

Daniel M. Grimley

## **Austerity Symphonies: Carl Nielsen and the Politics of British Music Criticism, 1945–1955**

Symposion »Analyse und Aufklärung, »Public History« und Vermarktung. Methodologie, Ideologie und gesellschaftliche Orientierung der Musikwissenschaft in (und zu) Nordeuropa nach 1945«

Beitragsarchiv des Internationalen Kongresses der Gesellschaft für Musikforschung, Mainz 2016 – »Wege der Musikwissenschaft«, hg. von Gabriele Buschmeier und Klaus Pietschmann, Mainz 2018

Veröffentlicht unter der Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 im Katalog der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek (<https://portal.dnb.de>) und auf [schott-campus.com](https://schott-campus.com)  
© 2018 | Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG

**gfm**  
GESELLSCHAFT FÜR  
MUSIKFORSCHUNG

## **Austerity Symphonies. Carl Nielsen and the Politics of British Music Criticism, 1945–1955**

On 15 November 1947, members of the »Exploratory Concert Society« gathered at St Martin's College of Art on the Charing Cross Road in London for their seventh concert of the season, a recital given by Danish violinist Henry Holst and the British pianist and composer Harold Truscott. The programme featured three unusual works by Carl Nielsen, who was then not well known in the United Kingdom: his *Chaconne*, the *Theme and Variations* for piano, and the Second Violin Sonata.<sup>1</sup> An unsigned note from the concert, preserved among the papers of the Robert Simpson Archive in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and presumably written by Simpson himself, declared boldly that: »while the concise harmonic style of Sibelius has left few English composers untouched, Nielsen's remarkable contrapuntal manner has had few chances of making itself felt«. The note went on to claim that: »were his powerful symphonies played here as often as those of Sibelius, new trends in English music might well occur: his six masterpieces in that form will[,] in architecture, scoring, and richness and beauty of invention[,] be found at least equal to any tothers [sic] of our time.«

This text is significant in a number of respects: firstly, as a confident and prescient analysis of the imminent shift in the reception of Carl Nielsen's music in the United Kingdom that was about to take place in the early 1950s in which Robert Simpson was a pivotal figure (as Paolo Muntoni has shown<sup>2</sup>); secondly, as a sign of the depth of Sibelius's well-known legacy in mid twentieth-century British music (and as an early instance of the now familiar convention by which Nielsen's music was often coupled and compared with that of his Finnish contemporary); and, most importantly, as an insight into the tensions and debates that underpinned British music criticism in the decade following the Second World War. These tensions emerge increasingly as the note proceeds, through its elaboration of a revisionary model of twentieth-century musical development. »The older modern symphonists fall into two camps«, it continues. »There are those who, like Sibelius, Strauss, Bax, and Franz Schmidt, think naturally and predominantly in terms of harmony: the other group, of whom Mahler and Nielsen are pioneers, bring a new transparency to the orchestra by writing melodically for each instrument, thinning the »middle« of the harmony by separating it into clear strands.« It is through this unexpected comparison with Mahler, and with his emphasis on the linear-contrapuntal dimension of music, the note suggests, that the genuine progressiveness and originality of Nielsen's music can be identified. »One cannot go on inventing new chords for ever, but the resources of melody are infinite«, the note argues. »That is why the most vital modern composers are taking inspiration from the Sixteenth Century, and from Mahler, Nielsen, and Vaughan Williams«, it concludes. »The clogged texture of much of Walton's symphony [sic] shows only too simply the limitations of harmony as such.«<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald Macauley, *The Power of Robert Simpson. A Biography*, Milton Keynes 2013. Also relevant is Arnold Whittall's brilliantly succinct review of Macauley's book, in: *Music & Letters* 95 (2014), pp. 138–40. For assistance with the Robert Simpson papers at the Bodleian Library, I am indebted to Martin Holmes.

<sup>2</sup> Paolo Muntoni, »Carl Nielsen in the United Kingdom«, in: *Carl Nielsen Studies* 5 (2012), ed. Niels Krabbe, pp. 165–95, based on material from his excellent 2011 Copenhagen University MA thesis, »Den britiske reception af Carl Nielsen«.

