

Traditionalist Thought in British Music: Robert Simpson's Promotion of Nielsen and Sibelius

There are few musicians whose life and work reveal the cultural connections between British and Northern European music as clearly as Robert Simpson. A composer and writer of distinctive views and uncompromising opinions on art, Simpson not only left his stamp on twentieth-century musical life in the United Kingdom as the most important advocate for the work of Carl Nielsen and as an authority on Jean Sibelius, but also as the composer who strove most intensively to follow the paths of his two great Nordic colleagues, with unique results. Simpson's creative work parallels his aesthetic and analytical writings, in which he aimed to establish Nielsen and Sibelius as the classic exemplars of an evolutionary, anti-avant-gardist musical history, in the succession of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Bruckner. This constellation of figures and aesthetic assumptions gives rise to some valuable questions, which demand more detailed attention. Why are two Northern European composers of such great importance for a British one? What concept of music history underpins this model? And what more general views on music did Simpson seek to disseminate?

To illuminate Simpson's opinions and the historical context in which they emerged, we have to look at some characteristics of the development that British music underwent during the decades prior to his birth in 1921. It is not by accident that German musicology didn't pay much attention to the history and contemporary state of twentieth-century British music until a relatively late stage. The reasons for this lack of interest could be located in the historical relationship between German and British musical life as well as in the very different ways in which musical aesthetics and composing styles had developed in the two nations. By the time Robert Simpson was born it was already obvious that the musical tastes and practices of the German-speaking world had ceased to be a model for many British composers, and that an epoch of German stylistic domination had ended. For much of the nineteenth century, composition in the United Kingdom, viewed from German perspective, must have appeared little more than a provincial outpost of the Leipzig or Berlin conservatories, shaped by the fashionable classicist tradition of the time that took first Mendelssohn and later Brahms as its models. That Britain produced composers like William Sterndale Bennett or C. Hubert Parry, who could be characterized as true masters of the classicist idiom and whose music stands comparison with German contemporaries of similar thought, was no argument for the assertion of British musical independence from the aesthetically conservative parts of German music life. When a new generation of composers appeared on the stage in the early years of the twentieth century, the influence of academic classicism began to fade, as it did in Germany, but in Britain, where anti-classicist tendencies, as they were represented in Germany by Wagner, Liszt and their followers, had come to influence much later, it left a weightier legacy: since these days traditionalist thoughts are a dominating factor of British music. The decline of German academism gave place to explore new concepts of musical traditionalism. This shift coincided with composers' growing national consciousness, and the search for more ostentatious national styles of composition increasingly began to occupy British minds around 1900. They explored the creative possibilities of folk songs and dances, and took greater interest in the music of Tudor and Stuart composers as they sought to revitalize their techniques. One of the principal ideas in twentieth-century German music history was the linear and organic progression from late nineteenth-century

chromatic tonality to atonality, dodecaphony and serialism. The development of British music, however, didn't fit into this model of historical progress. Instead, it was the tendency to reconcile traditionalist and modernist aesthetics that remained a characteristic feature of British composition. All in all, the situation wasn't suitable for developing a radical British modernist wave, comparable to Schoenberg and his followers.

When Robert Simpson began his creative career after the Second World War, only a few British composers had adopted serialist techniques, and the neoclassical idiom of Hindemith, though it was important for the development of many composers, like Michael Tippett, never became such a dominant style as in Germany. Most composers had no interest in a radical break with nineteenth-century traditions and genres: different trends and schools existed, but they were less radically separated from each other than in Germany, and built their music on tonal principles. There was widespread interest in new methods of using tonality, and Robert Simpson was clearly a product of this cultural environment. Tonality for him, in the second half of the twentieth century, was still the fundamental condition for creating great music. And all great music, he believed, was rooted deeply in tradition. This traditionalism is shown in the genres in which he composed: between the mid-1940s and his death in 1997, he created a body of work dominated by 11 symphonies and 15 string quartets.

The maverick is not an uncommon figure in twentieth-century British music, and Simpson certainly belongs within this category. Alongside his compatriots, he appears a somewhat isolated figure: not only did he never write anything on a British national subject or for an official occasion, but nearly all of the elements which have formed the popular image of British music since the late nineteenth century are missing from his work. There are no references to the style cultivated by Parry and Edward Elgar in their ceremonial pieces, and there are no hints of folk songs, dances and marches, as they emerge in the work of Vaughan Williams. His conception of form suggests some relationship with the English Fantasy (or »Phantasy«) style, but this is never as apparent as, for example, in the music of Edmund Rubbra, Bernard Stevens, and some works by Benjamin Britten. Such resistance to the dominant trends of his native country's musical life leads to the conclusion that Simpson didn't assign any importance to the idea of being regarded as a British composer in an emphatic sense.¹

