
Introduction

The ‘victory-through-struggle’ symphony is an enduring monument of Western culture, albeit one which is now looking somewhat dilapidated and which has become encrusted in ways its creators could not have foreseen. Fifth symphonies seem to have been particularly vulnerable. Beethoven’s C minor set the process in motion. Idolised by Nielsen as by practically every composer with ambitions to compose symphonies, it was the first great darkness-to-light journey in music, the first to allow separate movements to interpenetrate, the first to unify them motivically with a view to reinforcing dramatic cohesion; or if not literally the first, it was the first so to embed itself in the consciousness of audiences and composers. But it also received the most famous ‘encrustations’, first when Beethoven’s pupils Czerny and Schindler disagreed over whether the famous four-note opening motif stood for the song of the yellow-hammer or Fate knocking on the door, and later when the Allies in the Second World War used the same motif to signify Victory.

None of the other great victory-through-struggle or dark-to-light Fifth Symphonies has acquired the iconic force of Beethoven’s, but each has been felt, or forced, to stand for something ideologically concrete. Before the 1939–45 War Hitler had already appropriated the finale of Bruckner’s Fifth.¹ Before that Sibelius’s Fifth, along with his symphonic output in general, had been taken as the embodiment of Viking virility – a view the composer was content to endorse but which eventually provoked a violent critical reaction.² Nearer the present day, in 1971 Luchino Visconti’s film *Death in Venice* reinterpreted the ‘Adagietto’ of Mahler’s Fifth, turning the composer’s love-song for his wife into an emblem of decay and morbid homosexual frustration. And over the years Shostakovich’s Fifth has ceased to be understood in terms of the composer’s supposed subtitle ‘A Soviet Artist’s Practical Creative Reply

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to Just Criticism' and has come to stand for something close to the opposite, one myth thus being substituted for another.³

Nielsen's Fifth has been more fortunate. It has become sufficiently well known to have made its mark, but not so over-played as to seem hackneyed, so over-commentated as to have become the target of myth-making, or so over-praised as to have provoked a backlash. It has not been besmirched by the entertainment industry, commandeered by political propagandists, or hijacked by intellectual cliques. Unmistakably dealing with life-and-death issues, in a manner at once stylistically engaging and structurally sophisticated, it is the kind of work which may actually catch admirers on the rebound from over-exposure to other great twentieth-century symphonists with comparable ethical concerns.

In an age which has witnessed human 'struggle' on a previously unimaginable scale, the concept of 'victory' in art-forms has come to seem barely defensible, a cheapening of the issues. Some would argue that that was already the case in 1921 when Nielsen was composing his Fifth Symphony. But composers are not prisoners of history, they are shapers of it. At least they can be, if they share Nielsen's determination to tackle human issues head-on and to find a musical language and structure with which to do them justice. In such cases engagement with an archetype whose heyday is apparently over can give a composer's work a special edge. Such is the case with Nielsen's Fifth.

It is widely held to be the summit of his achievements. Deryck Cooke, celebrated for his Performing Version of Mahler's Tenth Symphony, is even said to have dubbed it 'the greatest twentieth-century symphony'.⁴ Be that as it may, the point probably does not need hammering home. The time has surely passed when a crusade needed to be fought on Nielsen's behalf. In 1952 when the first edition of Robert Simpson's masterly study appeared,⁵ it was a different matter, and this may account for Simpson's somewhat dismissive remarks about other composers and trends. He toned down these comments by the time of the revised edition in 1979, but if nothing else they had served to stir up discussion of a composer few had previously thought to put in the front rank. Meanwhile a huge boost to Nielsen's reputation came in 1962 when Bernstein's recording of the Fifth Symphony appeared – it remains arguably the most inspiring version on record (see chapter 4 below). Less conspicuous, but indicative of the steady growth of interest in and admiration for Nielsen, was

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Stephen Walsh's contribution to the article 'Symphony' in the 1980 *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, which ranged him alongside Mahler and Sibelius as more or less equally important symphonists around the turn of the century.⁶ Seventeen years on, that assessment seems not unrealistic, with a dozen complete or near-complete cycles of Nielsen's symphonies currently available on Compact Disc and a steady stream of concert performances. The scholarly community is also beginning to catch up with the musical world at large, with a Complete Edition of the music well under way, an international symposium recently published, and a new popular biography about to appear.⁷

