

## **THE INTERNATIONAL GRIEG SOCIETY – IGS - CONFERENCE**

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”BEYOND GRIEG –

Edvard Grieg and his Diverse Influences on Music of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries”.

Dr. Yvonne Wasserloos

Lecturer for Musicology

Institute of Musicology, Robert-Schumann-Hochschule Düsseldorf

**„Hearing through eyes, seeing through ears.” Nation and Landscape within the Works of Niels W. Gade, Edvard Grieg and Carl Nielsen**

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### **I. Landscape, Nation and Music**

Talking about music and landscape does not mean talking about music and geography. The expression “landscape” is multi-dimensional. Therefore the following reflections do not in first place refer to physical landscape, which is closely related to nature. They refer to cultural landscape and its relation to music. “Cultural landscape“ means nature as it is interpreted by man and his intellect. Thus the term refers to a cultivated nature, which comes into being when it is connected with legends, sagas and fairy tales for example and transfigured to a mythical or poetic and, most importantly, unique landscape. Well-known are legends of water spirits and sprites in the sea or trolls and giants in the mountains. A means of picturing landscape musically is folk music, which is closely linked to it by being played in the mountains, in the woods or by the sea. Especially in the North of Europe, as a result of the climatic conditions and the lower population density, the natural surroundings are far more present than in urban Middle Europe. The deep embedding of

natural experience has remained a characteristic of Northern literature, painting and music as a mirror of nature since the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the age of nationalism, when several European countries started their search for national identities. The changing perception of the surrounding played an important role for cultural emancipation especially in Scandinavia. Unique landscapes as well as music, that is folk music, were regarded as the nation's "treasures", which were to be highlighted. The significance of folk music for national identification may be illustrated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's remark, who saw folk song as an archetype of art music. Folk songs as an expression of a free society could come to political significance.<sup>2</sup> For the propagation of folk music beyond national boundaries art music was used as a medium. The integration of elements of folk music into art music took place in Europe for the first time in the works of Niels W. Gade (1817–1890). This is an important point when it comes to assessing musical landscapes. He pointed out that it is not a musical description of a rural scenery by using natural sounds like later in Richard Strauss' *An Alpine Symphony*. The use of folk music in art music as it appears in Gade is not descriptive, but associative with a cultural-political background. From the interplay of landscape and folklore originated his avowal to his own nation.

## II. Niels W. Gade – Landscape and Nordic Tone

Gade was born in 1817 into a period when Denmark's striving for national identity and the emancipation from German influence grew more powerful and were transported into the arts. Poets like Adam Oehlenschläger or Bernhard Severin Ingemann were leading in establishing a Danish art by rediscovering old Nordic sagas. Only later this trend found its entrance into music. This did not happen through the ears, but through language, as Robert Schumann remarked in 1844: "Scandinavia's emerging poets were well predisposed to influence its musical talents, when they would otherwise not be reminded by their mountains and lakes, runes and northern lights that the North was well allowed to speak in its own language."<sup>3</sup>

The same process of recognizing the North via literature and only to a smaller extent by direct experience happened also to Gade. After a concert tour through Norway and

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<sup>1</sup> Torsten Gunnarsson: Nordic Landscape Painting in the Nineteenth Century. (Transl by Nancy Adler). New Haven u. London 1998, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gülke: Rousseau und die Musik. Darmstadt 1986, 131.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Schumann: Niels W. Gade. In: Neue Zeitschrift für Musik 20 (1844), 2.