Simpson's artistic aims led in another direction. His views on music were heavily influenced by the writings of Donald Francis Tovey, who was one of the last British composers who followed the Brahmsian path directly and rejected both modernist and folklorist tendencies. Tovey wasn't a model for Simpson in terms of compositional style, but rather as a theorist and aesthete. Like Tovey, Simpson was deeply attracted to the Viennese Classics, especially to Beethoven, and he learned to understand their art of composing through the essays that Tovey wrote on their works. In this way Simpson adapted Tovey's claims, namely that the fundamental character of a classical masterwork lies in its perfect handling of tonality, momentum and proportion. All of these factors are technical terms for describing the classical idea of »unity in diversity« at different compositional levels: unity in diversity through the contrast between a principal tonality and its subordinate functions and other tonal centres; unity in diversity via the rhythmical arrangement of the work's individual sections; and unity in the diversity of the different parts of the work themselves, being geared to each other in terms of length. This makes Simpson, in succession to Tovey, an advocate of the idea of music as an art of movement in time, duration, and its articulation through harmony and rhythm.

¹ His biographer, Donald Macauley, points out that Simpson's socialist and pacifist views were the reason for his resistance to English musical nationalism, too: Donald Macauley, *The Power of Robert Simpson. A Biography*, Milton Keynes 2013, p. 9.

Simpson thought of music as a manifestation of life, and he found Carl Nielsen's statement that »music is life and like it inextinguishable« to be the precise summary of his own opinion. Simpson's idea of life was more biological than psychological. A perfect composition for him resembled an organism, in which all the elements worked together to keep the whole alive. It is not surprising, in this context, that Simpson was sceptical about the popular conception of music as a medium for subjective personal expression. Music, he believed, did not represent the concrete feelings or thoughts of the subject who had created it, but rather rendered the listener awestruck, and prompted an emotional response in this way.² The personal beliefs of a composer didn't matter, what was important was rather what they had achieved in practice. Simpson criticized nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers and their preoccupation with cultivating personal stylistic trademarks, which he believed resulted in mannerism rather than the creation of more classically beautiful works.³ Personality was revealed not by what one wrote about oneself, but through one's deeds. So Simpson sought to be what he called an »objective« or »life-sized« artist;⁴ that is, a composer, who attempted to be convincing not through the use of rhetorical devices but by creating a »living« music, consistent with the ideals and assumptions described above.

Unlike Tovey, Simpson's traditionalist views didn't lead him into being a conservative composer in an academic sense. For him, progression and change were an inevitable part of historical development, and a composer was a product of his time and a successor to those who had preceded him. He should learn from them, but not try to imitate their style. While history progressed, new discoveries and designs changed the nature and shape of art: a great artist in this way is always an explorer. Simpson's idea of tradition aimed not to elevate a particular »classical« style of composition, but to produce works of classical perfection out of the materials that the historical evolution of music had generated.

Simpson strongly disliked the atonality, dodecaphony and avant-gardist trends of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, because he saw them as a diversion from the classical ideal, a mannerist sequel to nineteenth-century romanticism.⁵ That doesn't mean, however, that he disliked dissonance itself. Rather, his own music cultivated dissonance to a high degree, and chords that contain all twelve notes frequently find their place in his harmonic repertory, while traditional major-minor-tonality is found only in his earlier works, and mostly modified; the forms of his works are also often far from nineteenth-century conventions. Nothing in his work could have been written during an earlier epoch. And there were few countries except Britain where such a compositional style could have developed – apart from Denmark and Finland.⁶

Here we reach Sibelius and Nielsen, who, Simpson was convinced, acted both as the most important explorers of new musical paths and as the most perfect masters of classical composition in the first half of the century. In a comparative essay, written in their centenary year (1965), he described the two composers in the following way:

»Almost every aspect we examine reveals them as diametrical opposites, yet they are brothers and their differences in some deep way complete each other. This does not mean that either is in any sense an incomplete artist (two more comprehensively masterly musicians have not lived in this century) but that the two of them sum up the positive side of the human condition in northern Europe in their own time. What they have to say, moreover, is powerful and relevant now.«⁷

² Simpson, »Composing« (1959), in: Macauley, *The Power of Robert Simpson*, pp. 319–25.

³ Macauley, *The Power of Robert Simpson*, p. 309.

⁴ Simpson describes his image of an ideal artist in *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, revised edition, London 1979, pp. 17–22.

⁵ »Musicians Talking. Symphonic thinking, avant-garde and romanticism«, in: *Tonic* 11 (Summer 2001), pp. 7–24, especially p. 21.

⁶ As it is revealed, for example, in Vagn Holmboe's and Joonas Kokkonen's music.

⁷ Later worked into *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, this passage on p. 190.