<sup>3</sup> »Exploratory Concert Society/VII/Carl Nielsen Concert/Saturday November 15<sup>th</sup>. 1947. At/2.45 p.m./(St Martin's School of Art, Charing Cross Road, W.C.2)/Henry Holst/(Violin)/Harold Truscott/(Pianoforte)«.

Tracking Nielsen's early reception in the United Kingdom, as part of the broader engagement with Finnish and Scandinavian music, inevitably reveals more about British musical aesthetics, and about the status of British music criticism in particular, than it does about Nielsen's work. Professional writing on music in Britain in the late 1940s and early 1950s still remained a predominantly journalistic pursuit, despite the growing size and profile of university music departments and the legacy of academics such as Edward Dent.<sup>4</sup> Reading many of the essays and articles on Scandinavian music from the period, it is hard to escape a lingering sense of epistemological anxiety: the feeling that musicology was not yet an entirely respectable British intellectual pursuit, or that the boundaries between scholarship and criticism were permeable and not formally defined.

In that sense, music criticism faced a particular challenge in the strongly applied, vocational climate that pervaded British culture in the immediate aftermath of the war.<sup>5</sup> As Stefan Collini suggests, »in literary and cultural terms, the period after 1945 thus saw a self-conscious return to values and forms of expression identified as quintessentially English, as a reaction against the equally self-conscious internationalism of inter-war high Modernism«. For Collini, this renewed insularity both reflected historic British reservations about the value of intellectual discourse more widely – reservations that concealed deeper ideological assumptions about class, authority, and national character that came under increasing strain as Britain edged slowly and resentfully toward decolonisation in the late 1940s – and also prompted a significant modulation of language or register, a more explicit sense of social responsibility and the need for public accessibility rather than elite knowledge. »One can see examples of this return to the vernacular in much of the poetry and prose of the late 1940s and early 1950s«, Collini suggests, pointing to the work of Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis, »and it is not, I think, too fanciful to see a kind of analogue to this development in the vogue for »ordinary language« philosophy during this period, a philosophical style that evinced some of the same hostility to high-flown or overly abstract ideas, which it often stigmatised as »foreign«.«<sup>6</sup>

The implications of this shift for British music criticism, and for its reception of Scandinavian music, are considerable: the need to appear sufficiently modern and contemporary was difficult to resolve alongside the desire for plain-speaking and directness of expression. Scandinavian music, and Nielsen's work in particular, might seem retrospectively to have been strategically well-placed to achieve a critical and popular breakthrough in this highly charged aesthetic atmosphere. But it equally touched on many of the fault-lines that ran through British musical circles in the post-war era, especially the conflicting claims of national style, continental modernism, internationalism, abstraction, anachronism and tradition that so frequently underpinned writing on contemporary music.<sup>7</sup> As Simon Phillippo has argued, Robert Simpson was no less keenly engaged in such debates than his contemporaries – from Ralph Vaughan Williams and William Walton to Benjamin Britten, Michael Tippett, Elizabeth Lutyens and Edmund Rubbra.<sup>8</sup> Scandinavian music became an instrumental tool in these discussions, both as a point of resistance and a model for advancement.

---

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed contextual study, see Annegret Fauser, »The Scholar behind the Medal: Edward J. Dent (1876–1957) and the Politics of Music History«, in: *The Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 139 (2014), pp. 235–60.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the argument in Robert L. Jacobs's essay, »Appreciating Contemporary Music«, in: *The Musical Times* 96 (1955), pp. 418–19.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds. Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford 2006, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion in the first chapter, »Music and Cultural Renewal«, in Heather Wiebe's *Britten's Unquiet Past*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 16–40.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Phillippo, »Simpson, Modernism, and Relevance«, in: *Robert Simpson, Composer. Essays, Interviews, Recollections*, ed. Jürgen Schaarwächter, Hildesheim 2013, pp. 49–56.

