CONFLICT AND MEANING
IN CARL NIELSEN’S
CONCERTO FOR CLARINET AND ORCHESTRA, OP. 57 (1928)

DMA DOCUMENT

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Musical Arts in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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2008

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Carl Nielsen wrote his *Concerto for Clarinet, Op. 57* in 1928 for Danish clarinetist Aage Oxenvad. In ascribing meaning to the piece, most Nielsen authorities describe it as a caricature of Oxenvad. Certainly Oxenvad had substantial influence on Nielsen, and many aspects of Oxenvad’s moody and tempestuous personality are captured in the Concerto. Nonetheless, the music has more to do with Nielsen’s life than with Aage Oxenvad’s personality.

In 1926, Nielsen suffered a massive heart attack. Until the time of his death in 1931, he suffered many more cardiac incidents. By 1928, Nielsen was facing the last few years of his life without promise of a successful remedy for his heart disease. Nielsen’s Concerto for Clarinet and its inherent conflict have more to do with his internal struggles than with any external influence. The Concerto is the only large-scale work Nielsen composed during the last five years of his life and it is filled with conflict that never resolves.

After the introductory chapter, the five chapters that follow document five elements of conflict within the Concerto. Tonal conflict concerns the struggle between the piece’s two main key centers, F and E. Their presence together creates unrelenting stress. An equally significant aspect of tonal conflict is the absence of Nielsen’s lifelong practice of “progressive tonality.” To dramatize growth and arrival in his large-scale
works, Nielsen would begin in one key and end in another. The Concerto is his only major work that lacks progressive tonality. There is also conflict in the interplay between the clarinet and the soloistic snare drum. Both instruments take on characters which are in direct opposition to one another. The clarinet is also set apart from the orchestra by means of its many cadenzas as well as its stylistic and range differences. Nielsen uses counterpoint as a metaphor for conflict; in the Concerto, it presents conflict which never resolves. The final aspect of conflict is the short coda which dramatically and tragically ends the music’s journey by abruptly returning the music back to its original key, signifying a failure to reach an ultimate new arrival. The coda seals the dark pessimism of the music.

Though Nielsen rejected music’s power to communicate directly about life events, the conflict and dark emotions of this work strongly suggest a link to his own inner battle with a mortal disease. As Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross documented in 1969, people who are terminally ill pass through five different stages of grief; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Chapter 7 develops a reading of Nielsen’s Concerto that relates its affective qualities to Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief. The lack of progressive tonality, the angry affect of the music, and the alienation of the clarinet from the orchestra mirror the emotions of a man coming to grips with the end of his life.
To my best friend;

by participating in my pain,

you helped me find meaning in my conflict.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my co-advisor, James Pyne, for the incredible support he has always extended to me and to all his students. You are a wonderful role model in character and musicianship. Thank you for allowing me back into The Ohio State University’s DMA program after so many years away. You helped me fulfill a lifelong goal.

I would also like to thank my co-advisor, Danielle Fosler-Lussier, for helping me rekindle my interest in musicology and in music’s meaning. You have challenged me and caused me to grow. You believed in my ideas and continue to show me better ways to communicate them. Thank you for the countless hours you spent helping me.

I am thankful for the example of professors like Richard Blatti. You come to work everyday and consistently love your students in thought, word, and deed. You express the warmth of your personality in everything you do, especially in your conducting. You are one remarkable man.

I am indebted to Chief Master Sergeant Jon Yates, Senior Master Sergeant Peter Aiello, and the rest of the members of the United States Air Force Heritage of America Band. You covered my back so that I could devote time and energy to my school work.

Special thanks to Colonel Charles Wynne (retired), USAF, for allowing me to take an educational leave of absence from the Air Force. You opened a huge door for me.
I am so fortunate to have the love and support of my father and mother, Charles and Mary Monroe. Through the years, you provided me with opportunity after opportunity to realize my dreams.

I will never forget the love and support I received so long ago from Patrick and Joyce Monroe. Your amazing brand of love was selfless and key in helping me find my way.

I am blessed to have had the support of Dianne Monroe and my four children Ian, Caitlin, Christian, and Mairin. I would not have been able to finish this degree without your encouragement.
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PUBLICATIONS

Compact Disc Audio Recordings


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Music
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Danish composer Carl August Nielsen (1865-1931) was an outspoken advocate of “absolute music.” In Living Music, he wrote, “Music, it must be remembered, has nothing to do with ideas.”¹ Nielsen’s writings are full of references to this “Hanslickian” philosophy as related to his music. He argued against Romantic ideas that compared music to other art forms such as literature, painting, and sculpture. He thought it ridiculous to discuss music in terms of its “colors” or “program” because he believed that music could not possibly represent ideas in the direct way that poetry, painting, or sculpture could: “Music can express nothing that can be said with words or displayed in colors or pictures.”² Music to him was simply an organization of tones which had power to evoke emotional feelings.³

Nielsen took an equally cautious position with respect to the question of program music. In his essay “Words, Music, and Program Music” from Living Music, he wrote:

If we confine ourselves to a brief suggestion of a title, music can from various angles and in many ways elucidate and emphasize it….But then the program or title must imply a mood or emotional theme, never a thought or concrete action theme.⁴

² Ibid, 37.
³ Ibid, 10-11.
⁴ Ibid, 36.
He further suggested that if a piece were to be played without revealing its programmatic nature, there would be as many interpretations to its “story line” as there were people listening. He found it illogical to ascribe concrete meaning to so subjective an art form.

In another respect, in regard to concrete or positive ideas, music is completely silent. It can tell us nothing about the meaning of this or that, and cannot be translated into words or pictures. If one were to ask a composer what he meant by a particular chord or succession of tones, the only answer he could really give would be to play or sing the passage. All other explanation is nonsense.\(^5\)

In Nielsen’s mind, the composers and critics who supported the philosophy of programmatic music were grasping for ideas that they desperately wanted to be there, but which could not possibly be supported by an art form that speaks in such a purely abstract fashion.

Even though Nielsen did not believe that music could communicate concrete ideas, he did find it intensely and personally expressive: “Music, more than any other art, relentlessly reveals its origin, the composer.”\(^6\) One of Nielsen’s biographers, Jack Lawson, agreed and took the statement even further. Lawson believed that the composer’s life and work were intertwined: “Nielsen the man and Nielsen the artist are two sides of one coin: his life and work cannot be separated even if the autobiographical elements of his music are more concealed than those of many other composers.”\(^7\) While music may not communicate in exact detail the story line of life, it is relevant in this case to consider the life experiences of the composer in relation to his music, especially those experiences occurring during the composition of a specific piece. In this paper I examine Nielsen’s Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra, Op. 57 (1928) and relate the dark moods

\(^5\) Ibid, 29.

\(^6\) Ibid, 31.

and dramatic conflicts contained within the work to Nielsen’s state of mind during the period of its composition.

Despite Nielsen’s rejection of program music, several commentators have found programmatic elements in this music. One persistent interpretation has focused on the personality of Aage (pronounced Oh-uh) Oxenvad, the clarinetist to whom the work was dedicated. Oxenvad was Copenhagen’s premier clarinetist during the first half of the twentieth century. Nielsen was well acquainted with Oxenvad and many of his colleagues in Copenhagen. Many of Nielsen’s works were written directly for the musicians in the Copenhagen Chapel Orchestra and the city’s other performing groups. Nielsen demonstrated an obvious love of the woodwind instruments through the many fine works he composed for them. Though Nielsen was familiar with the musicians of the Copenhagen Wind Quintet for many years, it was not until a rehearsal of the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante for oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon and orchestra that he developed a meaningful relationship with the ensemble. Within a year, Nielsen wrote the group a three-movement Wind Quintet, Op. 43, arguably one of the finest works for woodwind quintet.

Subsequently, Nielsen promised each of the five musicians a concerto. Because Nielsen had already established himself as a composer who wrote fiendishly difficult music, Knud Lassen, the group’s bassoonist reportedly said, “You go ahead and do just that, but I won’t play it!” Unfortunately, Nielsen completed only two of the concertos before his death. He wrote his Concerto for Flute and Orchestra in 1926 for the mild-
mannered flutist Holger Gilbert-Jespersen. Early in 1928, he began work on his Concerto for Clarinet for Oxenvad. It was finished later that year and given its premiere in a private performance on September 14th, 1928 at the home of one of Nielsen’s patrons, Carl Johan Michaelsen. The first public performance was given in Copenhagen on October 11th, 1928. Both performances featured Oxenvad on the clarinet with Nielsen’s son-in-law Emil Telmányi conducting.

Since the Concerto was written for Oxenvad, many have credited the work’s moodiness and meaning to his personality. David Davenport says, “The Concerto portrays the blunt, gruff, and unsentimental character of the artist for whom it was written.” This is true, but the conflict in the music points to greater depth. In their personalities and backgrounds, Oxenvad and Nielsen shared a great deal of common experiences, and these ideas are presented in the Concerto. For instance, both men were raised in the Danish countryside. Later in life, when their professions forced them to Copenhagen, both missed the pleasures of country living. Oxenvad missed it so much that he lived on the outskirts of town, as close to the country as he could be. Both men were sons of laborers who were also musicians. As young men, both were highly active as performers of Danish folk music. Nielsen expresses these common experiences in the folk-like main theme in the Concerto; the folk-like imagery pertains equally well to Oxenvad or to Nielsen. With these common experiences and their relationship as professional musicians in Copenhagen, the two men developed a close friendship. Gary Mizener states, “Over time, Oxenvad became a close friend and musical confidant, within

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what was essentially a music society with Carl Nielsen, Thorvald Nielsen, Knud Jeppesen, Christian Christiansen and others.”

This friendship was critically important to Nielsen’s composition of the Concerto. Nielsen consulted often with the clarinetist and Oxenvad had great influence over many aspects of the composition. Most commentators attribute the dark and moody nature of the piece to Oxenvad’s personality when discussing the piece’s meaning. Eric Nelson interviewed one of Oxenvad’s former students, Tage Scharff, who said that Oxenvad “considered himself a frightful curmudgeon when things were contrary, and was always obstinate. Oxenvad considered the clarinet a masculine instrument and strongly disapproved of women playing it.” The music seems to express these stiff, unforgiving attitudes well. Robert Simpson called Oxenvad’s personality “turbulent.” The review of the Concerto’s first public performance also attests to the clarinetist’s eccentric personality: “Oxenvad has made a pact with trolls and giants. He has a temper; a primitive force harsh and clumsy, with a smattering of blue-eyed Danish amenity. Surely Carl Nielsen heard the sound of his clarinet when he wrote the Concerto.” In an obituary for Oxenvad, S.C. Felumb stated that

[The Concerto] was not only a concerto for clarinet; it was a concerto for Aage Oxenvad. The composer was so deeply inspired by Oxenvad’s immersion in the essence of the instrument and by his peculiar manner of expressing the soul of the clarinet, that one may safely say that Carl Nielsen would never have written this work if he had not heard Oxenvad. No verbal characterization could be more

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11 Gary Mizener, “The Four Chamber/Solo Works of Carl Nielsen Which Utilize the Clarinet” (D.M.A. paper, University of Texas), 68.
14 Robert Simpson, Carl Nielsen; Symphonist (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 143.
vivid than Carl Nielsen’s musical one. It tells everything about Aage and his clarinet.16

Considering Oxenvad’s role in the writing of the Concerto and his personality, it is not difficult to see why Oxenvad has commanded so much attention from his contemporaries and later from music commentators. Most commentators on the Concerto base their analyses of the work’s meaning on Oxenvad, focusing only on the idea of the music as a caricature of the man. Those who wrote about Oxenvad’s association to the Concerto all speak in general terms of the mood of the work; none offer any specific musical examples to demonstrate how Oxenvad’s personality is represented. As easy as it is to recognize these general elements of personality in the Concerto, to limit the piece to only a single mode of representation is to miss what I believe is a deeper layer of significance contained within the music.

