
STASIS AND ENERGY

Danish Paradox or European Issue?

By Colin Roth

Speaking of *Det Uudslukkelige* (The Inextinguishable), the fourth of his symphonies, Nielsen wrote to Emil Holm on 24 July 1914, 'more than the other arts, music is a manifestation of Life, in that it is either completely dead – at that moment when it is not sounding – or completely alive and, therefore, it can exactly express the concept of Life from its most elementary form of utterance to the highest spiritual ecstasy'.¹ That Nielsen should feel music to be so far beyond its sister arts in this respect is to a substantial degree simply a function of his mental 'wiring', that part of our neurological functioning through which each of us experience one of the three primary senses (seeing, hearing and 'feeling') as the strongest for us.² What is certainly true is that music relies on sound, not silence, for its expressive power – as Peter Hauge has observed, 'in order to hear a silence, you have to have a sound'. In this paper we will see how Nielsen explores the relationship between 'stasis', the manifestation of inertia (and thus a substitute for absolute silence) through control of rhythm, texture, colour, pitch and harmony and its polar opposite, energy, to enhance his music's power in representing 'Life'.³

Søren Kierkegaard gave voice to an experience common to artists and thinkers in the 'Romantic' period when he wrote, of anxiety, that 'I must point out that it is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite,

1 ... og Musikken er jo mere end de andre Kunster Livsytring, idet den enten er fuldkommen død – i det Øjeblik den ikke lyder – eller fuldkommen levende, og den kan netop derfor udtrykke Begrebet Liv lige fra den elementæreste Ytringsform til den højeste sjælelige Betagelse. Quoted from *The Nielsen Companion*, ed. Mina Miller, Portland 1994, 627.

2 This observation, and the way in which it is manifest in the motion of our eyes as we think, was made by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in *Frogs into Princes: Neuro Linguistic Programming*, Moab 1979; its implications for our aptitudes and understanding are discussed at length in Colin Roth, *Being Happier*, Sheffield 1997, 54-7.

3 I want to thank Douglas Bostock, whose inspirational commitment to Nielsen's music and support for our efforts to promote Danish culture in Sheffield have helped to provide the resources with which this paper has been written.

whereas anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility'.⁴ The emergence of this oppressive self-consciousness had a marked philosophical consequence, the acknowledgement of 'right-brained' thinking as a distinct form of mental experience. The experience of 'being-in' (Heideggerian language is helpful in clarifying the meaning of Existentialist constructs) now had to be considered alongside the long-established basis of philosophy in rational (left-brained) thought about 'objects' and ideas, and our relation to them.⁵

This recognition of personal experience as an important and valid subject for examination and articulation had been 'in the air' for a good while, emerging from the previous century's long fascination with aesthetics (which we can now recognise as the first study of psychology). By the turn of the nineteenth century it was possible for the English poet William Wordsworth to make a huge claim for 'the poet' who is, he says, 'chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner'.⁶ In sum, Wordsworth was claiming that the artist was more sensitive than 'the common man' and more articulate too; that the artist's expression of their feelings in a work of art gave ordinary people access to a kind and strength of emotion that would otherwise be denied them. This assertion of the artist's role in society, as the only vehicle through which ordinary people could gain access to the highest emotion, was inevitably subject to pressure during the century that followed. In learning from art to open their own eyes and ears, each member of the public gradually came to think of themselves as capable of sensitivity and articulacy, steadily less prepared to accept the artist's claim to be especially gifted in these respects, not least because the arrogance of the artists' claims encouraged ordinary people to consider themselves equal.⁷ That challenge, in turn, led artists to delve ever deeper into their experiential life for more and more arcane and curious manifestations of their particular gifts.⁸ For, without a claim to being special, the artist would cease to be economically viable.⁹ So, in waves through the nineteenth century, artists in all genres chose a variety of different subjects for

4 From *The Concept of Anxiety*, 17 June 1844, quoted in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton 1978 (2000), 139.

5 Colin Roth, *op.cit.*, 19-21. It is worth remembering that the constructs 'objective' and 'subjective' were only invented (by Denis Diderot) in the 1760s (*ibid.*, 11-12.)

6 *Wordsworth & Coleridge Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. W. J. B. Owen, London 1969, 169.

