

Longwood Symphony Orchestra – June 12, 2010
Nielsen & Debussy
PROGRAM NOTES
By Steven Ledbetter

CARL NIELSEN

Symphony No. 4, Opus 29, The Inextinguishable

Carl August Nielsen was born in Norre-Lyndelse, Fyn, Denmark, on June 9, 1865, and died in Copenhagen on October 3, 1931. He began to sketch the *Symphony No. 4* in 1914 and completed the work on January 14, 1916. He himself conducted the first performance with the orchestra of the Copenhagen Music Society in Odd Fellows Hall, Copenhagen, on February 1, 1916. The score calls for three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings. There are two sets of timpani and two players, the second stationed opposite the first. Duration is about 36 minutes.

Carl Nielsen grew up in a rural environment and from early childhood developed a love of the natural world and a remarkably insightful perception of human beings and their role in the world. Though he had artistic leanings to both the visual arts and literature, his musical gift was even stronger. It was discovered early because his father played violin and cornet as a much sought-after village musician. His mother sang him simple songs, and he learned to imitate them, at the age of six, on a small violin. By nine he had become part of an amateur orchestra, thus extending his horizons to orchestral dance movements and a few symphonic excerpts from Haydn and Mozart. Yet he remained a product of the country, earning some of the family's income by looking after geese during school holidays and developing a realistic and utterly down-to-earth character, which remained an important part of his music.

Though he long earned his living as an orchestral violinist, Nielsen's real interest quickly turned to composing. His First Symphony (1894) revealed a strong Brahmsian influence, but his Second, *The Four Temperaments*, was already wonderfully personal, characteristic. To many of his symphonies he gave a title, intended to suggest the general character and no more. Like the others, the "*Expansive Symphony*" grew out of purely musical concerns and makes its dramatic and lyrical points with purely musical techniques. Most significant of these is Nielsen's tendency to shape a symphony in what has been called "progressive tonality," written not so much *in* a key as *toward* it. The Third Symphony, for example, begins undeniably in D minor, but it ends in A major; throughout its entire course, Nielsen sets up conflicts of tonality that eventually resolve in the latter key.

The Fourth Symphony was composed during two of the most harrowing years of the 20th century, from 1914 to 1916, when the vast European war broke out in August 1914 and quickly became a grinding, repetitive, murderous slog that wore away four full years of human history and changed forever our perceptions of "before" and "after." Given the horrors that were unfolding only a few hundred miles from where he lived in Denmark, it is astonishing that Nielsen retained his essentially positive view of life. He was by no means blind to the situation along the hundreds of miles of trench warfare, where one side might gain a few yards today only to lose them next month—and both advances and retreats taking an appalling waste in the lives of young men from Germany, France, Belgium and England.

Perhaps the strongest sign of Nielsen's trust in the "life force" is the title he gave his Fourth Symphony. This is not the "*Inextinguishable Symphony*"—as if the title were an adjective intended to describe the music. No, in Danish the title is in the neuter, and it refers to that which is inextinguishable in human life and in the world of nature.

In a short epigraph to the score, Nielsen noted that the title was intended "to indicate in one word what the music alone is capable of expressing to the full: *The elemental Will of Life*." He emphasizes that the title is not a program intended to "explain" the music, still less does it offer any kind of "plot" for the unfolding of the work. But it does represent the feeling that he had learned as a child in the woods, that after the longest and coldest winter, a new burgeoning of life would appear in the spring, so that even

after the longest and most senseless of wars, there could yet be a hope for the rebirth of the natural world and also for the future of human aspiration.

This sounds highly poetic, but what is most impressive is the purely *musical* way that he achieves it. The process is similar to that of the Third Symphony—starting in one key and ending in another. Of course any rank amateur can make the elementary mistake of ending a piece in the “wrong” key. What Nielsen accomplishes is to make the “wrong” key the right one, the home that the music has sought from the very beginning. It is perhaps an expression of his confidence that, for all our folly as a race, we have the capability to grow and change, and to find ourselves, at the end, in a surprising place.

In the Third Symphony, Nielsen had cast the music into the standard four movements, with a break between them. In the Fourth, the work unfolds with four sections that function and sound like the four movements if a traditional symphony, but that are linked directly from one to another. He had been immensely impressed by Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor, which was shaped in much the same way. And he had gotten well started on the new symphony by mid-July 1914, which he described in a letter to a friend as “a sort of symphony in one movement, which is meant to represent all that we feel and think about life in the most fundamental sense of the word, that is, all that has the will to live and to move.” Only a few days after the writing of this letter the world exploded with an assassination in Sarajevo and all the countries in Europe, with interlocking secret treaties of mutual support, found themselves facing one another in battle.

