

Carl Nielsen

Symphony No. 2 *The Four Temperaments*

Symphony No. 4 *The Inextinguishable*



Andris Poga
Stavanger Symphony Orchestra

Carl Nielsen set out to write music that would give his homeland a locally distinctive but internationally relevant voice. Nielsen was raised poor in Denmark, his formative musical experiences provided by his father's travelling wedding band (in which he played the fiddle) and the local barracks band (in which he played the bugle). Recognizing his talent, officials in his hometown on the island of Funen raised funds to send Nielsen to conservatory in Copenhagen, where he would eventually be recognized as his generation's most outstanding musician.

As the twentieth century loomed, Nielsen considered how he could best move Danish music away from what he referred to as the 'gravy and grease' of the German musical tradition. He began to imagine a new sort of music that would fuse perceptions of the high and low in art. Nielsen's symphonies, bursting with vitality, humour and energy, had an energizing effect. In the first three, musical energy is given free rein. In the fourth and fifth, written during and after World War I, that energy is set up against violent destructive forces.

In a letter written just before his death in October 1931, Nielsen recalled how, three decades earlier, he had been drinking 'a glass or two of beer' with his wife and some friends in a country pub when he came across a painting depicting the ancient

Greek notion of the Four Temperaments – the idea that human emotions can be grouped into four states or 'humours'. The painting seems to have struck Nielsen on a few levels; he was interested in ancient Greek philosophy but he was also a keen observer of characteristics in his fellow human beings (he was a fine mimic, by all accounts). Vitally, Nielsen also found the naivety in the painting hilariously funny.

Those paintings would find sonic form in Nielsen's Symphony No 2, finished in November 1902 (just as the composer was putting finishing touches to his first opera, *Saul og David*) and introduced days later on 1 December. Like all Nielsen's symphonies, it was first performed by the orchestra in which he himself played among the second violins and later worked as a staff conductor, that of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. Nielsen himself conducted, and in the symphony's clear concept and breezy demeanor we find a decent overall portrait of the composer himself: his characteristic combination of city sophistication and rustic bluntness.

Each of the Symphony No 2's four movements is a musical depiction of one of the temperaments, as seen in the pub painting (we should keep the crudeness of the painting in mind when listening to Nielsen's music, as much as the philosophy of the temperaments themselves). The

first picture was of the 'choleric' temperament, showing a man on horseback. 'He had a long sword in his hand, which he was wielding fiercely in thin air,' recalled Nielsen; 'his eyes were bulging out of his head. His face...was so distorted by rage... that I could not help but burst out laughing.'

It's easy to hear that description echoed in the cartoon-like energy of Nielsen's first movement, which boils up even after the music's moments of still reflection (listen out, in particular, for the rollicking bass trombone that cavorts through the orchestra a few minutes in). And yes, there are moments of apparent stillness in the music. After all, 'the volatile person has his milder moments, the melancholic his more volatile or brighter moments, and the buoyant, sanguine person can become pensive,' according to Nielsen's own program note.

'But the lazy, sluggish person rarely emerges from his phlegmatic state,' Nielsen continued, which explains why his brief 'Phlegmatic' movement retains its lilting gait from beginning to end. The composer likened this movement to a young man dreaming on a jetty, 'too inactive to dance... but he might well rock his hips in a slow waltz rhythm.' The same minor third that rocked that young man into his phlegmatic state returns in Nielsen's 'Melancholic'

third movement, but now is invested with a sense of heavy tragedy that appears to plunge deep until the music levels out into something like contentment, albeit of the melancholic variety.

That feeling is shattered entirely by Nielsen's 'Sanguine' finale, depicting 'the basic character of a person who storms thoughtlessly on in the belief that the whole world belongs to him and that roasted pigeons will fly into his mouth without work and care,' in the composer's words. The feeling here is of a carefree person skipping out on a journey without much caring where it will lead. At one point, Nielsen wrote, 'he becomes afraid of something'. But although the music plunges into the minor key, the character's 'rather shallow tune is still manifested.'

Though he wrote an extended commentary on the symphony from which those quotes are taken, Nielsen also suggested that his observations be viewed 'as a private matter between the music and myself.' As for his progress as a symphonist, that is clear. Nielsen's themes are more clear-cut here than in the Symphony No 1 while the composer purposefully casts the middle two movements in keys a minor third lower than their predecessors to create a feeling of continuation. The composer's affront to German 'gravy and grease' is there in the abruptness that launches not just this

symphony but the two that would follow. *The Four Temperaments* evidently felt different and new in 1902. In a review for the newspaper *Dannebrog*, the critic Leopold Rosenfeld wrote that the symphony's colours 'are very brutal and in their crudeness easily cross the aesthetic line.' Just what Nielsen intended, surely.

A decade after the first performance of the Symphony No 2, Nielsen's life looked as different as the world around him. In the years 1914-15, Nielsen found himself estranged from his wife and thrust into a precarious freelance existence following his resignation from the Royal Theatre, where he had been employed in some musical capacity for nearly his whole professional life.

Traveling and frequently alone, Nielsen wrote to friends, elaborating on his theories of the 'life force' – the biological and philosophical impulse that he had harnessed in his freewheeling Symphony No 3 and which had surely been adumbrated in *The Four Temperaments*. While those two symphonies let their self-perpetuating energy loose, in the next, Nielsen would set that energy up against a destructive opposing force.

