THE WOODWIND MUSIC OF CARL NIELSEN

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Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) was a Danish composer born on the island of Funen between Jutland and Sjaeland. His music covers a wide range of styles, from “Brahmsian Romanticism at the outset to a high-principled, personal brand of neo-classicism in his last years.”¹ He composed in the majority of the main musical genres of the time, but he is remembered mostly for his six symphonies. In Denmark, he is heralded as somewhat of a national icon, revered for his large output of popular strophic songs. He was also an active teacher, conductor, and writer, and although his international fame was sporadic during his lifetime, it has grown steadily since the 1950s, especially in Britain and the United States.²

In 1921, Nielsen made acquaintance with members of the Royal Orchestra Wind Quintet of Copenhagen while the group was rehearsing a piece by Mozart. He was inspired by listening to the group’s rehearsal so he decided to compose his Quintet, Op. 43 in 1922. Additionally, he went on to compose his Concerto for Flute and Orchestra, FS 119 in 1926 and his Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra, Op. 57, in 1928, for the group’s flutist and clarinetist. Nielsen’s wind quintet, flute concerto, and clarinet concerto feature prominent woodwind writing. The purpose of this project will be to provide historical background on Nielsen’s life and compositional style as well as his relationship with the members of the Royal Orchestra Wind Quintet, which led to the aforementioned compositions. It will also analyze the works by discussing the overall form and structure of the pieces, focusing especially on the similarities of the woodwind writing between pieces.

²Ibid.
Background Information

Carl Nielsen grew up on the island of Funen, an area that is often referred to as the “Garden of Denmark.” Nielsen mentioned later in life that he often had the sights and sounds of Funen in his mind when he composed. As a child, Nielsen had the opportunity to become associated with traditional Danish folk music and dances. His mother often sang lullabies and folk songs around the house, which inspired Nielsen’s love of traditional Danish folk melodies. His father was a house painter and amateur musician who played violin and cornet in a dance band that frequently performed at weddings and parties. When Nielsen was eight years old, he began experimenting with composition and his early pieces were based heavily on the songs and dances he was accustomed to hearing at home. Additionally, he began to develop an early fascination with “the underlying animating forces of nature and human character,” which would become an archetypal thread for his entire compositional career. In 1879, Nielsen joined a military orchestra in Odense, where he was able to receive violin lessons from a local musician, play string quartets, and study theory and piano. He never managed to achieve success as a pianist, but the piano was used frequently in his compositional process.

Nielsen grew up in a period of Romantic nationalism, when people across Europe were pushing to restructure social and governmental foundations that had been in place for centuries. After defeat in a war against Prussia in 1864, territories in South Jutland (the Duchy of Schleswig) were seized under Prussian control and were not reclaimed until after World War I. The resurgence of national pride in Denmark after 1864, caused by feelings of oppression from external governments, created an environment in which the people began establishing liberal
institutions, promoting communal activities, and fostering young talent. Although several of his siblings emigrated to the American Midwest in the 1870s and 1880s, Nielsen remained in Denmark his whole life, for his career benefitted from the overwhelming sense of nationalism felt in Denmark at the time. While working with the military orchestra in Odense, he was invited to audition at the Copenhagen Conservatory, where he successfully gained admission in 1884. During his time at the Conservatory from 1884 to 1886 he was not an outstanding student, nor did he compose much. He did, however, make great progress as a violinist and made contact with Orla Rosenhoff, who taught him theory and counterpoint, and with Niels Gade, head of the Conservatory and Denmark’s most well-known composer at the time. Nielsen was determined not to emulate Gade’s “smoothed-over Germanic style of composing.” According to David Fanning, “Nielsen’s background as a patchily educated country boy had left him with an insatiable curiosity for the arts, philosophy, and aesthetics, as well as a highly personal, common man’s point of view on those subjects.”

After graduation from the Conservatory, Nielsen made money as a free-lance violinist and performed with the Royal Chapel Orchestra at the Royal Theatre. Eager to travel and experience new places, he left for a nine-month tour of Europe in 1890. By looking at his diary, which he began that year, scholars have noted that during this time Nielsen fell in love with Wagner’s music, was impressed by the best performers and orchestras of the day, and sharpened his view on music and the visual arts. While in Paris, he met Danish sculptress Anne Marie Brodersen, a modern-minded woman who was determined to have her own career. She joined him on his tour to Italy and married him in Florence in 1891. His reputation began growing in the 1890s, as he was being asked to write incidental music for the theatre and several cantatas.