Emergent from the reception of Nielsen's music in the United Kingdom are three critical assumptions or hypotheses. Firstly, that the Scandinavian symphony constituted part of a much broader repertoire of works that collapsed the historical (if not geographical) distance between the composition of Sibelius and Nielsen's last major orchestral works (from the mid-1920s) and the late 1940s into an ahistoric symphonic practice. Discussion is frequently marked by an awkward synchronicity in which Nielsen, alongside Sibelius, becomes the avatar of a Beethovenian symphonic practice that is simultaneously contemporary and also historically authenticised: a process signalled by the adoption of the term »symphonist« as opposed to composer or creative artist.

Secondly, such authenticating claims were reliant on the idea of the symphony as an ethical or moral project, bound up with humanistic visions of community and social responsibility. As Sanna Pederson and others have shown, such claims were an integral part of the aesthetic discourse surrounding the development of the symphony concert as cultural practice in the 1820s, and were endorsed a century later by the writings of critics such as Paul Bekker.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Bekker emphasised the symphony's socially formative potential (»gesellschaftsbildende Fähigkeit«), however, British critics in the late 1940s and early 1950s tended to talk instead of the genre's rigour, clarity, logic, health, and restraint: qualities which Scandinavian music was assumed to embody particularly intensively.

The third critical assumption guiding such responses was a commitment to the idea of the symphony as imminent critique – a musical form that inescapably reflected the values, tensions, and instabilities of contemporary life, but which, through its resilience and universality, ultimately retained an optimistic, transformative, and forward-looking quality. It is through this sense of an upward trajectory, and its associated faith in the genre's regenerative potential, that the British notion of symphonic immanence in the late 1940s diverged sharply from the social criticism of the Frankfurt School (though I suspect that Theodor W. Adorno's »Glosse über Sibelius«, written in 1938, was not known in the United Kingdom until much later). No less significant was the assumption that such an immanent meaning was both natural and unideological. As Anthony Hartley loudly proclaimed, in a highly partial publication entitled *A State of England*, published in 1963, British intellectual life in the late 1940s and early 50s was motivated by »a flight from idealism towards an empiricism which was the more welcome in that ideology had visibly proved itself to be the curse of the twentieth century.«<sup>10</sup> Its motto might almost be summarised as »No Ideology, please – we're British«: a proposition, of course, that barely conceals its own ideological assumptions.

Post-war British interest in Nielsen is usually thought to begin with the highly acclaimed performance of the Fifth Symphony by the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra at the Edinburgh Festival in 1950.<sup>11</sup> But critics had already begun to be aware of Nielsen's work a few years earlier. The first significant popular article on Nielsen, published by Graham Carritt in *The Listener* in May 1947, had been preceded just a couple of months earlier by an essay entitled »Denmark and its Problems«, by Roy Duffell. Though Duffell's text did not address aspects of Danish cultural life in any detail, it drew attention instead to the political circumstances of Anglo-Danish relations following liberation in 1945, and in particular to the highly unfavourable conditions that the British government imposed on the Danish economy in the post-war years. Food exports to the United Kingdom, for example, were imported at costs well

---

<sup>9</sup> Sanna Pederson, »On the Task of the Music Historian: The Myth of the German Symphony after Beethoven«, in: *Repercussions* 2/2 (1993), pp. 5–30.

<sup>10</sup> Hartley, p. 33. Quoted in Collini, *Absent Minds*, p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> Muntoni, »Carl Nielsen in the United Kingdom«, p. 170.

below those of actual production. Duffell hence argued cautiously for greater understanding of Danish political sensitivities, not least over the territorial future of southern Slesvig.<sup>12</sup>