Sweden in 1838 his way of composition changed. On his trip he wrote to his teacher Andreas Peter Berggreen: „I feel now, for the first time, my own self. [...] Many great, glorious conditions of nature that my corporal eyes have had the pleasure to view have spiritually awakened new emotions and thoughts and given my intellectual activities inspiration and nourishment for a long time.“<sup>4</sup> After this experience Gade’s sources of inspiration changed. Goethe’s texts ceased to be the bases for settings giving way to texts of Nordic, mainly Danish poets.<sup>5</sup>

The fundamentals of his work Gade derived from Berggreen’s theoretic-aesthetic bases, who assumed folk songs to be significant for the expression of popular mind, as well as his analysis of nature.<sup>6</sup> From this Gade developed what his contemporaries named vaguely “Nordic Tone”. This expression opens up an interesting view on Gade’s roots. Carl Nielsen reported about a joint walk at Lake Esrom. Gade pointed excitedly to some point with the words: „Look, look, these strange greenish colours over there. Aren’t they like the sound of woodwinds in an orchestra?“<sup>7</sup> This means that In the context of landscape and music Gade formed through the eyes a connection of visual impressions and sound. He thus coupled colours of nature and musical tone-colour. There are some characteristics within Gade’s Nordic Tone which can be identified as impressions of landscapes and impressions of music played in nature. Among these are a preference of dark tone colours, minor keys, and abrupt changes between major keys and minor keys. Furthermore the use of elements from folk music is to be mentioned. On the level of melodic and harmonic style church modes, fifths and bourdons tend to appear. Gade’s overture *Efterklange af Ossian* op. 1 (Echoes from Ossian) and especially his first symphony in C Minor, op. 5 represent important early examples of Nordic Tone in connection with Nordic landscape. Concerning his first symphony Gade’s song „*Paa Sjølund’s fagre Sletter*“ („On Zealand’s fair plains“) is in the center and forms the melodic basis of three out of four movements. The basis of the song, which was composed by Gade in 1838 in folk tone, was the poem „Kong Valdemars Jagt“ (1816) by Bernhard Severin Ingemann (1789–1862).

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<sup>4</sup> Gade to Berggreen, 24. 9. 1838. In: C. Skou: Andreas Peter Berggreen: Et Mindeskrift. Kjøbenhavn 1895, 56 (English Translation by Anna Harwell Celenza: The early works of Niels W. Gade. In search of the poetic. Aldershot 2001, 20).

<sup>5</sup> Most of characteristic pieces can be found within Gade’s symphonic works: *Efterklange af Ossian* op. 1, I *Højlandene* op. 7 (1844), *Nordisk Sæterrejse* WoO 101 (1850), *Sommerdag paa Landet* op. 55 (1879).

<sup>6</sup> Niels Martin Jensen: Niels W. Gade og den nationale tone. Dansk nationalromantik i musikalsk belysning. In: Ole Feldbæk (Ed.): Dansk Identitetshistorie. København 1991-1992, vol. 3, 206.

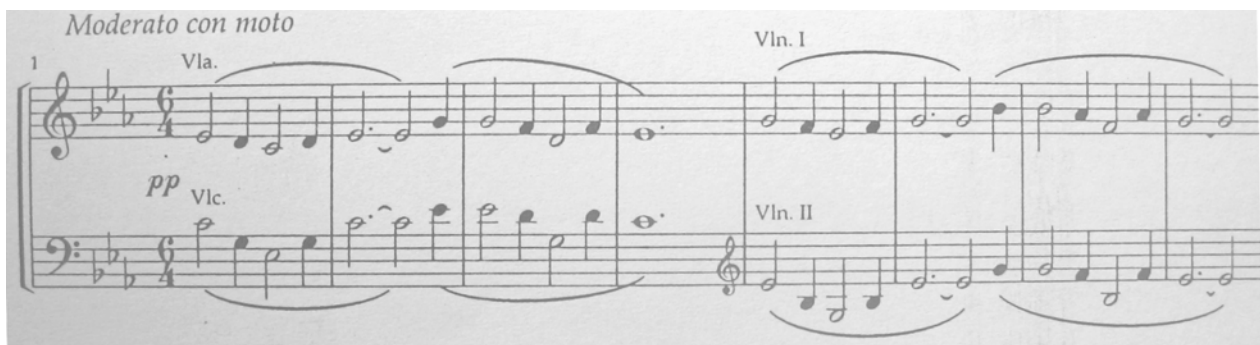
<sup>7</sup> Carl Nielsen. In: William Behrend (Ed.): *Minder om Niels W. Gade. Kendte Mænds og Kvinders Erindringer*. København 1930, 84. „Se, se de grønligelige underlige Farver dér, er det ikke som Træblæserklange i Orkestret?“