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
In 1905, he was occasionally invited to be a guest conductor for the Royal Chapel Orchestra, and in 1908, he took over as the group’s second Kapellmeister. His appointment as a conductor was controversial. Many liked his energy and passion but he was not very technical in his approach to conducting, and he would often appear absent-minded during rehearsals. Between 1914 and 1922, Nielsen and his wife separated, due largely to the fact that the couple found it difficult to make both of their independent careers work. Additionally, Anne became aware of Nielsen’s multiple extra-marital affairs. During the next eight years, Nielsen worked as a freelance composer and musician, traveled frequently, and experienced a great amount of self-discovery.

The height of Nielsen’s career came in 1925, when he was sixty-years-old. His 60th birthday party was a national celebration and was advertised throughout the country. In one interview, he told a newspaper that he had never managed to secure a living as a composer, which angered his publishers and led to a break in his contract. In 1926, he suffered a severe attack of angina, which he had been dealing with since 1922. During his last years, he turned to religious texts for sources of comfort. He was not a church-goer, but he often found comfort in religious hymns and texts in times of crisis, which is consistent with his compositional aesthetic of simplicity and purity.

**Compositional Style**

Carl Nielsen had a unique compositional style. According to Eric Nelson:

Nielsen’s creative life represents a metamorphosis from his inheritance of late-Romanticism to Modernism. In the music of Richard Strauss, Wagner, and other German late-Romanticists he saw a denial of the fundamental and essential elements of music. He deemed their excessive emotional outpourings needless and profligate. His own music, from first to last, demonstrates a consistent rejection of these

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
attributes, and a desire for clean and concise music, music in which each voice and even each note is essential to the progress of the work as an entirety.¹⁰

The most important aspects of Nielsen’s compositions were melody, harmony, and rhythm. Form, according to Nielsen, was the least important musical element and was defined by the melodic content.

In general, Nielsen viewed tonality as the primary “vehicle of motion in music” and believed that moving from one key to another was the essence of musical life.¹¹ Nielsen employed frequent modulations, often to distant keys, and would regularly use opposing key centers that would develop a sense of harmonically-derived internal conflict within the piece. Nielsen believed in the concept of a “home key center,” where he would provide a goal key, and then base the harmonic development on getting to and from that key. For example, in his clarinet concerto, he uses F major as the home key and creates conflict by “forcing the solo part to try and escape the key of F major.”¹² The clarinet concerto also exhibits an example of his tendency toward polytonality seen in some of his works at the end of his life. Nielsen’s works also frequently employ harmonic collisions, places where the bass line moves stepwise and utilizes notes that do not support the surrounding harmony. He allowed his compositions to develop organically in their own directions, never sacrificing “an allegiance to tonality” but also not relying on any one tonal center to connect his works in a large-scale manner.¹³

More important than harmony to Nielsen was melody, especially the most basic melodic element: the interval.¹⁴ Much of the melodic inspiration in his works comes from growing up

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¹² Ibid., 14.
¹⁴ Eric Nelson, “Carl Nielsen’s Koncert For Klarinet Og Orkester, 39.
surrounded by Danish folk music. Generally, Danish folk music is uncomplicated, though the meters are often irregular, and the mixolydian mode is frequently used. Nielsen’s themes tend to be diatonic, though the melodies in many of his later works modulate temporarily. According to Jerry Rife, Nielsen’s melodies are able to change character abruptly because of their “mutability.”

For example, the last movement of his third symphony features a lyrical melody that is inverted twenty-nine measures later in order to produce a more accented version that fits into the texture of the rest of the movement.

