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Who are the heroes of Nielsen's 'Eroica'?

Full of mystery and seeming contradiction, **Nielsen's Third Symphony** can be difficult to fathom and offers ample room for interpretation – resulting, as **David Patrick Stearns** finds, in a wide range of readings

Although once the most popular of Carl Nielsen's six symphonies, the *Sinfonia espansiva* (his Third) is now more of a curiosity, quite overshadowed by the Fourth and Fifth symphonies. But for all its absence in the concert hall, it remains the object of passionate advocacy in recordings.

Practicality works against the symphony's necessity to hire two vocal soloists for the wordless vocalises heard only in the second movement. More subtly daunting is the fact that, more than in any other Nielsen symphony, each movement is a separate sound world – one reason why performances don't always connect with all four. Overall, the composer's idiom is elusive, owing to the lack of antecedents or descendants as a point of reference. 'Nielsen was neither a classicist nor a modernist, neither reactionary nor an avant-gardist,' wrote Danish composer/theorist Povl Hamburger. 'He had certain features derived from all, but he was and remained himself' – whatever 'himself' was.

Conductors from Leopold Stokowski to Osmo Vänskä have admitted that Nielsen requires them to apply their interpretative intuition to music they don't fully fathom – at least in the more enigmatic Symphony No 6. You could assume that the Third Symphony's title refers to the endless Nordic landscapes suggested by the second movement; in fact, *Sinfonia espansiva* takes its name from the burgeoning imagination that Nielsen is said to have felt while writing it, and part of that originality

comes from moments when musical events aren't sequenced in any conventional manner, partly because the structure isn't based on the usual tonic/dominant axis, but often progresses in a series of stepwise terraces. And while much of the first movement seems inspired by natural phenomena, a seemingly indoor waltz somehow lands in the middle. What does this mean?

EXTREMES OF INTERPRETATION

The interpretative leeway for both interpreters and listeners is immense. The irregular sputtering chords of the first movement are often described as lightning bolts, though to these ears they're an electric current coming to life. With Leonard Bernstein, the chords are a furious sword that slashes its way into the unknown. Leon Botstein has chaos coalescing into order. Myung-Whun Chung's recording feels like industrial machinery chugging to life – and aiming to change the world.

The placid second movement might be a watery tour of the ice floes where one encounters two other-worldly beings – the baritone and soprano placed in the rear of the orchestra – who vocalise like benign sirens. Or, as in Erik Tuxen's more forward-placed singers, are they tour guides to eternity? Sir Colin Davis's vocalists sound like lost hikers. The singers themselves range from Michael Schönwandt's Inger Dam-Jensen, who has the amplitude of *Götterdämmerung*'s Noris,

and Botstein's lighter-voiced Yulia Van Doren, who hails from the early-music world. Sakari Oramo's Anu Komsi brings with her a rich modern-music sensibility.

The third movement is the least successful of the four, beginning with a brass entrance that's full of crisis and concluding with enigmatic flutes that look ahead to new 'espansiva' territory. The effectiveness of these musical bookends often dictates whether the music in-between seems pedestrian or an expression of torment that's more inward than the rest of the symphony. The final movement acts like a patriotic anthem that becomes a series of variations, though not strictly thematic ones. They're more cinematic, showing cross-sections of the composer's life, including dips into minor keys that contradict Nielsen's nice-guy stereotype. Sometimes the movement goes the pace of a march (Tuxen), but it can also slow down to an Elgarian procession (Alan Gilbert).

The interpretative extremes are thrilling with swift, craggy Bernstein; confounding with slow, Furtwänglerian **Gennadi Rozhdestvensky**, who makes the music fray around the edges and leaves the piece struggling to sustain itself. The latter is the one out-and-out failure of the Nielsen Third discography. Historic recordings are of surprisingly limited value, but the 10 minutes of 1931 excerpts under Launy Grøndahl, caught live in excellent sound and heard on the 'Great Singers and Musicians in Copenhagen' collection (Danacord), offer a glimpse of a more popular period in the symphony's history. The performance has little of the cognitive distance between notes and meaning often encountered in later recordings, with all disparate elements working together like a dinner-table conversation that's consistently absorbing but not always amicable.

Tor Mann had important first-hand encounters with the composer (as did Grøndahl) – but can one really tell, when the sound quality blurs the geologic layers of the dense orchestration? Less opaque but in still-challenging sound quality is **Erik Tuxen's** 1949 recording, exuding a kind of nationalistic nobility that tells you how important the music is. The best-sounding historic recording is the Dutton-label transfer of the 1955 Danish State Radio Symphony, under **John Frandsen**, who is among the last to claim personal contact with the composer, though his performance remains respectfully curatorial rather than taking chances on what it all means.



