



- [Clarinet Anthology](#)
- [Previous ClarinetFest Presentations](#)
- [Electronic Archived Issues](#)
- [Clarinet Journal Back Issues](#)
- [Links](#)

Abstract For Lecture Recital: Conflict And Meaning In Carl Nielsen's Concerto For Clarinet And Orchestra, Opus 57 (1928)

ClarinetFest® 2008
Douglas Monroe

INTRODUCTION

In 1922, after having established an amiable professional relationship with the Copenhagen Wind Quintet, Carl August Nielsen (1865-1931) wrote one of the finest woodwind quintets in the repertoire for the ensemble. He subsequently promised to write a concerto for each of its members. Before his death in 1931, he managed only two; the *Flute Concerto* for Gilbert-Jespersen in 1926 and the *Clarinet Concerto* for Aage Oxenvad in 1928. Both these works' characters seem to have been influenced to a high degree by the character of each of these men. One of the central components of the *Clarinet Concerto* is Nielsen's approach to conflict and its overall lack of resolution.

Much has been written by Nielsen biographers about Oxenvad and his passionate personality. Danish clarinetist Tage Scharf, from the tutorial lineage of Aage Oxenvad, said, "... (Oxenvad) considered himself a 'frightful curmudgeon' when things were contrary, and was always obstinate". Robert Simpson calls Oxenvad's temperament "tempestuous". Most musicologists explain the moodiness and conflict of the *Clarinet Concerto* as a result of Oxenvad's personality. But I believe this is only part of the reason for the conflict.

In 1926, Carl Nielsen suffered a massive heart attack while conducting a concert of his music. He suffered many more heart attacks until his fatal coronary in October 1931. The years between 1926 and 1931 were a severe challenge to him physically and emotionally. His compositional output slowed tremendously during these years. In fact, the *Clarinet Concerto* was his last major symphonic work. I contend that the conflict inherent in the *Concerto* has more to do with Nielsen's poor health than it does Oxenvad's difficult personality.

TONAL CONFLICT

Nielsen wrote several major symphonic works based upon the sonata-allegro formal structure. In these works, he was one of the first composers to employ a technique theorists call "progressive tonality". His normal tonal scheme was to begin in one key (initial tonic) and end in another (final tonic) as a metaphor for growth and arrival in life destinations. According to Simpson, "...most of his mature works treat a chosen key as a goal to be achieved or an order to be evolved, and his final establishment of the key has all the organic inevitability and apparently miraculous beauty with which the flower appears at a plant's point in full growth". The most significant aspect of the *Clarinet Concerto's* formal structure is that it is his only large symphonic work which begins and ends in the same key (F), purposefully avoiding his "progressive tonality" resolution. This simple fact is intensely powerful in ascribing meaning to the Concerto. There is no point of arrival; Nielsen takes us back to the place he began the piece. I believe this is because he had become resigned to the power of death's inevitable grip on his life. There is no final tonic in this piece to resolve the initial tonic leaving the struggle between keys unresolved. The ending is very dark orchestrally and emotionally, and is clearly a point of non-resolution.

The principle tonal struggle in the *Concerto* is fought between the keys F and E. The fact that they are only a half step apart creates a great deal of sonic tension. The first movement begins with a folk-like melody harkening the listener back to both Nielsen's and Oxenvad's rustic upbringings. Clarinetist Eric Nelson states that this theme's rustic roots come from the fact that both Nielsen and Oxenvad were country men, having "mud on their boots". The theme is still squarely in F when the clarinet enters in m. 17. From the beginning to the end, the piece is filled with tension between the two tonal centers. The fourth movement begins in the subdominant of E with a fast, seemingly happy folk-like melody at m. 535. At m. 670, this theme returns

through the dominant of E, clearly attempting to create the final tonic in E. At m. 694, in a very abrupt entrance of the coda, the fourth movement's main theme sounds modally in the low register of the clarinet, shockingly back to the piece's original key, F. The tone F on the clarinet is trapped tighter and tighter intervallically before it lands on its final sustained F.

Conflict with interplay between clarinet and snare drum

The snare drum takes on such a large role that music commentator R. J. Gregory calls the piece a duo concerto. Its true role is to create tension with the clarinet. If the soloist is the protagonist, as Cone suggests for a typical concerto, then the snare drum in this *Concerto* is the antagonist. It is always threatening, ominous, and disruptive, attacking the protagonist at key places in the *Concerto*. The snare is a character similar to Schubert's *Erlkoenig*; an agent representing death. The many interactions between the clarinet and the snare illustrate this point.