Nielsen also identified rhythm as being an important element in his compositional aesthetic. The rhythms and cadences of Danish folk music are present in Nielsen’s music. His meters can be irregular, but his method of composition makes it such that the music is continuously flowing from beginning to end. According to Rife, the music of Nielsen is “forever in motion.” At times, Nielsen creates a feeling of suspension by adding a rhythmic ostinato. Other times, he uses rhythm to purposefully disrupt the music, as is seen in the contrast between the snare drum and solo clarinet in his clarinet concerto. Also, in the first movement of his fifth symphony, he instructs the snare drum player to improvise “as if at all costs he wants to stop the progress of the orchestra.”

Furthermore, Nielsen’s music features an advanced understanding of counterpoint. When he first began taking piano lessons as a child, he studied the works of Bach, which initially were difficult for him to understand because he was accustomed to the styles of Danish folk music. Nielsen uses imitation in his music, and the opening theme to his clarinet concerto is an example. In his last period of works, beginning in 1922, he explored a number of polyphonic techniques that culminated with his Commotio, Op. 58 (1931) for organ.

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16 Ibid., 18.
17 Ibid., 19.
Fragmentation is a common technique of his later works, and his sixth symphony even has periods of four- and five-voice fugues and canons.

**Wind Quintet, Flute Concerto, and Clarinet Concerto**

On an evening in the fall of 1921, Nielsen called his friend Christian Christiansen, a pianist who happened to be rehearsing with four of the members of the Wind Quintet of the Royal Orchestra, Copenhagen. The group was working on Mozart’s *Sinfonia Concertante, K. 297b*, and they continued to rehearse while Nielsen and Christiansen talked on the phone. According to James Keller, Nielsen was “so taken by the sounds” that he asked if he could come listen to the rehearsal.\(^{18}\) Having just completed his fifth symphony, Nielsen decided his next work would be for the Royal Orchestra Wind Quintet. Over the next few months, Nielsen worked closely with each quintet member to learn the specific personalities of the players. The members were flutist Paul Hagemann, oboist Svend Christian Felumb, clarinetist Aage Oxenvad, hornist O. Hans Sorensen, and bassoonist Knud Lassen. Nielsen was also determined to write a concerto for each of the members. In 1926, he completed his flute concerto for Holger Gilbert-Jespersen, who had replaced Hagemann as the group’s flutist, and in 1928 he completed his clarinet concerto for Oxenvad. Unfortunately, Nielsen died before he was able to complete the project and write a concerto for the other three members.

Nielsen’s wind quintet was finished in 1922. According to Keller, the work is full of “Haydenesque good spirits (even slightly Stravinskyian neo-Classicism) and Neo-Baroquism.”\(^{19}\) The work is written in three movements. The first is in traditional sonata form, is characterized by having a relaxed, pastoral style, and is predominantly in E major. The second movement is a minuet and trio that features contrapuntal motion and recalls Baroque styles. It is mostly in A


\(^{19}\) Ibid.
major, but the trio hovers between D minor and F major. The third movement is the longest movement of the work and is perhaps the most complicated. It begins with a two-minute Praeludium in C minor, with a melody played by the English horn and instances of cadenza-like moments for the flute and clarinet. This is the first and only time an English horn is used in the work, and the result is a darker, more somber timbre than if he had chosen an oboe to play the introduction. Following the introduction is the main theme of the movement, which is a chorale based on a tune Nielsen himself wrote several years earlier entitled “Min Jesus, lad mit hjerte faa” (My Jesus, let my heart be thine). When it was originally performed, the chorale achieved instant success among Danish church-goers, but Nielsen made it a point to not treat the chorale as “an item invested with sanctity.”

James Keller’s article includes the following program note, written in the third person, by Nielsen:

The theme for these variations is the tune of one of Carl Nielsen’s spiritual songs, which is here made the basis of a number of variations, now gay and grotesque, now elegiac and solemn, ending with the theme itself, simply and gently expressed.

Following the theme, the movement moves into a set of eleven variations based on “Min Jesus.” In the variations, we are able to see the individual instruments’ idiomatic characteristics as each variation features a different soloist. After the variations, the chorale theme returns for a full restatement, though this time the oboe is used instead of the English horn. Keller points out that Nielsen returns to a “democratic balance” among the instruments to “again enunciate the unembellished chorale.” The wind quintet is one of Nielsen’s most frequently performed works today. At Nielsen’s funeral in 1931, the Royal Wind Quintet of Copenhagen performed the third movement as a tribute to him.