7 George and Weedon Grossmith, *Diary of a Nobody*, in *Punch* 1892.

8 One of the most startling instances of this phenomenon is the little novel, *A Rebour* (*Against Nature*) published in Paris in 1884 by a Belgian civil servant, Joris-Karl Huysmans.

9 Colin Roth, *Interdisciplinary parallels: a study of the creative process in certain European artists, 1880-1914*, (Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1982), 10-22.

attention, producing work that varies hugely in style (generating large numbers of -isms) but always with the same underlying motivation, to demonstrate their value to society.

By the late nineteenth century, the characteristic means by which an artist sought to justify their special place in society was to take some particular idea or stimulus and describe their response to it in very great detail. Thus Proust produced a vast novel from the memories which the taste of a biscuit dipped in a cup of tea brought flooding into his mind; Debussy took particular notions or conceits, usually entirely musical, and transformed them into musical structures in a notably cerebral (Haydnesque) way, and then decorated them with pretty titles, for example the fragrant motif whose transformations constitute 'turning in the air' in *Préludes*, Book 1, number 4, 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir';¹⁰ Monet painted interminable pictures of haystacks, poplars and many other subjects in which we are meant to be interested not in the 'object' being seen by the artist, but rather in the artist's extraordinary ability to see so much.¹¹ Henry James spoke, in the preface to his *Portrait of a Lady*, of the way in which fiction was like a vast building pierced with many windows each yielding a slightly different view of the subject to all the others: 'the spreading field, the human scene, is the "choice of subject"; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form", but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher – without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist'.¹² So this compulsion to present aspects of the artist's personal experience as 'art' was a phenomenon which permeated all European and European-influenced culture, the result of important and inescapable social pressures on the artist in society rather than a matter of fashion or whim.

Danish artists were not exempt from these pressures, and exhibit it in equal measure to their contemporaries. At the Proustian (or Mahlerian) end of this great variety of means by which each artist set out to prove themselves distinct and remarkable, Jens Ferdinand Willumsen spent thirty five years chipping bits and pieces of stone off of, and adding chunks of marble, gilt and much else besides to *Det store Relief* (The Great Relief).¹³

His contemporary, Vilhelm Hammershøi, worked at the opposite extreme, finding infinite beauty and variety in a tiny spectrum of domestic interior subjects (as well as a very few landscapes, architectural subjects and figure studies) whose gra-

10 The title is taken from Baudelaire's sonnet 'Harmonie du soir'.

11 Paul Hayes Tucker, *Monet in the '90s: the series paintings*, London 1990.

12 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Harmondsworth (1881) 1963, 1970.

13 Illustrated in *Young Composers 1960-1996*, the Danish Composers' Society programme book for the 3rd Composers' Biennale, København, 2-17 March 1996, 13, with accompanying articles by Svend Ravnkilde, 10-4. I am grateful to Svend Ravnkilde for drawing my attention to this and other resources while preparing this article.

dations of colour and form manifest precisely the ‘stasis’ to which I refer in Nielsen’s music.¹⁴ Hammershøi’s subject is the light and shade, or rather, his experience of it as an emotional force impacting on a familiar environment. In its calm modulation of colour, tone, texture and form, Hammershøi’s art invites us to join with his ‘being-in’, his absorption in the experience. His paintings are an invitation to immersion within the artist’s sensory world, so that our own ‘palette’ of colour is suppressed in favour of his, and our habitual lust for activity is toned down to the point where we can suspend time and simply ‘be’, with him.

Though Hammershøi’s paintings carry no sense, for me at least, of Kierkegaard’s ‘anxiety unto death’, no sense of forboding, they do clearly inhabit the philosopher’s world in the way that they suspend expectation and invite us to wonder what might be possible, while refusing to hint at any particular kind of possibility. Hammershøi’s interiors embody ‘stasis’, being stuck, and they illustrate how good art (as a medium) is at conveying feeling without time. The calm textures and forms diminish our awareness of activity – and even when a figure is included within a room, or an open door or window hints at human life outside the picture’s frame, it is a contemplative mode of life to which the pictures refer.