*Paa Sjølund's fagre Sletter,  
ved Østersøens Bred,  
hvor Skoven Krandsse fletter  
om Engens Blomsterbed,  
hvor Sølvenkilden glider  
nu ved Ruinens Fod,  
der stolt i gamle Tider  
en Kongebolig stod.*

*On Zealand's fair plains  
along the Baltic shore  
where woodlands form a wreath  
'round the meadow's flowerbeds  
where silver springs no drift  
by the base of ancient ruins  
there, in olden times  
proudly stood a royal home.*

Bernhard Severin Ingemann (1789-1862): *Kong Valdemars Jagt* (1816), 1st stanza

It depicts King Valdemar IV's destructive hunt through Zealand. The first movement follows the course of the ballad, which is strongly connected to visual impressions.<sup>8</sup> The slow introduction pictures Zealand's idyll at a prominent place at the Baltic Sea, which Ingemann describes in the first stanza of his poem. Gade uses „*Paa Sjølund's fagre Sletter*“ as „soundtrack“ to describe a romantic landscape.



Niels W. Gade *Symphony No. 1, C Minor, op. 5* (1841-1842), 1st movement, bb. 1-8

This is done by characteristics which are connected to landscape, like echoes in the lower and higher strings, measures 1–4, 5–8, and the fifth-hunting call played by a lone horn, mm. 7–8. The Nordic Tone in the construction of melody additionally points to an archaic folk element through modal coloured harmony and the phrygian cadence on the fifth. The poetic character of the work was directly connected to Zealand's landscape by Robert Schumann in a letter to Gade in 1844: „*You [Gade] are an excellent poet .. – you have not promenaded in vain in the beech forests and along the shore of the sea.*“<sup>9</sup>

Strikingly, the reception of the work was nationally dependent. The first performance in Copenhagen was refused with the reason that the work appeared to be less original than

<sup>8</sup> For other opinions pointing out there is no musical visualisation see Siegfried Oechsle: *Symphonik nach Beethoven. Studien zu Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn und Gade.* Kassel, Basel, London u.a. 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Schumann to Gade, 28.12.1844, Dagmar Gade (Ed.): *Niels W. Gade. Optegnelser og Breve.* København 1892, 100.

the Ossian-overture and that it mainly „imitated the style of Mendelssohn ...“<sup>10</sup> In Germany, where the symphony 1843 had its first performance in Leipzig, it was especially the landscape-oriented imagination which supported the success of the work: “The audience enjoyed the cold bath in the icy mountains of the North.”<sup>11</sup> For Grieg and Nielsen, Gade played a decisive role, at least through his first attempt at making nation sound.

### III. Edvard Grieg – The Power of Landscape

To say something about landscape and its inspiring power for Edvard Grieg here would mean carrying coals to Newcastle. This is why I will content myself with some remarks helpful to form a clearer view of Grieg's position in relation to Gade and Nielsen. To be inspired by landscape, one needs to flee from the humane and urban to the natural.<sup>12</sup> Jean Sibelius retreated into a cabin in the forest in order to compose. Gustav Mahler loved the vastness of the country and fled from the straitness of Viennese society frequently to a little house in a garden of his summer residence. There is no need to talk of Edvard Grieg in this context. His dwellings in the „Komposten“ at the fjord are legendary. Mainly in his nearly pathological attitude towards German music Grieg's esteem of the Norwegian art as the only original one is expressed. „Great nature at home“ was „related to great art“. To the German art as “school art” he denied a “high and pure level”<sup>13</sup> As Arvid Vollsnes noted, Grieg regarded the Norwegian landscape as already conveying the Norwegian art.<sup>14</sup> Landscape, (folk) music and nation to Grieg were an inseparable unity. The criticism which called Grieg a “provincial artist” against this background, which has often been pronounced by Germans, was not always shared in the North or in France. There it was pointed out that Grieg's music cannot be understood without imagination and the capability to perceive pictures through one's ears.<sup>15</sup> Thus was described a multi-sensory process, which opens up an approach to Grieg's music.