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20 Ibid., 363.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
Composed in 1926 during a vacation in Italy, Carl Nielsen’s flute concerto was the first time Nielsen had used flute as a solo instrument in a major work. The piece was premiered on October 21, 1926, in the Salle de Concerts, Maison Gaveau, Paris, with Holger Gilbert-Jespersen as the soloist. The first performance in Denmark was on January 25, 1927, with Gilbert-Jespersen as soloist and Nielsen as the conductor. It was for this occasion that Nielsen reworked the ending of the concerto. Kirsten Petersen points out that Nielsen had composed the original ending “in great haste as a provisional ending to the work for use at the premiere...he had clear intentions about the concluding ideas but simply did not have time to realise them.”

The piece is written in two movements. The first movement has its material presented in four main groups followed by a cadenza episode and variations on motives from earlier in the movement. The movement has no real key signature and begins with dissonance: there is an E-flat in the bassoon, horn, cello, and double bass against a fourth-leap from A to D in the melody. The first theme fluctuates between D minor and D dorian, and E-flat is used as a pedal tone. The second theme group, beginning in measure 12, gravitates toward E-flat minor. Theme group C, beginning at measure 34, is in F major, and theme group D, beginning at measure 101, is in B minor with hints of the mixolydian mode. There is no regular recapitulation, and new material is presented after the cadenza. There is also no development section that we may expect in traditional sonata form, but rather the material develops through variations of motives. Petersen uses the term *fortspinnung* to describe Nielsen’s technique of introducing familiar material in varied ways. The movement ends quietly and inconclusively in G-flat major, creating an overall harmonic structure of D, E-flat, F and G-flat for the movement. The second movement has three

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24 *Fortspinnung* is a German term coined in 1915 to describe the process of developing musical material by which a motif is “spun out” into an entire phrase by sequential treatment, intervallic transformation, and repetition.
main theme groups, beginning in measure 12, 39, and 62 respectively. Each theme is repeated in varied form after its initial statement, and toward the end, the A theme is repeated in a more lively 6/8 meter in measure 154. The movement starts in G and often returns to it, though the trombone solo adds conflict and a sense of bitonality with a D-flat in measure 195. As with the first movement, there is no development section, but instead the work develops and modulates through melody. Nielsen’s revision of the ending includes the addition of seventy-two measures beginning in measure 169. The last section features a prominent trombone part that adds conflict against the flute part, similar to his treatment of the snare drum in the clarinet concerto.

Throughout the work, prominent wind parts make the piece feel more like a chamber piece rather than a work with a soloist and an orchestral accompaniment. For example, measures 57-70 of the first movement feature an extended clarinet solo that acts as a duet partner with the flute. Also, in measure 145 of the second movement, the clarinets and bassoons introduce the melody in its new meter of 6/8.

In 1928, Nielsen completed his clarinet concerto for Aage Oxenvad. The concerto is often regarded as one of Nielsen’s best works. According to Eric Nelson, Nielsen embodies “the struggles and joys of his entire life, and thereby [creates] a work of great beauty and significance to clarinetists.” The work is in one continuous movement with four distinct theme groups. The instrumentation involves clarinet solo with a string orchestra, two bassoons, two horns, and snare drum, which is an example of Nielsen’s neoclassical tendencies. The work opens and closes on the tonic F, but it is not clear whether it is F major or F minor. Nielsen frequently departs from F major throughout the concerto, as is evident in the Adagio theme of the work when he uses the horns and bassoons bitonally against the melodic line in the clarinet (see Example 1).

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26 Eric Nelson, “Carl Nielsen’s Koncert For Klarinet Og Orkester, 34.
Additionally, he frequently employs modulation to atonal episodes.\footnote{Ibid., 73} Counterpoint is also employed in Nielsen’s clarinet concerto. For example, the opening melody of the first movement is a fugue that begins with low strings and has a real answer in measure 9 with the entry of the violas and bassoons. When the clarinet enters with the melody in measure 17, the theme is ornamented. There is no countersubject, because the clarinet line immediately transitions the listener to new material. As with Nielsen’s other works, the melody defines the tonality, and there is not a strong emphasis on harmonic structure. According to Nelson, the Adagio section is the only place where the melody seems to have been conceived harmonically, and even then, it is met with bitonality.\footnote{Ibid., 69.} Additionally, the clarinet often stands alone as “a single unharmonized melody against the stark accompaniment of the snare drum.”\footnote{Ibid., 61.} The formal structure is also generally irrelevant in Nielsen’s music, as the form is dictated by the melodic transformations and by shifts of mood.