No one disputes that this piece contains great emotional depth, but there seems to be a wide variety of opinions regarding its meaning. Some understand the Concerto as fundamentally optimistic. Nielsen’s English biographer Robert Simpson says, “Choleric humor, pathos and kindliness are mingled in conflict...the piece cannot be called pessimistic.”17 Simpson does not deny the inherent conflict within the work, but states that “the calm severity of the ending puts the individual conflict into perspective.”18 Simpson finds that “while it analyzes a personal struggle, it underlines the fact that such a struggle is the result of self-isolation.”19 For Simpson, the main element of the music that supports his optimistic reading is the serenity of its sudden ending. David Davenport

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18 Ibid, 146.
19 Ibid, 146.
likewise cites the “whimsical” nature of the Concerto and the “air of wry mockery and gruff peasant-like humor” added by the snare drum.20 As an example, Davenport points to four isolated snare drum hits at measures (mm.) 86, 249, 253, and 306, which he claims lighten the clarinet’s serious mood. He calls these examples “a knock on the [clarinetist’s] head.”21 There is also popular thought in the modern clarinet world that the music is ultimately optimistic. Many prominent clarinetists contend that since the Concerto ends on a major chord, the piece ends in optimistic resolution.

Perhaps it is natural to look for a silver lining in a work filled with so much conflict. To do so may lead to an erroneous interpretation of the piece. Considering the overall mood of the piece, and especially its dark ending, it may be more appropriate to read the work as deeply pessimistic. As will be discussed in the chapters that follow, little in the Concerto supports the claim that the piece is ultimately optimistic. I view it as a pessimistic, tragic work full of anger and bitter resignation. Even its ending, which so many use as proof of a more positive outlook, points to bleakness and negativity. Though it ends with a major chord, when taken in context with the overall work, this too strengthens the pessimism of the music.

Nielsen’s personal situation in 1928 points to a possible reason for this pessimism. After working at a fever’s pitch to complete his Symphony no. 5, Nielsen began writing his Wind Quintet, Op. 43. During this time, in the spring of 1922, Nielsen was diagnosed with angina pectoris. His doctors recommended bed rest. For the rest of his life, his heart condition increasingly limited his activities and creative output. In 1926,

21 Ibid, 52.
he collapsed from a heart attack while conducting a performance of his works; from then until his death from heart failure in 1931, Nielsen’s compositional output slowed significantly.22 During his last five years, he primarily wrote smaller-scale works. The Concerto for Clarinet was his last major work, composed two years after his major heart attack. In the early twentieth century, medical care for cardiac patients was in its infancy. Nielsen and his doctors knew well that his condition would continue to deteriorate until his death. For a man who had been vibrant and active his entire life, this “death sentence” must have caused great emotional and physical pain. I believe that the content of the Concerto has at least as much to do with his emotional and physical pain as the piece has to do with the personality of Aage Oxenvad.

The chapters that follow evaluate the role of musical conflict in the Concerto and their relationship to Nielsen’s biography by focusing on five specific aspects of the Concerto. Chapter 2 introduces the form of the work and offers an interpretation of the dramatic transformations of the first theme. Nielsen uses this theme, which unifies the entire Concerto, to touch on the various emotions in the piece. Chapter 3 considers the role of tonality, which is always meaningful in the analysis of Nielsen’s large symphonic works. In the Clarinet Concerto, Nielsen begins and ends the piece in F, abandoning his lifelong practice of ending his large works in different keys from which they began. Throughout the music, tonality further generates conflict as the keys of F and E compete for dominance, creating wrenching tension throughout. In Chapter 4 I analyze the roles of the clarinet and the snare drum as the protagonist and antagonist of the work, as well as the distinctive roles of clarinet and orchestra. Chapter 5 examines Nielsen’s use of

counterpoint as a metaphor for conflict. In Chapter 6 I describe the cold non-resolution of the piece’s sudden and short coda, which brings an abrupt halt to the work in the gloomiest way. It does so by bringing the music to an end in its original key, F, when it seemed the structure of the last movement would bring the music to E. The last cadence points to a more spiritual, though pessimistic conclusion, leading the listener to a final F major chord that is very eerily scored. These five aspects of conflict within the work offer intensely emotional experiences to the attentive listener. In Chapter 7 I suggest, with reference to the theories of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, that the affective qualities of the Concerto reflect Nielsen’s grief over his illness and impending death.

My reading of the Concerto is based on the principle that instrumental music has the ability to communicate extramusical ideas. In “Music and Meaning: An Evolutionary Story,” Elizabeth Tolbert states that “metaphors in musical discourse describe musical experience in terms of movement and intention…. [and] it has been shown that Western music is heard as if it were a ‘virtual person’ that unconsciously discloses information of the self, such as emotional state.” She cites several studies relating to the evolutionary and anthropological development of man that point to evidence that man derives specific meaning from music. In *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*, Wye Allanbrook develops similar ideas by focusing on the composer’s “expressive vocabulary,” namely specific musical topics (or topoi) that communicate meaning in a given work. Allanbrook states:

> The argument for music as an imitative art runs in the most general terms as follows: objects in the external world make an impression on our souls; music can, by imitating those impressions, move our souls in a similar fashion, placing

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us ‘in tune’ with certain substantial entities. The entities to be imitated are various; the higher order of being, perhaps, or the passions of our fellow men.\textsuperscript{25}

She convincingly argues her case by using examples from Mozart’s \textit{Le Nozze di Figaro} and \textit{Don Giovanni} as well as a brief discussion of the Piano Sonata in F Major, K. 332.

Nielsen’s statements suggest that he would have disapproved of this type of reading; yet interpreters are not obligated to take his beliefs about interpretation as their own. Artistic performance requires more than the composer for communication of ideas; the performer and the audience have critical roles to play as well. For the performer to communicate anything of value to the audience, he or she must arrive at decisions on the work that they perform based on a close reading of the score as well as contextual factors. The performer’s objective cannot be to duplicate a composer’s intentions, for this is impossible given how much is left out of a score. The responsible performer will remain as faithful as possible to the details of the score but will also develop his or her own interpretation. The performance lives only if the performer can collaborate with the composer in arriving at meaning. This paper is an attempt to communicate one performer’s interpretation of Nielsen’s Concerto for Clarinet based on the formal elements of the work, Nielsen’s own biography, his compositional techniques in other works, and the connotations of musical sounds themselves.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 4.
CHAPTER 2

TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE FIRST THEME

Carl Nielsen is credited with writing over 200 Danish “folk songs” in addition to his serious compositions. Of course, these works are not truly folk songs, but Nielsen’s original compositions in the style of folk music. He wrote these as supplements to already existing Danish folk music during a period when many composers were doing the same in other countries as an expression of nationalism in their music. Many of Nielsen’s folk compositions found their way into the Danish schools and folk musicians’ living rooms as great Danish musical gems. His Op. 4, 6, and 10 song collections are excellent examples.

The first theme of the Concerto is reminiscent of these folk songs and sets the tone for the entire piece. It is just the type of topic Leonard Ratner analyzes in the music of classical composers in his book *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. He maintains that composers of the early eighteenth century “developed a thesaurus of characteristic figures [topics], which formed a rich legacy for classic composers.”

These “characteristic figures” could be dance music, such as a gigue or a boureé, or an expression of a particular style of music, such as “hunting music” or the baroque “French overture” style among many other topics. The first theme of Nielsen’s Concerto is truly

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reminiscent of Danish folk dance music, and it is treated topically, retaining some of its folk-like implications throughout the movement (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Measures 1-8; first theme

Clarinetist Eric Nelson says this about the theme:

The most significant motive of the work is sounded at the outset. It is strong melodically as a perfect fifth, but derives the bulk of its power from its square, heavy rhythm. The weight is on the beat, a clumsy, masculine peasant dance step. A blatant avoidance of any phrasing nuance distinguishes the motive. There is mud on the boots: long – short – long, stamp – kick – stamp. The motive recurs incessantly in many melodic guises, yet the rhythm is so singular as to protrude at each event – the simple, coarse quality commands.27

It is a theme fitting for both Nielsen and Oxenvad, two boys from the country raised by their parents on Denmark’s folk music. The obvious link to this theme is Oxenvad since the music was written for him; but equally important is its link to Nielsen himself. Knud Ketting from the Carl Nielsen Society says “its somewhat generalized folk music character may be seen, perhaps, to mirror more vaguely something that Nielsen and Oxenvad in fact had in common, i.e. a rural upbringing with a fiddle-playing father.”28 The common man, “mud on the boots” feel of this theme permeates the Concerto.

Though Nielsen was stringently opposed to the idea of a program in music, the “folksiness” of this first theme has programmatic implications. If Nielsen was correct in his assertion that music “reveals its origin, the composer,” this folksiness becomes even more important. It could programmatical represent the character and upbringing of both Oxenvad and Nielsen. Their folk heritage is their most important common bond. That the motive is so pervasive throughout the piece permits us to interpret the various adventures of the motive as spinning a musical tale about the emotional journeys of both men. Perhaps it may represent a hearkening back to the simple roots of childhood. In his book *My Childhood on Funen*, Nielsen details many of the formative experiences of his youth and his experiences as the son of a folk-fiddler as well as his earliest musical memories playing in his father’s folk ensemble. The motive may have elements that represent the rural life both men experienced as children, but it could more easily be seen to represent the innocence of those days. As demonstrated later in this chapter, the theme progressively takes on an angrier and more sinister tone, removing the listener from the innocence of youth to the stark realities of adult life. These ideas could all apply to both men to a certain degree, but the intimacy with which the theme is developed points back to the composer himself. This first theme finds its roots back in his childhood.

If this first theme suggests a programmatic meaning representing aspects of Nielsen’s (and Oxenvad’s) character and personality, its true importance to the music is the way in which it is developed. Nielsen subjected the theme to a process of thematic transformation, like that used by nineteenth-century composers such as Liszt and Wagner, in which the theme takes on many new guises and appears radically transformed.

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at key moments within a work.\textsuperscript{30} The theme constantly changes character throughout the piece, but this element of thematic transformation is also perhaps the music’s strongest unifying device. This theme is present in one form or another in each of the four movements and provides the music’s cohesion. In “Tradition and Growth in the Concertos of Carl Nielsen,” Ben Arnold states,

The most important use of cyclical materials occurs in the Clarinet Concerto, the most serious and intense of these works [concertos]. Its opening theme, set up incessantly in the beginning, haunts the remainder of the work, and undergoes several Lisztian transformations….Nielsen also transforms this motif into several other recognizable fragments, particularly a two-note isolated pattern that begins the third movement.\textsuperscript{31}

It is comparable to Berlioz’s use of the “idée fixe” in Symphonie Fantastique but perhaps not as overt. Whereas Berlioz is communicating a distinct programmatic story line, Nielsen’s use of this folk-like theme conjures up different emotions and varying degrees of conflict. Whatever its form, Berlioz’s theme always references the protagonist’s love interest; its purpose was to directly represent the idea of a living person. Nielsen’s theme does not act in such a direct way, but it seems to be a continual reminder of the character of the protagonist. Carl Dahlhaus’s reference to this technique in relation to the music of Liszt captures the spirit of Nielsen’s use of this first theme:

The device that Liszt used to combine the divergent sections of his forms was what Alfred Heuss called the technique of ‘motivic transformation:’ the practice of deriving opposing and seemingly unrelated themes and motives from common elementary structures of pitch and rhythm. Passages that seemed separate and distinct by virtue of their contrasting tempos and moods were all the more closely related internally.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{32} Carl Dahlhaus, Nineteenth Century Music (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 240.
Considering Nielsen’s emotional state, the music, in fact, reveals the composer. While one cannot say that the theme is the character of Nielsen, in its transformations it does seem to represent a variety of emotional experiences undergone by the theme’s rural persona.

The first measure of the Concerto begins with this folk-like theme. The first phrase is eight measures long, but the “long – short – long” motive that Eric Nelson refers to above, the essence of the first and second measures, is the material Nielsen uses in his transformation. Measure (m.) 27 presents the first dramatic change to the character of the theme by moving it an eighth beat later (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Measures 27-30; first three notes of the main theme in canon on off-beats
This serves to remove its stability; it is no longer a “square, heavy rhythm” and loses the essence of its folk dance flavor. The rhythmic canon, occurring until m. 30, further obscures the stability of the first measures. By having its stability removed, this presentation of the theme points the listener to the fact that all is not right. The purity and innocence of the folk theme is completely destroyed. The rhythmic shift and canon both seem to represent the jarring realization of something terrible. In a simple but profound way, this area foreshadows the conflict ahead. This excerpt occurs about forty-five seconds into the twenty-eight minute work, also a significant point. Nielsen dives right into the meaning of this music, namely that of conflict and pain. From this point until the end of the work, there is no relief.