If a crusade is no longer needed, an aggressive moral stance on Nielsen's behalf also runs the risk of being counter-productive. Journalistic appreciations of Nielsen continue to clutch at descriptions such as 'healthy', 'invigorating', 'life-giving' – not (presumably) out of copycat thoughtlessness, but because those terms come spontaneously to mind when the music is played.⁸ They are all adjectives the composer himself used and approved of, and they reflect what has been dubbed, with reference to the philosopher Henri Bergson, his 'vitalist' outlook.⁹ Before jumping to the conclusion that this could be one of the few manifestations of twentieth-century idealism still worth upholding, it may be worth remembering that in Nielsen's time such terminology was often used in the context of a reactionary moralising that few of us today would wish to endorse.¹⁰ It has even been suggested that: 'The consequential continuation of the *Espansiva* [Nielsen's Third Symphony] would have led to the art which our century's later totalitarian regimes extolled.'¹¹

There is a balance to be struck here. Certainly there is a danger of Nielsen enthusiasts under-playing the many-sidedness of his musical personality, and that is the point of raising the whole ethical question here. But nor should misappropriation of ideas by later generations in other cultures mean that Nielsen is retrospectively tainted. There is no need to abandon worthy principles just because others have put them into wicked practice. In other words, there is no need to apologise for the ethical content of Nielsen's music, with its anti-decadent slant, provided it is looked at with an open mind. In any case his next symphonies were far more than 'consequential continuations' of the 'Espansiva', as they were affected by unforeseen extra-musical factors, most obviously the

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First World War, in which Nielsen saw patriotism transformed into a 'spiritual syphilis'.¹²

Nielsen's high ethical stance remained meaningful in proportion to his awareness of the darker forces which threatened it, and to his artistic strategies for dealing with both poles, which he outlined in his Fourth Symphony ('The Inextinguishable') and perfected in his untitled Fifth. Not that immersion in the inimical forces of Life was anything unusual for a composer on the cusp of late romanticism and modernism. What was unusual was Nielsen's determination to transcend that experience through a process of dynamic psychological growth, mirrored in complex, self-generating musical structures. This is the issue I have tried to keep as the main focus of my book. To do it justice demands, I believe, a 'close reading' of the music, with no apologies for any ideological dimension anyone chooses to read into the enterprise.¹³

Nielsen's Fifth is (or at least should be) an overwhelming experience – for the innocent, the curious and the jaded alike. His capacity to overwhelm is not a matter of emotional suffocation or aural bombardment (though in his first movement there is a conspicuous instance of the latter). Rather it arises from a realisation of humane values, in music which is at once boldly original and deeply rooted in tradition. It is a combination, in other words, of reach and grasp. Nielsen reaches towards the big issues, touching on the most destructive elements that life can throw at us; he proposes that they can be faced, resisted and absorbed, if never truly overcome, by forces within us, provided we can gain access to them. As for grasp, this is evident in the subtlety with which his musical images of good and evil are wedded to long-term structural processes and transformed thereby, elevating generalised anthropomorphism from manifesto to music. To investigate this is, ideally, to make the overwhelming experience more fully and more permanently our own, to ensure that it nourishes the soul rather than passing through like some temporarily invigorating pill. That is the ideal I have tried to keep in mind.

As a preface to the main analytical part of the book I have sketched a historical context for the symphony as a threatened species (chapter 1). But it is my belief that getting to grips with one of the masterpieces of music, as I have attempted to do in chapters 2 and 3, teaches us that the survival of a genre, or, as in this case, of an archetype within that genre, is

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a matter of individual creative will. Historical pressures may be a challenge, never a veto.

So far as analytical commentary is concerned, Nielsen scholarship has been laggardly.¹⁴ I feel that my own approach remains broadly compatible with Robert Simpson's, and I am proud to acknowledge his influence on its tone and content. His analysis is, however, more than forty years old, and it remained virtually unchanged in the 1979 revision of his book. Its emphasis on tonal schemes and their putative metaphorical force has been as widely criticised as it has been admiringly echoed.¹⁵ It undoubtedly embodies the creative preoccupations of its author, who has since won deserved international acclaim as a composer. Not that one-sidedness or a personal angle are necessarily a bad thing, unless they are mistaken for the only true path to understanding. No doubt my own approach is no less coloured with personal emphases. What I do hope to offer is an equally distinctive view to Simpson's and a more rounded and detailed one than has been available hitherto. Apart from straightforward commentary on the musical surface, this entails a thorough re-examination of Nielsen's handling of harmony and tonality, and an entirely new scansion of his musical paragraphs. For the interest of specialist or specially intrepid readers, reductive analytical summaries are presented in Appendix C. I have also taken into account the Danish musicological perspective, which is mainly interpretative rather than analytical.¹⁶ Very little of this has filtered through into English-language publications (which goes also, surprisingly, for Nielsen's own remarks on the work, translated in Appendices A and B).