Literature, because it is necessarily sequential (that is, we have to read through it, and cannot – as we can with a picture – take in the overall form at a glance before ‘entering’ the frame), is rather better than art at managing the juxtaposition of contemplative with more vigorous elements. In shifting the balance between aesthetic dominans and the narrative screw, an author can manipulate our sense of liveliness and suggest changes in pace in much the same way as a composer – but only match the musician’s resource in colour and texture with the greatest difficulty.

So, does Nielsen use a contrast between stasis and energy as an expressive device? There can be little doubt of that. Indeed, the idea seems to have appealed to him as a notion before he began to explore it in direct musical terms: the story of *Saul og David* (1901) tells first of the old king’s impatience, his anger and frustration, and of the consequences for him of sacrificing to God without waiting for Samuel to appear and fulfil his priestly role. In breaking out of his enforced ‘stasis’, Saul offends – and is displaced by David, the embodiment of energy, ‘life’. Just as in life, so in this opera, anger and spite are the emotions of a man who is trapped by his own incapacity, by his inability to understand the situation or find a rational way of dealing with it. David, in the long tradition of ‘idiots’, naïve innocents with the blissful energy of youth (to which John Fellow has referred in his article on *Saul og David*) represents the vigour of life, the potential for a future for ‘God’s people’ – both in his victory over Goliath and his love (in the opera) for Mikal.

14 Illustrated in *Vilhelm Hammershøi and Danish Art at the Turn of the Century*, Poul Vad, New Haven 1992.

Just as in the nearly contemporary work of the Viennese artist, Egon Schiele, there is a hint of allegory, the possibility that these characters are projections of one self in different states. Schiele's 'Doppelgänger' images of himself mirrored and doubled, or sometimes transformed to show himself with his patron, Gustav Klimt, or of the 'Dead Mother', still bearing her unborn child, are comparable manifestations of this theme, which Freud would have argued was a manifestation of a mythic (but inescapable) struggle between a son's force for new life and his father's clinging to power.¹⁵

In *Saul og David*, I hear little musical sign of this narrative being embodied in the textures and structures supporting the story: the word is allowed to dominate, and the story is told with great power and tenderness – but keeps moving.

But in the early symphonies Nielsen plays fondly with the 'pedal' device, exploiting its capacity to heighten tonal awareness and articulate structures in a way that is positively reminiscent of Haydn. The *Sinfonia Espansiva* (1910-12) carefully manages levels of energy, both between movements (as when contrasting the idyllic second movement with its precursor) but also within them, for example in the long and placid climb (from b. 284 of the first movement) towards the exhilarating climax at b. 388.

There is a sea-change in *The Inextinguishable* (1914-16): now the composer's intention, clarified for us in surviving letters written during the symphony's composition, to embody 'Life itself', requires that contrasting near-Death, the stasis whose very stillness throws life's energy into relief. There are so many passages in the symphony which might be cited in illustration of this contrast between stasis and energy: the music is already becalmed, if only briefly, at b. 41. For me the most vivid example is less obviously inert – but in 'capturing' the timpani and double-basses' *pizzicato* 'tune', the gloriously soaring violas and 'celli, in towering momentarily above their cousins the violins (bb. 559-83), bring into my mind a glass imprisonment, shimmering and hovering like a sonic force-field around the angry but hamstrung pluckers. The rising of the lower strings over their companions seems to me to embody an assertion of exceptional effort, an unmistakably narrative strand in the music which, while not stepping beyond polite abstraction, clearly signals that Nielsen means us to take his 'programme' as having real *musical* substance and meaning.

That the whole of *The Inextinguishable* 'breathes' in a structure of energy emboldened and then displaced, only to be overtaken by even greater effort, is self-evident. The challenge for musical analysts is not to recognise that it is happening, but to recognise its significance. For a description of this symphony which implies a simple passage from one key centre to another, from 'A' to 'B' – in other words, a linear

15 Freud's psycho-analytical theories are as much an example of the phenomenon I am suggesting is characteristic of the creative process in the later nineteenth century as any of the artistic works I have cited. See Colin Roth (1982), *op.cit.*, 48-64.

journey of any sort – is simply wrong. Though such patterns do exist and are interesting to explore and elucidate, they are no more than one, subsidiary, level in the music. It is this three-dimensional breathing, the struggle between that which is ‘inextinguishable’ and that stasis which seeks to bind it, which is the symphony’s life force, its ‘meaning’. Here is no ‘object’ which, like a Cartesian reality, can be picked over rationally and mentally disposed in accordance with politely ordered rules. This music grabs us in the guts, pulls hard, releases, tugs and holds – and in the process takes us to a sort of *emotional* and internal higher plane. This music, in other words, catches the right-handed part of our brain, addresses our feelings directly and sends calculatedly confusing signals to the perpetually rationalising left, forcing us to ‘be-in’ the music, not outside it in judgement or mere observation.