Measures 57 to 61 bring rhythmic stability back to the theme by placing it back on the strong beats. Similar to the example at m. 27, this passage is also canonic, with the entries separated by a beat. The difference is the addition of the clarinet solo. The clarinet part has nothing to do thematically with the orchestra’s three-note theme. Instead, the clarinet begins by wailing in the upper tessitura. The theme becomes more aggressive at this point. The three-notes are presented in canon in four sequences which are all marked forte. The line rises a major third in m. 59 which adds to its aggressive nature. Its mix with the clarinet is filled with discord. The intense emotions of the music become uncontrolled for the first time. The three-note folk-theme underpins the angry, grasping clarinet line, which is extreme and out of character compared to the orchestra. It begins by screaming in its highest register and plays a wild scalar passage down and then back up again, first in the key of b minor and ends in E. The trill in m. 60 adds to this grasping nature with its unsuccessful search for a cadence point. It is an outburst of negative
emotion. The clarinet line is fighting with the orchestral line. It is angry and lashes out at the folk-theme.

The next appearance of the theme at mm. 69 to 76 is not nearly as overtly contentious as the previous examples. This place in the music serves as a transitional area leading into the second theme of the first movement. It immediately follows the most intense conflict thus far encountered in the Concerto with a brief interplay between the clarinet and the snare drum (addressed in chapter 3). At m. 69, the theme becomes more and more stable, giving the music the opportunity to transition from intensity to the relative calm of the upcoming second theme in the first movement. The three-note theme is played eight times in a sequence whose descending pattern is broken only once. This motion gives the music a chance to, quite literally, settle “down.” The repetition and the gradual descent give the listener some relaxation from the intensity of the previous section. The music serves on a deeper level to lead the character into a place of temporary retrospection: the second theme of the first movement. The second theme, new material, is melancholy, perhaps a sad recollection of earlier days. It is a lyrical line outlining a minor third (G, A, Bb). The half-step relationship between Bb and A from mm. 79 to 82 figure prominently in communicating this melancholia. Each additional presentation of the theme uses these intervals in different transpositions of the theme. The calm, fading transition of the folk theme prepares the way for this look back.

The calm of retrospection does not last long. The music once again becomes more intensely angry until it settles into the piece’s first major cadenza at mm. 133 to 142. The folk-theme plays a prominent role in the middle of the cadenza. The three-note theme sounds six times. The first four appearances are written with accents and marked
“marcato.” The next two presentations pose an extreme contrast, marked pianissimo with all the material surrounding them at fortissimo. With these two contrasts, Nielsen seems to be communicating two distinct emotions competing against each other; perhaps an angry flavor with the former and a desire to return to relative peace with the latter. At each point, the three notes are followed by wild arpeggiations in unrelated keys. The untamed quality of the fortissimo outbursts and the abrupt, angular arpeggios suggest the eruption of a temper tantrum. Again, the folk-theme loses the secure footing on which it initially stood (see figure 3).

![Figure 3: Measure 133; excerpt from cadenza no. 1](image)

The heavily conflicted cadenza leads to the first movement’s retransition and recapitulation. The area from mm. 143 to 166 returns to the folk theme and to the stability of the Concerto’s opening; there is the weight on the beat and the “clumsy masculine dance” that Eric Nelson noticed. This section is one of the piece’s few light-hearted sections. The pianissimo theme is gently stated by the orchestra with playful, pianissimo thirty-second note embellishments by the clarinet. The snare drum plays a passive
accompanimental ostinato. Since this section is the recapitulation, this is the only other place in the Concerto besides the beginning where the full theme is stated. The renewed stability is short lived; mm. 167 to 182 quickly degenerate into a seething anger. Measure 167 introduces the theme again with a dark fortissimo statement in the bassoons and horns. It is a not so subtle reminder of the anger stated earlier. The theme at m. 167 in the bassoons and horns, and then a few measures later in the clarinet line, further develop the anger presented in the theme from mm. 57 to 68. This time, the strings add a sixteenth-note counterpoint which drives the section forward with its repetitive, driving motion. By m. 173, the clarinet takes the three notes of the main theme and violently repeats them over and over. This is all in its uppermost register. This area of the clarinet’s range is the shrillest and commands the attention of the listener (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Measures 172-174; clarinet presents first three notes of the main theme against aggressive counterpoint in the strings
The clarinet pedantically shouts this theme on the same three notes seven times over nine measures finally yielding it to the orchestra in m. 183. At this point, the clarinet plays virtuosic patterns extending the entire range of the instrument. They are essentially major chords interrupted by aggressive, repeated articulations before the sounding of the next chord. The chords move up and down the range of the clarinet. Throughout this section, there is no apparent arrival or resolution; the character of the theme seems to be grasping for meaning but finding none.

From mm. 205 to 218, the first movement winds down and transitions into the second movement, using the first three notes of the folk-like theme in a progressively calmer fashion until the arrival of the second movement at m. 219. The calm is not a peaceful one. The lack of tonal or thematic resolution, the four-measure diminuendo from mm. 215 to 218, and the rallentando in the last two measures suggest a quiet born out of exhaustion, for up to this point, the music has used so much of its energy to express anger. Programmatically, this section of music seems to be a place for the protagonist to rest and regroup from sharing his intense emotions.

The second movement offers a new twist in the development of the first movement’s first theme. In mm. 235 to 236 and 245 to 246, the theme is inverted. The low-ranged, thinly scored texture creates a mood in the A section of this ABA form that is lonely. The inversion of the theme in this slower tempo creates a feeling of introspection and tenderness; a decided change of character to the original presentation of the theme at the beginning. The only times in the Concerto that the theme is inverted are intimate and tender moments, bringing to mind a feeling of longing and reminiscence.
The B section of this movement has sarcastic, dance-like rhythms in the orchestra with the clarinet again playing the main theme in its upper extremes in mm. 275 to 277 and 286 to 287. The snare drum adds an antagonistic flavor with its incessant, pedantic rhythms. For many measures, the snare drum plays three sixteenth notes followed by a sixteenth rest over and over without change. It is accented on the first note of each grouping and has a diminuendo every three notes. Its march-like presence never changes. Once the clarinet assumes the strings’ dance rhythm, the snare drum also becomes more complex. The music suggests a game of pursuit with the snare drum “chasing” after the main theme protagonist.

The third movement develops new material during most of its duration but brings back the folk-like theme immediately following some of the movement’s greatest tension and just prior to the fourth movement. Nielsen brings back the inverted theme in mm. 529 to 530, 533 to 534, 539 to 540 and 543 to 544, hearkening back to the introspective feeling of longing, reminiscence, and loneliness of the second movement (see figure 5).

Figure 5: Measures 529-531; inverted first three notes of main theme
Its emotional impact is deepened by the descending accompanimental chromatic bass lines at each statement, imparting a feeling of hopelessness. The emotional feel of the slow inversion of the theme together with the descending bass line make this entire transitional area leading to the final movement, mm. 529 to 546, perhaps the most heart-rending music of the Concerto. The final reference to the theme is like this in mood and structure and occurs in the fourth movement, mm. 674 to 675 and 680 to 681.

This folk-like theme is the most important theme of the Concerto and represents the music’s unifying element. It appears throughout the Concerto in a variety of guises. It sounds stoical at the opening; at times it sounds intense, agitated, and even angry. It serves as a quiet but ominous transition; and in its inversion, it takes on a tender and lonely affect. The importance of the theme’s first three-note motive (see figure 1) is manifest in its many transformations which are accomplished through manipulations of counterpoint, rhythmic displacement, and interruptions that are extreme and far from the theme’s original character. The scoring of the theme adds significantly to these transformations. Most of the instances are darkly scored, emphasizing the low frequencies of the orchestra. Nielsen adds brightness to the theme by scoring the clarinet in its altissimo register. The only places where the theme seems to have repose are the passages in which it is inverted.

Because of Oxenvad’s and Nielsen’s lifelong association with folk music and the countryside, one possible interpretation is to personalize the adventures of the theme as pertaining to one or both of them. Though some of its emotional transformations can be linked to Oxenvad and his peculiar personality, I believe that these transformations have more to do with Nielsen’s struggle to come to grips with his mortality. From the first
canonic destabilization of the theme through all the subsequent guises in which it appears, the theme is set in ways that reflect anger, terror, and sadness. When the clarinet screams the theme in the uppermost register, it seems to express anguish and rage. When the theme is presented tenderly, in inversion, the orchestration suggests wistful loneliness, congruent with the emotions of a man facing imminent death. The theme’s folk flavor underscores its tie to Nielsen’s folk music heritage. As I will argue in chapter 7 using the work of Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, these emotions are closely associated with the process of grieving the loss of one’s own health and life. The transformations of the theme therefore seem to reflect the conflict in Nielsen’s own life as he grappled with the anger, fear, and loss that come with terminal illness.
CHAPTER 3

TONAL CONFLICT

Tonal conflict plays a vital role in the development of the Clarinet Concerto in two significant ways. First, the Concerto stands out in the history of Nielsen’s distinct practice of tonal development because of its denial of progressive tonality. His frequent use of progressive tonality as a compositional device to communicate growth and arrival together with its absence in the Concerto tempts the listener to understand the Concerto as lacking this kind of philosophical progress. Second, the Concerto enacts a struggle between the two keys, E and F. The struggle takes on war-like proportions. It is apparent during many passages in the Concerto that each key is vying for tonal control of the work. The distance between the two keys makes these battles fierce. These two aspects of Nielsen’s use of tonality provide intense conflict which does not resolve.

In *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, Robert Simpson describes Carl Nielsen’s tonal practices in his large-scale works. In Nielsen’s symphonies, concertos, and other large works, he develops his tonal scheme around what theorists have called “progressive tonality.” Simpson uses the symphonies and concertos to show how Nielsen creates motion from an “initial tonic” (opening key) to a “final tonic” (ending key). Harald Krebs
further details this practice and maintains that Nielsen was one of the first composers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to employ this technique.\textsuperscript{33}

According to Simpson, this practice was a metaphor for growth and arrival. In a given piece, it gave Nielsen a place to begin his journey as well as a final destination. It fit in well with his ideas on the process of living and the wonder of discovery. Simpson says “it was to become a positive principle with him that a sense of achievement is best conveyed by a firm establishment of a new key.”\textsuperscript{34} The establishment of the new key metaphorically spoke about Nielsen’s ideas relating to the journey and overall process of living. The progress of life involved change. The new key showed that life was not stagnant and optimistically moved toward some sort of achievement. According to Simpson,

\begin{quote}
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 plant’s full growth.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

In his works, Nielsen philosophically saw the potential of the musical voyage as it related to the real world. Simpson closes this argument by commending Nielsen’s artistic courage as an expression of Nielsen’s own temperament, which Simpson states “cannot help looking outwards.”\textsuperscript{36} The importance of Simpson’s comments cannot be overstated. The practice of progressive tonality extended Nielsen’s personal philosophy into his creative process allowing his compositions to reflect an optimistic overall view of life and the process of living.

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{34} Robert Simpson, \textit{Carl Nielsen; Symphonist} (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 20.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 21.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 184.
\end{footnotes}
Nielsen’s larger-scale works, his symphonies and concertos, provide a clear picture of this overarching philosophical principle. Each of these works is a musical journey toward discovery by way of this progressive tonality and each ends in a different key from the one in which it began. For example, the Symphony no. 5 is the most conflict-ridden of Nielsen’s symphonies; it is also the symphony that most closely resembles the Concerto for Clarinet. From its beginning to just a few moments before its end, the work is filled with conflict. Simpson suggests that the conflict of this music has to do with the effects of World War I on the composer: “Its long and painful tragedy had left its mark on Carl Nielsen’s mind.”37 There is negativity from the beginning of the Symphony: the violas start the work with a seemingly endless tremolo between the notes C and A while the bassoons play a melody line in cold harmonies. The use of the snare drum for militaristic interruptions and the clarinet cadenza suggest a close affinity between the Symphony no. 5 and the Clarinet Concerto. Nonetheless, the largest difference between the Clarinet Concerto and the Symphony no. 5 is that the Symphony does eventually resolve its conflict in the most heroic, optimistic fashion during the last forty-five seconds of the work. There is no real rest in the music until that point. The finish is in B major, a distance from its original tonal center of C. After all the bitterness, heartache, and pain expressed throughout the symphony, Nielsen’s final few measures suggest a definite faith in mankind.