Carritt, who studied piano at the Royal College of Music, had toured Denmark for the British Council in 1935, and corresponded with both Finn Høffding and Yrjö Kilpinen.<sup>13</sup> Beginning his essay with a short survey of earlier Danish music history, he noted that »with the advent of Carl Nielsen (1865-1931), a more virile and distinctive music was forthcoming«, and added that »seeing that his output was so large and varied, it is strange that he is so little heard in this country«. Most relevant, however, is Carritt's early attempt to describe Nielsen's music, in ways that parallel, but also differ significantly, from the more familiar terms developed by Simpson. »Carl Nielsen's music is a singular blend of intellectual and spontaneous writing«, Carritt explained: a theme that has since been widely adopted in writing on the composer. He then added that »[a]t times the dissonant intervals and dissonant harmonies which the composer reaches by counterpoint (that was in itself an antidote to the warm romanticism of a previous generation) do not appear natural and inevitable«, and concludes, contra Simpson, that »Nielsen is often more convincing when he writes less formally, under the inspiration of his country's scenery or literature, or in pictorial vein«. Hence, Carritt's discussion ends not with a promotional account of the symphonies, but rather of less well-known pieces: *Pan og Syrinx*, *Helios*, *Saga-Drom*, and the Violin Concerto.<sup>14</sup> Only in a later essay from 1951, on a concert of music by Nielsen, Høffding, Gösta Nyström and Karl Birger-Blomdahl, would Carritt write in more detail about any of Nielsen's symphonies, describing »a sad and noble strain, rather Elgarian in character« in the third movement of the Second Symphony, and suggesting (improbably) that »polytonality is here used for the first time in Danish music«.<sup>15</sup>

Carritt's discussion is typical of the period in its emphasis on Nielsen's »virility«, »distinctiveness«, and »spontaneity«, accolades that should implicitly be read in opposition to terms such as »intellectualism«, »abstraction«, or »complexity« which were associated pejoratively with continental modernism (especially the Second Viennese School). But this early enthusiasm for Nielsen's earthiness was not unilaterally shared. A remarkable article by the composer and writer Gerald Cockshott, later Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, entitled »Music and Denmark«, published in the *Musical Times* in 1948, offered a very different appraisal of Nielsen's music in terms that betray an equal degree of aesthetic bias. Cockshott's position is announced unequivocally at the start of his article:

»Danish music is little known outside Denmark. The reason may be partly (as the Danes suggest) that Denmark is a small country; it may also be that Danish musicians seem preoccupied with the works of an indifferent composer named Carl Nielsen and are less anxious to introduce us to better things.«<sup>16</sup>

Cockshott's analysis of Nielsen's musical style is remarkable for its naivety and short-sightedness. »To the foreigner«, he suggests, Nielsen appears »an unequal writer of limited ideas who is often very dull, not infrequently banal and vulgar, and sometimes just silly«. Though he compares some of Nielsen's songs, inexplicably, with those of Stanford, and suggests that the Second Symphony and Violin Concerto »are pleasant lucid music hardly inferior to that of Saint-Saëns«, Cockshott concludes that »Denmark has produced no composer of the stature of Bartók, Hindemith, Sibelius or Vaughan

---

<sup>12</sup> Roy Duffell, »Denmark and its Problems«, in: *The Listener* 37, no. 945 (6 March 1947), pp. 321–22.

<sup>13</sup> Carritt edited the Royal College Magazine for many years, and lectured at the City Literary Institution. His papers are held in the Royal College archive (GB 1249 MS 6894); he died in 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Graham Carritt, »Carl Nielsen: Danish Composer«, in: *The Listener* 37, no. 953 (1 May 1947), p. 688.

<sup>15</sup> Graham Carritt, »Four Scandinavian Composers«, in: *The Listener* 46, no. 1178 (27 September 1951), p. 524. The concert was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme (later Radio 3) at 7.05 pm, Friday 5 October.

<sup>16</sup> Gerald Cockshott, »Music in Denmark«, in: *The Musical Times* 89 (1948), pp. 363–65, at p. 363. Cockshott was a founding member and first president of the Peter Warlock Society.

Williams«, and that »[Knudåge] Riisager is probably the outstanding figure in Danish musical life today.«<sup>17</sup> In a note at the foot of his essay, Cockshott explained, »[t]his judgement may seem rather severe in view of the seriousness with which Nielsen is taken in Denmark; but all the English musicians I have spoken to can find even less to say in his favour«: a provision that nevertheless begs the question which English musicians he had asked, and precisely how much of Nielsen's music they actually knew.