Here, Carl Nielsen achieves what all of his European contemporaries held to be their hope and objective: he draws us into his own emotional world so that we feel his ‘struggle’, the ‘force of Life itself’ in absolute intimacy with him, and he uses all the distinctive strengths of the musical genre (management of experience through time; management of emotion through intensity of sound [dynamics] and level of activity; control of pitch and colour, and even of the *sight* of the orchestra, the musical theatre of those soaring lower strings and the battling timpani) to be able to ‘talk’ to the greatest number of people with the greatest possible force.

We don’t really have a critical vocabulary that can cope with multi-dimensional musical structures. Although, as David Fanning points out, Schenker speaks of the idea, the published analyses of Nielsen conform to ancient precedent and look for ways of proving that his music always aims to ‘go from “A” to “B”’. The sense in which Nielsen, like James and all the others we have mentioned, also varies our closeness to the music’s point of activity – as though we are moving in and out as well as along – is perfectly expressed in the absolutely contemporary Theory of Relativity (Albert Einstein) as well as the philosophical writings and other art works that we have been discussing; but not in the musicologist’s opus.

That linear analysis of *The Inextinguishable* misses the point has not been the subject of earlier comment is only mildly surprising, as the linear description is still valid as a description of one of the music’s structural strands. That linear analysis of the Fifth Symphony (1920-22) went unchallenged for so long¹⁶ is even more surprising.

The really extraordinary thing, though is that no-one seems to have spotted this solution to ‘the problem’ of the *Sinfonia Semplice* (1924-25), which sails into glorious intuitive focus when linear models are jettisoned in favour of a multi-dimensional model which recognises stasis and energy as opposing forces which rule the

16 David Fanning, *Nielsen Symphony No 5*, Cambridge 1997, provides a splendidly surprised account of the work’s critical history as well as a host of constructive observations.

motivic, tonal and structural pitch. Perhaps we would have seen it sooner if Nielsen had written a letter explaining what he was trying to do? But then, remember what he said about music being the ‘best’ of all the arts – why should he be a composer at all, if not because he thought his music more powerfully communicative than words?

Seeing the importance of this structural principal in Nielsen’s later music, and recognising its basis in the concerns that were general to all European artists in his day (in other words, the *zeitgeist* which prompted artists to justify their position by embodying their own experience as artworks) raises the intriguing paradox that another of Denmark’s great gifts to world culture – its preservation in the hands of the Royal Danish Ballet of the Bournonville style and August Bournonville’s choreography – should have survived precisely because ballet is virtually incapable of dealing with the social imperatives we have been observing.

Ballet, more than any other art, is incapable of expressing inertia or stasis. The only exceptions I have ever experienced are the great moment in *Sylfiden* (La Sylphide) where the *corps de ballet* surround the dying sylph, brutally maimed by James’s unthinking greedy urge to possess her, and magically reflect the fluttering decline of her breathing, her heartbeat, in their wonderfully understated *port de bras*; and the equally extraordinary moment in Kenneth Macmillan’s choreography for Prokofiev’s *Romeo & Juliet*, where, while the music rushes headlong and tells us of her inner turmoil, Lynn Seymour’s Juliet remained absolutely still, rooted to her bed and staring out into the auditorium as if the maelstrom’s force held her tight.

Ballet, too, is inescapably bound to the objective. Though many choreographers have tried, and some may even have succeeded, in showing inwardness and meditation, in the end ballet depends on you looking at someone else doing something, and that inevitably encourages a response which is ‘objective’ rather than one which draws the viewer into empathetic identification.

So, contrary to the legend of economic decline touted by the standard ballet texts as an explanation for the Danish ballet’s stagnation – which is at odds with the account of Denmark’s economic situation in the later nineteenth century given recently by Niels Thomsen,¹⁷ and at odds with Nielsen’s and Hammershøi’s economic success in a Danish cultural life clearly full of the highest quality work and great vitality – we have a quite different explanation for what happened to the ballet.