It is very significant that the Concerto for Clarinet is Nielsen’s only large-scale piece that does not end in a key other than its opening key. Measures 1 to 8 clearly show a tonal center of F (see figure 1), although its mode is ambiguous. The last five measures, 

37 Ibid, 92.
710 to 728, unmistakably end the Concerto in F (see figure 15) with a cadence on an F major chord. Philosophically, this suggests that there is no growth or arrival; there is no sense of discovery or achievement. If Nielsen’s use of progressive tonality is a metaphor for growth, his abandonment of this philosophy in the Concerto is a deeply pessimistic statement.

The primary keys of the Concerto are its beginning and ending key, F, and its half-step neighbor, E. Concertos from the classical and romantic eras typically developed keys that were related. It is hard to imagine more distance than this half-step relationship. It is the source for much of the chaos in the Concerto. These keys fight each other for supremacy throughout. While I do not necessarily ascribe specific meaning to these conflicts, the presence of this battle underscores the general idea of conflict within the composer himself. Generally, the clashing keys create an exciting tonal drama as the work unfolds and they serve to accentuate the pervasive anger throughout the Concerto.

The struggle begins almost at the outset. Measures 1 to 16 are squarely in F. Measure 17 introduces the clarinet with the orchestra’s opening theme, again in F. But by the time the clarinet arrives on its lowest note in m. 27, Nielsen has landed in E. Nielsen creates wonderful tension by presenting this new key with the main theme in the unstable “off-beat” canon mentioned in chapter 1. The rhythmic instability of the rugged opening theme, together with the sudden lurch to a distant tonal area truly make it chaotic. The first movement continues to develop the tension between F and E with ventures into some of their closely related keys and the introduction of the second theme in C.

The first major cadenza appears at m. 133 in the first movement and is immediately preceded by the leading tone to E in the clarinet against a sustained C# in
the strings. The cadenza does not, however, begin in E but gradually works its way there: midway through the cadenza, the main theme is stated in c# minor, the relative minor of E, and the dramatic pianissimo moment in the cadenza arrives on a statement of the main motive in E (see figure 3). The aggressive, maniacal treatment of this theme, mentioned in the previous section, is underscored by the use of the key of E. It is a completely different flavor than the first sounds of the movement. Almost immediately, F aggressively asserts itself through a meandering modulation with augmented arpeggiated chords leading to 22 consecutive, pedantic articulations on the note F, ending on a long fermata. It is as if F has been threatened by E’s attempt to take tonal control of the piece and restates itself over and over, as if a child in a temper tantrum. The overly emphatic reassertion of F highlights the tonal struggle.

The retransition of the first movement, beginning in m. 143, uses the main folk theme with a slightly ornamented line in the bassoons in the dominant of F. This is to be expected in a normal retransition as a composer makes his way back to the tonic key. Nielsen clearly emphasizes the dominant by outlining the tonal area of C with the folk theme beginning in m. 143. He has not transposed the entire theme here, but uses C-C-C, Bb-C-C repeatedly. Starting in the dominant of F clearly heightens the expectation that the music will end up in F at the recapitulation, but Nielsen does the unimaginable by recaptitulating in E rather than F! The orchestra recapitulates at m. 151 clearly in E and the clarinet follows at m. 159 in E with an eight-measure phrase which stays in E but becomes increasingly agitated. The recapitulation at m. 151 is still rather unstable with its canonic material between the upper and lower strings. This is perhaps part of Nielsen’s
plan to ready the listener’s ears for the soloist to enter at m. 159 with the complete restatement of the opening material in its new key.

The unexpected tonal center of the recapitulation leads to a violent firestorm from mm. 164 to 218 in which F attempts to regain authority. This is the wildest passage of the Concerto to this point. Thematically, Nielsen generates excitement by using the main theme in the upper register of the clarinet with driving and aggressive imitative sixteenth note patterns in the orchestra. The bassoons and horns provide a competing counterpoint to the clarinet throughout the section. The clarinet takes over the orchestra’s sixteenth note rhythms at m. 183 and then later with its quasi-cadenza passage at m. 198. The music sustains this tension without successful resolution to either E or F by the time the movement ends at m. 218. Although the movement quiets dynamically leading to the second movement, there is no sense of resolution.

The second movement continues this tonal warfare with a beautiful bitonal theme (see figure 6). The melody in the horns is in the dominant of F and the accompaniment in the bassoons is in E. Thus, there is a temporary “détente” in the war between keys.

Figure 6: Measures 219-222; bitonal first theme of the second movement
The dominant of F, the tonal area of C, continues to take on an important role in the
Concerto. As both the dominant of F and the submediant of E, it takes on an intermediary
role between the warring keys. Though its presence does not diminish the visceral effects
of the key relations, it provides a bridge between the keys which Nielsen uses to his
advantage. In this passage, the “détente” between keys is reached by way of the key of C.

This section of music presents an intensely beautiful dissonance with a soaring,
lonely sounding horn melody. Nielsen wrote this loneliness masterfully, isolating the
horn from the key of the accompaniment. When the clarinet enters at m. 227, this
isolation increases. The lonely color of the clarinet is set in its clarion register against the
darker, lower colors in the viola and cello, still set bitonally. Measures 249 to 252
highlight several integral elements to this work. Measures 245, 246, 251, and 252 present
the melancholy inversion of the first movement’s main theme. The orchestration features
an isolated clarinet voice from the string accompaniment again suggesting loneliness. The
sforzando snare drum strike at m. 249 is not light-hearted or whimsical, but intensely
threatening to the melancholy character of this music. This isolated strike helps propel the
music into the next section at m. 253. The B section of the movement is stylistically quite
different from the slow, melancholy A sections. It is centered upon a grotesque dance
rhythm in the violins at m. 253. The clarinet develops the main theme from the first
movement above these rhythms with the snare drum beating a chilling ostinato. Nielsen
does this subtly at first with intervallic fragments of the theme at the eighth note
anacrusis to m. 259 and completes the theme in the next measure. The use of this theme
is more apparent from mm. 274 to 277, with the three-note motive finally being stated
correctly on beat three of m. 276 and beat one of m. 277. The predominant key in the B
section is E. The overall lonely tension in the two A sections suggests a very real human isolation.

The third movement begins at m. 314 with new, waltz-like material and has a distinctly dreamy, nostalgic feel, perhaps recalling or yearning for days gone by. Tonally, the section in 3/8 (mm. 314 to 465) alternates between E and F by making journeys into each tonality’s related keys. The first phrase of melody, at m. 328, is in B, the dominant key of E. The second phrase, at m. 336, begins in F but quickly modulates back to B for the first entrance of the clarinet solo in the movement at m. 344. At m. 352, the first violins present the theme in c# minor; the rest of the strings provide a cadence in the subdominant of F at m. 354. Measures 356 to 361 feature an escalating “argument” between the soloist and the strings, who trade short phrases with rising pitch and increasingly louder dynamics. In each of their phrases, the strings insist on an F scale rising to the diminished fifth; the clarinet first presents the same figure in B, the dominant key of E, which quickly modulates to F# (V of V in E). It is an exceptionally fine use of the conflicting harmonies to break the waltz’s hypnotic mood. This interruption also breaks the rhythmic stability of the waltz with a hemiola which alternates beat to beat between the soloist and the strings (see figure 7).
Measures 362 to 385 serve as a transitional area which takes the music to the second theme of the third movement at m. 386. The transition material begins in F and works its way to C by the time the second theme arrives.

The second theme begins in C and visits other keys closely related to F (Bb and D) but works its way back to C until m. 442, at which point the rhythmic flow changes and Nielsen adds the aggressive snare drum. From m. 442 until the arrival of the final section of the movement at m. 466, the music pulls between B (the dominant of E) and F. In a sort of “tonal counterpoint” at m. 466, the accompaniment begins in the strings in E, but the theme of this section, played by the bassoons at m. 471, begins abruptly in F (see figure 8).
This section alternates wildly between E and F (and their related keys) and settles into F the closer the music gets to the Concerto’s second major cadenza at m. 528. As with all the other sections of music which alternate between the two keys, the tonal instability with its aggressive, quick modulations between E and F suggest anger.

Following the cadenza in m. 533, Nielsen returns to the inverted folk-like theme from the first movement in the dominant of E. This section prepares the final movement’s arrival at m. 547. Based upon Nielsen’s previous use of progressive tonality, one might expect that this final movement would finish in the key of E. Nielsen certainly sets up a strong expectation that this will occur. The final movement is a short rondo. The A theme begins at m. 549 in A, the subdominant key of E. The return to the A theme at m. 682 is in B, the dominant key of E. Through this process, Nielsen seems to be setting up a IV – V – I finish for the Concerto; one expects that the final entrance of the A theme will be in E. But in m. 706, when Nielsen presents the A theme once again following a flurry of sixteenth note activity from the soloist, the theme is in the key of F. The suddenness of
this change of key is stark and shocking. After the immense energy spent battling between the two keys and the strong indications in the fourth movement that the piece would end progressively in E, Nielsen chooses a dark emotional ending in F (see figure 15). He changes the character of the A theme’s virtuosic flavor to one of utter anguish. He sets the clarinet solo in its low chalumeau register, whereas the previous statements of the A theme were in the clarion register. The accompaniment is also very bare; its most notable feature being the pedal tone F’s in the low strings. The crushing ending is masterfully developed; expectation of a final tonic in E is destroyed.

The speed of this modulation in comparison to the distance between keys that it has had to cover is striking, especially after the listener has been prepared to end in E. According to Nielsen scholars, his practice of progressive tonality was significant. It symbolized a journey with an arrival at a different place from which the journey had begun. The fact that Nielsen denies this practice in the Concerto communicates a bitter resignation. The rhythmic motion has died down significantly in this ending section, without ever having come to a grand resolution, and Nielsen marks “poco a poco calando” for the last 11 measures. The heroic sense of growth and arrival is absent here.

The relationships between the two main keys in Nielsen’s Concerto for Clarinet create a dynamic tension and a sense of menacing conflict throughout the piece. Nielsen takes the keys of F and E and uses them and their close relative keys in a way which pits one side against the other. The only middle ground to the keys is the key of C, which is the dominant of F and the submediant of E. There are a few instances in which C acts as an intermediary, but in most instances, C functions as the dominant of F. Nielsen uses the keys of E and F separately, pitting section against section; and he even uses them
simultaneously, pitting them directly against each other at the same time. Nielsen uses this key relationship to express many different shades of pain. Depending on its context, this key contrast can seem lonely, argumentative, maniacal, wild, or sad; in all cases, it heightens the sense of conflict that drives the work. The effect I have demonstrated with regard to thematic transformation is also integral to the tonal conflict within the Concerto; the tonal conflict supports the other forms of musical conflict in the Concerto, strengthening the music’s capacity to suggest pain, anguish, and other negative emotions. Together with the lack of progressive tonality, the overall impression is thus one of struggle without success, of effort without triumph. This struggle, I will suggest, conveys some of the emotions common to the grieving process at the end of life, and relates Nielsen’s own biography more closely to his work than scholars have previously suggested.
CHAPTER 4

PERSONAE IN CONFLICT

In his book, *The Composer’s Voice*, musicologist Edward Cone presents the idea of musical “personae.” Simply put, a persona is a role which an instrument or a group of instruments takes on in the symbolic communication of ideas through music. The overall persona of a piece can be an abstraction not related to the composer or it could be an implied or imagined representation of the composer. Cone states, “The persona’s experiences are not the composer’s experiences but an imaginative transformation of them; the reactions, emotions, and states of mind suggested by the music are those of the persona, not the composer.”38 The persona is thus to be differentiated from the composer as a person. Cone illustrates this distinction by drawing on an example from Beethoven’s Symphony no. 6. He says that when Beethoven wrote “cheerful feelings on arrival in the country” in his score, this constituted a “self-portrait” that may or may not represent the actual man or his feelings. Like Tolbert’s idea on page 9 of the “virtual person” in a given piece, Cone insists that a music work always implies a single, over-arching persona: “In every case there is a musical persona that is the experiencing subject of the entire composition, in whose thought the play, or narrative, or reverie, takes place—whose inner life the music communicates by means of symbolic gesture.”39 Thus, the “Nielsen”

39 Ibid: 94.
we imagine we hear in the work may or may not be equivalent to the composer himself, though it is a typical response to imagine them as identical.