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<sup>10</sup> C.f. Siegfried Oechsle: Gefeiert, geachtet, vergessen. Zum 100. Todestag Niels W. Gades. In: Dansk Årbog for Musikforskning 19 (1988-1991), 175.

<sup>11</sup> Niels W. Gade. In: Die Grenzboten 9 (1850), 809.

<sup>12</sup> David B. Knight: Landscapes in Music: Space, Place and Time in the World's Great Music. Lanham, Md., 2006, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Johan Halvorsen, 26.1.1897, c.f. Arvid Vollsnes: Grieg und die Natur – Empfindung und Malerei. In: Ekkehard Kreft: (Ed.): Kongressbericht. Internationaler und 4. Deutscher Edvard-Grieg-Kongress 2002. Altenmendingen 2002, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Vollsnes, 82.

<sup>15</sup> Heinrich W. Schwab: Musik und Landschaft. In: Greger Andersson: Musikgeschichte Nordeuropa: Dänemark, Finnland, Island, Norwegen, Schweden. Aus dem Schwed. von Axel Bruch u.a. Stuttgart u. Weimar 2001, 398.

Carl Nielsen took up this way of sensual experience. His observation of nature however by far exceeded the pure experiencing of landscape with different senses.

#### **IV. Carl Nielsen – Nature and Landscape**

Carl Nielsen (1865–1931) was born on the Island of Fyn like Hans Christian Andersen. The influence of his island childhood is as well known as it is decisive for his works. As a violin and a cornet player on village festivals Nielsen came into touch with Danish folk music early. On the basis of this intensive impression Nielsen developed his fascination for his home country's popular power like his teacher Gade and his friend Grieg did. Furthermore Nielsen developed a special sense or rather a good hearing for the sound, but also the silence of Fyn and nature and associated this with music: "The bells are ringing and the cocks are crowing in the Fyns' language, and from all birds' nests a pure symphonic cheer is rising ... Silence is singing in the same tone, and even the trees are dreaming and speaking the Fyn's language in their sleep."<sup>16</sup> Here it becomes clear that Nielsen studied not only landscape, but also single natural elements and their principles, like originality and simplicity. He used these impressions as a source of inspiration for his music.

Nielsen's perspective of nature is typical for the developments at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When nature had been seen as "directive" or "determinant" for man, especially in the Western hemisphere, attitudes then changed to the effect that nature was regarded as also making "offers" for human life. This referred to technological achievements, infrastructure or social systems.<sup>17</sup> Nielsen was convinced that there was no exact, mathematical rhythm in music, as in nature no sound and no movement repeated itself evenly either. He rather assumed an "organic" rhythm with which nature conducted the movements of wind or waves.<sup>18</sup> In Nielsen's music the organic rhythm refers to an instinct for sound and silence, that is for appropriate lengths of rests and fermatas, of *Accelerando* and *Ritartando*. Sticking to the regular beat was secondary to this. Presumably this development is a counter-reaction to Nielsen's father, who was a distinguished dance musician on Fyn, as he could keep time as exactly as "the piston of a steam engine".<sup>19</sup> Although Nielsen's existential approach to his environment happened against a national background like in Gade and Grieg, he also had a philosophical background. In 1907,

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<sup>16</sup> Carl Nielsen: Das fünische Lied. In: Carl Nielsen: Lebendige Musik. (Transl. by Mogens Rafn Mogensen). Arbon 1992, 96 f.

