danish musical consciousness, planting Nielsen's music firmly in the Danish soil..." while the second examines his music within the context of early twentieth-century composers' movement away from conventional diatonicism.<sup>68</sup> Like many composers in the twentieth century who sought to distance themselves from traditional nineteenth-century harmonies, Nielsen used modal mixture to obscure harmonies and to create tonal ambiguity. This is true of the opening of the Fourth Symphony which makes use of modal mixture, a flattened seventh, and tritones in the opening five measures alone. The movement begins with two arpeggiations in D minor and major in the winds, followed by a short passage in D minor with an added E flat, all of this played over a flat seventh C pedal in the strings. The timpani, reinforcing the E flat/A tritone of the winds, add to the sense of tonal instability.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See also Daniel Grimley, "Horn Calls and Flattened Sevenths," in *Musical Constructions of Nationalism*, Harry White and Michael Murphy, eds (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 129.

<sup>68</sup> Grimley, "Horn Calls and Flattened Sevenths," 129.

<sup>69</sup> Nielsen often uses tritones in melodic passages and there are many tritone relationships in his symphonies. Tritones provide some of the tension lost by the flattening of the seventh scale degree.

Allegro ( $\text{♩} = 88$ )

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

Allegro ( $\text{♩} = 88$ )

Example 4: Nielsen, *Symphony No. 4*, Movt I: Opening.

The final tonality of the second movement of the Fourth Symphony is also obscured by a series of flat sevenths. In a passage from mm. 113 to 120, which traditionally would have been a dominant-tonic progression confirming the movement's tonic key of G major, Nielsen wrote a series of pre-dominant harmonies into which he interspersed a series of flattened sevenths. In m. 113, the G major chord contains the flat seventh F natural, in m. 114, the C chord has a flat seventh B flat, and in m. 115, the chord of F is the flat seventh degree of the goal key of G major, reached in m. 118.<sup>70</sup> This produces a sensation of the music losing all sense of direction, wandering with uncertainty into the elided third movement.



Example 5: Nielsen, *Symphony No. 4*, Movt II: mm. 113-120.

In a few instances, Nielsen used flattened sevenths to obscure tonality within a pastoral setting. In the second movement of his Third Symphony, modal inflection and modal mixture are used both to create a folk feeling and obscure tonality. The movement opens in C major with a bassoon and horn pedal over an arpeggiated melody in the strings. In mm. 13 and 28, the seventh degree, B, is flattened, giving the static C major chords a Mixolydian colour and adding a slight folk feel to this pastoral idyll. When at figures 2, 5, and 7, solo wind instruments cut in with meandering but largely

<sup>70</sup> The Symphony No. 3 also ends on pre-dominant-tonic harmonies; Nielsen entirely leaves out the seventh degree, instead writing a series of IV-I harmonies.

diatonic runs, the central tonality becomes obscured through the use of modality. The most frequently altered scale degree is the seventh, though the sixth and the third are also sometimes flattened, and the third degree is at times left out entirely to further obscure the mode. The high wind polyphony sounds vaguely pastoral due to its orchestration and rhythmic make up with syncopated, dotted, and off-beat rhythms predominating. Yet these passages, entirely made up of formulaic folk-like idioms, are made less folk-like through the use of modal writing, as modality in this case creates tonal ambiguity.

**7** a tempo, tranquillo

The musical score is for measures 78-81 of Nielsen's Symphony No. 3, Movement II. The tempo is 'a tempo, tranquillo'. The score is written for a woodwind section and strings. The woodwinds include Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), English Horn (or. ingl.), Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. (Bb)), and Bassoon (Fg.). The strings are represented by 'or. (F)' and 'Imp.'. The woodwinds play a complex polyphonic texture with various dynamics (mf, mp, p, pp, f) and articulations (accents, slurs). The strings play a rhythmic pattern with dynamic markings (pp, mf, p).

Example 6: Nielsen, *Symphony No. 3*, Movt. II: Figure 7.



One occasionally gets the impression that Nielsen's symphonies are in fact the direct descendants of Brahms's (Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart also having left indelible traces) tinged by a Nordic inflection. This inflection, whether the result of internalised folk traditions or of a less tangible cultural consciousness that may have coloured his perceptions of the world, is hard to define and often problematic. A few aspects of his symphonic writing can convincingly be argued as having such an inflection, most having to do with the works' overall tone or with the images they conjure up for the listener. Nearly all of Nielsen's symphonies suggest a sense of light or space. If one were to pin down ideas that have been drawn on by most turn-of-the-century Northern composers, an awareness of, or a concern with, musical images of light (or dark) and space would be uppermost on the list. Sibelius and Shostakovich, with their dark, often cold, expansive symphonic landscapes, and Vaughan Williams, Svendsen, and Nielsen with their brighter ones, have explored these concepts in their symphonies. As is the case with most of these composers, the musical depictions of light and space in Nielsen's symphonies are associated with the pastoral and have been equated with nationalism. However, evocations of nature and the pastoral need not be inherently nationalistic. Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, Haydn's Symphony No. 104, and Brahms's Second Symphony all contain musical characteristics associated with the pastoral without being labelled nationalistic symphonies. The pastoral, whether achieved through evocations of nature or by making allusions to folk cultures, was a mainstay of German romanticism. Nationalism, as an offshoot of romanticism, could play a role in this without being the symphony's sole function. As a part of the dominant musical discourse, German pastoral music is seen as having universal appeal

despite its nationalistic roots whereas pastoral writing by composers of peripheral countries cannot escape being nationally marked and are therefore primarily of local significance.

Nielsen's pastoral Third Symphony, titled *Sinfonia Espansiva*, is commonly considered to be his most "Danish" symphony. Nielsen wrote the *Espansiva* between 1910 and 1911 and it was premiered shortly after performances of his first nationalistic songs. It was therefore perhaps not coincidental that the premiere of the Third Symphony marked his first major triumph with both critics and the public. Whether or not his *folkelige* writing was responsible for the symphony's unmitigated success remains unclear. Reviews and contemporary literature about Nielsen do not mention the songs, and although they may have helped establish his popular image, this symphony seems to have spoken to the Danish public from the start. It has remained his best loved symphony in Denmark, and its popularity has most likely been the result of the symphony's pastoral nature which has been felt as evoking the Danish landscape.<sup>71</sup> Despite the fact that early biographies and critical articles discussed its pastoral nature without linking it with nationalism, the Third Symphony is now often thought of as a "Danish" symphony.<sup>72</sup> Although it is Danish in the same sense as *Maskarade* is Denmark's national opera—it has a national significance beyond anything Nielsen intended—its appropriation by the public has in some respects imposed a nationalistic function on the symphony.

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<sup>71</sup> It should be noted that the Third Symphony is in fact many people's favourite of Nielsen's symphonies, not only the Danes. The pastoral qualities of this symphony may speak to a much wider audience than a Danish or national one.

<sup>72</sup> Kappel made the connection explicit in his description of the symphony. He wrote: "By a Dane (or a Scandinavian), the context of the first movement of the *Espansiva* is felt quite naturally to be distinctly Nordic. Here Carl Nielsen has succeeded in reproducing Hartmann's tone, though in a new way. The Andante is like a Funen summer day recalled in memory, a day from the master's childhood, breathing sweetness, warmth, mysticism, and peace." Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*, 42.

The second movement of the *Sinfonia expansiva*, an *Andante pastorale*, is generally thought to be the most literal evocation of the Danish landscape in Nielsen's symphonies. Nielsen clearly intended the music to suggest feelings of a pastoral nature. In a letter to his friend Bror Beckman from November of 1910, Nielsen wrote that this movement, which he was in the midst of completing, was "a broad, landscape Andante, quite different from any of [his] earlier works."<sup>73</sup> When the symphony was performed in Holland in 1912, a programme was attached that briefly explained the contents of each movement. The description of the second movement reads:

Andante pastorale describes, as the title suggests, peace and quiet in nature that is only interrupted by the voice of a single bird, or what have you. The composer's idea for the whole movement is the following tripartite:

The landscape:



Voices of nature:



and humans' stirring *feelings* in relation to that:



Towards the end, the landscape-like peace and quiet becomes, as it were, more condensed (E flat Major) and one hears, a long way off, human voices, first a man's and then a woman's, that again disappear as the movement ends in a perfect, still trance.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Irmelin Eggert Møller og Torben Meyer, *Carl Nielsens breve i udvalg og med kommentarer*, (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1954), 111. Letter from November 1910.

<sup>74</sup> Reproduced in Danish in John Fellow, *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid: artikler, foredrag, interviews, presseindlæg, værknoter og manuskripter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1999), 162-4.

The second movement of Nielsen's Third Symphony contains numerous elements associated with the pastoral in music: pedal tones, dotted and off-beat rhythms, bucolic improvisatory wind passages, and expansive modal melodies over open-fifth harmonies. All of these elements come together in the twenty-nine measure passage beginning halfway through the movement. This section is uncharacteristically diatonic and remains in E flat throughout, with only the briefest hints of modality. The modal inflection, achieved through the occasional flattened seventh scale degree, does not obscure tonality as it does elsewhere in the movement. Rather, it adds to the calm pastoral sound produced by an arpeggiated wind theme over horn-fifths and pedal tones, combined with a meandering, at times syncopated melody in the violins that rotates around the tonic and fifth of E flat. Midway through this section, soprano and baritone solo voices enter with a languorous, wordless melody that again outlines E flat/B flat.<sup>75</sup> As tonality and rhythm are brought to near stasis, a feeling of endless time and space is evoked as if Nielsen were indeed creating a musical representation of rural Denmark.

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<sup>75</sup> As David Fanning noted, the voice parts of the second movement were originally set to the text "All thoughts disappear. Ah! All thoughts disappear[,] I lie beneath the sky," but were removed prior to publication. Quoted in Grimley, *Musical Constructions of Nationalism*, 135.

**8** Tempo I, ma molto tranquillo

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Fl. *mp espressivo*

Ob. *mp espressivo*

(Bb) *mp espressivo*

Fg. *mp espressivo*

κ. (F) *ppp*

rb.t. *ppp*

rb.b. *ppp*

Tb. *ppp*

imp. *pp*

solo

r. solo *pp*

Tempo I, ma molto tranquillo

con sord. *mp*

con sord. *mp*

Va. *pp*

Vc. *pp*

Cb. *pp*

F muta in Eb

A

Example 7: Nielsen, *Symphony No. 3*, Movt II: Figure 8.