From December 1899 on (shortly before the Second Symphony), Nielsen made very few sketches and generally composed straight into a pencil-draft orchestral score.¹⁷ His draft of the Fifth Symphony and his ink fair copy are retained in the Carl Nielsen Collection at Copenhagen's Royal Library,¹⁸ and pertinent information in these sources is incorporated into the two main analytical chapters. Apart from this, the history of the Fifth Symphony's composition, early performances, reception, editions and recordings, is dealt with in chapter 4.

There are two published scores – the first dating from 1926, and a posthumous revision in 1950. Michael Fjeldsøe's scrupulously researched Critical Edition volume, scheduled to appear not long after this book, should become the standard score, and current plans are for

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his critical commentary to be available on CD ROM. Without attempting to duplicate his findings, I have included a summary of the most conspicuous discrepancies between the 1926 and 1950 scores. This should be of interest to conductors and to owners of the latter publication, which has been the only widely obtainable source for nearly half a century.

No recordings were made of Nielsen's own conducted performances of any of his music, but several conductors can legitimately claim contact with that tradition, and their recorded interpretations throw up many points of interest. These and many other issues of performance practice in the symphony are summarised in chapter 4, in the course of a discussion of all twenty-six recorded interpretations to date.

1

Tradition and renewal
The death of the symphony?

In 1888, the year Nielsen embarked on his first attempt at a symphony,¹ George Bernard Shaw announced that the symphony as a musical form was ‘stone dead’.² In 1940, fifteen years after Nielsen’s sixth and last symphony, the Danish composer Knudåge Riisager published an article entitled ‘The Symphony is Dead: Long Live Music!’³

It would be easy to scoff: to rub Shaw’s nose in the symphonic masterpieces of Nielsen, Sibelius, Elgar and Mahler; to confront Riisager with Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Vaughan Williams; to cite Maxwell Davies, Henze, Górecki, Holmboe, Kancheli, Lutosławski, Sallinen, Schnittke, Silvestrov, Simpson and Tippett as evidence that rumours of the symphony’s death have been exaggerated.

Even today, however, there are those who would consider that the rumours were not exaggerated at all, or at least that some of the symphonists just named have failed to shoulder the full responsibilities of the genre. Perhaps there is indeed such a thing as symphonism by default; perhaps the ‘Breath of Symphonists’, which Schoenberg claimed to perceive in Shostakovich and Sibelius,⁴ is actually an illusion in the twentieth century, the reality being a necrophiliac artificial respiration.

The symphony’s premature obituarists have had their reasons, and it may be worth playing devil’s advocate a little longer. For it can scarcely be denied that individual composers, even whole generations, have experienced symphonic ‘crises’. Beethoven himself turned away from the genre in the last fifteen years of his life, and the one symphony he produced in that period (The Ninth, 1822–4) bequeathed huge problems, as well as inspiration, to the next generations of symphonists. When

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Eduard Hanslick hailed Brahms's First as its only true successor some fifty years later, he was looking back on a twenty-five-year fallow period during which the symphony was over-shadowed by the symphonic poem and had nothing better to show for itself than Gade, Raff and Rubinstein and the pre-mature essays of Dvořák and Tchaikovsky.

Another fifty years on, in the post-First-World-War context of Nielsen's Fifth, the symphony as it had been understood until that time once again seemed ill-adapted to the prevailing winds.⁵ It was not only the traumas of war and the Communist Revolution which defined the *Zeitgeist*. This was also the time of the confirmation of Einstein's theory of relativity (1919), of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and part two of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (all 1922). These were all indications that the period from 1815 to 1914, 'the most peaceful and productive years in the history of mankind' as Paul Johnson has provocatively described it,⁶ had come to an end, and with it the kind of art forms which had mirrored that century's self-confidence. Beliefs in progress and humanity, which had sustained projects like the symphony, had been dealt a huge blow, and with the reaction came a mistrust of the genre's presumed baggage of elitism, high ethical content, idealism and large orchestral forces – virtually its entire psychological and sociological infrastructure. The Second Viennese School triumvirate now only approached the symphony with its own radically re-defining agendas, as too did Stravinsky. Brevity and chamber scoring were among their innovations, and shrinking of dimensions was taken to an extreme by Darius Milhaud. Late-romantic over-ripeness had given way to a pruning-almost-to-death. Among Milhaud's fellow-members of *Les Six* only Honegger turned to the symphony at all, and that not until the 1930s.