Nielsen didn't have to look far to find a real-world inspiration for that idea. On top of his turbulent private life, the First World

War was ravaging Europe. Even the generally optimistic Nielsen, relatively safe in neutral Denmark, saw that the conflict would have profound implications.

As such, Nielsen's Symphony No 4 unleashed a level of sonic violence barely suggested in its predecessors. The orchestral language was denser and darker. Nielsen's characteristic breathlessness remained, but was injected with a new willingness to indulge dissonance and disorder. While the Symphony No 1 opens in the wrong key, the Symphony No 2 in haste and the Symphony No 3 in disorientation, the Symphony No 4 launches with something akin to a volcanic eruption.

For a title, Nielsen chose not an adjective but a Danish abstract noun, 'Uudslukkelige' ('inextinguishable') that he believed encapsulated the inexhaustible and inevitable power of nature. 'Music is life, whereas the other arts only depict life,' said Nielsen shortly after the symphony's premiere in Copenhagen on 1 February 1916; 'life is unquenchable and inextinguishable.' In a private letter to the Dutch composer Julius Röntgen, Nielsen wrote more plainly that he was 'trying to describe all that has the will and the urge for life, which cannot be kept down.'

Shortly before beginning work on the symphony, Nielsen heard a performance

of Franz Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor. That might have persuaded the composer to cast his new work in four linked movements, giving the music a continuous sweep. The first movement introduces the theme 'which cannot be kept down' on singing woodwinds, a part of which returns to blazingly conclude it. The second movement is threaded out of that, using a theme subtly related to the first but stalked by siren-like warnings.

Three falling minor thirds on a clarinet lead into the third movement, whose dark landscape is interrupted by a soothing, expressive version of the original 'life force' theme offered-up by a single violin. This is very nearly overwhelmed by dark forces but somehow puts them into retreat. Shattered and disjointed, the music can only look in on itself before collapsing into the hurtling string passage that leads into the final movement.

This is where we hear most clearly the threat to Nielsen's life force. Those hurtling strings lead to something like a unified orchestral consensus. A monumental eruption follows: bar upon bar of disorientating chaos exacerbated by loose cannons at the back of the orchestra: the timpani.

Circling strings instill calm, but it turns out they are harboring energy for a bigger fight. With inexhaustible power, the

timpani hurl thundering broadsides at one another, the strings protesting underneath like the hopeless sirens of inadequate law enforcement. In the end, it's the woodwind theme from the opening movement that emerges from the chaos, as if it were there all along, to bring the music off the boil. But the timpani continue to rumble underneath. Life might be inextinguishable, but it will never go unthreatened.

Andrew Mellor

Andrew Mellor is author of
The Northern Silence — Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture
(Yale University Press)



Andris
Poga

Andris Poga is the Chief Conductor of the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra. He was the Music Director of the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra from 2013 till 2021 and continues to collaborate with the LNSO as its Artistic Advisor.

Highlights of recent years have included concerts with the leading orchestras of Germany, France, Italy, Japan and Scandinavia. After the first successful collaborations he has become a regular guest at the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester Hamburg, WDR Sinfonieorchester Cologne, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, NHK Symphony Orchestra Tokyo and many others. He has also conducted the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Gewandhaus-Orchester, Accademia Nazionale di



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Symphony Orchestra

Santa Cecilia, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Sydney Symphony and Dallas Symphony.

In 2010, Andris Poga was the First Prize winner of the Evgeny Svetlanov International Conducting Competition, which thrust him into the international scene. He became an assistant to Paavo Järvi at the Orchestre de Paris and he also served as the assistant conductor for the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Poga has graduated from the conducting department of the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music. He studied philosophy at the University of Latvia and conducting at the Vienna University of Music and Performing Arts.

Located on Norway's southwest coast, the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra (SSO) performs in Stavanger Concert Hall, regarded as one of the finest acoustic venues in Europe. Andris Poga has been the orchestra's Chief Conductor since the 2021–22 season. Recent guest conductors have included Karina Canellakis, Pablo Heras-Casado, James Gaffigan, Dalia Stasevska, Fabien Gabel, Jan Willem de Vriend, and Andrew Manze.

The orchestra has released a substantial catalogue under SSO Recordings, in addition to acclaimed albums of Scandinavian music for BIS and baroque repertoire with Fabio Biondi for Naïve. SSO has toured in Japan, the United States, Germany, Fin-

land and the Netherlands. Early music has been a key artistic pillar for the orchestra. Frans Brüggen served as Artistic Director for Early Music from 1990–1997, followed by Philippe Herreweghe (2000–2004) and Fabio Biondi (2006–2016).

The orchestra was nominated for a Spellemann Award in 2018 and for a Grammy Award in 2020, for Gisle Kverndokk's Symphonic Dances.

Founded in 1938, the orchestra today consists of 85 musicians representing 24 nationalities.

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

Symphony No. 2, Op. 16

- 01. Allegro collerico_09:56
- 02. Allegro comodo e flemmatico_04:14
- 03. Andante malincolico_10:46
- 04. Allegro sanguineo_07:15

Symphony No. 4, Op. 29

- 05. Allegro_11:53
- 06. Poco allegretto_04:35
- 07. Poco adagio quasi andante_09:42
- 08. Allegro_08:19

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