Nielsen's stand on the issue of nationalism in art music makes it difficult to discern whether or not he was consciously appealing to the Danish public in creating musical depictions of nature. On the one hand, he was primarily interested in modern art and against creating specifically nationalistic art. On the other, as he was familiar with the body of works from the so-called "Golden Age" of Danish painting that makes use of the pastoral for nationalistic purposes, he could have created musical depictions of the pastoral in his symphonies with a similar intent. One of the earliest cultural manifestations of nationalism that emerged in Denmark was the development of a Danish school of painting. Many Scandinavian artists had been educated at French art schools in the early nineteenth century during a period of intense nationalism which encouraged "return-to-the-folk" attitudes. When Scandinavian painters returned home, they became interested in "the distinct and separate qualities of Scandinavia [including] special conditions of light, topography, and physiognomy that characterized their Northern homelands."<sup>76</sup> Danish painting became intensely nationalistic in tone and subject matter, depicting the flat open spaces and undulating hills of the Danish landscape, accompanied by rustic cottages, farmers, and fishermen bathed in a warm, evening summer light that gives everything a sweet nostalgic glow and wholesome ambiance. These paintings were created with the intent of producing a distinct body of national works that would be recognised as such by the Danish public. Now referred to as the Golden Age, this was the first time Danes had painted specifically Danish subjects, and it was instrumental in strengthening pre-existing ties between the Danish

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<sup>76</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 21. Groups of painters gathered to capture this Scandinavian landscape on canvas. One of the best known was the "Skagen" group which formed around the small village of Skagen on the Northern tip of Jutland in Denmark. These artists painted pre-industrial folk-life of fisherman and their families. Varnedoe, 23.

landscape and a national collective identity. Nielsen's pastoral orchestral writing, often evoking similar images of landscape and light, might consciously have been written for a similar audience and for the same reasons.

Another possibility is that Nielsen's musical depictions of nature arose from his deep attachment to the land but were not intended as references to Danish nationalism. Nielsen's love of nature, of animals, and of the Danish landscape is undisputed and well documented. Throughout the 1910s Nielsen looked back to the simple and happy times of his youth in the quiet countryside of Funen. Through his letters, essays, and memoirs of his childhood, one is made aware of the deep reverence he felt for the island's rustic and pastoral countryside and its simple, hardworking people. He loved to travel, and at one time even contemplated leaving Denmark to live with his wife in Germany to improve his career prospects, but he became progressively nostalgic about his childhood and increasingly attached to the Danish countryside as he grew older. In 1922, at the prompting of his daughter, Nielsen wrote a memoir of his peasant childhood in Funen. Around the same time, he published a short essay entitled "The Song of Funen" in which he sentimentally described the sounds of his beloved island, writing:

Some laugh at the dialect of Funen, but they have no ear for its matchless song....Everything in Funen is different from the rest of the world, and whoever takes the trouble to listen will know. The bees hum in a way of their own with a special Funen accent, and when the horse whinnies and the red cows low, why, anybody can hear that it's different from anywhere else. It is a lilting Funen that the throstle flutes, and the laughter of the blackbird as it slips under the lilac bushes is an imitation of the starling's whims, themselves an echo of the enchanting chuckles of the Funen girls when they jest and laugh in the gardens behind the clipped hedges. The bells ring and the cocks crow in Funen dialect, and a joyous symphony issues from the birds' nests every time the mother bird feeds her young. The stillness sings

the same tune, too, and even the trees dream and talk in their sleep  
with a Funen lilt.<sup>77</sup>

Although the Third Symphony was written considerably earlier than his essay and childhood memoir, similar feelings of nostalgia could have become embedded in his symphony. Alternately, his love for nature and the pastoral may have been musically depicted in the *Espansiva* without his intending the symphony to have nationalistic overtones. It is likely that critics looking back on his symphonies have been influenced in their reading of his music by the childhood memoirs he wrote at the end of his life and may have exaggerated the musical associations with nationalism. The fact that the symphony that followed the publication of *My Childhood in Funen*, Symphony No. 6, was his most modern and least pastoral might indicate a less direct correlation between his writings and his music.

Nielsen leaves us in no doubt that the second movement of the Third Symphony was in some ways an evocation of nature, but what is less clear is whether he intended to convey a specifically Danish landscape in order to create a national sound. There is no direct proof that Nielsen at any time wanted to create a musical image of the Danish landscape in order to appeal to the public; his statements about nationalism in music were in general contradictory. In one interview for *Politiken* in 1906, Nielsen briefly addressed the issue of nationalism in song-writing. He claimed that the Danes could not help but recognise certain melodic turns and would naturally associate them with Danish poetry and Danish landscape painting while “a foreigner, who does not know [their]

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<sup>77</sup> Carl Nielsen, *Living Music*, Translated by Reginald Spink (Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen, 1968), 71-72. *den Fynske Sang* written June 1925. John Fellow: *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, 345.



poetry, [their] nature, or [their] history, will of course not make these associations.”<sup>78</sup>

He also said that “National character must come of its own accord”; “the national element...should warm, colour, or breathe spirit into the art, but it must not be done consciously.”<sup>79</sup> Yet he felt that writing nationalistic music was “foreign” and “dangerous” for all art. In the same *Politiken* article, he spoke caustically of how Danish nationalistic music is composed: “One takes an andantino in six-eight time, some minor mode, and some Danish pear stew that has stood overnight: stir them together well, set it over the fire and let it cook for around twenty minutes.”<sup>80</sup> Nielsen seems to have wanted to appeal to his public while at the same time keeping a distance from “cheap” patriotic music. In an interview late in life, Nielsen was explicit in his antipathy towards overtly nationalistic music. In 1925, the year he wrote his most “modern” symphony and the year he was celebrated as Denmark’s national composer, Nielsen stated that “There is nothing that destroys art more than nationalism or formal religion. Patriotism is the scoundrel’s last resort, and it is impossible to make national music to order. If one attempts it, one is not an artist but a patch tailor.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Quote in Ludvig Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen: En Musikografi* (Odense: Fyns Boghandels Forlag, 1949), 134. Original article, *Politiken* 14.6.1906.

<sup>79</sup> Quote in Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen: En Musikografi*, 134.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Finn Mathiassen, *Livet, musiken og samfundet*, 70. *Politiken* 14.6.1906. Dolleris seems to have wanted to paint a clearer picture of Nielsen’s views on nationalistic music since he left out this section of the interview. Mathiassen, on the contrary, left out what Dolleris included and instead added a later quotation of Nielsen’s in which he speaks of nationalism being the scoundrel’s last resort.

<sup>81</sup> Mathiassen, *Livet, musiken og samfundet*, 70. Nielsen was probably referring to Samuel Johnson’s quotation “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” 7 April, 1775.

## **Part 2: Nielsen's Reception as a National Composer**

### **Denmark's National Composer**

The perception of Nielsen as a nationalistic composer is in large part the outcome of having been labelled Denmark's national composer. Yet what Nielsen is most highly treasured for in Danish popular culture is not the same as what he is valued for within musical circles or outside Denmark, nor is it only the result of his musical activities. While Nielsen is best known outside of Denmark for his symphonies and concertos, the Danes are most familiar with his songs. It would not be an exaggeration to say that virtually all Danes have sung Nielsen's songs at some point in their life, though many do not realise that they were written by Nielsen. His songs have been the mainstay of the folk high school song books for three generations and have become ingrained in the popular psyche of Denmark. In consequence, he has become something of a national cultural hero with a reputation similar to Denmark's chief icon, Hans Christian Andersen. Nielsen's early biographers, all of whom were acquaintances or former students, admired him as much for his song writing as for his large-scale works. Although more space is usually devoted to discussions of his art music, his songs tend to be treated with a certain sentimental reverence and devotion while his "difficult" works are discussed with respect and perhaps awe, but also more critically. One biographer, Finn Mathiassen, describes how he fell in love with Nielsen through Nielsen's songs, many of which "became a part of himself." He writes, quoting a saying attached to the

Danish poet Jeppe Aakjærs, that the Danes “take Carl Nielsen’s music as [their] own ‘without thought, uncritically, but as a rich gift from the Danish soil’s beloved son’.”<sup>82</sup>

While Nielsen is well known and highly valued within Denmark for his contribution to the folk song tradition, his image as an ideal Dane is an important part of what he stands for in Denmark. In *The Songs of Carl Nielsen*, Reynolds identifies some of the common Danish virtues that resurface in his songs’ poetry. These include characteristics such as “tradition, loyalty (to country rather than monarchy), patience and constancy (usually in the face of adversity), morality, and freedom.” The idealised Dane is hard working but has “a sense of humour, [is] in proximity to nature, and [is] among a community of plain, decent people.”<sup>83</sup> In biographies, Nielsen is almost always portrayed as the quintessential Dane: he is described as having had a great sense of humour, as having been personable, hard working, honest, and close to nature. He was also seen as a preserver of Danish traditions through his song writing. In *Carl Nielsen—Danskeren*, Jørgen Jensen quotes friends and relatives who spoke of Nielsen’s unquenchable optimism, friendliness, and irrepressible sense of humour. While there is no reason to doubt that Nielsen’s personality or disposition fit Danish ideals, he did not always qualify as the perfect Dane in his own lifetime. As many Danes know but have tacitly agreed not to discuss, Nielsen was not faithful to his wife during the many months she worked abroad, and fathered at least two children by other women. He was also nonconformist in his art music career, breaking with Danish musical conventions and institutions. Yet this has been either downplayed or ignored and he is now upheld

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<sup>82</sup> Mathiassen, *Livet, musiken og samfundet*, 7.

<sup>83</sup> Reynolds, *The Songs of Carl Nielsen*, 153.

as the quintessential diligent, hard-working, genial Dane of peasant origins who brought music into the homes of all Danes.