The political fall-out from Cockshott's article was sufficient to prompt a reply from Danish composer and conductor Svend Erik Tarp, published in the *Musical Times* the following year. Tarp's response nevertheless begins by reinforcing the sense of Danish cultural cringe, the self-deprecating position of the *Jantelov*, as a small nation addressing a much larger neighbour: »To us Danes it comes as rare event for our music to be made the subject of outspoken remark in an international magazine.«<sup>18</sup> Tarp concedes that, as a young man, he also found Nielsen's music »uninspired, dull, traditional and unimportant«, and that »maybe there is something indefinably Danish in the artistic psyche of Carl Nielsen that makes it difficult for his music to make a hit in foreign countries.«<sup>19</sup> Tarp's counter-case relies instead on familiar notions of strength, elementalism, and healthiness: tropes that were already well-established in the Scandinavian reception of Nielsen's music<sup>20</sup> and through which Tarp sensed a greater commonality with post-war British musical aesthetics. Nielsen's work hence »does not flatter the ear by outer brilliance. It has its strength in an eminent sense of the elementary power and tension that can lie in absolute melodic intervals«, and that »in spite of Vaughan Williams's undoubtedly superior technical skill, the two composers have a great deal in common in their outspoken and truly healthy melodic feeling.«<sup>21</sup>

The terms by which Nielsen's music would be understood in the United Kingdom – both positively and negatively – were therefore already largely defined before Simpson came to write his monograph in 1952. In one of his earlier essays on Nielsen, published in 1951, Simpson wrote of Nielsen's »blunt honesty and directness of purpose«, and to his »totally positive attitude [which] enables him to express wide extremes of feeling while remaining always perfectly balanced and aware.«<sup>22</sup> Again, there is an emphasis on the empirically grounded quality of Nielsen's musical aesthetics, conceived characteristically as a restorative response to contemporary musical thought: »He never allows his own person to obscure the matter in hand (as do nearly all Romantic composers), nor does he lose himself in dry theories«, Simpson argues. »Experience rules, imagination enlivens, purpose drives; the effect on the musical structure is as salutary as that of the music on the perplexed modern mind.«<sup>23</sup> Simpson's writing on Nielsen is hence powerfully self-reflexive, a proxy for his own position in British musical circles. But it is no less a manifesto for a distinctive mode of musical criticism, a plea, once more, for clarity and directness of expression over sophistry of the kind which Simpson would later associate (increasingly bitterly) with supporters and proponents of the post-war avant-garde.

A key work in this debate, however, is Nielsen's final symphony, the *Sinfonia Semplice*, a score with which Simpson would struggle for many years. In his 1951 piece, Simpson neatly evaded the issue: »of the remarkable Sixth Symphony (1925) with its immense first movement and its tragic remainder,« he wrote, »there is no space to speak«. In the first edition of his monograph, *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, Simpson

---

<sup>17</sup> Gerald Cockshott, »Music in Denmark«, in: *The Musical Times* 89 (1948), pp. 363–64.

<sup>18</sup> Svend Erik Tarp, »Carl Nielsen: a Danish View«, in: *The Musical Times* 90 (1949), pp. 75–6.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Daniel M. Grimley, *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism*, Woodbridge 2010, pp. 12–4, et passim.

<sup>21</sup> Tarp, »Carl Nielsen«, p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Simpson, »Carl Nielsen: a Great Symphonist«, in: *The Listener* 45, no. 1163 (14 June 1951), p. 972.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

famously described the symphony as »bitterly disappointing in more senses than one«. Greater insight into the controversy surrounding the Sixth, and the difficulties it caused for Simpson, can be gained from looking again at his correspondence. In a letter to his colleague Hugh Ottaway, dated 1 January 1955, Simpson wrote: »Many times over the past year or two I've been on the point of writing you in sincere appreciation of your fine understanding of Nielsen's music«, and added that »when I read your article on the Sixth Symphony in »Musical Opinion« I nearly wrote to you then – but it would have seemed churlish to have delayed doing so until I had something to disagree with!«