According to Nelson, there are three melody types employed in the concerto. The first type exhibits an upward curve followed by a downward curve, as in the opening melody in the clarinet (see Example 2). The second hovers around a specific point and then descends, as seen at rehearsal 5 (see Example 3). The third is quite characteristic of Nielsen’s music. In this melody type, the melody notes revolve “with great intensity” around a few notes without any “apparent direction” (see Example 4).\footnote{Ibid., 62.}
As mentioned earlier, motives are very important in Nielsen’s music. The two-measure motive that opens the piece (the upward-moving fifth) returns throughout the work and is developed in a number of ways (see Example 5). For example, the Adagio section inverts the motive to a downward-moving fourth, and it occurs later in the last movement as a downward-moving third. Also, the first movement cadenza uses the motive a number of times and adds ornamentation.

Like the flute concerto, the clarinet concerto features a number of spots where the woodwind parts are prominent. For example, six measures after rehearsal number 29, the bassoon introduces a new melody that is taken over by the clarinet. At rehearsal number 38, the clarinet and bassoon play a lyrical duet in duple meter accompanied by the strings playing triplets.
There are a number of similarities between the woodwind parts in the wind quintet, flute concerto, and clarinet concerto. For example, the lyrical melody in measure 62 in the second movement of the flute concerto is similar to the Adagio melody in the clarinet concerto in rhythm, style, and pitch content. In measure 58 of the first movement of the flute concerto, the flute has a technical passage that is similar to the triplet figure in rehearsal number 32 of the clarinet concerto. In both cases, Nielsen begins the run on a quick duple pick-up that leads into a fast set of triplets (see Examples 6a and 6b).

Example 6a: Carl Nielsen, *Flute Concerto*, mm. 58-59.

Example 6b: Carl Nielsen, *Clarinet Concerto*, m. 32

The variations in the third movement of the wind quintet are comparable to the writings in the two concerti as well. For example, Variation V features a raucous clarinet line that looks and sounds like it could have been composed for the clarinet concerto. It is rhythmically complex, fast-moving, and employs the full range of the instrument (see Example 7).

Example 7: Carl Nielsen, *Wind Quintet*, Movement 3, Variation V, mm. 3-4
Variation X uses polyrhythm between the triplet subdivision of the flute and the duple subdivision of the bassoon, similar to the way in which Nielsen uses the snare drum in various places within the clarinet concerto. In measure 146 of the first movement of the flute concerto, the use of timpani can be compared to the way in which Nielsen uses the snare drum at rehearsal number 10 of the clarinet concerto, as the flutist is accompanied only by the timpani roll (see Examples 8a and 8b).

Example 8a: Carl Nielsen, *Flute Concerto*, m. 146

Example 8b: Carl Nielsen, *Clarinet Concerto*, rn. 10

Finally, both concertos feature a “jagged and syncopated rhythmic figure” that often serves as an ostinato accompaniment.31 By looking at these and other parallels between the three pieces, it is evident that Nielsen had a specific group of people in mind when composing the works, and he was able to capture their idiomatic tendencies and individual personalities in his compositions.

Carl Nielsen’s music is some of the best of the 20th century, though international recognition was not achieved during his lifetime. Until the 1950s, many people tended to equate Scandinavian music with Sibelius and hardly included Nielsen’s music in the conversation. Through the advocacy of conductors like Bernstein and the performance of his music in the 1950s by the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra in Edinburgh, his music spread internationally.

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and he has since been heralded as the prized composer of Denmark. His works are lyrical, melody-driven, attainable for audiences, and expand over a variety of musical genres. His associations with the Wind Quintet of the Royal Orchestra in Copenhagen led to the composition of three of his most famous works that have established themselves into the standard repertoire of woodwind literature.
Bibliography


Scores