The portrayal of Nielsen as a Danish musical hero is all the more persuasive for his “rags to riches” life story. Most Danish and some English articles about Nielsen begin with an overview of his childhood, and as biographical references are often drawn from Nielsen’s memoir, *My Childhood in Funen*, they have perpetuated the rose-tinted view of the childhood he romanticised in his sixties. Parallels are frequently drawn with the life and stories of Hans Christian Andersen, which, though based in truth, helps give his life a fairy-tale aspect. The Danish musicologist Knud Jeppesen made this explicit in “Carl Nielsen: A Danish Composer” by describing Nielsen as “a man to whom things happened [;] his life was a fairy tale no less than that of Hans Andersen.”<sup>84</sup> Nielsen’s upbringing did differ markedly from Danish composers of his time. While most, if not all, grew up in Copenhagen surrounded by the cultural amenities of the cosmopolitan capital, Nielsen grew up in the countryside. He was born the seventh of twelve children into rural poverty on the island of Funen and, aside from violin lessons, had little formal music training until he entered the Royal Conservatory in Copenhagen at the age of eighteen.<sup>85</sup> As a youth, Nielsen was apprenticed to a greengrocer in hopes of finding stable employment but the grocer soon went bankrupt. Nielsen’s father, hearing about auditions for the Odense military band, convinced Nielsen to try out and gave him lessons on the cornet. Against all odds Nielsen won the job, and at the age of fourteen, he joined the band playing cornet and trombone.<sup>86</sup> He remained in Odense for four years, during which time he kept up the violin and wrote his Mozart-influenced violin

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<sup>84</sup> Knud Jeppesen, “Carl Nielsen: A Danish Composer,” *The Music Review* 7/3 (Aug 1946), 170.

<sup>85</sup> Nielsen, *My Childhood*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 21.

sonata and first string quartet.<sup>87</sup> Thus, by the time he tried out for the Royal Conservatory, he had in fact received a basic, if eclectic, training in music. Nielsen realised that he wanted to be a musician, and in 1884 he left his well-paid band job against his father's wishes to study at the Royal Conservatory in Copenhagen. Early in his career, Nielsen was appointed to a seat in the second violin section of the Royal Theatre Orchestra in Copenhagen, a position he retained for nearly twenty years for financial reasons. He was by no means immediately successful either as a musician or as a composer. He was never able to make a living through composing alone and he was at times highly criticised by his peers for his conducting skills and compositions. However, by the end of his life, he had gained the reputation for being the shepherd boy who became Denmark's national composer.

In 1925, Nielsen's sixtieth birthday, always an important one in Danish culture, was made a national holiday and celebrated with as much pomp as was H. C. Andersen's. In an essay in honour of Nielsen's centenary, Thorvald Nielsen described the day of Nielsen's sixtieth birthday: "Fewer or none of Denmark's great sons have been celebrated in such a grandiose manner—except Hans Christian Andersen, perhaps. The King made him a Knight Commander of the Order of the Danebrog [the Danish flag], and all day long presents and greetings kept pouring in from far and near."<sup>88</sup> A concert of Nielsen's works was performed by the orchestra at Tivoli in the evening, followed by a large banquet to which thousands turned up to cheer him on. In his speech to the public, Nielsen told them of his mother's encouraging words when he was

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<sup>87</sup> Nielsen also continued to play the violin, getting lessons during occasional visits home. Nielsen, *My Childhood*, 129.

<sup>88</sup> Thorvald Nielsen, in Balzer, *Carl Nielsen: Centenary Essays*, 15.

young: that he should never forget that Hans Christian Andersen had been poor like himself.<sup>89</sup>

Related to the perception of Nielsen as the musical shepherd-boy is the popular myth that Nielsen was a self-taught musical genius born to impoverished peasants. Although there is some truth to this, his childhood story has been played up for public consumption. Both of his parents were in fact musical and he descended from a line of professional and semi-professional musicians. Lawson notes that Nielsen's parents were usually described as being the offspring of peasants but his mother was in reality the daughter of a wealthy family of sea captains near Odense.<sup>90</sup> Though she was not herself a musician, her half brother was an organist, and she is described in Nielsen's memoirs as having sung folk songs around the house with a clear if small voice. He credits her for much of his talent but his father and great uncle were also musicians. Nielsen's father, Niels, a house painter by profession, was famous around the island of Funen for his fiddling and cornet playing. He often played for country festivities and was so popular that people would arrange their events to accommodate him.<sup>91</sup> He wrote a few small compositions, one of which Nielsen later arranged. Niels's uncle, another reputed composer and performer of popular music, was famous for his ability to notate music played by travelling dance bands, his own being too poor to buy new music.<sup>92</sup> Nielsen's father also belonged to a classical music society called Braga made up of teachers and amateur musicians from all around Funen who gathered on occasion to play a combination of waltzes and polkas and some of the smaller works of the

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<sup>89</sup> Thorvald Nielsen, in Balzer, *Carl Nielsen: Centenary Essays*, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 16.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 21.

Viennese classical composers, namely overtures and movements by Haydn and Mozart.<sup>93</sup> Nielsen often came to rehearsals and at times was allowed to participate. To the young Carl Nielsen, who was not exposed to the late nineteenth century works being played in urban centres, these classical works were very influential in his developing love and respect for art music and would later be models for his first teenage compositions.<sup>94</sup>

The various myths and embellishments that surround Nielsen's biography form a significant part of his position as a national figurehead. The image of Nielsen as a peasant boy who succeeds against all odds was, and to some extent still is, symbolic of Denmark's ideals, both for itself as a country and for its people. These ideals resonated with the Danish public, as well as with the artistic community which integrated them into their work. It was especially apparent in literature, one of the most prevalent themes of the time being the Aladdin motif. This theme, based on the German romantic philosophies of Friedrich Schelling's, centred around the idea that people could be chosen by God or by nature to achieve greatness and that none could stop them even if they seemed ill-suited for heroism. This could be applied both to individuals and to the nation.<sup>95</sup> The popularity of this topic was likely the result of the social and political situation in Denmark after the 1864 war. In the years following Denmark's loss of territory and reduction of political power, Danish nationalism often centred around the idea that the poor or the weak could triumph over all. This, combined with Grundtvig's encouragement of educational and cultural activity in peasant communities, resulted in

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<sup>93</sup> Nielsen, *My Childhood*, 53.

<sup>94</sup> Jørgen I. Jensen, "Carl Nielsen: Artistic Milieu and Tradition: Cultural—Historical Perspectives," in *The Nielsen Companion*, ed Mina Miller (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994), 66-67.

<sup>95</sup> Glyn Jones, *Denmark: A Modern History* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1986), 52-3.

deeply held beliefs in the power of the “little Dane.”<sup>96</sup> People such as Nielsen and H.C. Andersen, both of whom had peasant roots and became cultural icons, were therefore important symbols for Danish nationalism as their stories provided a visible confirmation of these principles.

Nielsen was not labelled Denmark’s national composer overnight. It took many years for both the public and the musical establishment to accept his music and he was initially considered by his peers to be something of a rebel. Critics objected to his compositions on the grounds that they were too modern and not in the tradition of Weyse’s ballads or Gade’s symphonies. The public, which was either ambivalent or put off by the unfamiliar sounds of his work, was at times simply unresponsive. While Nielsen may not seem avant-garde in the same way Schoenberg or Stravinsky were on the European continent, in Denmark his music was perceived as ground-breaking. Many contemporary reviews of his works complained of rampant dissonance, strange harmonies, and incomprehensible melodies. In a country that had heard few contemporary works, Nielsen’s music was a shock. His early instrumental works were chastised for being too modern and rebellious, and he was often reproached for standing out. Although Nielsen’s early songs were harmonically less adventurous than his large-scale works, even these were at first attacked by critics. Reactions shifted fairly abruptly around the time he began composing his *folkelige* songs and resulted in an acceptance of his symphonies, though these grew increasingly inaccessible in almost direct proportion to the increased accessibility of his songs.

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<sup>96</sup> Grundtvig’s term. Interestingly, Grundtvig’s theories have been proven true. The Danes have one of the highest literacy rates in the world and one of the highest ratios of artists and writers to general population, an unusually high percentage of whom grew up in rural communities.



## Nielsen's Critical Reception

The critical reception of Nielsen's works throughout his lifetime was contradictory, even paradoxical, and did not always coincide with his popular reception. His earliest instrumental work, *Little Suite*, written shortly after his graduation from the conservatory and clearly reminiscent of the Viennese classics that inspired them, caused little commotion amongst critics. Many spoke enthusiastically of the young Nielsen as a rising talent, commending him for his sense of form and orchestration. The public was equally enthusiastic, yet musicians on the whole were less keen. Many of his colleagues in the orchestra were likely jealous of his early success—he was twenty-two at the time and was a mere rank-and-file player in the second violin section—while some established musicians were critical of the direction in which his compositions were going.<sup>97</sup>

Another split in reception emerged after the premieres of Nielsen's early song collections, this time between critics and the public. Nielsen's first two song collections, Op. 6 and Op. 10, were performed in 1892 and 1898 respectively. They were almost all simple, often strophic, accessible songs which sound archaic when compared to lieder by contemporary continental European composers. Some did, however, have interesting harmonic traits that point towards Nielsen's later style. They were fairly well received by their initial audiences and remained well-liked by the public after publication. However, reviewers were less than enthusiastic. Danish critics, brought up on the sentimental romances of Weyse's generation, were suspicious of Nielsen's songs. One of the more negative reviews of Nielsen's Op. 6 songs reads: "Carl Nielsen seems with diligence to avoid all that sounds natural...he insists on

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<sup>97</sup> Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 45.

composing differently from everyone else.” It also accuses Nielsen of writing “gnarled harmonies and laboured modulations that stifle the effect.”<sup>98</sup> By far the harshest reviews were written by a well established and influential Danish critic, Charles Kjerulf, who wrote for one of the country’s most widely circulated and respected dailies. In his review of the premiere of Nielsen’s Op. 10 songs, Kjerulf admonishes Nielsen for having “a sickly craving for originality,” adding that his songs were “neither song nor music but a random experiment with notes.”<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, one of the simplest of the six, *Sang bag ploven* [Song behind the plough], a catchy, plodding tune about working peasants, soon became a popular hit with the public.<sup>100</sup> The split between the popular and critical reception of his work that developed early in Nielsen’s career continued for nearly twenty years and was only resolved after the premiere of his Third Symphony.