High ethical aspirations in the symphony did survive the death of Mahler in 1911, but not very securely. Schoenberg himself found it impossible to convert his most ambitious symphonic project into reality.⁷ Vincent D'Indy, whose Second Symphony of 1903 had been an explicit representation of the conflict between Good and Evil, now enshrined his feelings about the First World War in his pallid Third Symphony of 1916–18.⁸ An exact contemporary of Nielsen's Fifth was Roussel's Second Symphony, for whose première Roussel provided a programme (later withdrawn) relating the three movements to different stages of

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human life.⁹ Comparably high ambitions lay behind two Danish symphonies of 1919 – Louis Glass’s Fifth (*Sinfonia svastica*) and Rued Langgaard’s Sixth (*Det himmelrivende* [The Heaven-rending]); but despite their champions neither work commands repertoire status. Almost the only other symphonies, certainly the only fine ones, to attempt an encapsulation of the experience of war, were Vaughan Williams’s Third, the ‘Pastoral’, premièred just two days after Nielsen’s Fifth on 26 January 1922, and Myaskovsky’s Sixth, composed during 1921–4 and arguably more bound up with the experiences of the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent civil war in Russia than with the war in Europe.

As for the senior established symphonists in the 1920s, Elgar had already fallen into a disillusioned silence; Nielsen himself shifted from the epic line he had pursued in his first five symphonies, and in his last symphony, the ‘*Sinfonia semplice*’ of 1925 he consciously confronted the state of crisis he perceived in musical styles and values of the time; Sibelius brought his drive for unity to a conclusion in his single-movement Seventh Symphony of 1924 and went into a thirty-year retreat, the famous ‘silence of Järvenpää’. At that time no significant heirs to the nationalist traditions of Eastern Europe were on the horizon. It was the mid-1930s before the Soviet Union produced, by an extraordinary combination of pressures, symphonies which were more than academically still-born or experimentally iconoclastic. Meanwhile a great individualist interested in writing symphonies, like the émigré Prokofiev, did so only by adopting the foreign language of Parisian *style mécanique* (No. 2) or by adapting material conceived for the opera or the ballet (Nos. 3 and 4). Only the 1930s swing of the pendulum back to idealism and large ambitions, albeit in a now more consciously democratic guise, renewed the seed-bed for symphonism in England, America, the Soviet Union, and to some extent France (but not in Germany, and not to any great effect until much later in Scandinavia).

The survival of a symphonist

Nielsen’s Fifth stands as a summit of achievement in terms of his personal creative evolution. Yet it is a summit from which the foothills of an ongoing flourishing tradition had been eroded. He not only had to build his symphonic edifice; he had first to mark out his own plot and lay the

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foundations. This does not mean that the Fifth Symphony was an attempt to reinstate an outmoded past, however. Rather it was an attempt to deal with the present in a manner emulating, at the most fundamental level, the finest that composers of the past had produced in dealing with their present. It was that very capacity to ‘deal with’ which the post-war *Zeitgeist* in Europe was questioning, and this is the sense in which Nielsen was working against the grain.

What enabled him to do that so effectively was a mixture of character disposition, musical affinities and life experiences. Nielsen inherited his father’s gift for mimicry,¹⁰ and he gradually developed it from a personal characteristic into an artistic principle of empathy, which operates on an ever-widening scale in his first five symphonies. He also inherited from both parents a respect for the elemental power of straightforward melody and rhythm. His early musical affinities were with the rhythmic force, will-power and ethical tone of Beethoven, exemplified in the latter’s Fifth Symphony,¹¹ with the melody, harmony and instrumentation of Brahms and Dvořák, and with the Scandinavian accents of Grieg and Svendsen. However radical his later stylistic journeys, he constantly returned to these roots for sources of well-being and energy. They were sorely needed, because the life experiences which helped to shape his musical development created a thrice-deracinated psyche à la Mahler – as a peasant-boy from the island of Fyn among cosmopolitan Copenhageners, as a Dane within European society, and as a late-nineteenth-century believer in the innate goodness of mankind confronted with the traumas of the new century. Each of these uprootings was a challenge Nielsen had to rise to in his life; and his music shows a comparable determination to tap inner sources and rise above external threat.

Nielsen was not entirely alone in his aesthetic or stylistic preoccupations, as the symphonies of Vaughan Williams and Honegger attest.¹² Indeed it was Honegger who, after the Paris concert including the Fifth Symphony in October 1926, told Nielsen, ‘You formulated the aims for which we are all striving now, a generation before the rest of us!’¹³ Such statements would have made bizarre reading in German-speaking lands and probably still do today. While America and Britain, and to a degree France, have enthusiastically embraced Nielsen, the Germans never seem to have acquired the taste. Admittedly Nielsen never suffered from the Adorno-led backlash against Sibelius’s popularity in the 1930s and