As discussed in chapter 1, Nielsen had no tolerance for others’ attribution of concrete meaning to his or any other composers’ music. His writings ridiculed those critics who attempted such a thing. He reserved special venom for the composers who claimed that their music could convey specific meanings. Despite Nielsen’s vehemence, it is also evident that some instrumental music can convey certain imagery or ideas by its topical content or by seeming to represent human action. In the Clarinet Concerto, the clarinet and the snare drum seem to act as two distinct characters, each with its own way of “behaving” musically. As the solo instrument, the clarinet represents a protagonist of sorts, presenting a florid, tragic story line. The snare drum is the antagonist; all of its music provides nothing but interference and pain for the solo clarinet. As these two characters struggle through the Concerto, the work as a whole presents an overall persona that we might identify with the composer: it seems to embody irresolvable difficulties. These three personae in the music are quite evocative but cannot be said to tell a story. Rather, all three taken together suggest emotions and conflicts related to Nielsen’s life situation.

Persona of the Solo Clarinet

In addition to the overall persona implied in a musical work, Cone allows that individual instruments or groups of instruments often assume specific roles, even emerging as individual “voices.” When instruments stand out in this way, Cone refers to their roles as “virtual agents.”  

40 Ibid, 88.
characters or traits. When a single instrument is “individualized,” as in a concerto, Cone further defines this as a “unitary virtual agent.” When sections of an ensemble take on specific characters or traits, Cone calls them “implicit virtual agents.” Depending upon the composer’s use of an agent, it could be defined as “permanent” (as in the role of soloist in a concerto or the role of any instrument which assumes the same persona for the duration of a piece) or as “temporary” (as in the use of various solo instruments used briefly in a piece to assume a particular persona). In his Concerto for Clarinet, Nielsen uses two permanent unitary virtual agents, while the orchestra has a more complex role. The orchestra has many sections that seem to represent temporary implicit virtual agents, but as a whole, it also represents an overall persona which provides a dramatic contrast to the solo role of the clarinet.

The first of the two permanent unitary virtual agents is the clarinet. Cone suggests that in a concerto, the solo instrument plays the role of protagonist. As the main unitary virtual agent, Nielsen’s solo clarinet presents a specific point of view throughout the piece: much of its material sounds angry or panic-stricken, while an undercurrent of loneliness comes to the fore less frequently. In the section following the recapitulation of the first movement from mm. 167 to 218, for example, the clarinet screams the folk-like theme in the highest register in a piercing voice while the orchestra grunts constant accented sixteenth notes (see figure 4). In m. 182, the clarinet takes the orchestra’s sixteenth-note motive and develops it in a manic fashion covering the entire range of the clarinet in a very short space of time.

41 Ibid, 89.
The first cadenza, mm. 133 to 144, is wild and flailing in its roughly two-minute development of the main folk-like theme. Its anger is set with a series of augmented chords preceding the first statement of the main theme of the first movement. The tritone in these chords is highlighted in a wild descending line leading to the folk-like theme. These chordal structures communicate a agitated and wild anger. The first six notes of the folk-like theme present themselves in two sequences, each divided into two three-note statements. The first statement is in C# and the second is in G, a tritone apart. Between each three-note set, Nielsen presents virtuosic minor arpeggios in distant keys from each of the themes’. His harmonic language in the cadenza is emotionally troubling because he is blurring pitch center. It implies anger and confusion. The cadenza then settles into a treatment of the second theme material from m. 136. Though this material is more lyrical and legato, the foreboding tritone still makes its way into the first phrase of this music in three distinct places. It is, however, much calmer than the earlier part of the cadenza. The second cadenza, m. 528, is a roughly two-minute virtuosic display on thematic material that imitates the percussive striking of the snare drum by beginning each phrase grouping with two aggressive, percussive articulations. In its imitation of the snare drum, the clarinet seems to mock or defy its antagonist, the snare drum. These articulations are so obviously set apart from the rest of the clarinet line, not only by its articulation by also by the different range in which it is set. The sound of these articulated notes is very similar to the sounds of the snare drum in many passages of the Concerto. The six other cadenza-like areas occur at mm. 24, 97, 201-204, 288-291, 306-313, and 530-532. The latter three serve as transitional material into different music. In the cadenzas, particularly the
extended ones, the clarinet seems to be an isolated voice, completely separated from the orchestra.

Even in parts of the Concerto where one might expect clarinet and orchestra to play together, the clarinet is very often separated from the accompaniment with an unusual level of independence. This is true both of the tessitura used for the clarinet, which tends to set it apart, and of the topical material treated by soloist and orchestra. The separation of the clarinet from the orchestra not only serves to further the independence of the soloist, but also creates stark colors heightening the overall tension and conflict of the music. The first example of this writing occurs from mm. 58 to 61, where the orchestra develops the first theme of the piece in its lower register while the clarinet wails high above in its altissimo register, then cascades back down to the throat tone area and back up into the high clarion register. This line of music for the soloist takes on an angry, frenzied quality by presenting dissonant, cascading scale patterns over the folk-theme, material that is independent from what the orchestra plays.

Another such contrast begins at m. 117 and lasts until the cadenza at m. 133. It features the clarinet in a rather aimless, jagged, but nonetheless melodic passage in its upper range while the orchestra plays a martial sixteenth-note pattern in its lower register. The orchestra’s martial pattern seems to support the idea that the clarinet’s character is under siege. As the soloist gets closer to the cadenza, it calms down into the lowest part of its range. The difference in these two styles during this excerpt shows the independence between the personae.

Between mm. 253 and 278, clarinet and orchestra are differentiated by topical as well as registral cues as seen in figure 9.
The orchestra begins a dance of exaggerated dotted rhythms in its middle register; the exaggerated quality of the short notes suggests mockery or sarcasm. The exaggerated short notes create this element of sarcasm. The clarinet sings long frantic phrases related to the first theme of the piece mostly in its altissimo register. The orchestra’s driving dance rhythms together with the snare drum’s ostinato heighten the clarinet’s frenzied line, but its unfocused direction of line together with the wide intervallic leaps and its relatively long sustains between movements all contribute to its emotional flavor. The juxtaposition of the orchestra’s and the clarinet’s music creates a sense of argument between the voices. The orchestra’s rhythmic and melodic drive take what could have been an elegant dance and seems to create a distorted caricature. It is crass. This dance seems to taunt the persona of the soloist in its repetitive strains throughout this section.

Figure 9: Measures 260-262; stylistic and range differences between clarinet and orchestra
The soloist, on the other hand, searches for some kind of order in its quest to bring the first theme of the work to the fore. The clarinet stands alone against the orchestra. It is as if with each incantation of the first theme, this character is seeking something that is not there. The phrase beginning at m. 257 and ending at m. 261 demonstrates this by ending in an incomplete cadence. There is a pleading quality to the line as it continues to go without a real cadence point. The orchestra will not give up its sarcastic dance to the simplicity of the first folk-like theme in the clarinet and the tension builds between the two elements. This section of music comes to a conclusion when the clarinet finally abandons its search and picks up the mocking dance rhythm with a militaristic accompaniment by the snare drum alone. The snare drum’s music here is very repetitive and sounds like a military cadence. It is as if it is trying to lead the clarinet in the way a drill sergeant would lead his troops in formation.

As explained in chapter 3, the second movement, at m. 227, is set bitonally and the orchestration of horns and bassoons provides a dark sound (see figure 6). The horn takes the melody in the first statement and the clarinet in the second. By the time Nielsen introduces the clarinet, the bitonal accompaniment shifts to the violas and cellos. The darkness of the orchestration contributes to the somber quality of the clarinet’s persona. Not only is the sound of the music dark, but the emotional impact of the music is also dark. The loneliness is beautifully portrayed; not only has Nielsen isolated the clarinet’s range from the low strings, but the strings are playing an accompanimental role that is rhythmically very different from the clarinet part. The minor mode of the passage amplifies this loneliness. In the final movement, the clarinet expresses a painful yearning, as in mm. 533 to 546, where Nielsen uses the inverted folk-theme against a thickly
harmonized string section (see figure 5). The low end of the accompaniment presents descending chromatic lines that evoke the genre of lament.

Another extended example of the separation presents itself in the middle of the fourth movement from mm. 618 to 643. The passage, marked “molto tranquillo,” features accompanimental triplet patterns in the low range of the orchestra with a singing style melody in the clarinet’s altissimo register. The range difference is enough to clearly set the clarinet’s persona apart from the orchestra. In this high tessitura, the clarinet plays a mournful legato melody covering the range of an octave that suggests crying. It is the same range Nielsen uses for the clarinet’s screaming and wailing in previous sections. This time, the melody is not aggressive; it is much more subdued in its minor mode. The strings create a stable harmonic bed while the bassoons present a light counterpoint providing an opposition to the clarinet. The solo line is pleading and searching for answers. The end of the first phrase for the soloist at m. 630 is an incomplete cadence. At m. 631, the violins enter with a lazy presentation of the rondo theme from this movement, as if to regain focus and move on, but the clarinet again enters pianissimo in m. 634, whispering in continuation its long, pleading, lonely searching phrase. There is a sense within the orchestra that the rest of life moves on as the individual, represented by the clarinet, remains alone.

The emphasis in the clarinet part on music that evokes anger and frantic activity has been attributed to Oxenvad’s tempestuous personality; but we can also hear in these aspects of music Nielsen’s own painful struggles in the years before the Concerto was written. This is apparent in the clarinet’s outbursts throughout the work. Other compositional aspects supporting this reading include the separation of the clarinet from
the orchestra. There are many passages in the Concerto that feature the clarinet alone or performing with the orchestra but separated by tessitura or style. They suggest a separation from society and, in some instances, loneliness. If the clarinet represents Nielsen’s inner struggle, the orchestra represents the world around him.

**Persona of the Snare Drum**

The snare drum is the piece’s second permanent unitary virtual agent. According to percussionist David Davenport, music commentator R.J. Gregory suggests that the piece is a double concerto because of the importance of the snare drum part.\(^4^2\) This is an understandable statement due to the virtuosic nature of the drum part and its organic involvement in the composition; but when one looks at the work in terms of the clarinet’s and snare drum’s roles as unitary virtual agents, it is clear that the snare drum provides only a supporting role.

Before 1928, no concerto featured the snare drum in such a large supporting role. In fact, it is a major part of the snare drummer’s repertoire and much has been written about its significance. Davenport claims that “the drum lends an air of wry mockery and gruff peasant-like humor, especially in those passages when the solo clarinet begins to take himself too seriously.”\(^4^3\) Yet if we follow Cone’s interpretation of the concerto soloist as the protagonist, then the snare drum is clearly the antagonist in this work. Its presence is always ominous, threatening, and disruptive. Much of the snare drum playing in the Concerto is aggressive and militaristic. Most of the entrances are repetitive with rhythms reminiscent of rudimental, functional military music. Nielsen had a pronounced


\(^{4^3}\) Ibid, 52.
distaste for the disciplines of military life. He recalls in *Living Music* a corporal who tutored him in this discipline and his resulting disdain for the man. Other negative military memories include thoughts from his first rehearsal with the Odense military band:

> The orchestra came in with a fortissimo. I nearly sank to my knees at the dreadful din. It was like being thrown into a raging sea inhabited by all sorts of monsters that were dashing the spray over one another, crying and screaming, pushing and buffeting and pulling one another’s tails in one mighty uproar.\(^4\)

His choice of an overly militaristic sounding snare drum strengthens the negative and combative side of its persona.

The first entrance of the snare drum takes place from mm. 63 to 68. It is set in an angry, combative rhythmic counterpoint to the wild, rambling clarinet solo line (see figure 10).

The drumming is set in very square rhythms, emphasizing both the strong and weak eighth beats, like a military cadence. This is no whimsical treatment of the two voices together; the strikingly contrasting material seems argumentative, as in m. 65, for instance, when each voice interrupts the other. It is highly significant that Nielsen chose such an aggressive stance for the snare drum’s first appearance, as it introduces the hostile relationship between the two personae.