Nielsen’s most frequently and fervently denounced works were invariably his piano and chamber pieces, the ever-popular wind quintet aside. His first violin sonata, premiered in 1896, received particularly harsh reviews from the press. Angul Hammerich wrote that “with the best will in the world, it was impossible to understand anything that the work had to say.”<sup>101</sup> Charles Kjerulf found the work “strange and dislocated...a futile experiment” and again accused Nielsen of “clearly ha[ving] a morbid craving to compose differently and in a more modern manner than everyone else.”<sup>102</sup> The reviewer initialled R.H. agreed with prevailing views of Nielsen, writing: “Fear of not being sufficiently interesting leads Mr. Nielsen away from natural

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<sup>98</sup> R.H. review in *Dannebrog* (11.6.93). Quoted in Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen: En Musikografi*, 29. I have been unable to identify R.H.

<sup>99</sup> Ch. K. [Charles Kjerulf] in *Politiken* (7.2.97). Quoted in Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen*, 37.

<sup>100</sup> Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 66.

<sup>101</sup> A.H. [Angul Hammerich] *Nat.* (17.1.96). Original quotation in Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen*, 41.

<sup>102</sup> Ch. K. *Politiken* (4.2.96). Originals quoted in Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen*, 41.

paths.”<sup>103</sup> Others remarked on the work’s lack of beauty, jarring sounds, and artificial, troubled lines. This sonata was in all fairness Nielsen’s most modern-sounding composition to date and would not have been accessible for late nineteenth-century Danish audiences. Some of these early descriptions of the work are apt: the sonata is full of unsettled harmonies and constantly changing, often twisted modulations that refuse to be resolved. Many of the melodic and rhythmic quirks of Nielsen’s later style are also present, the most recognisable being melodic oscillations and syncopated or shifting rhythms, though never without an overriding sense of lyricism. It is therefore not surprising that this work, which broke so entirely with the tonal and harmonic idioms the Danes were used to, sent most critics into spasms.

Fanning and Grimley have noted that Nielsen’s symphonies were often spared some of the more cutting criticism that his smaller works were subjected to. They speculate that this may have been due to a greater willingness to accept experimentation in large-scale compositions as past composers had set a precedent for stylistic and technical innovations in such genres.<sup>104</sup> Nielsen’s First Symphony was premiered in March 1894 at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen under Svendsen’s baton while Nielsen played in his usual position with the second violins. The audience included the King and Queen along with other members of the Royal family, as well as a number of important Scandinavian musicians.<sup>105</sup> It was a resounding popular success; the audience was enthusiastic and Nielsen was called forward to take a bow with Svendsen several

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<sup>103</sup> R.H. *Dannebrog* (16.1.96). Original quoted in Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen*, 41.

<sup>104</sup> Grimley, “Tonality, Clarity, Strength: Archaism and Acculturation in the Piano Works of Carl Nielsen” (University of Surrey, 2002, unpublished), 2.

<sup>105</sup> Grieg was in the audience and later wrote an enthusiastic letter of congratulations to Nielsen.

times.<sup>106</sup> From his description of the 1896 German premiere of the First Symphony in a letter home to his wife, Nielsen was clearly satisfied by the reception of his symphony:

The evening went really well...and I had much success with the audience, as you may know from the telegram that was sent to Hansen for the benefit of the newspapers. But it was not the tremendous success that it was in Copenhagen. After the first movement, strong applause; after the Andante, so much strong applause that I had to appear before the audience three or four times to bow. After the third movement, three times and at the end I was called back most vigorously after the Finale ... again I find that there is so much life and movement in it that I think the piece really does possess some spark. ...Everyone here says that it was a *grosser schöne Erfolg* [great, beautiful success].<sup>107</sup>

The Danish press was, for the most part, sympathetic in their reviews. Many wrote of a promising young talent and praised his technical abilities as an orchestral composer.<sup>108</sup> However Nielsen was once again criticised for originality. Kjerulf, continuing what Lawson describes as a life-long battle with Nielsen in *Politiken*,<sup>109</sup> wrote a mixed review. He described this first symphony, which bears unmistakable traces of Brahms and Svendsen, as being “a work from which there already emerges a streak of talent and which already promises a storm of genius. Turbulent and with recklessness in its harmonies and modulations, but altogether so wonderfully innocent and unaware, like a child playing with dynamite.”<sup>110</sup> Nielsen’s initial reception in Germany was less divided but the Germans were also less enthusiastic about his music

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<sup>106</sup> Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 68.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>108</sup> The difference in attitude towards Nielsen’s large and small-scale compositions is striking here. The First Symphony was written between the two early song collections and shortly before the much criticised violin sonata. Yet the new or innovative aspects of Nielsen’s composition technique—especially as regards his use of harmony—were no less present in the symphony than in these other works.

<sup>109</sup> Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 68.

<sup>110</sup> Kjerulf in *Bladet* (15.3.94). Quoted in Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen*, 33. Lawson has a different take on this review. He thinks it is negative, but only quotes a section that reads “unsettled and violent in its harmonies and modulations...as if one is witnessing a child playing with dynamite.” Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 68. Kjerulf was not always opposed to new music. His review of Stravinsky’s 1924 performance in Copenhagen was very enthusiastic. Svend Ravnkilde, “Stravinsky i København,” *Dansk musiktidsskrift*, 56/6 (1981-2), 261.

on the whole and all but lost interest after Nielsen's death. Interestingly, outside of Denmark, Nielsen's most highly appreciated quality was his individuality. The First Symphony was well received when it was performed in Dresden two years after its premiere in Copenhagen. The critic Georg Riemenschneider, praised it for its individuality, writing that "from the first to the last note, [it was] outstandingly original, with no echoes of other people's work. Certain and sound, this sterling artist treads his own path."<sup>111</sup>

Reviews of Nielsen's early songs and chamber works point to a problem common in Scandinavia from which Nielsen was not spared. The theme that returns most frequently in reviews is that of Nielsen having a "morbid craving for originality," and a strange desire to be different.<sup>112</sup> Anne-Marie Reynolds discusses this prevalent Scandinavian attitude towards individualism, writing that there was and still is immense pressure for Danes to conform and that those who stood out were discouraged and censured. This arose in part out of Grundtvig's teachings which centred around a belief that all Danes (though he was most concerned with the status of the peasants) were equal and could achieve their goals given the same educational opportunities as youth. There is a common saying in Denmark that reflects this attitude: Few have a lot and fewer have little. While these socialist values were admirable in many ways, taken to an extreme they created a mentality that the Scandinavians have dubbed *Janteloven*. The term *Janteloven* [the laws of Jante] refers to a fictitious town in a novel by the Norwegian/Danish author Aksel Sandemose in which the town's first (of ten) commandments is "Thou shalt not believe thou art something"; it has come to describe

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<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 74.

<sup>112</sup> "A morbid [or sickly] craving for originality" were Kjerulf's words, but other reviewers have expressed similar views including R.H., and Angul Hammerich.

the tendency of the Scandinavians to want everyone to conform.<sup>113</sup> At its extreme, this resulted in a desire for no one to stand out or be better than another. Nielsen suffered on account of this attitude during his lifetime, being frowned upon for the originality of his work and for being successful. This mind-set remains present to this day and may partially account for the lack of promotion of Danish composers outside Denmark. Nielsen is still closely guarded by Danish musicologists who wish to keep him and his music to themselves. Reynolds notes that these attitudes may have been partially responsible for Nielsen's shift in 1914 to a simpler style of song written for the folk.<sup>114</sup> Once he began writing these songs, he no longer faced the same kind of criticism, becoming instead a national figure.

Nielsen did not receive unanimous critical acclaim for his art music compositions until 1911 with the first performance of his Third Symphony, the *Sinfonia espansiva*. As seen previously, it is likely that his warm popular reception was due to the *folkelige* songs that he had begun to compose shortly before its performance. Critics, especially those who had for many years openly attacked Nielsen's compositional style, were in essence forced by the public to accept this musical enigma who was, for the Danes, at once avant-garde and backward-looking. Over the fifteen years separating the *Espansiva*'s premiere and Nielsen's sixtieth birthday, Nielsen composed over one hundred popular songs to Danish texts, including a first Danish Songbook.<sup>115</sup> During this time his art music became increasingly less accessible for the general public, yet he received less criticism for it than he had prior to 1910. There was a noticeable shift in the critical reaction towards all of his works after the Third

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<sup>113</sup> Reynolds, *The Songs of Carl Nielsen*, 7.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>115</sup> His songs were also later included in other Danish Songbooks. Lawson, *Carl Nielsen*, 222-227.

Symphony, making it seem as though critics had come to an agreement to support their new-found national composer. Danish musicologist Jørgen Jensen notes a contradiction between Nielsen's role as "national composer" and the apparent inaccessibility of his large-scale works. This contradiction remained unresolved throughout Nielsen's lifetime even as he became a household name.<sup>116</sup>

Nielsen's last three symphonies grew increasingly modern, yet they received little criticism either from the Danish press or public. In discussing Nielsen's Fourth and Fifth symphonies, Fanning wrote, "it is somewhat ironic that Scandinavian critics who found a vein of wilful experimentation in his earlier works were bowled over by these apparently far more challenging masterpieces."<sup>117</sup> This was likely due to his having won over the Danish people through his song-writing, as his reception elsewhere in Scandinavia indicates that audiences had not suddenly become accustomed to modern music. The reception of his Fifth Symphony is a case in point. It was composed between 1920 and 1921, during which time he also composed a collection of songs titled *Twenty Popular Songs*. This symphony, often described by musicologists as his masterpiece, was arguably his most modern-sounding work to date. The Danish press, by that time supportive of Nielsen's work, was enthusiastic, even gushing in their praise of the symphony.<sup>118</sup> However, in Sweden, where the public had not been won over by Nielsen's national songs, reaction was divided. The work was performed in Stockholm on January 20, 1924 in conjunction with a series of concerts of Northern music. It was

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<sup>116</sup> Grimley, *Nielsen, Nationalism, and the Danish Musical Style*, 37.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Grimley, "Tonality, Clarity, Strength", 15.