It is hard to know exactly how much the ground-plan of the symphony might have changed because of the war, but there is no change in Nielsen's fundamental decency or his sense of the ultimate success of the “inextinguishable,” which wins out at the end of the work even though the war still had nearly three years to run (though no one could have realized this) as he penned the closing pages.

It is difficult to discuss Nielsen's achievement without getting at least slightly involved in technical explanations. Essentially the piece begins with music that seems to be in D minor (or perhaps major—it changes often), but that key is undermined by a simultaneous suggestion of C. So even without a guidebook, it is clear from the opening measures that all is not well, that there is a state of struggle. Ultimately the symphony will end in a glowing E major, and the final end point can be glimpsed (or rather heard) briefly at various points in the course of the symphony until it finally becomes the only possible ending for the music.

The symphony opens with an outburst of great energy with the woodwinds and the strings emphasizing different keys (D and E respectively) but unfolding essentially the same musical ideas, rhythmically vigorous (with long and short notes appearing in surprising places to complicate our sense of the meter) and at a great speed. The argument gradually calms down. A pair of clarinets sings a sweet duet in thirds (later echoed by other woodwinds), but the rest of the orchestra objects to more of this and breaks out with a restatement of the very opening soon after with the introduction of a new idea in E—the first strong statement of the key that will be the final goal of the symphony.

First violins over a solo timpani rhythm link the first movement with the Poco Allegretto. This tempo, and indeed this whole movement, seem to reflect the kind of substitution for a scherzo that Brahms liked to employ—not too fast, not too slow, often quite charming and slightly old-fashioned in feel. The woodwinds are featured throughout, and the movement offers a splendid example of Nielsen's ear for woodwind color.

As the last hint of the movement dies away in a faltering clarinet flutter, the violins enter with a passionately intense statement to introduce the slow movement (in E, though chromatic and not immediately stable). It becomes less stable when the woodwinds begin to return (solo flute first), agitating and building to a massive orchestral climax. A short statement lickety-split in the strings sounds as if it is going to turn into a fugue—but it suddenly stops in a grand pause and the finale begins.

The last movement begins with a vigorous waltz theme that is not allowed to dance because it is part of the final struggle of the life force to exert itself. The key signature suggests A major (which is closely related

to E), but the timpanists—two players—begin attacking any sense of key by playing the “forbidden” interval of the tritone (F/B, or D-flat/G), once called “the devil in music,” to confound any sense of “home.” Eventually a clear A-major rings out as the orchestra—including timpani—the perfect fifth (E down to A), which banishes the “devil” (Nielsen marks this passage “*glorioso*.”) But it is still necessary to reach the destination, E major. Further struggle occurs, culminating in the arrival of the brass instruments pouring forth the melody that the clarinets had introduced in thirds back in the first movement—now climactically in E, a key that the rest of the orchestra confirms to bring the symphony to its glorious climax, celebrating all that is inextinguishable.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

La mer, Three symphonic sketches

Achille-Claude Debussy was born at St. Germain-en-Laye on August 22, 1862, and died in Paris on March 25, 1918. He began work on *La Mer* during the summer of 1903 and completed the score in March 1905, though he continued to make revisions for many years. Camille Chevillard conducted the *Lamoureux Orchestra* in the first performance on October 15, 1905, in Paris. *La Mer* is scored for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons and contrabassoon (the latter in the third movement only), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, timpani, cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, glockenspiel, bass drum, two harps, and strings. The string section Debussy hoped for but can rarely, if ever, have found, was an unusually large one, including sixteen cellos.

Debussy's parents planned a sailor's career for their son, but these ended when the woman giving piano lessons to the 9-year-old boy discovered his musical talent; within a year he was studying piano and theory at the Paris Conservatoire.

In the meantime, Debussy's memories of the sea were charged with images drawn from literature and art. He may have considered a “sea symphony” as early as the 1890s, but the first clear reference to *La Mer* comes from a letter of September 12, 1903, to André Messager: “I am working on three symphonic sketches under the title *La Mer: Mer belle aux Iles Sanguinaires; Jeux de vagues; and Le Vent fait danser la mer*.” Only the second of these titles (“Play of the waves”) remained in the final version. The first came from a story by Mauclair (changed in the end to “From dawn to noon on the sea”); the last (“The wind makes the sea dance”) was later turned into the rather more neutral “Dialogue of the wind and the sea.”