The ballet went into virtual hibernation not because of lack of funds, but because people lost interest in an art form which was inherently incapable (or nearly so) of addressing the issues they – and the artists speaking to them – believed to be of central importance. While music, art and literature could engage people in emo-

17 Niels Thomsen, *Hovedstrømninger 1870-1914*, Odense 1998, reviewed by Steffen Heiberg in *Politiken*, 13 September 1998.

tional journeys that took them inside the psyches of their artists, the ballet continued to offer vikings and peasants, folk dances from distant places and music by composers whose output had long since fallen out of favour in the concert halls. At a time when the ballet in every other European country except Russia (where Imperial patronage meant that other rules applied) had modernised, displacing male dancers from as early as the 1840s with the 'much more appealing' young ladies that the male members of the audience were prepared to spend money to see, Danish audiences continued to support a 'modest' ballet, enjoying male dancing and women costumed respectably in tales of derring-do and romantic love that had long since fallen out of favour everywhere else.¹⁸

So in the end our Danish paradox is not Carl Nielsen, who seems to be entirely European in sharing the same emotional, aesthetic and structural concerns and interests as his finest contemporaries in all the other artistic genres. The Danish paradox is the survival of the ballet, blissfully neglected and allowed to stagnate almost untroubled (barring only the intrusion of a little Russian vim in the mid-twentieth century) until Erik Bruhn and Lillian Moore's 1961 book¹⁹ and Disney's *Ballerina*²⁰ blew the lid off this extraordinary wonder – the near-perfect survival of ballet as it had been danced in Paris in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and up to the mid 1830s but no later. Why, how, did it survive? Well I wouldn't wish to be rude about Danes, but in Britain (and I think in the USA) if something is out of fashion and losing money because people don't really want it any more, it gets closed down. In Denmark, it seems, as long as the thing doesn't offend and doesn't cause trouble, it gets left alone as long as somebody is interested in keeping it going. Who is right? Who knows – but we should be grateful that somehow, Denmark has blessed us with a wonderful means of staying in touch with the most perfect era of the classical ballet *and* has also contributed Carl Nielsen to our great European culture.

18 Theophile Gautier, writing about the Elsslers in *La Volière* (7 May 1838), said 'nothing is more distasteful than a man who shows his red neck, his big muscular arms, his legs with the calves of a parish beadle, and all his strong massive frame shaken by leaps and *pirouettes*'. Cyril Beaumont (ed.), *The Romantic Ballet*, (1932) undated reprint by Dance Horizons, New York – now out of print – but the material is available in Ivor Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, London 1986.

19 Erik Bruhn and Lillian Moore, *Bournonville and Ballet Technique, Studies and Comments on August Bournonville's Études choréographiques*, 1961, reprinted by Dance Horizons, New York.

20 *Ballerina*, directed by Norman Campbell and starring Jenny Agutter and Kirsten Simone as well as including appearances by many of the then stars of the Royal Danish Ballet, was produced by Walt Disney and appeared in 1965.

A B S T R A C T

In examining Carl Nielsen's expressive intentions and formal strategies in an interdisciplinary and historical context, this article shows how closely Nielsen's aspirations and practice parallel those of his European contemporaries.

One strand of this interrelationship between art and its social context is manifest in the recognition by philosophers, Kierkegaard perhaps the first amongst them, of the value and significance of right-brained thought, the experience of life, as a legitimate object for consideration and understanding, where previously only left-brained, objective thought had been considered worthy of the philosopher's attention.

Tracing Nielsen's developing interest in the embodiment of experience and feeling in the form and substance of his art, not just in its narrative content, it is argued that traditional linear analysis is inadequate to describe Nielsen's symphonic writing, and that a 'three-dimensional' model that can also account for the expressive meaning and value of relative levels of activity, 'stasis and energy', is required.

By contrast with Nielsen's success in developing musical forms that embody these 'concerns of the time', Danish ballet, one of the great achievements of the Golden Age, faded from sight during the same period. The article asserts Nielsen's place within the broad range of European cultural life by contrasting it with the uniquely Danish survival of a form whose particular expressive character led to its disappearance or transformation nearly everywhere else.