<sup>118</sup> Reviews mention fantastic, beautiful sounds, wonderful dream-like qualities, and feelings of great depth. One of the more poetic reviews reads: "So follows the wonderful, beautiful Andante—one is in the wide open spaces, the view over the peak, increasingly high, a mighty ascent, no, an eagle's flight with outstretched wings toward heaven, the everlasting." (*Nat.* no date), quoted in Dolleris, *Carl Nielsen*, 261.

played after a couple of works by earlier nineteenth-century composers and therefore probably appeared all the more dramatic. Despite the concert series having previously presented other contemporary works by Northern composers, Nielsen's symphony caused an uproar when first performed there and occasioned something of a controversy afterwards. The review that followed two days later described events:

The distance from the previous generation of composers was truly extraordinary. Shortly after, the sixty-year-old composer revealed here so advanced a modernity, that the impression became too powerful for a large part of the public. In the middle of the first part with their crashing drums and 'cacophonous' effects, a real panic broke out. Nearly one quarter of the audience rushed for the exit with horror and rage painted on their faces, and those who remained in their places began to 'hiss down' the spectacle, whereas the conductor set the orchestra up to the outermost degree of force. The whole episode underlined the humorous burlesque element in the symphony in a way that Carl Nielsen surely never dreamed of. His depiction of modern life with its confusion, hatred, and fighting, all the uncontrolled cries of suffering and ignorance—and behind it all the march drummer's hard rhythm as the only discipline—obtained, as the audience fled, a touch of almost diabolical humour.<sup>119</sup>

This was clearly not a work designed to please the general public. Yet the Danes, having by that time placed Nielsen on a pedestal as their national composer, were able or willing to accept the individuality and modernity of his new work.

### **Musicological Reception**

In the years following his death in 1931, Nielsen's compositions came to epitomise Danish music. After struggling to establish a place in the musical world of Copenhagen, Nielsen had become the head of the musical establishment in Copenhagen. His compositional style had become *the* Danish musical style and his influence on the

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<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Jensen, *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, 304-305. The Fifth Symphony was first performed in Copenhagen January 24, 1922.



subsequent generation of Danish composers was overwhelming. Danish music history books reflect this, delineating Danish music history in categories headed “Before Carl Nielsen,” “Carl Nielsen,” and “The Generation after Carl Nielsen.”<sup>120</sup>

Despite Nielsen being revered by the public and musical establishment of Copenhagen, in-depth musicological studies of his music were slow to appear. A few articles had emerged during his career, and Denmark’s two main music journals, *Musik: Tidsskrift for tonekunst* and *Dansk Musiktidsskrift*, had each published a special issue devoted to his music the year of his sixtieth birthday.<sup>121</sup> In the year following his death, reminiscences of friends and colleagues, as well as a few scholarly articles, were published in an issue of *Dansk Musiktidsskrift* devoted entirely to Nielsen.<sup>122</sup> However, between his death and his centenary in 1965, little was written about him and no significant musicological studies were published, either in English or in Danish. What did appear were biographies and a first edition of Nielsen’s letters. His first three biographies were all written by acquaintances, and the first editions of his journals and letters were heavily edited by his friend and his daughter. This naturally led to a slightly skewed depiction of his personality and music, and meant that early writings were often lacking in critical distance from their subject. The centenary of Nielsen’s birth in 1965 instigated a brief frenzy of Danish musicological research, some of which was translated into English.<sup>123</sup> Although a few short articles appeared in both Danish and English journals throughout the forties and fifties, and one significant study of Nielsen’s

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<sup>120</sup> Kai Åge Bruun, *Dansk musiks historie: fra Holberg-tiden til Carl Nielsen, ii: Komponister og vaerker fra J.P.E. Hartmann til Carl Nielsen* (Copenhagen: Vinten, 1969); Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*; Horton, *Scandinavian Music*.

<sup>121</sup> Mina Miller, Introduction to *The Nielsen Companion*, (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>122</sup> *Dansk Musiktidsskrift*, 7 (January 1932).

<sup>123</sup> The most important of these was a collection of sentimental reminiscences of the man with some discussion of his music published in Jurgen Balzer, *Carl Nielsen: Centenary Essays* (London: Dobson, 1966).

symphonies was written by the British composer and musicologist Robert Simpson in 1952, little in-depth research was produced before the 1990s.<sup>124</sup> Mina Miller's publication of a *Guide to Nielsen Research* in 1987 renewed interest in Nielsen studies and a number of English-language works about his music appeared through the 1990s. Danish musicology has remained focused on biographical studies and on the collection of primary materials; musicologists at the Danish Royal Library have issued a new Carl Nielsen Edition and are currently editing Nielsen's complete letters, due to be published over the coming few years.<sup>125</sup>

For the most part, Danish biographies and critical essays about Nielsen and his music examine his art music independently of his songs. This split between his *folkelige* writing and his art music, both of which are treated with nearly equal importance, allow his parallel compositional careers to be discussed as separate entities with different functions, audiences, and approaches to composition. In this way, Nielsen's songs can be analysed in the context of his being Denmark's national composer without it imposing on critiques of his more "universally" oriented art music. This has remained true of more recent Danish research into Nielsen's music, while English-language studies have focused almost exclusively on his large-scale art music without necessarily eliminating the national label.

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<sup>124</sup> Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist* (London: J.M.Dent, 1952). A new collection of Nielsen's letters was published in 1983, and a new Danish biography appeared three years later by the Dane Finn Mathiassen. A couple of dissertations on Nielsen's symphonies were also written, both of which focus entirely on tonal structure: Dean Clarke Wilson, *An Analytical and Statistical Study of the Harmony in Carl Nielsen's Six Symphonies* (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1967), and William Isaac Jones, *A Study of Tonality in the Symphonies of Carl Nielsen* (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1973).

<sup>125</sup> The Edition is nearing completion and the first volume of letters is set to be published in the coming year.

Although Danish literature about Nielsen is not unanimous in its depiction of his place in music history, one of the most striking aspects of early Danish musicological essays and biographies is how frequently their writers espoused the values and ideals that Nielsen had run up against in his lifetime. The overriding concern for conformity that appeared in so many contemporary critical reviews of Nielsen's music reappeared in new forms and under different guises. While slightly more subtle than reviews of his premieres, many of the critical and biographical writings that appeared over the next few decades continued to censure Nielsen's individuality, either by playing down the originality of his art music or by minimising the appearance of rebelliousness that Nielsen had been accused of displaying in his compositional approach.

The biographies that appeared in the years following Nielsen's death were laudatory in tone, yet their writers often seemed to want Nielsen to "fit in" more than he had during his lifetime. Many references are made to music of the past, and Nielsen is placed within a continuum of musical style. Nielsen's early biographers, Hugo Seligman (1931), Ludvig Dolleris (1949), and to some extent, Torben Meyer and Frede Schandorf Petersen (1947), as well as the later biographer Finn Mathiassen (1986), were all concerned with trying to depict Nielsen as having been forward-looking and original while countering the myth that Nielsen was a musical rebel. They make endless connections between Nielsen's style and that of Germanic composers from Bach and Mozart to Schumann and Brahms. This may have been an expression of an ever-present *Janteloven* way of thinking, or simply the outcome of deeply ingrained beliefs about the character of the Danish people. Kappel summed this up when he wrote that the Danes dislike exaggerations and are moderate in their modes of expression, citing the smooth,

unrevolutionary transition to Nielsen's compositions as proof of this. While this may characterise a stereotyped Danish mentality, Kappel seems unaware that Nielsen's reception in Denmark was anything but smooth and that he was at one time highly criticised for being a musical rebel.<sup>126</sup>

Danish scholarship has also displayed a concern for maintaining Nielsen's iconic status as a peasant-boy composer. While biographical aspects doubtless have an impact on a composer's music, in Nielsen's case, many musicologists have created an unrealistic portrayal of Nielsen's influences by making numerous references to his rural upbringing while rarely taking into account later and equally important events or changes in his life.<sup>127</sup> Nielsen's somewhat romanticised childhood stories have been told repeatedly in articles, critical essays and history textbooks alike. Perhaps more than any other composer, Nielsen's childhood has been made to appear as the single largest influence on his compositional outlook and therefore on the outcome of all his music. This, combined with his well documented love of the land and respect for the common folk, has led to myths about his untrained musical genius. Besides serving the dual nationalistic purpose of demonstrating the strength of the peasants and illustrating Nielsen's connections to folk traditions, the continuous propagation of Nielsen's peasant

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<sup>126</sup> Kappel, *Contemporary Danish Composers*, 17. Many Danes have written about the character of the Danish people; the language, mild climate and open, flat landscape are cited as having influenced this placid, understated frame of mind.

<sup>127</sup> Connected with this is the idea that he was not terribly well educated. Lewis Rowell, writing about Nielsen's peasant roots in an article titled "Carl Nielsen's Homespun Philosophy of Music," examines the parallels between Nielsen's upbringing and his music. Rowell claims that Nielsen was not well versed in philosophy, nor was he especially well read. He writes: "[Nielsen] had obviously read his national classics—Holberg and the treasures of nineteenth-century Danish lyric poetry—in addition to the obligatory masterpieces of Shakespeare, Goethe and Ibsen, but he does not appear to have been much interested in philosophy as such." Rowell, in Miller, *The Nielsen Companion*, 36. However, both biographers and friends have remarked upon Nielsen's interest in philosophy, and his collection of literature was not as sparse as the above would imply. Nielsen had a life-long interest in Plato and kept the *Republic* by his bedside for years. Incidentally, Nielsen's own writings on music in *Levende Musik* seem to have been directly influenced by Plato. Meyer and Petersen, *Carl Nielsen kunstneren og mennesket*, 57-8.

image has exaggerated certain aspects of his personality and compositional style while minimising others.<sup>128</sup> Nielsen left his cottage home at the age of 14, and while it likely had a deep and lasting impact on his musical and philosophical outlook, his 48 years of living in the country's capital and his many travels through continental Europe should be given equal weight.