Ottaway's article was in fact published in *The Musical Times*, not *Musical Opinion*, appearing in July 1954, and it reinforces many of the ideological assumptions that had shaped Nielsen's British reception.<sup>24</sup> »To many of us,« Ottaway begins, »this belated attention to Nielsen has been thoroughly stimulating; the vigorous, tonic quality of his best music is as bracing as it is rare.« Healthiness and physicality are once again foregrounded as the defining characteristics of Nielsen's work. This also becomes the basis for introducing the debates surrounding the Sixth: »equally healthy, no doubt,« Ottaway claims, with a sidelong glance at the pre-war reception of Sibelius's work, »is the fact that what recently looked like becoming a vogue has developed into a controversy«. The platform for Ottaway's critique of the Sixth in fact becomes a means of advancing a broader defence of Nielsen's work. »Here, as elsewhere,« Ottaway suggests, »the composer's »instinct to identify form with content« led towards an almost literal presentation of the underlying human idea«, borrowing from Simpson's earlier reading of the work. This tendency is »shown unmistakably in [Nielsen's] use of tonality, his treatment of instruments as individual characters, his views on certain melodic intervals and even, perhaps, in his apparent inconsistencies of idiom«. As in Simpson's work, Ottaway's concern with an »underlying human idea« becomes the means of assimilating Nielsen's work within the central symphonic canon and simultaneously establishing his sense of difference. »Whereas in a Beethoven symphony the drama is figurative, consisting primarily in the contrast of rhythms and tonal centres throughout the length and breadth of the music,« Ottaway suggests, »in Nielsen's last two symphonies it is real and actual. [...] Beethoven shows us dramatic forces and Nielsen the shape and substance of the drama itself.« But it is in this distinction between Beethovenian »Kraft« and Nielsensk action, however, that the Sixth Symphony begins to disappoint. »While the music remains »a reflection of vital processes« with a positive, hopeful outcome,« Ottaway claims, »the literal argument has musical power; but when it is concerned with despairing, unaffirmative issues, the musical strength is gravely sapped.« Thus, Ottaway concludes, turning once again to metaphors of health and physical rigour, Nielsen's »generally robust outlook« is fatally compromised in the Sixth Symphony, and even the finale's closing bars are little more than »the literalist's final fling«. Like that of Simpson before him, Ottaway's evaluation rests upon a covert organicism. The Sixth Symphony fails not because of »its depressing content« Ottaway claims, but because it is »weakly embodied«. The broader integrity of the project hence remains intact. »The work is inferior Nielsen before it is bad philosophy.«

Ottaway's article was evidently an important stimulus to Simpson, and in his January 1955 letter is provided an opportunity to develop his reading of the *Sinfonia Semplice* in ways that provide further insights into Simpson's own aesthetic position. »In order to write genuine tragic music the composer must certainly have experienced what you call the »bottomless pit of subjective despair«, Simpson suggests, aligning the first movement of Nielsen's Sixth Symphony with Beethoven's *Coriolan* Overture and the first movement of the Ninth, »but he must not compose subjectively. This is what, to my mind, Nielsen has done in the latter 3 movements of no. 6.« This is the point at which Simpson

---

<sup>24</sup> Hugh Ottaway, »Nielsen's Sixth Symphony«, in: *The Musical Times* 95 (1954), p 362–63.

turns to a broader discussion of music's ethical responsibilities. A properly »objective« work of art, Simpson claims,

»is one in which the composer is able to place whatever human feeling he is expressing within the framework of something bigger than the mere subjective emotion. In other words, he must be able to see an emotional situation whole; it must first master him and he must then be objective enough to master it. Only then can he genuinely create and construct works that have the ring of authority.«