But the most direct inspiration for *La Mer* was probably from art. Debussy had admired the sea paintings of Turner, with their misty impalpability, which had been on display in Paris and which he may also have seen during London visits in 1902 and 1903, shortly before he began composing *La Mer*. Still more influential were the Japanese artists Hokusai and Hiroshige, whose work became enormously popular in France by the end of the nineteenth century. When the score of *La Mer* was published, Debussy requested that the cover design include a detail of Hokusai's most famous print, “The hollow of the wave off Kanagawa,” the part showing the giant wave towering above and starting to curve over in its downward fall, its foaming billows frozen in a stylized pattern that almost resembles leaves on a tree.

Debussy came to *La Mer* soon after the great success of his one completed opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, performed with great success in April 1902. He may have expected *La Mer* to be even more successful, if only because the music was more assertive. Debussy modestly called *La Mer* “three symphonic sketches,” but it is a full-fledged symphony and has been called the greatest symphony ever written by a French composer. But the work at its premiere caused violent controversy, with assessments ranging from “the composer's finest work” to “lifeless as dried plants in a herbarium.” The mixed impression was reversed when Debussy himself conducted *La Mer* in January 1908—even though he had never before conducted an orchestra.

La Mer has never been amenable to the simple summaries such as “sonata form” that can at least give direction to the listener's perceptions of, say, a classical symphony. The use of orchestral color is more immediately identifiable than melodic shapes, though these play a crucial role in the work as well, and the harmonies are *sui generis*.

The first movement's title, "From Dawn to Noon on the Sea," indicates a progression from near darkness, in which objects are indistinct, to brightness, in which they are clearly perceptible. (Debussy's friend Erik Satie, always a joker, and one who loved inventing elaborate titles for his own music, once commented to Debussy that he "particularly liked the bit at a quarter to eleven.") Debussy's pictorialism is wonderfully evocative in its suggestion of indistinct outlines that gradually appear to view, the light evidently breaking forth in the undulating tremolos of the strings just at the moment that the principal key, D-flat major, is established. A striking change comes with a new theme in the cellos, which seem at first to bring the motion to a halt and then to proceed in wavelike triplets, which build to the movement's climax.

The second movement, "Play of the Waves," is a lighter scherzo, scored with extreme delicacy. It is an interlude between the storm and emphatic passions of the first and last movements.

"Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea" begins with an evident pictorial image: the waves softly surging up in the low strings, answered by the winds—the woodwinds, in fact—blowing high up in chromatic shrieks. The struggle of wind and waves is developed at length, turning to material drawn from the opening movement, and building to a brilliant sunlit conclusion.

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Program Notes
ALBERT SCHWEITZER PORTRAIT
by Jonathan McPhee

The Longwood Symphony Orchestra embodies many of the characteristics we associate with Dr. Schweitzer. It is the Orchestra of Boston's Medical community. Dr. Schweitzer was a medical doctor, theologian, an accomplished organist, and the respected editor of organ works by J.S. Bach and Widor. He was a humanitarian. The Longwood Symphony utilizes its activities as a musical organization to benefit under served medical charities; in other words, music for the common good.

On this anniversary of Dr. Schweitzer's only visit to America, we wanted to pay tribute to the man and his mission. The idea was sparked by another unique individual, Thurston Moore, who suggested creating a musical work that would immortalize Dr. Schweitzer in much the same way as Aaron Copland's famous portrait of Abraham Lincoln.

I was fortunate enough to have worked with Mr. Copland on many occasions surrounding revivals of both RODEO and APPALACHIAN SPRING. During that time, we talked about many of his works, including his LINCOLN PORTRAIT. Aaron struck a wonderful balance in that piece immortalizing the man and his ideals without preaching. I followed his lead, creating the text for the ALBERT SCHWEITZER PORTRAIT from the words of Schweitzer himself as well as what others said about him. Like the LINCOLN PORTRAIT, the central concepts are the destiny of change, his origins, his mission, and his personal epiphany. Both Schweitzer and Lincoln inspired others, lead by example, and shared a universal concept for humanity as it should be. My thanks to Lachlan Forrow, Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School and President of the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship, for his help with this text.

Finally – what music to use? I was captivated by the songs written by Gene Scheer for the PBS series "The War" by film maker Ken Burns. After describing the project, I asked Gene to send some songs that might provide the thematic material I needed to develop the composition. Once again, his ideas were perfect. After putting together a piano score, I collaborated with Gary Fry (orchestrator for Gene's music for the Ken Burns film) who did a superb job with the finished orchestration and the organ version of the score.