But not all of the snare drum’s work is as aggressive. There are a few places in which its role is presented in a more subtle, quiet fashion. For instance, in the area immediately preceding the first cadenza at mm. 118 to 132, the drum plays a strict, repetitive militaristic pattern emphasizing the weak eighth beats at first. Then it spirals into a rhythmic rallentando with its rhythmic values gradually slowing down with the overall energy of the music. Though its intensity calms, it gives a quiet reminder against the clarinet’s singing style melody that it is still there, watching and waiting (see figure 11).
The next entrance of the snare drum is similar. At the beginning of the recapitulation in m. 151, it enters again quietly with its fifteen-measure repeating military ostinato, an ominous presence against the austere first theme.

As the first movement winds down from mm. 205 to 218, it plays its loud rolls and eventually dies away into the second movement with its familiar military-style thirty-second note ostinato off-beat patterns against the first theme material. In these quieter places, the snare plays regular repeating patterns. They highlight the sense of passing time during the clarinet’s and orchestra’s lyrical sections. It is an odd element during expressive music. Clearly, the purpose here is not to outline time, but to heighten tension and provide a reminder of its omnipresence.

During the middle section of the second movement from 253 to 288, the drum returns. Against the sarcastic dance in the orchestra and the singing style in the altissimo clarinet, it provides another relentless ostinato rhythm, again in a repetitive, militaristic

Figure 11: Measures 128-132; material immediately preceding first cadenza with quiet snare drum
style (see figure 9). This time, the snare plays three sixteenth notes followed by a sixteenth rest over and over. This repeating motive lasts for 24 measures. It is the snare drum pursuing the clarinet, almost as though its repeating footsteps are gaining on the protagonist. At m. 278, the clarinet breaks its wailing singing style and plays a virtuosic section based largely on the orchestra’s sarcastic dance. In these eight measures, the snare plays contrasting rhythmic counterpoint to the clarinet. When the clarinet is in triple time, the drum is in duple and vice versa. This rhythmic counterpoint emphasizes the unrest between the two. For the final few measures of this section, before the return to the A theme of the second movement, the clarinet goes back to its singing style and the drum to its ostinato. The element of “chase” in this music reinforces the idea that the persona of the drum is the antagonist and is symbolically pursuing the persona of the clarinet.

At only one place in the Concerto do the two personae cooperate. From mm. 443 to 465, the snare works in concert with the clarinet’s line, filling in rhythmically at break points in the clarinet’s thirty-second note fragments. The two lines dovetail to create one overall musical line. This is not a peaceful kind of teamwork, though. The snare is very aggressive and accented and works its way into the clarinet’s persona in a hostile way. It is a violation. The clarinet’s line is a virtuosic, slurred chordal construction and the drum’s interruptions are all heavily accented. The drum continues the line but interrupts it with its demonstrative style. The drum continues at mm. 466 to 528, directly preceding the second major cadenza. The style here is again martial and returns to the idea of the snare’s persona pursuing the clarinet. This chase becomes significantly more intense as the cadenza nears.
Nielsen’s use of the snare drum is noteworthy because it rarely establishes the tempo or provides impetus for forward motion: it serves primarily as an agent of disruption. Only in the fourth movement, at m. 547, does the snare drum establish the tempo after the final fermata of the third movement. It continues here with its military drum style until m. 610. It sets a course for the march through time. The forward motion seems to reinforce this idea of the music reaching its goal and arrival point; thus, perhaps the snare drum works together with Nielsen’s tonal trickery that leads the listener to believe that the music will end in a different key than it had begun. Nonetheless, in its next entrance at m. 643, the snare goes back to its disruptive patterns by playing the most strident rhythmic dissonance of the piece. It is a basic three against two pattern (see figure 12).
Figure 12: Measures 643-646; strident three against two pattern

The snare, joined by the horns and bassoons, plays a series of quarter note triplets against the duple-metered rondo theme in the strings.

Measures 682 to 706 bring back the A rondo theme and again the snare takes up a supporting role propelling the rhythmic drive of the music forward. In the last eleven measures of the work, the snare punctuates beat two of each measure except in the second and fourth measures from the end. The snare becomes quieter and quieter until its final strike at m. 726, where it is marked pianissimo. This quiet ending of the Concerto is anything but peaceful. As the clarinet winds down in quiet acquiescence, the snare
continues its work as a reminder of its presence. With the “death” of the clarinet line, the snare is right there waiting, reinforcing its ominous role in the music. It suggests the idea of death crouched and waiting for the persona of the clarinet at the very end.

In *The Composer’s Voice*, Cone explains that “the thoughts and attitudes [personae] convey and the experiences they undergo are basically human, for in the last analysis all roles are aspects of one controlling persona, which is in turn the projection of one creative human consciousness—that of the composer.”45 The Concerto’s four crucial personae—the clarinet’s role as protagonist, the snare drum’s role as antagonist, the orchestra’s role as society, and the overall piece’s role telling the narrative life-drama—are the projection of Nielsen’s human consciousness. They communicate the conflicts and difficulties of the composer’s life and death struggle with his critical illness.

The genius behind these personae lies in how they underline the stress in Nielsen’s life. Each persona establishes the specific emotional effects mentioned above. But beyond this individual level of communication, they also interact with each other as though they were actors on a stage. The clarinet represents Nielsen’s inner struggle with all of its intense anger, conflicted loneliness, and its soulful questions, but it has a dynamic relationship to the characters surrounding it. The ominous snare drum is the constant reminder of death with its black and white ostinati and its relentless pursuit of the clarinet. When the two play together, there is always a sense of struggle and stress. The orchestra represents society as a whole. The clarinet is separated from this persona with Nielsen’s use of cadenzas and by the stylistic and range differences between the two. This points to an actual separation of the main character from society. The totality of

the Concerto gives expression to the overall struggle. The journey is dark and brooding
and the work of these personae points in a variety of ways to the pessimism of the work.
There is no relief from the negativity from any of the three personae, which together
dramatize the conflict of the work.
Nielsen is widely regarded as one of the great contrapuntalists of the twentieth century. Counterpoint served a focused purpose in his music: as Lewis Rowell has described it, counterpoint was “a metaphor for the conflicts he observed, and he conceived of music as a dialectic process.” Rowell cites Nielsen’s own words in support of his claim: “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.” This dialectic process, the tension that exists between two conflicting forces, elements, or ideas, is central to Nielsen’s philosophy of music. It fits in with his ideas on progressive tonality; to reach an arrival point, one must wade through life’s conflicts. The counterpoint in the Clarinet Concerto exemplifies the sense of dialectical conflict; but in example after example, it shows no sense of resolution. It simply moves the music from section to section while providing its tension.

A good comparison to the Concerto with respect to counterpoint is Nielsen’s Symphony no. 5, composed in 1922 just after the onset of his debilitating heart condition. Both these works share a tense atmosphere, the use of the snare drum as a destructive unitary virtual agent, and a heavy use of counterpoint. For example, the second section of

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the second movement of the Symphony, marked “presto,” is a fugue that creates tension for its three minute duration. Shortly after the fugue begins and the subject is passed around to different instruments of the orchestra, Nielsen uses the timpani (in the same menacing way he uses the snare drum in the Clarinet Concerto) to rudely interrupt the fugue with a fortissimo strike, after which the clarinet section plays a virtuosic passage completely out of character with the fugue subject. As mentioned earlier, an important difference between the two works is that the Symphony resolves to its “final key” in the last moments of the work, thus creating an overall optimistic view of growth and arrival.

Counterpoint in the Concerto creates its tension in several distinct ways. First, there are passages that use an antiquated Baroque style of counterpoint. These portions of the work generally offer the tension in a milder way than in the other instances. Second, there are passages of counterpoint on the first three notes of the main folk theme, the most distinctive theme of the piece: these passages present the theme in simple canonic imitation but the conflict in each instance is strong, perhaps because of the strong personality of this theme. Third, Nielsen creates counterpoint among different agents. There are areas in which the clarinet plays long, singing melodies with the orchestra playing radically different material, creating a very different kind of tension; at other times Nielsen divides material between the clarinet, snare drum, and orchestra but breaks up the lines between the three agents. Nielsen’s distinctive uses of counterpoint all contribute to the unresolved tension in the Concerto.

Counterpoint as a Bearer of Tension Throughout the Concerto

Nielsen begins his use of counterpoint from the outset. In mm. 9 to 17, after the simple statement of the first movement’s main theme, the theme is stated in the violas
and bassoons while the cellos and basses develop a basic contrapuntal line, reminiscent of the writing of Bach in its strict adherence to the rules of counterpoint (see figure 13).

Given Nielsen’s view of counterpoint as a metaphor for conflict, it is interesting that he chooses to treat his theme contrapuntally at the outset of the work, providing an early sign of the continual conflict that will characterize the remainder of the Concerto. The counterpoint in this passage is not especially elaborate. It is actually fairly relaxed in its opposition to the melody. Its dark scoring, with both melody and counterpoint presented in the low end of the orchestra’s range suggests resignation over the journey of conflict ahead. The phrase ends by leading into the third straight statement of the theme, this time with the clarinet. It does not bring the music to any kind of completion or resolution; it only recycles the main theme.

The music in the third movement from mm. 386 to 466 is also rather conservative in its strict adherence to the rules of counterpoint. Overall, the clarinet presents a legato melody which could lend itself to a feeling of relief from the intense conflict of the music up to this point, but the accompanimental writing makes any sense of relief nearly impossible. From the beginning of this section, the bassoon and violas provide a subtle
opposition to the melody in the clarinet. It is a sweet, tranquil tune that seems to be searching for some comfort from all the previous stress. It is very tonal, emphasizing major triads in each measure, but continues to travel to different triads, as if looking for a place to rest. This line is then assumed by other instruments in the orchestra in opposition to the clarinet. At m. 398, the clarinet plays an episodic thirty-second note figure, sounding as if it is trying to rid itself of the pestering accompaniment. But the accompaniment follows in imitation. The clarinet tries again at m. 400, but the same imitation occurs. In m. 406, the orchestra begins playing the clarinet’s theme and the clarinet is high above it developing a busy, virtuosic phrase. The quest for a resting point is not successful. The mix of these two elements causes the tension to gradually grow but not in an overly aggressive fashion. As in mm. 9 to 17, the strict contrapuntal writing maintains a subtle tension. The imitation between the orchestra and the clarinet continues from mm. 410 to 413, as if their dialogue represents an argument. Triplet figures begin in the orchestra and are answered in the clarinet until the clarinet finally takes control of the line to finish the phrase. The music continues with the two main subjects from the beginning of this section at m. 386 lasting into m. 441. The tension continues without reaching a point of repose.

The next section, mm. 466 to 528, contains two distinct forms of counterpoint. First, there is counterpoint between the themes, and like the previous passages, it closely follows the guidelines of species counterpoint. Second, there is also a counterpoint of tonalities; the simultaneous development of music in the keys of F and E. The orchestra begins by creating a sixteenth note fabric in B, the dominant key of E. Six measures later, the bassoon enters with the main theme of this section in the key of F (see figure 8). The
snare drum adds its own contrapuntal tension with its militaristic music for the duration of this section. The clarinet enters at m. 494 with the theme introduced by the bassoon against the constant badgering provided by the orchestra and snare drum. All these elements create a very serious music. It is not angry, questioning, or pleading like most of the other music in the piece. The melody is set in a very serious minor mode and scored darkly. The melody line, accompaniment, and snare drum are all very controlled in regards to dynamics, normal instrumental ranges, and strict counterpoint. This contrasts the outbursts of emotion present in so much of the piece. This passage is cerebral in contrast to the other sections of the Concerto which are so emotional. The section comes to a climax from mm. 520 to 527 with the clarinet breaking into a virtuoso section that explores the entire range of the instrument while the snare and orchestra provide down beat and up beat, march-like accompaniment. The bassoon, meanwhile, plays a lyrical line of counterpoint. This passage is slightly more modern than the previous, Baroque-style examples with its counterpoint of tonalities and the four layers of counterpoint between the clarinet, orchestra, bassoon, and snare drum, but is still not emotionally aggressive. As before, there is no resolution in this section. This music leads directly into the second major cadenza of the piece.