Musicologists were by no means unanimous in wanting to promote Nielsen as a follower of Scandinavian music traditions. Some preferred to depict him as a pivotal figure in Danish music, reclaiming his reputation as the modernist who brought Danish music into the twentieth century.<sup>129</sup> Nielsen was considered a modern composer during his lifetime and in some ways he was. He was seen as revolutionary for breaking with nineteenth-century Danish watered-down romanticism and was criticised for this apparently rebellious behaviour. While Nielsen would not have labelled himself a modernist or avant-gardist, he did consciously try to pull away from the music he encountered in Copenhagen. He was highly critical of the previous generation of composers, including Gade and Svendsen, who were writing in what Fanning has called a "Leipzig-influenced, soft-core romanticism."<sup>130</sup> He pleaded to get rid of what he described as the "soft, stodgy Danish smoothness" of the last generation in favour of "stronger rhythms, more advanced harmony."<sup>131</sup> His goal was to break away from the conservative attitudes that he felt had caused a musical stagnation in Copenhagen. In

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<sup>128</sup> This is as much a romantic idea as a nationalistic one, the two been inextricably entwined in Denmark as elsewhere in Europe.

<sup>129</sup> One example of this is Jan Maeggård, who, writing in 1953, stated that "Carl Nielsen will, without a doubt, come to stand as the one who laid the foundation of Modernism in Denmark." Jan Maeggård, "Den sene Carl Nielsen," in *Dansk Musiktidsskrift* 4 (1953), 79.

<sup>130</sup> David Fanning, "Progressive Thematicism in Nielsen's Symphonies," in Miller, *The Nielsen Companion*, 170.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted and translated in Grimley, "Archaism and Acculturation in the Piano Works of Carl Nielsen," (University of Surrey, 2002, unpublished), 3.

this he was successful. Since few contemporary works by continental European composers such as Mahler, Debussy, Strauss, or Schoenberg were performed in Copenhagen before the First World War, Nielsen's music sounded strikingly new and "modern" to its first Danish audiences.

Yet it would be difficult to categorise Nielsen solely as a modernist. He was not interested in espousing a given music tradition or system, his individualistic approach to composition being a complex mix of different styles and eras.<sup>132</sup> From Nielsen's writings one gets a contradictory picture of a man who simultaneously wanted to be on the cutting edge of music in Denmark, while denouncing musical experimentation. He was at times ambivalent about, and at other times disliked, the self-conscious modernism which he felt had been espoused by many contemporary continental composers. He is known to have met Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartók between the years 1919 and 1926 and was familiar with some of their music,<sup>133</sup> however, he rarely commented upon it and the little he did write about them was vague and contradictory.<sup>134</sup> Although a cutting-edge figure in Denmark, ironically, by the end of his life he too caused something of a musical stagnation in Copenhagen. His aversion to musical experimentation increased as he got older and he chose to conduct little contemporary music. As a conductor, and as head of the Danish musical establishment,

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<sup>132</sup> His symphonic style is a remarkably individualised synthesis of the compositional procedures of a number of eras; Baroque counterpoint, Classical forms, Romantic orchestration and harmony, inflected by twentieth-century harmonic idioms and medieval modality, are combined to form his own approach to modernity.

<sup>133</sup> Grimley notes that Nielsen's music was not unrelated to the musical modernism of Schoenberg and Stravinsky; he sees a parallel between theirs and Nielsen's concern with fundamental issues of musical form and syntax. Stravinsky travelled to Copenhagen in 1924, though it is not known whether Nielsen attended performances of *Petrushka* and *L'histoire du soldat*. He was, however, familiar with some of Schoenberg's works such as the Chamber Symphony and the Piano Pieces, op. 11. Grimley, "Modernism and Closure," 5.

<sup>134</sup> See Jan Maeggård, "1923—The Critical Year of Modern Music," in Miller, *The Nielsen Companion*, 107-108

he could control much of what was performed in Copenhagen. Concert listings from the 1920s display a remarkably unadventurous list of performances, with only a handful of contemporary works.<sup>135</sup>

Danish Nielsen studies have naturally had a significant impact on the way Nielsen is studied by English-language musicologists. Although the repercussions of this are by no means entirely negative, it has led to the prolongation of certain Danish biases or ideals. As with Danish research, many English-language Nielsen studies have remained focused on the composer's life and on his relation to Danish cultural history. While Nielsen's cultural and political context should not be ignored, the extent to which it is relied upon has had a restrictive effect on the study and perception of his music. As Grimley writes, "It is as though there is a tacit assumption that, given the socio-cultural implications of Nielsen's status as national composer, a proper amount of preliminary historical 'spade work' must be done before aesthetic contemplation of his music can begin."<sup>136</sup> Nearly every study of Nielsen's music, independent of the article's or book's length, alludes to Nielsen's life with an emphasis on his rural childhood. Besides creating an unrealistic picture of Nielsen's musical philosophy, it has restricted the field of research within Denmark, and to some degree, in English-speaking countries. One of the consequences of this has been an unusually high number of biographical analyses of Nielsen's symphonies.

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<sup>135</sup> Torben Schousboe, *Udviklingstendenser inden for Carl Nielsens symfoniske orkestervaerker indtil ca.1910*. (Ph.D.dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 1968). Annex: Concert repertoire of the Musikforeningen [Music Society] from 1886 to 1931. Nielsen directed the Musikforening from 1915 to 1927. Between 1886 and 1931, only one of Mahler's symphonies was performed (1914), two works by Debussy (1915, 1919), Strauss (1903, 1913), and Ravel (1922, 1928), and one each by Milhaud (1927), Prokofiev (1930), and Stravinsky (1930).

<sup>136</sup> Grimley, Review of *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, ed. John Fellow, in *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 126 (2001), 108.

To a certain extent, his symphonies can withstand such readings. His Fourth Symphony, written between 1914 and 1916, has been read as the product of Nielsen's inner turmoil during a time of upheavals in his personal life combined with observing the traumatic events of the First World War, though from a distance.<sup>137</sup> In some ways the parallels drawn between the symphony's oppositional musical material and that period in Nielsen's life are convincing. However, from Nielsen's writings alone one is made aware of how many more layers there are to this work. Less convincing is the biographically-based reading of his Sixth Symphony commonly held by Nielsen scholars. As this symphony was written in the last years of his life and shortly after Nielsen was diagnosed with angina pectoris, the work has been read as an allegory for his depression in facing his impending death.<sup>138</sup> However, based on biographical elements alone, this symphony could have an entirely different reading: his personal and professional life had regained much of the stability lost ten years earlier, and Nielsen was finally recognised for his compositions and conducting. He also lived for another six years after the symphony was completed during which time he composed a number of works including two concertos. It is unlikely that he thought he was writing his swan song. Indeed, not all of the symphony's musical elements convey a consistently dark or depressing mood; it is a far more complex musical statement than a biographically-based reading allows for.

Relying too heavily on Nielsen's peasant upbringing in discussions of his art music may have implications on how Nielsen is perceived in relation to other European

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<sup>137</sup> Nielsen and his wife were separated at that time and he had been pressured into resigning from his position with the Royal Theatre Orchestra after sixteen years of service.

<sup>138</sup> Peter Garvie describes the tonal chaos and apparent lack of structure as the result of Nielsen's illness, saying "The meaning of form eludes Nielsen in his desperate effort to record the meaningless nature of experience." Garvie, "Carl Nielsen," in *Canadian Music Journal* 5/2 (Winter 1961): 26.



composers. Reading biographies and critical discussions of Nielsen's works, one gets the impression that despite the important early influence of the Viennese classics on his writing, his compositional style and musical philosophies arose directly out of his peasant upbringing. Taruskin is critical of this kind of essentialism as it creates a false hierarchy of composers. He gives the example of Glinka, who is described by biographers as having "inherit[ed] directly and unconsciously from his folk heritage" instead of having consciously shaped his compositional powers as would a Mozart or a Schumann. Taruskin writes: "Consider the implications. A Russian composer in the art music tradition is assumed (or rather, doomed) to create, because he is Russian, in the manner of a peasant singer—not by effort or art but by instinct, as is only 'natural for a man born and bred in different cultural surroundings, and inheriting different racial characteristic and attitudes'." <sup>139</sup>

English literature on Nielsen has been somewhat farther ranging than Danish, though not free from its own ideological limitations. It has vacillated between an over-reliance on biography and technical analyses of the compositional components of Nielsen's large-scale compositions. The first in-depth discussion of Nielsen's symphonies was written in 1952 by Robert Simpson. <sup>140</sup> Though somewhat distanced from Danish musicology which placed Nielsen's life in the foreground of any discussion of his work, Simpson's book nevertheless connected his musical critique with Nielsen's biography. <sup>141</sup> This was combined with a narrative-style structural and harmonic analysis of Nielsen's symphonies, the goal of which was to create a musical story told

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<sup>139</sup> Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 47.

<sup>140</sup> Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist* (1979).

<sup>141</sup> Grimley, *Review of Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, 108. Grimley notes that this humanistic approach to Nielsen research was used by his English biographer, Jack Lawson, while the Danish musicologist Steen Chr. Steensen has also followed this trend in his new Danish biography published in 1999.

through the symphonies' tonal layout. Simpson's analyses set a trend for subsequent Nielsen scholars, many of whom emulated his simultaneous reliance on biographical material and focus on the technical, structural aspects of the symphonies.

English-language musicologists, especially American, have moved toward studying Nielsen's music without reference to his cultural environment, focusing on the technical aspects of his compositions to a far greater extent than their Danish counterparts.<sup>142</sup> This has likely emerged from an attempt to incorporate him into current musicological discourse which favours "progressive" musical structures and compositional techniques. In the late 1980s, American musicologist Mina Miller blamed the lack of new Nielsen scholarship on the limited availability of English translations of primary and secondary research materials. However, recent studies of his music, mostly British, have proven the Danish language less of an obstacle than Miller supposed. Grimley has pointed out that it is for ideologically motivated reasons, not linguistic ones, that Nielsen's music has been neglected. He compares the apparent language barrier in Nielsen research to that faced by Bartók scholars, writing: "Hungarian material, which poses a greater linguistic challenge for the majority of Anglo-American musicologists, for example, does not appear to have obstructed Bartók research significantly."<sup>143</sup> As a modernist, Bartók fits the model of twentieth-century music favoured by current musicological discourse whereas Nielsen, on the whole, does not. Discussing Nielsen's music in terms of harmony and tonal structure—these being the most "modern" aspects of his writing—allows his work to be placed alongside the

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<sup>142</sup> David Fanning, *Nielsen: Symphony no.*; Tyler Goodrich White, *The Music's Proper Domain: Form, Motive, and Tonality in Carl Nielsen's Symphony no. 4, Op. 29 ("The Inextinguishable")* (D.M.A. dissertation Cornell University, 1991), as well as the majority of articles in Miller, ed. *A Carl Nielsen Companion*.

