



CARL NIELSEN

Clarinet Concerto

Carl August Nielsen (9 June 1865 – 3 October 1931) is widely recognized as Denmark's greatest composer, and is also recognized as being a skilled conductor and a violinist. Brought up by poor but musically talented parents on the island of Funen, he demonstrated his musical abilities at an early age. At first, he did not gain enough recognition for his works to be able to support himself. During the concert which saw the premiere of his first symphony on 14 March 1894 conducted by Johan Svendsen, Nielsen played in the second violin section. However, the symphony was a great success when played in Berlin in 1896, contributing significantly to his reputation. Nielsen became increasingly in demand to write incidental music for the theater and cantatas to mark special occasions, both of which provided a welcome source of additional income. From 1914 to 1926, he conducted the orchestra of *Musikforeningen* or the Music Society and in 1916, he took a post teaching at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen. The strain of his dual career, constant separation from his wife Anne Marie (and the accompanying affairs) and the devastation of World War I greatly influenced his late music, which includes his Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, and Clarinet and Flute concerti. While his early music was inspired by composers such as Brahms and Grieg, he soon started to develop his own style, first experimenting with progressive tonality and later diverging even more radically from the standards of composition still common at the time. Sir Colin Davies, who undertook a celebration of Nielsen with the London Symphony Orchestra in 2010, noted that “there’s such destructive force in the man and he lets it loose in the most surprising ways.”

Nielsen was originally inspired to write the **Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra** in 1921 when he heard the Copenhagen Wind Quintet. He was so impressed by the group that he immediately wrote a wind quintet (Op. 43) for the group, and taking the idea further he promised a concerto for each of the members. Only two of these would come into being: a concerto for flute, and one for clarinet. In writing these concertos, Nielsen attempted to capture the personality of the intended musician. In this case, the clarinetist was Aage Oxenvad, who had bi-polar disorder: at times he would be introspective; others he could be extremely aggressive. This personality trait is manifested in a clash between F major and E major throughout the piece. Having removed much of the instrumentation and leaving only a pair of bassoons and horns, Nielsen achieves a somewhat cynical outlook for the piece. The percussion section features a single snare drum instead of the more typical timpani; the drum’s purpose is to goad the two tonalities into open warfare. This battle is fought across drastic changes in character and mood, and is never fully resolved by the end of the concerto.