Both interested Simpson through their handling of tonality. He described Nielsen as the first significant developer of what he initially called »progressive tonality« and which he later preferred to name »emergent tonality«, meaning the progression from one tonal centre at the beginning of a work to another, where it ends. Sibelius, Simpson points out, was a conservative in terms of the overall tonal layout of his symphonies, all of which end in the same key as that in which they began. There are nevertheless tensions between tonal centres within his works, but he resolves them in favour of a governing tonality.⁸ Both composers in their later works show a tendency toward non-classicist forms and athematism, which also became a characteristic of Simpson's own creative development. Nielsen's technique of generating harmony from interval constellations left its mark on him, as did Sibelius's art of assembling forms through the transformation of tempi. In the art of both he found alternatives to »thematicism«,⁹ as he called the way of composing without notes unrelated to a main theme or motive as well as the tendency for music analysts to look at compositions only for motivic relations. Simpson's idea of musical organicism wasn't based on themes or motives. They were important as waymarkers in the course of a work, but couldn't form the work's basis, because motives and themes were themselves a product of the music's fundamental elements: harmony, interval, and rhythm. The more important factor for achieving musical coherence was the momentum of the music. Simpson hence challenged the dodecaphonist concept of organicism, which had developed principally from thematicist ideas.

In 1951, Simpson had joined the music department of the BBC, where he worked until 1980 as recording producer and broadcaster. He was very concerned with enlarging the audience's knowledge and their musical repertoire, so he took the opportunity to support composers whose works weren't often played in Britain. For example, he became the leading British advocate of Bruckner, promoted the unconventional symphonist Havergal Brian, and introduced some works by Vagn Holmboe to British listeners. Of course, he also used his office to work intensively for Sibelius and Nielsen, and engaged musicians, organized performances and planned broadcasts. In addition, he gave lectures about the composers and their music for both radio and television. It could be argued that Simpson championed Nielsen and Sibelius's work intensively, because he wasn't very satisfied with the music of many celebrated British composers. He disliked Elgar, »the dreamy, religious romantic«,¹⁰ was no admirer of Britten, who »always seems to me to take the easy way out«,¹¹ and though he called Vaughan Williams a composer of »sufficient stature«, he used him in his Nielsen book as a contrasting figure to present the Dane as the greater master.¹² Considering the context for Simpson's commitment to the two Nordic symphonists, his advocacy not only aimed to install them as classics in the British musical world, but also acted as an aesthetic bulwark against avant-gardist tendencies, which were prominent in Germany and France and which became an object of interest for other British musicians in the 1950s. Because Sibelius had been established in Britain around three decades earlier, as writer and broadcaster he paid more attention to the lesser-known Nielsen.

Simpson, who became acquainted with Nielsen's music through records and scores shortly after the war, was not the first person to introduce the Danish composer to a British audience. Nielsen himself had made an impression when he conducted his music in London in 1923, but a more lasting interest in his work only came after the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra visited the Edinburgh Festival in

⁸ Robert Simpson, Carl Nielsen, p. 194, pp. 203–05.

⁹ Some remarkable passages criticizing thematicism can be found in *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, p. 216, and in his writings on Beethoven (for example in *Robert Simpson on Beethoven. Essays, Lectures, and Talks*, ed. Lionel Pike, Hull 1986, p. 38).

¹⁰ Simpson, Carl Nielsen, p. 48.

¹¹ Macauley, The Power of Robert Simpson, p. 247.

¹² Simpson, Carl Nielsen, p. 85.

1950, where they played the Fifth Symphony. This concert was such a success that they were invited to London the following year to perform the Fourth. Simpson had not had any influence over these events, but he became the main driving force for much of the activity that followed.

Using the interest generated by the Radio Symphony concerts, Simpson tried to arrange a Carl Nielsen Festival, for which he undertook the task of writing an introduction to Nielsen's entire works. The festival never materialized, but Simpson's book, *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, published in 1952, became a standard study of its subject.¹³ In an extended second edition, which appeared in 1979, Simpson integrated the material on Sibelius from his 1965 Nielsen-Sibelius centenary essay, and so the volume became a study of both composers.

Viewing the present state of British musical life, Simpson may not have succeeded in achieving a complete paradigm shift in favour of his aesthetics of classical composition. But he surely helped Sibelius and Nielsen to become part of the regular repertory of British orchestras, and among the most popular and frequently performed composers of their generation. Simpson secured the rank of the one, and did decisive work to establish the rank of the other. Traditionalism in the Simpsonian sense is still strong in British music, and there are composers working today heavily influenced by Simpson's views and works, such as John Pickard and Matthew Taylor. In summary, then, Simpson's lifelong campaign for his classical ideals, of which his propagation of Nielsen and Sibelius formed an important part, was not without success.

¹³ Simpson, *Carl Nielsen*, p. 12.