<sup>143</sup> Grimley, *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, 108-9.

musical innovators of twentieth-century symphonic music. Christopher Ballantine's *Twentieth Century Symphony* successfully pairs Nielsen and Mahler because of similarities in their use of large-scale harmonic functions.<sup>144</sup> It is unusual to see Nielsen's work discussed alongside other "canonic" composers but the fact remains that he was included for being "innovative" in his use of tonality and not for stylistic reasons. When studied in this context, Nielsen can be regarded as a modernist and therefore relevant to current music studies without having to dwell too long on his many works that make use of classical structures, lush orchestrations, and swelling melodies that may now appear sentimental.

### **Nielsen's Reception as a Nationalist Composer**

The single most important outcome of Nielsen's treatment in musicology as a peasant composer, as Denmark's national composer, and as the "Danish" symphonist, is that he has come to be perceived as a nationalistic composer. There is a tendency to equate a "national" composer with a "nationalistic" one. Nielsen's role as Denmark's national composer has been greatly responsible for forming popular and musicological perceptions of his music. Through the forties and fifties, a handful of articles appeared in Danish and English journals, almost all of them brief, and most bearing titles such as "Carl Nielsen: A Danish Composer," "Carl Nielsen: The Danish Composer," or simply "Carl Nielsen: Danish Composer." Oddly, not one treats the issue of his connection to Danish music or culture. By always referring to Nielsen as a "Danish" composer, there is a danger of oversimplifying or creating too restrictive a category. Such a label implies a tangible connection to Danish music traditions or a conscious desire to write

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<sup>144</sup> Christopher Ballantine, *Twentieth Century Symphony* (London: Dobson, 1983).

music that will be recognized by the public as nationalistic. While Nielsen did participate in Danish folk music making, he was not simply a nationalist. One would never reduce Beethoven to being merely a “German” composer, yet a number of composers from countries surrounding Germany, including Nielsen, are described first and foremost in relation to their countries of origin. Nielsen’s labelling as a national composer has had far-reaching implications for the way his music is taught, as well as on the extent and the manner in which he is discussed in music history surveys or textbooks.

### **Nielsen’s Textbook Reception**

For Nielsen to be included in history surveys, it seems he has to be classified as a nationalist along with a vast array of geographically peripheral composers from Bartók to Britten. As Nielsen’s work incorporates stylistic attributes from a number of different periods and places, Nielsen is dismissed by twentieth-century music textbooks which often attempt to create an easy-to-digest narrative centred on an experimental-evolutionary model of central European music. As Nielsen did not follow some of the more avant-garde trends of the early twentieth century, it is difficult to discuss his music in this context. He is dismissed as a lesser or peripheral composer simply because he does not fit easily into the currently accepted narrative of Germanic-centred musicology which promotes modernism through formal and harmonic innovation. Grimley puts it thus: “Nielsen’s music has been neglected for two...ideologically motivated reasons: first, an unwillingness to stray from canons of musicological discourse that may be chronologically, generically, geographically or even racially exclusive; second, a more

specific but no less intense methodological problem arising in the analysis of turn-of-the-century works that do not conform to familiar formal patterns.”<sup>145</sup>

There are many problems with both this view of music history and the inclusion of Nielsen as a nationalist. Although Nielsen was, as a writer of Danish popular songs, a nationalist composer, this body of works is only mentioned when speaking of the composer’s musical output and is never discussed in detail. Textbooks focus on Nielsen’s six symphonies and three concertos as his major contribution to music. However, these large-scale works, genres that have traditionally been favoured by musicological discourse, have little if any claim to nationalism or to self-consciously Danish music. Therefore, as Nielsen’s large-scale works cannot be discussed in the context of nationalism, he has, for the most part, been excluded from the pedagogical canon.

Looking through surveys of twentieth-century music one gets the impression that the only way for non-Franco-Germanic composers to be included is to be lumped into the category of nationalism, though this does not ensure any kind of in-depth treatment of their music. Taruskin writes:

In conventional ‘canonical’ historiography Russian (or Czech, or Spanish, or Norwegian) composers are in a double bind. The group identity is at once the vehicle of their international appeal (as “naifs”) and a guarantee of their secondary status vis-à-vis the unmarked “universal.” Without exotic native dress such composers cannot achieve even secondary canonical rank, but with it they cannot achieve more. However admirably it is apparently done, casting a composer as a ‘nationalist’ is pre-eminently a means of exclusion from the critical and academic canon (though not, obviously, from the performing canon).<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Grimley, “Horn Calls and Flattened Sevenths,” 124.

<sup>146</sup> Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 48.

No surveys of twentieth-century music, aside from Arnold Whittall's *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*, include Nielsen in any category but a national one.<sup>147</sup> Yet as a national composer, he is relegated to being a lesser, peripheral composer who, it is implied, drew on German music traditions to create art of local, not universal, significance.

As the most widely studied music history survey textbook in English-speaking countries, Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca's *A History of Western Music* provides a convenient starting point for discussing Nielsen's neglect through labelling as a national or nationalistic composer.<sup>148</sup> The chapters that cover the eighteenth through twentieth centuries are heavily biased towards German-speaking countries, though French composers are often allotted a secondary importance.<sup>149</sup> In the chapter "European Music from the 1870s to World war I," which contains a long discussion of German and French music, a sub-heading entitled "National Trends" briefly makes reference to composers of half a dozen other countries. This section lumps together composers from a wide variety of countries including Russia, the Czech Republic (the only country under the subheading "Central Europe"), Norway, Finland, England, and Spain, with Poland, Denmark, and the Netherlands grouped under the heading "Other Northern Countries." Four lines devoted to Nielsen very briefly describe his musical output with an additional sentence about his supposedly most important work, the Fifth Symphony. Not coincidentally, the Fifth is one of his most modernist large-scale works.

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<sup>147</sup> If not categorised as a national or nationalist composer, he is simply not included at all. Prior to the seventies, virtually no English-language history books mention his music. This is in part due to the lack of performances of his music outside of Scandinavia. The first performance of his six symphonies in the U.K. took place in the early fifties; only one had been played in London during Nielsen's lifetime.

<sup>148</sup> Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca. *A History of Western Music*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed (New York, W.W. Norton, 2001).

<sup>149</sup> Despite obvious biases, the most recent edition of Grout and Palisca is considerably less centred around Germany and France than previous editions.

Grout describes it as being “unconventional in form and orchestration and original in its adaptation of tonality to a sometimes very dissonant harmonic idiom.”<sup>150</sup> As a large-scale and innovative composition, it fits the ideals of this music history survey remarkably well. Yet in this context it would be difficult to discuss Nielsen’s art music in any more depth so it is hardly surprising that he is given only a cursory four lines. His symphonies would in fact fit in better with the following chapter “The European Mainstream in the Twentieth Century” which includes information on Bartók, Vaughan Williams, Hindemith, and Prokofiev, and talks about such categories as neo-classicism, modernism, and the symphony in the twentieth-century.

The classification and marginalisation of composers who are neither French nor German under umbrella headings such as nationalism is endemic to surveys of twentieth-century music. Eric Salzman, Robert Morgan, Alfred Einstein, and Paul Collaer, to name but a handful, all use the same simplistic analysis. Salzman’s *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction*<sup>151</sup> includes a chapter headed “National Styles” in which he briefly describes the musical output of composers from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Scandinavia, England, Italy, Spain, Latin America, and the United States. Bartók is given his own subheading within the same chapter. The paragraph on Scandinavian music is especially strange. Salzman quickly dismisses Nielsen with: “Leaving aside the late-Romantic Danish composer, Carl Nielsen, who was touched by neo-Classicism in his later work,” and moves on to discuss Jean Sibelius as the only Scandinavian composer of importance. To begin with, Nielsen would have vociferously objected to being called a late-Romantic, and his later works were less neo-

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<sup>150</sup> Grout and Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 656.

<sup>151</sup> Eric Salzman, *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000.)

classical than his early compositions. Sibelius, for his part, as a Finnish composer who was active in writing nationalistic Finnish music, was not technically Scandinavian.<sup>152</sup> That aside, Salzman creates a split between composers of serious art music in central Europe (read France and Germany) and those working with folk traditions and looking to the past to create locally significant, but rarely universal, musical works.

Taruskin, looking at Alfred Einstein's *Music in the Romantic Era*, discusses the problem of viewing music as a dichotomy between "center and periphery" or "the universal and the national."<sup>153</sup> Scanning the table of contents reveals yet another case of favouring German and French music traditions while lumping all other composers indiscriminately in an "other" category. He notes that chapters 15 and 16, "Universalism within the National," "treat German, Italian, and French composers, plus Chopin and Liszt, evidently travelling on Nansen passports; chapter 17, titled 'Nationalism,' is the ghetto chapter, covering all denizens of Bohemia, Russia, Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, Hungary, Poland, Spain and Portugal, and North America without further discrimination."<sup>154</sup>

That these assumptions about peripheral composers were prevalent in twentieth-century musicology may be seen in the number of smaller music history books that followed such rhetoric. French musicologist Paul Collaer's *A History of Modern Music*<sup>155</sup> provides a clear example of this. His textbook-style survey openly pits so-called universal composers against nationalists. The table of contents of this survey is

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<sup>152</sup> Scandinavia includes Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. Though Swedish by descent, Sibelius closely identified with Finland and Finnish nationalism.

<sup>153</sup> Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, xviii. Alfred Einstein, *Music in the Romantic Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1947).