Measures 618 to 642 present the final portion of old-fashioned counterpoint. The clarinet plays a melancholy lyrical melody above the low murmuring accompaniment of the low strings. Meanwhile, the bassoons provide a subtle countermelody in octaves. The next phrase is similar for the clarinet, but the bassoon line is omitted and the strings develop the first theme of the rondo. This subtle tension is heightened with the aforementioned rhythmic counterpoint at m. 643 between the snare drum and orchestra,
the height of tension in the Concerto. Measure 654 resumes with material from m. 618. This section of music elides into the next section at m. 674, which presents a return to the inverted first theme of the Concerto as it appeared in m. 533. As in the former section, it is tender and pleading, but this time Nielsen has added the first theme of the rondo as the principal source of counterpoint, truly melding the tragically sad theme with the fourth movement. This entire section of music serves to blur Nielsen’s tonal plan for the movement. The fourth movement seems to be pointing to a conclusion in E, but this slower interlude interrupts that journey by obscuring the tonality. It is a hint that the conflict between the two keys will not, in fact, be resolved. Following this section, Nielsen moves on to further treatment of the rondo theme in the dominant key of E, but the tension generated in this passage will continue unresolved to the very end of the music with its return to the initial tonic, F.

**Counterpoint and the Folk Theme**

Another way that Nielsen uses counterpoint in the Concerto is to develop the first three notes of the work’s main folk theme. The canon from mm. 27 to 38 (discussed in chapter 2) eliminates the stability of the folk-theme by setting it in a canon and beginning the motive on the off-beats (see figure 2). This disorienting effect is further enhanced by its statement in the key of E as opposed to the use of F in the beginning. This instability works with mm. 9 to 17 to foreshadow the chaotic conflict in the rest of the Concerto.

From mm. 57 to 61, the opening motive from the first theme is again treated canonically, but on the strong beats, loudly and with heavy accents. This regained rhythmic stability in the orchestra anchors and contrasts with the rhythmically unstable clarinet lines. The conflict between the two lines contributes to the overall buildup of
tension. The fragmenting of the folk-theme into its three-note motive with its canonic, repetitive treatment is disconcerting. The listener does not get to hear more of the phrase, only the first three notes repeatedly. It is a wonderful heightening of the building tension. The passage rapidly goes through D, F#, and G before giving way to the next section of music. The music passes abruptly at m. 62 to an even tenser section with a dramatic interplay between clarinet and snare drum. The counterpoint offers no culminating resolution; only the emergence of the snare drum’s first entrance.

Another passage of counterpoint relating to the first theme occurs following the Concerto’s second major cadenza in m. 528. This passage offers a transition from the third to the fourth movements in mm. 533 to 546. This mournful passage of music utilizes the inversion of the folk-like theme from the first movement in the most tender, nostalgic way (see figure 5). There is simple counterpoint to this line in the low strings and the clarinet enters at m. 536 with yet another line of counterpoint before taking over this melancholy theme at m. 539. At this point, the low strings imitate the clarinet’s statements of the three-note theme. Measures 543 and 544 imitatively continue the development of the first three notes of the folk-like theme as the movement comes to a close in m. 546 on a dominant chord in the key of A, the key which begins the fourth movement. The third movement has no tonal resolution on its own but serves to propel the music into the next movement.

The next passage is similar to the passages above in that it uses the three-note motive from the first theme. Its difference lies in the aggressive style of the counterpoint against the theme. Following the recapitulation, mm. 167 to 197 concern themselves with the battle for tonal supremacy between F and E. During this section, there is an
aggressive passage of counterpoint between the violins and the rest of the strings. It is primarily a canonic imitation of a one-measure figure. Measure 173 presents a good example of this material, in which the entrances are separated by a beat and a half. Each sixteenth note is accented, making for a heavy, dense texture. The clarinet sings its melody, which is unrelated to the string material, high above this counterpoint. Together, these aggressive elements obscure any sense of clarity which heightens the anger. Then in m. 182, the clarinet develops the string material in counterpoint to the rest of the orchestra playing first theme material. The strings again pick up the sixteenth note pattern at m. 191, turning it back over to the clarinet in m. 198. In each instance, the counterpoint over this sixteenth note material is related to the first theme. The sense of conflict created by this writing lasts until the final measure of the first movement without any kind of resolution. There is no final cadence to bring the movement to a close. The transition into the next movement is sudden.

Counterpoint Between Clarinet and Orchestra

Another kind of counterpoint in the Concerto involves the clarinet singing long-phrased melodies above seemingly unrelated material provided by the orchestra as a counterpoint. Just prior to the first major cadenza, from mm. 117 to 132, the orchestra provides a cold sixteenth-note pattern against the clarinet’s long melody (see figure 11). The dichotomy of styles and the contapuntal nature of the music create tension. The snare drum’s presence further prevents clarity from mm. 127 to 129 by playing three against the orchestra’s four. The overall effect of this area is one of confusion leading into the first cadenza. The counterpoint takes the music to the cadenza without resolution. It is once again an abrupt arrival.
The second section of the second movement, from mm. 253 to 286, develops the altissimo clarinet singing melody, including material from the first theme (see figure 9) against a sarcastic dance rhythm in the orchestra and the snare drum’s pedantic ostinato. There is a rhythmic counterpoint in the strings in sixteenth-note triplets against the jagged dance theme beginning at m. 256, obscuring the overall rhythm and adding tension. During this entire episode, the snare drum plays a driving ostinato that adds an impatient urgency to the music. The mood of this counterpoint is confusing with the clarinet singing its melancholy melody above the sarcasm in the strings. By the time the clarinet takes over this dance rhythm in m. 278, the snare drum provides a martial counterpoint as mentioned in chapter 4. The solo clarinet transitions the music back to the second movement’s A theme material from mm. 288 to 291, again without any kind of resolution. The counterpoint stops at m. 288 and the clarinet plays one of its quasi-cadenza like passages to lead the music back to the A material.

Measures 442 to 457 create a great deal more tension by fragmenting the earlier thematic material from m. 386 in three separate units: the orchestra, the clarinet, and the snare drum (see figure 14).
The fragments become smaller and smaller as the listener loses a sense of the overall phrase. The once placid theme is reduced to one in which there is no continuity, only confusion. There is a brief return to the material from m. 386 in mm. 458 to 465, but there is no resolution as this section ends. One section abruptly transfers into the next as has been a pattern throughout the Concerto.

The opposition Nielsen spoke about with regard to counterpoint never ceases in the Concerto. Whether it is a Baroque-style counterpoint, counterpoint which makes use of the first theme’s three-note motive, or aggressively different material between the orchestra and the clarinet, Nielsen masterfully uses counterpoint in different ways to communicate tension. The counterpoint in the Concerto, example after example, shows no sense of resolution. It simply moves the music from section to section while providing its stress. The lack of resolution is quite significant. It is an emotional statement about an internal struggle that seems to amplify Nielsen’s own personal struggle with heart disease, a situation that would have no positive resolution. The use of counterpoint in the
Concerto is in complete agreement with its lack of progressive tonality; they both point toward the dark conclusion of no growth or arrival.
CHAPTER 6

CODA AND CONFLICT

The coda, mm. 706 to 728, is vitally important in ascribing meaning to the Concerto. Its brief 23 measures provide a key which unlocks many answers to the questions created by the work’s conflict (see figure 15). As mentioned in chapter 3, the first two A sections of the final movement’s rondo are in the subdominant and dominant keys of E respectively. This sets up the expectation that the work will finish in the key of E, affirming Nielsen’s usual practice of progressive tonality. Despite this implication, the arrival of the coda at m. 706 is plainly in F. The duration of the coda serves, in part, to solidify F as the ending key of the Concerto.

The thematic material of the coda is the same as the thematic material from the A section of the rondo. Nielsen develops a “tonal trap” around the tonic F in the solo clarinet’s melody line beginning at m. 710. Following the meandering line of the thematic material, the clarinet outlines the F by going as high as a perfect fifth above F (mm. 714 and 716) and goes as low as the instrument’s lowest note, a major third lower than F (mm. 711 and 713). The clarinet line gradually diminishes the range around F in both directions until from m. 721 to the end, all that remains are the lower and upper neighbors to F. The final F in the clarinet is prepared by the lower neighbor E and the clarinet sustains the final F for five measures. It is as though Nielsen was tying a noose
tighter and tighter around the key of F, leaving no doubt that this piece will not advance
to a final tonic but remain in the key in which it began.

Figure 15: Measures 712-728; coda

The last cadence in this work, at mm. 727 to 728, is plagal. Despite Nielsen’s lack of religious beliefs, the religious connotations of a plagal “amen” cadence were not lost on him.48 (He was, for instance, familiar with hymnody from the Danish church.49)

Certainly, there seems to be some sort of spiritual meaning behind these final sounds in the Concerto. This “amen” cadence seems to bring an element of “spiritual” closure to the work, but because of Nielsen’s lack of progressive tonality in ending the piece, it is difficult to accept the ending as peaceful resolution. Since there is no growth or arrival in a different final tonic, it seems to point towards a weary acceptance to the outcome of the conflict. If the work, in fact, follows Nielsen’s struggle with terminal illness, this cadence could be simply a factual realization of his final demise using a religious musical cliché and not a religious acceptance of the fact.

The final chord of the piece is an F major chord. Some students of the Concerto contend that since it ends on a major chord that the overall outlook of the piece is optimistic, but there is a danger ascribing to such a formalistic approach. While the chord is major, the context is eerie and unresolved. The clarinet sustains its lowest F for five measures over widely open, eerie sounding chords in the upper strings, while the lower strings play pizzicato notes outlining I, VII, VI, IV, I in descending motion. The low clarinet F presents a dark sound. The open chords in the upper strings give the illusion of incompleteness. In fact, the color and mood of this ending is chilling. The marking “calando poco a poco” further enhances this effect, as the performers become quieter and slower to the end. The context of the ending remains: Nielsen has not resolved to a different final tonic from the beginning; no conflict has been resolved.
CHAPTER 7

THE MEANING OF CONFLICT IN THE CLARINET CONCERTO

After the work’s second performance, Swedish composer and music critic Olaf Petersen-Berger wrote:

Absolutely the worst thing that this a trifle too obviously experimental and prevaricatingly sidestepping Dane has yet put together is nevertheless the Clarinet Concerto which was offered as a novelty and whose clucking, crowing, crying, weeping, and grunting solo voice was played by Aage Oxenvad. Carl Nielsen hereby confesses himself a cacophonist. He seeks to keep up with the times; he does not know any better. The result is that more intensely than in his other works one is reminded of the “masters” in Wagner’s brilliant [operatic comedy scenes]: this Clarinet Concerto seems indeed like a malicious continuation and expansion of everything parodic in Beckmesser’s serenade. Is Mr. Nielsen also joking? Stupid jokes are fashionable at the moment. One must laugh once again and think once more of what one was thinking during this dreadful Clarinet Concerto (it does not sound very nice to Swedish ears but [there] is a powerful and healthy Danish proverb which many people should be pondering at present): “When shit is honored it doesn’t know how it ought to behave.”

Other early reviews offered similar criticism. They demonstrate a lack of patience and understanding of the content of the Concerto. The work’s early audiences were clearly not ready for it.

Since its premiere, the work has inspired contradictory readings. Many of its critics have found in it optimistic or even redemptive meanings. David Davenport finds the work on the humorous side. While Robert Simpson recognizes the Concerto’s conflict, he also sees a lighter side to the piece. Musicologist Peter Garvie states, “The

epilogue almost casually resolves the argument and shows us how a hidden lyricism is actually the lasting element, like a stone about which the music has swirled and from whose quietness it must at last recede.”51 Peter Demos adds similar remarks: “The allegro vivace appears for the last time on the dominant of E major. It very cleverly makes its way back to F major and the Concerto ends in the same calmness in which it began.”52 Daniel Grimley also points toward resolution in the Concerto: “The concluding bars gather together and resolve the various antagonistic aspects of the work’s musical dialogue with an exemplary clarity.”53 In my opinion, these readings are inadequate because they fail to account for the many conflicts and pessimistic elements within the work.

Other critics take a darker overall view of the Concerto. Emil Telmány, Nielsen’s son-in-law and the first conductor of the piece, said that it was “music from another planet.”54 Its abrupt, emotional solo writing, the stark orchestration, its use of obligato snare drum, and the manic solo lines were original and their dark and intense moods were striking. Biographer Jack Lawson described the piece as

bleak, raw, arguably lacking in seductive calm or beauty, its depth and intensity, together with its stylistic fusion of progressive techniques within Classical structures, make it – along with the later symphonies – one of Nielsen’s greatest works.55

The Concerto certainly was very different from any other written before 1928.