<sup>17</sup> Knight, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Nielsen: Musikalische Probleme. In: Carl Nielsen.: Lebendige Musik. (Transl. by Mogens Rafn Mogensen), Arbon 1992, 56-57.

<sup>19</sup> Carl Nielsen: Meine fünische Kindheit. (Transl. by Mogens Rafn Mogensen). Arbon 1992, 102.

Grieg made a remark on Nielsen's opera „Maskarade“ which examines Nielsen's works in this respect. Even if he agreed with Nielsen's art, Grieg criticised: „Often I find, as it were, surrogates for music, things that are the product of pure intellect. But just as often there are great lines and music that is truly felt. And a mastery, a singular technique that surprises one.”<sup>20</sup> The reference to „pure intellect“ and „singular technique“ points out the two musicians' diverging perspectives. Grieg remained fixed on a poetic or mythical impression of landscape and rural life. Nielsen experienced nature and man against a rational background.

In his symphony No. 3 *Sinfonia espansiva* op. 27 from 1911, Nielsen's reflected approach to nature and landscape and his thesis of an organic rhythm becomes evident directly at the beginning.

The repetition of the note „a“ pushes in an uneven and unexpected change of stresses of beat towards the main theme. Determining measure is made difficult by the fitfulness. Only in measure 15 it becomes evident that it is a three-quarter time signature.

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) - Symphony No. 3 „Sinfonia espansiva“ (1910-1911), 1st movement, bb. 1-17

<sup>20</sup> C.f. Finn Benestad/Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe: Edvard Grieg. The man and the artist. Nebraska 1988, 387.

The use of church modes, like dorian for the theme in the first movement and mixolydian in the second movement, returns to the popular roots as they also formed Gade's and Grieg's styles. Nielsen however handles them within the framework of 20<sup>th</sup> century music by polytonality, non-resolution of dissonances and fourth-chords. This stylistic device Grieg had called „singular technique“.

Nielsen unites two main characteristics in his works. He is a popular and an experimental composer at the same time. In this, his artistic dilemma becomes apparent. In his early works he strove to dissociate from his being Danish musically. This was achieved by modern style, which clearly joined the European developments. In the beginning of the 1920s he returned to his roots and composed homages to his home like *Fynsk Foraar (Springtime in Funen)* op. 42 (1921) or *Fantasirejse til Færøerne (An imaginary journey to the Faeroe Islands)* (FS 123) (1927). In this originates a discussion taking place in Denmark up to today if Nielsen is to be regarded as a national composer or not.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

When Gade started with a strong tendency for national orientation, the movement found one of its most vigorous representatives in Edvard Grieg. Nielsen on his part completed these two lines in his synthesis of folk themes and progressive style. Gade and Grieg created musical landscapes through the inspiration of cultural landscape, which points at the culture of the nation. For Nielsen, apart from landscape there are natural principles like sounds and movements in the center, which he joins in one might call “soundscapes”. They do not always correspond to musical principles however, as the unusual beginning of *Sinfonia espansiva* has shown. The intensification of the unequal and thus – according to Nielsen – “organic” rhythm points to one of Nielsen's aesthetic principles. To be able to realize musical landscapes in their whole extension, apart from musical means the whole person and his ability to use his senses in an alienated way was required. Carl Nielsen described in 1920 this sensual behaviour in an impressive way: „We have to listen through our eyes, see through our ears, smell through our hands, think through our hearts and feel through our brains.“<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Henrik Marstal: Carl Nielsen, vore store (danske) komponist. In: Dansk Musik Tidsskrift 50 (2005/06).

<sup>22</sup> Carl Nielsen Breve. I udvalg og med kommentarer. Ed. by Irmelin Eggert-Møller and Torben Meyer. Copenhagen 1954, 190.