Conflict between the clarinet and the orchestra

The protagonist clarinet presents its music at times with little regard for what occurs with the orchestra. There is an element of complete independence between the two, as if Nielsen is making some sort of commentary on an individual separating himself from society. The *Concerto*'s two complete cadenzas at mm. 133 and 516 and four other sections I would call cadenza-like amplify this separation. Other examples of separation include range differences between the clarinet and orchestra as well as complete differences in musical style and thematic material between the two elements.

Counterpoint and Conflict

Nielsen's use of counterpoint in his large-scale symphonic works is analogous to conflict/tension. "Counterpoint was for him a metaphor for the conflicts he observed. (Nielsen said,) 'Conflict must be there so that we may have clarity. Perception must be preceded by opposition. The bad is not bad by itself, not bad absolutely; we must see it opposed to something else'". Some of the more notable examples occur during the turbulent sections of the concerto. It is a musical tool Nielsen uses throughout the *Concerto*.

Suddenness of Coda

The coda begins at m. 694. The ending comes very abruptly landing the piece back to its original key using the main motive from the fourth movement (the motive at mm. 537 and 670) that was seemingly taking the piece to a final tonic of E. At the coda, the motive from mm. 537 and 670, which to this point has struggled to maintain a major keyed "upbeat" feel and to modulate to E, is set modally in F in the clarinet. From m. 694 to the end, the coda outlines the tone "F". The closer the piece comes to conclusion, the intervals close in to surround the tone "F" on the clarinet, suggesting a "tonal trap" of sorts. Mm. 709-711 finally trap the "F" with its half-step lower neighbor, its half-step upper neighbor, back to its half step lower neighbor, and finally rests on an "F" for the final sustain in F major. This final major chord does not sound resolved, but has a dark, passive resignation to it.

This ending provides the most important aspect to my interpretation of the piece. There is no final tonic, thus no arrival or discovery. It seems to be a very bleak commentary. This final "tonal trap" calls to mind an idea Nielsen was heard to frequently discuss in these later years after his initial heart attack, "I know I've done it as well as I could, but I wonder if it's all any use? Maybe what I want is all wrong. Maybe it's all nothing". This last large scale symphonic work seems to be an outpouring musically of these very sentiments.

Meaning OF the Conflict

The *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra* by Carl Nielsen is a piece which expresses a wide variety of emotion. The sense of conflict in the piece is its one constant. From the available material about Aage Oxenvad, I cannot justify the depth of conflict through the *Concerto*'s tonal structure, the antagonistic persona of the snare drum, its fractured relationship between orchestra and soloist, the counterpoint, or its sudden, telling coda as being inspired only by the personality of Aage Oxenvad. The mere fact that Nielsen would abandon a lifelong pattern of progressive tonality suggests that this is more a work about himself and his inner struggles than it is about any other man. Nielsen was fully aware from the time of his heart attack in 1926 until the time of his death in 1931, that he was mortally ill. Even though he was adamant that others not read extra-musical information from his music, I believe his art, especially at this time during his life, was a reflection of his life circumstances. The evidence in the *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra* suggests to me that Carl Nielsen was consumed with the process of dying and expressed these conflicting emotions with great beauty.

Eric Nelson, "The Danish Performance Tradition in Carl Nielsen's *Concerto for Clarinet og Orkester, Op. 57 (1928)*, *Clarinet* 14, no. 2 (1987), 31.

Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen; Symphonist* (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 143.

Harald Krebs, "Tonal Structure in Nielsen's Symphonies; Some Addenda to Robert Simpson's Analyses," from *The Nielsen Companion*, ed. by Mina Miller, (Portland: Amadeus, 1988): 208.

Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen; Symphonist* (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 20.

Eric Nelson, "The Danish Performance Tradition in Carl Nielsen's *Concerto for Clarinet og Orkester, Op. 57 (1928)*, *Clarinet* 14, no. 2 (1987), 32.

David Davenport, "Carl Nielsen's Clarinet Concerto; Specific Interpretation Approach (Part II)," *Journal of the Percussive Arts Society* 31 (1993): 56.

Edward Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1974), 81.

Lewis Rowell, "Carl Nielsen's Homespun Philosophy of Music," in *The Nielsen Companion* ed. By Mina Miller, (Portland: Amadeus, 1994), 39.

Torben Meyer, "A Biographical Sketch," trans. by Harald Knudsen, appendix I in *Carl Nielsen; Symphonist* by Robert Simpson, (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 248.