55 Ibid, 206.
S.C. Felumb, the oboist in the Copenhagen Quintet, has suggested the
cantankerous personality of Oxenvad played a role in shaping the content of the
Concerto; but the Concerto also offers a level of meaning that has to do with Nielsen’s
own life. In Oxenvad’s obituary, he said,

The composition was so strongly inspired by Oxenvad’s unity with the nature of
the clarinet, and his unique expression of the soul of the instrument, that one can
reasonably say that Carl Nielsen never would have written this work had he never
heard Oxenvad. No verbal characterization can be given clearer than that which
Carl Nielsen here gives in tones. It says everything about Aage and his clarinet.56

Certainly an important aspect of the Concerto is its relationship with Oxenvad. And like
the Concerto for Flute, many of the aspects of the Concerto for Clarinet are directly
attributable to the personality of its dedicatee. But there is a deeper, richer meaning which
transcends the bounds of Nielsen’s friendship with Oxenvad. Weakened by his 1926
heart attack, Nielsen hardly had energy to devote to his favorite activities, including
composition.57 From 1926 to 1931, the Concerto for Clarinet was his only large-scale
work. During these last years, his life changed dramatically; he no longer had the strength
he once had as a younger man. For a man who had once been so active, his condition was
a constant burden. Peter Demos seems to be the only scholar that mentions Nielsen’s
health in connection with the Concerto.

The performer in the Clarinet Concerto is the clarinet and the composer is
portrayed by an aggressive snare drum. It is clear to suppose in view of Nielsen’s
slowly failing health the struggle of the snare drum to make its mark clearly
portrays Nielsen himself, never ceasing his stroke on life.58

Tidsskrift 19 (1944), 108.
58 Peter J. Demos, “The Little-Known Carl Nielsen in Comparison to Well-Known Masters: An Analysis of
Demos’ excellent article does little to back up his claim about the persona of the snare drum, though it is an interesting idea. But it is surprising that in the many words written about the piece that no other author mentions the composer’s health. Robert Simpson explicitly denies the possibility that the conflicts of the work were related to Nielsen’s own life: “Although his health never recovered [after 1926], subjective personal gloom was not permitted to feed his art, even in the angry Clarinet Concerto, which is, like the one for flute, a portrait [of Oxenvad].”\(^{59}\)

Simpson’s premise cuts off too many relevant possibilities for interpreting the Concerto. The portrait of Oxenvad in the Concerto by no means precludes the presence of other biographical factors in the composition of the work, and it is altogether possible that the conflict within this work reflects Nielsen’s anguish over his own decline in addition to the musical treatment of Oxenvad’s personality. To sustain this reading, we need not understand the Concerto as program music, and I do not mean to suggest that it is programmatic. Instead, by attending closely to the character and form of the music and to the interaction among performers, I offer an interpretation of the Concerto that links its affective content to Nielsen’s own likely process of grieving his own imminent demise.

In 1969, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross presented a wonderfully different look at the spirituality in the process of death in her landmark book, *On Death and Dying*. After spending in-depth time with many terminally ill patients, she introduced five separate stages she observed as patients dealt with the knowledge of their imminent deaths. Her research involved working with dying patients from the time of diagnosis to death. The

\(^{59}\) Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen; Symphonist* (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 143.
five stages were her attempt to clarify patterns she observed in her research. These stages are known as the “Kübler-Ross Model.”

The initial stage is “Denial and Isolation.” It is the first reaction one has in facing mortal illness. In an effort to self-protect, the patient reaches out for whatever rationale they can to explain their diagnosis away as a mistake. The typical verbal response in this stage is, “No, not me, it cannot be true.” This particular stage can introduce itself at any time while the patient is processing through their grief. Kübler-Ross notes that almost all patients experience denial, not only at the outset, but also in later phases of illness.60

A by-product of the denial is the patient’s emotional and physical isolation. Dr. Kübler-Ross suggested that it was healthiest for the patient in processing these five steps to avoid isolation.

The next stage is “Anger,” which follows the first stage of denial and is characterized by rage, envy, and resentment.61 This stage is characterized by the patient asking himself and the world, "Why me? It's not fair!" The patient might ask this question of God, himself, or anybody perceived, rightly or wrongly, as "responsible.” “[The patient] will raise his voice, he will make demands, he will complain and ask to be given attention, perhaps as the last loud cry, ‘I am alive, do not forget that! You can hear my voice, I am not dead yet.”62

The third stage is “Bargaining.” There is a sense of pleading with whatever power is out there to help the individual’s situation. The patient is characterized by attempting to enter into some sort of agreement with the powers or situation that he cannot control.

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61 Ibid, 63.
patient arrives at this stage because he was not able to arrive at the resolution he desired from the first two stages. “If God has decided to take us from this earth and he did not respond to my angry pleas, he may be more favorable if I ask nicely.”63

Following “Bargaining” is “Depression.” The patient has now come to realize that there is nothing he can do about the fact that he is dying. “When the terminally ill patient can no longer deny his illness, when he is forced to undergo more surgery or hospitalization, when he begins to have more symptoms or becomes weaker and thinner, he cannot smile it off anymore. His numbness or stoicism, his anger and rage will soon be replaced with a sense of great loss.”64 This depression is characterized by asking "I'm so sad, why bother with anything?"

The emotionally healthiest patients make it to the final stage. In “Acceptance” they come to realize that their death is a natural state of affairs and they make peace with this fact. “If a patient has had enough time [i.e., not a sudden, unexpected death] and has been given some help in working through the previously described stages, he will reach a stage during which he is neither depressed nor angry about his ‘fate.’ He will have been able to express his previous feelings, his envy for the living and the healthy, his anger at those who do not have to face their end so soon. He will have mourned the impending loss of so many meaningful people and places and he will contemplate his coming end with a certain degree of quiet expectation.”65 This stage is characterized by the patient’s acceptance of death.

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63 Ibid, 93.
64 Ibid, 97.
65 Ibid, 123-4.
Considering Nielsen’s health issues, I believe that some of these stages are applicable to his situation and may shed light on the expressive content of the music. Throughout the Concerto, an angry tone surfaces again and again, dominating the character of the work. In some passages there is also a sense of isolation; in others, we might well hear elements of both bargaining and depression. Clinically, Dr. Kübler-Ross claimed that her patients processed through only one stage at a time, which might seem to render the presence of these emotional stages simultaneously in the Concerto less compelling. Still, by the time the Concerto was written in 1928, Nielsen had had six years to deal with angina pectoris and two years in which to reflect on his first major heart attack in 1926: he likely spent a substantial amount of time coping with the emotional effects of his terminal illness and experienced several stages of the grieving process. That the Concerto might reflect on more than one stage may indicate composition over time, or more likely, a bleak assessment of the various stages through which Nielsen had already passed.

Anger is the most obvious musical affect presented in the Concerto. Upon the first listening to this piece, one can hear the raised voice, demanding demeanor of the protagonist, and the complaining for attention. Of the piece’s 728 measures, 279 of them and both extended cadenzas engage in aggressive, angry communication:
Measures | Description
---|---
52 to 68 | Two unitary virtual agents play together for the first time as if arguing
96 to 101 | Short tantrum
108 to 116 | Outburst between orchestra and clarinet
117 to 132 | Quiet, intense anger before the first cadenza
133 | First major cadenza; more tantrums based on the first theme
167 to 218 | Intensely angry; perhaps the rawest anger in piece
253 to 287 | Wild sarcastic dance with the clarinet singing an angry song above
362 to 382 | Builds up to m. 374; the clarinet angrily trills while the snare plays aggressive sixteenth patterns
442 to 465 | Three-part separation between the clarinet, snare, and orchestra as if in three-way argument
528 | Second major cadenza; angular and edgy
555 to 610 | Rondo A theme of fourth movement; violent
643 to 673 | Aggressive rhythmic three against two; last real look at anger in piece
690 to 705 | Rondo A theme return; still violent

Table 1: Examples of anger expressed in the Concerto

The four movements of this Concerto each contain elements of anger. Nielsen organized the work in such a way that this anger is always close by. Each section mentioned in Table 1 concludes without resolution to the anger; this unresolved quality adds a certain anxiety to all the sections of music that occur between these examples.

Though it is difficult to find a sense of denial in this music, there is certainly isolation; the physical isolation in the cadenzas and the metaphorical isolation in the separation of the ranges of the clarinet and orchestra. The element of bargaining in the Concerto seems to be slight; but three small excerpts towards the end of the piece offer a sense of pleading that is characteristic of this stage of grief.
Table 2: Examples of bargaining expressed in the Concerto

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>529 to 546</td>
<td>Inverted version of the folk-theme with chromatically descending bass line</td>
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<tr>
<td>618 to 642</td>
<td>B section in the fourth movement; soaring disjunct melody line in the clarinet which never finds a cadence point</td>
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<tr>
<td>654 to 674</td>
<td>End of B section in the fourth movement; same as previous</td>
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The most passionately sad portion of music in the entire Concerto is the music from mm. 529 to 546, following the second major cadenza. As mentioned in chapter 2, this section uses the inverted version of the folk theme. The slow pulse and the descending chromatic line in the bass give the music a yearning quality. It is as if the protagonist is grasping for some sense of security, but finds none.

We might also hear an element of bargaining in mm. 618 to 642, in which the music pleads in an almost frantic, wailing style. The music here is an augmentation of the clarinet’s solo material from m. 386. In its earlier version, the theme worked together with the countermelody to achieve its warm passion. In this instance, the theme retains its passion along with a simple counter melody in the bassoons. But the low strings present a static triplet harmony that changes every few measures. This serves to isolate the passionate clarinet’s line in a way that sounds questioning or pleading. The same material returns in mm. 654 to 674, with the soloist communicating the same pleading emotion. Underpinning this plea is an angry orchestra playing angular accompanimental sixteenth notes. These examples are different from the overall expression of the rest of the
Concerto; there is a bittersweet quality to them which further accents the angriness of the Concerto.

There are only two areas in the Concerto which seem possibly to highlight depression. For a man like Carl Nielsen, who was so active musically and physically during his life, to have both areas severely limited by his physical condition would be very disheartening. Attempting to keep his life the same as it had been before his illness, he put forth the best effort to remain active in all ways, though he gradually gave up many of the activities he enjoyed for the sake of his health.

<table>
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<th>Measures</th>
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<tr>
<td>219 to 252</td>
<td>Second movement; slow lyrical passage set bitonally that separates the melody in the clarinet away from the accompaniment</td>
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<tr>
<td>710 to 728</td>
<td>Coda; abrupt return to initial tonic, F</td>
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Table 3: Examples of depression expressed in the Concerto

In mm. 219 to 252, the A section of the second movement, we hear loneliness in its starkest form. The melody line is distinctly separated from the accompaniment. It is hauntingly beautiful and never seems to find any kind of resolution. There is no sense of peace within its loneliness. It is completely devoid of positive emotion and it is introspective in the darkest way. Measures 710 to 728 are the coda to the Concerto. As the coda increasingly solidifies the original key of the work, emotionally it faces the inevitability of death. There is no peaceful acceptance. It is dark and moody, providing
no real resolution, only bitter resignation. It provides the listener with a disturbed feeling rather than a feeling of refreshing or inspiration.

When considering the possibility that the clarinet’s persona is representative of the composer’s identity, feelings, and emotions in facing his impending death, it is quite helpful to look at Dr. Kübler-Ross’s model of grieving. While it is difficult to make a causative link between the psychology of grief and the musical processes of the Concerto, the most remarkable features of the work do seem to enact certain of Kübler-Ross’s stages of grieving in a particularly dramatic way. The lack of progressive tonality, the persistent angry outbursts, the sense that the clarinet’s music is by turns anguished and frantic: all these seem to reflect not only Nielsen’s modernist aesthetic but also his personal process of coming to grips with his mortality.

Late in his life, Carl Nielsen visited his daughter and son-in-law in New Zealand. He shared with them what he often shared with others during the last few years of his life: “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.” Considering the unresolved conflict inherent in the work and its final statement of no growth and arrival, perhaps the meaning of the Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra lies hidden in the sentiment of this dark musing.

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