Objectivity, mastery, constructivism, and emotional restraint hence become the keywords for Simpson's vision of the modern symphony – terms that, I've argued, also correspond particularly closely with the tone and register of a wider intellectual and aesthetic discourse in British cultural circles in the late 1940s and early 1950s. »I'd go so far as to assert that »pessimistic« is bad and subjective, and that anything objective (whether cheerful or grim) is basically optimistic«, Simpson concludes, »because its objectivity gives it a sense of proportion and enables it to be strongly constructed). I don't think it possible to have a really powerfully constructed work that is created subjectively – however intense or tragic its expression.« This then becomes the moment at which Simpson collapses historical distance, invoking a consciously Beethovenian paradigm in order to align Nielsen's music with the tastes (and methodological practices) of British music criticism. »As Tovey said of the slow movement of the *Hammerklavier* sonata »it floats over the sorrows of the world«. This is a very different thing from »Weltschmerz« – which is submerged under them!« Simpson thus canonises Nielsen's music in the most hallowed terms, and simultaneously uses his work in order to advance an aesthetic agenda that was couched in implicitly provincial (British) terms.

This brief analysis of the early British reception of Nielsen's music raises a series of wider methodological problems. The most urgently pressing, not least given the trajectory of recent political events, is the need to move beyond narrowly nationalising accounts of music history and to develop a more genuinely comparative critical model without reinforcing existing patterns of geographical relativism. Doris Bachmann-Medick has warned trenchantly of the dangers of a »methodological nationalism« that takes the nation-state as a standard for academic research and analysis.<sup>25</sup> The reception of Scandinavian music in British is a case in point. For too long, the discussion of Nielsen's work in the United Kingdom has tended to follow a streamlined model that has barely paid lip-service to more properly bilateral notions of cultural exchange. Yet thinking about such problems locally, as processes of translation, as Bachmann-Medick suggests, offers a more productive way of posing questions of historical and aesthetic context, and provides a firmer basis for analysis. »Even in times of global overlapping and mixing, processes of localization seem more important than ever«, Bachmann-Medick argues, »in order to stem hegemonic tendencies, in order to emphasize diversity, and in order to allow a multi-local production of theory.«<sup>26</sup> This notion of multi-locality prompts a more sophisticated grasp of the musical geography of Nielsen's reception in the United Kingdom: as a more complex three-dimensional play of centres, peripheries, and edges, animated by a group of creative agents who themselves felt simultaneously central and deeply marginalized. As Arnold Whittall has noted, »maybe Simpson had more in common with Schoenberg than he would have cared to admit.«<sup>27</sup> The unstable institutional status of British musical criticism, and of British music more widely, was merely one part of this interplay of vested interests and agendas. It is a salient fact, however, that most original and insightful

---

<sup>25</sup> »The trans/national study of culture: a translational perspectives«, in: *The trans/national study of culture*, ed. Doris Bachmann-Medick, Berlin and Boston 2014, pp. 1–22, at p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>27</sup> Whittall, »Review«, p. 139.

response to Nielsen's Sixth Symphony in the 1950s came not from Robert Simpson or Hugh Ottaway, nor from the other writers who took up the case for or against contemporary Danish music in British circles, but from another source: the journalist, producer, and music critic Andrew Porter. Writing after attending a festival of Nielsen's music in Copenhagen in 1953, Porter reported: »It is plain that Nielsen's claim to be considered a great composer rests principally on the fourth, fifth, and sixth symphonies«, but added that the *Sinfonia Semplice*, »an equivocal work even in Denmark, was not played at the Festival – a pity, for it is the only one not known to English listeners or available here on gramophone records.« Porter nevertheless writes, after listening to a Tono recording of the work, that »it proves to be far more approachable than Robert Simpson's monograph would suggest«. The second movement is »a bitter little satire on modern music«, but the third unfolds a set of variations »of wonderful beauty«. And in his commentary on the finale, Porter remarks that »Nielsen's variations are always profoundly satisfying«.<sup>28</sup> Such open-mindedness and transparency were exceptional for British music criticism in the decade after the end of the Second World War, and, with Porter's death in 2015, writing on music in Britain lost one of its most perceptive and luminous voices. In the current political climate, with its renewed anxieties, insularism, and mistrust of specialist knowledge and professional expertise, musicology can ill afford such loss.

---

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Porter, »A Carl Nielsen Festival, Copenhagen, 31 August–4 September«, in: *The Musical Times* 94 (1953), p. 527.