<sup>154</sup> Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, xviii.

<sup>155</sup> Paul Collaer, *A History of Modern Music*, Translated by Sally Abeles (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1961).



especially biased, with two chapters on Germany and the Second Viennese School, one on Stravinsky, four chapters on French music, and one on Soviet Russia, with a chapter entitled “Nationalism and Eclecticism” tacked on at the end. In case these categories were too subtle in illustrating the dialectic between “universal masters” and national “others,” Collaer begins the chapter on nationalism with the following statement:

We have reviewed the outstanding events in contemporary music in Germany, Austria, France, and Russia. We have tried to throw light on the talent and work of some of the great composers. Generally speaking, these composers have followed traditions and developed or restated techniques established through the centuries. They have gone beyond individualism and particularism [sic]. We can no longer say that Schoenberg’s music is German, Stravinsky’s is Russian, or Milhaud’s is French. Their music is the expression of various aspects of European thought. Nationalist feeling has disappeared.<sup>156</sup>

This supposedly universal music is made inherently superior to the nationalistic music coming out of all other countries in which musical cultures are, more often than not, “still in formation.” These countries, briefly reviewed in the chapter “Nationalism and Eclecticism,” include the Czech Republic, Hungary, Spain, America, and South America. No mention is made of the other typically sidelined nations: Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the Nordic countries. In deconstructing Russian composers’ connections with nationalism, Taruskin coined the term “panromanogermanic” to describe the musical mainstream of central Europe which views all others as nationalists while steering free of the descriptor themselves.<sup>157</sup> Yet even within this “panromanogermanic” complex, the peripheral countries are relegated to an equally limited role in European music. Spain, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries to name but a few are all given short shrift as countries of lesser importance within this

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<sup>156</sup> Collaer, *A History of Modern Music*, 338.

<sup>157</sup> Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 48.

romano-germanic context. As Grimley wrote, “Scandinavian music, because of its isolation, is perceived as nationalistic, on the basis that continental music, because of its assumed centrality, is not.”<sup>158</sup> This dichotomy between Germany and its neighbouring “others” has led to the marginalisation of music written by those outside of the cultural “centre.”

Nielsen’s compositions have not only been neglected from the Anglo-Germanic musicological canon for geographic reasons. In his survey, *Twentieth-Century Music*, Robert Morgan imposes other, but no less problematic, limitations on the study of European music.<sup>159</sup> Throughout his text, many of the musicological biases prevalent in much of the discourse about twentieth-century music are reinforced. Morgan does not place the non-Germanic composers under the heading of nationalists, yet they are still relegated to a category of “others.” Nielsen, granted only three paragraphs, is placed under the subheading of Scandinavia, which again includes the Finnish Sibelius. As Scandinavians, they join the usual list of seemingly secondary European countries, Russia, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. This chapter is given the heading “Other European Currents,” and along with the following chapter on composers in England and the United States, is placed in relation to central, mostly German, currents in early twentieth-century music. Of the central trends, technical innovation is given precedence over all other compositional changes. Therefore, the Germans, along with a few token French and Russians, are upheld as beacons in musical development. This implies that the central discourse of twentieth-century music is, and should be, a privileging of formal and tonal innovations, or as Christopher Williams puts it, technical progress over

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<sup>158</sup> Grimley, Review of *Carl Nielsen til sin samtid*, 109.

<sup>159</sup> Robert Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

all else.<sup>160</sup> In this context, Nielsen, a “peripheral” composer because he is labelled as a nationalist and because of his conscious rejection of the European avant-garde, can never achieve more than a “secondary composer” status as long as these covert value-judgements exist.

## Conclusion

Neither Danish nor English-language musicology has done justice to Nielsen’s work. His symphonies are open to far more complex analyses than one can perform if looking solely at the harmonic and structural components, or focusing on biographical and contextual aspects alone. Much has been written about Nielsen’s structural and symbolic use of what Simpson coined “progressive” tonality, a compositional technique in which a symphony begins and ends in a different key. While interesting because of its innovation—Nielsen was one of the first composers to use progressive tonality in symphonic music—it does not in fact say much about the symphonies themselves. Analyses that arise out of presenting Nielsen as a national or nationalist composer are no more helpful as these create exaggerated links between his Danish heritage and his music. Nevertheless, both are a part of his music and neither should be ignored in favour of the other; the layers of cultural or historical context and stylistic idioms of different eras imbedded in each symphony need to be examined simultaneously in order to get a clearer picture of the web of styles and techniques that make up his symphonic approach.

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<sup>160</sup> Christopher A. Williams, “Of Canons & Context: Toward a Historiography of Twentieth-Century Music,” in *Repercussions* 2/1 (Spring 1993), 32.

Nielsen was one of the few Danish composers to be trained entirely in Denmark, and as such, he was one of the first successful products of Denmark's new educational institutions—the conservatory and folk high schools were established shortly after the last Danish-Prussian war—which were themselves imbedded with nationalist rhetoric and ideals. As a song writer he was a truly Danish composer, espousing Denmark's political and cultural socialist ideals and returning to Danish medieval folk culture for inspiration as Grundtvig himself advocated. As a writer of large-scale art music, he was not a nationalist, yet elements of his symphonic writing point towards the rural folk heritage he grew up with. Arguably, Nielsen's Danishness was so deeply ingrained that his music could be national without being nationalistic.

The national or Nordic sound of Nielsen's symphonies cannot adequately be described by identifying musical features commonly associated with European folk music as these features are, more often than not, neither specifically Danish nor Scandinavian in origin and sound. Nielsen never directly quoted folk music, and while certain rhythmic and melodic characteristics of his own songs do reappear in his symphonies, these are most often idioms characteristic of his style in general. There are in fact more parallels between his early art songs and his symphonies than between his later *folkelige* song style and that of his art music. The folk-like idioms at times incorporated into his symphonies, as well as the use of modal writing in his harmonic language, may be the result of Nielsen's deeply ingrained national consciousness, yet these works were not composed with a nationalistic intent. In addition to this, while perhaps giving a vaguely folk-like character to certain passages of his symphonies, the

“Danish” sound associated with Nielsen’s music is not entirely the result of these stereotypically folk-like elements.

The intersection of the national and nationalism in Nielsen’s symphonies is best illustrated by his musical depictions of the pastoral. Nielsen was often explicit about the origins of his pastoral writing; he intentionally created musical illustrations of the peaceful rural island landscape of his childhood. This is true of both *Fynske Forår* and the Third Symphony, the latter of which was claimed by local audiences as a Danish symphony. The Third Symphony poses an interesting conundrum for the differentiation between the national and the nationalistic. In creating musical evocations of the Danish landscape, Nielsen could be seen as writing nationalistic music, yet he was clear about the larger humanistic context of his music. The Danish landscape was simply a part of his person, of his past, deeply ingrained in his identity. It became a part of his music, and this, because received by other Danes as being intrinsically Danish, has made the symphony national. Although the work was not written specifically for a Danish audience, he was gratified to be claimed by the Danes as their national composer, yet he maintained that his symphonies were multi-dimensional and neither representative of a given time of his life nor of a given feeling. It was not a coincidence that he removed the text from the vocal parts in the Third Symphony’s second movement; without it the message appears more universal and has an impact beyond a purely pastoral one.

The more subtle and more pervasive “Nordic” sound of his symphonies perceived by many is likely the result of Nielsen’s musical evocations of light and space, tropes dealt with in a number of Scandinavian works, including those by Grieg and Svendsen. Concepts of light and space, perhaps arising out of the local topography

and climate, are frequently visible in Danish architecture and painting. By creating this impression, especially in his pastoral writing, Nielsen did in a sense generate a national or Nordic sound that was emulated by the following generation of Scandinavian composers. However, because Nielsen's compositions became the dominant musical influence in Denmark and had an important impact on many Scandinavian composers of the first half of the twentieth century, Nielsen's symphonic style and sound have become associated with Scandinavia; the Nordic qualities of his music were in part a later attribution or construction. In any event, the Nordic sound of Nielsen's symphonies is by no means the dominant feature of his work, nor is it apparent in all of his large-scale compositions. The fact remains that his earliest and deepest influences in art music were the Viennese classics, Bach, and Brahms.

Although Nielsen's symphonies are national musical monuments and have a nationalistic function, the Danes' appropriation of Nielsen as their national composer and his reception as a nationalist should not be confounded with his music being nationalistic. He is an important figure for Danish nationalism and culture, epitomised as a perfect Dane and a quintessentially Danish composer. Outside of Denmark, where his music does not have a national function, Nielsen's label as a national composer has impinged on our perception of his art music. The association between his art music and folk culture is tenuous, yet in Danish and English-language musicology, he remains a "Danish" composer first and foremost.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Interestingly, his status as "Danish national composer" has not affected readings of his art music in Denmark to the extent that it has coloured discussions in English-language musicology, largely because the connotations of that label are vastly different: it has positive associations in Denmark but often leads to negative value-judgements being ascribed to his work.

The regionalism of Nielsen's symphonies has been exaggerated by his reception, whether in Denmark, or elsewhere. Nielsen wanted recognition for his art music abroad, and though not very good at self promotion—perhaps largely due to a lack of time and funds—he did what little he could to have his music performed outside of Denmark. Nielsen's perceived insularity has in part been the outcome of Denmark's dislike of show and individuality. It is not a coincidence that Sibelius is so much better known in the U.K. and North America than Nielsen. Sibelius, given a government stipend to compose, was promoted outside of Finland during his lifetime as his music still is now. Nielsen, on the other hand, was obliged to keep his violin position with the Royal Theatre orchestra for sixteen years, and at times conducted and taught. His music was rarely promoted abroad, his main supporters being friends and family. Although far more frequently performed and studied, even Sibelius has been ghettoised. Nielsen's neglect by Anglo-Germanic musicology has largely been the result of a long-standing privileging of central European, technically progressive compositional models above all others. For Nielsen to be included in the pedagogical canon, the covert value-judgements attached to the current centre-periphery model of musicological research need to be countered. Viewing Nielsen's work in the broader context of European composition at the beginning of the twentieth century would allow the humanistic philosophies and universal dimensions of his music finally to be recognised and be more fully appreciated.

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