A retouched photo of Nielsen at the piano during the period he was composing his Third Symphony, with the customary pencil between his lips removed

A CHANGE OF TACK

By 1960, Nielsen's Third emerges with a more consistently accurate sound picture and a generally high standard of performance, perhaps because it is such a *rara avis* and thus isn't taken on lightly. For whatever reason, though, Symphony No 3 has yet to be recorded by any of the great orchestras of Berlin, Vienna

and Amsterdam, and was only recently recorded in America by the New York Philharmonic. But that's OK. When the Berlin Philharmonic played the symphony under the usually authoritative Gilbert in November 2014, the players seemed to be speaking a third language (you could almost hear them thinking, 'Was ist das?'). Though perhaps a bit less glamorous,

native Danish orchestras, by contrast, make a special case for their countryman, finding that one rogue note in a Nielsen melody or harmony that highlights the composer's personality while also bringing meaning to details that with other orchestras are merely decorative.

That's why sound engineering is so important. The music's spatial qualities

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Thomas Dausgaard on DVD: 'a must for those learning the Third Symphony's mechanics'

are so flattened out in **Sir Colin Davis's** unexpected late-in-life Nielsen cycle with the London Symphony Orchestra that the performance's numerous balancing and phrasing touches that show a formidable musical mind at work fail to reveal what they all add up to in a tighter sound picture. Conversely, ultra-solid **Paavo Berglund's** 1989 recording ranks particularly high if only because of its ultra-transparent engineering that so clearly sets off the conductor's lighter touch with the symphony, making it one of the easier recordings to digest. The thoroughly up-to-date SACD engineering of BIS's Oramo recording shows why orchestral musicians tend to complain that Nielsen makes them sweat over details that the audience doesn't hear: the third-movement textures that can often be so opaque here reveal layers of developing thematic fragments, and thus more substance than normally meets the ear.

The DVD by the Danish National Symphony Orchestra conducted by **Thomas Dausgaard** is almost a must for those learning the symphony's mechanics. During an excellent, if not particularly distinctive, performance, the cameras stick to the score like glue in an

outstanding instance of how video can reveal a symphony's interior genius.

Two live recordings by **Thomas Jensen** and **Jascha Horenstein** have good-enough-for-Nielsen sound quality and naturally have magnetic live-performance energy, Jensen's final movement being unforgettable and Horenstein enlivening Nielsen with his typically feverish energy.

The majority of the Nielsen Third recordings inhabit a healthy middle ground: reasonably satisfying, not going terribly far in any one direction and giving a good if somewhat provisional view of the work. This category is occupied by **Adrian Leaper**, **Jukka-Pekka Saraste**, **Theodore Kuchar**, **Michael Schönwandt** and, somewhat surprisingly, **Osmo Vänskä**, who would probably give a more insightful performance of the piece today, whereas during his tenure with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (1996-2002) he was more inclined to let listeners make up their own minds.

MEMORABLE MOVEMENTS

Certain recordings command attention because of their extraordinary connection with one of the movements. Saraste has welcome flashes of fury in the third movement. **Esa-Pekka Salonen's** 1989

recording with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra (one of the happiest associations of his early career) has a second movement boldly reimagined in Sibelian terms, showing how much more expression the symphony can yield with thoughtful attention to sonority as an expressive entity. **Myung-Whun Chung** is a bit more green than Salonen in his 1985 Gothenburg recording, but few conductors make the third movement (starting with the aforementioned brass entrance) seem so dire. **Leon Botstein** hasn't the most polished execution with the American Symphony Orchestra, but a strong sense of expressive inference is heard at every turn, with soprano soloist Van Doren singing with a wonderful clarity and ease of vocalism. **Sixten Ehrling** captures much of Tuxen's nobility in more modern sound and has a distinctive third-movement brass entrance that's all the more penetrating for its softness, though his disc (live from the Kennedy Center, Washington DC) can be awfully hard to find. The new **Sakari Oramo** recording has a second-movement masterstroke: soprano Komi is placed at a more distant recording perspective than baritone Karl-Magnus Fredriksson, opening up a new world of poetic possibilities. Is the soprano some other-worldly creature beckoning him deeper into the wilderness – is she an alter ego? Other recordings have toyed with this effect, but none is this effective. In the final movement Oramo goes on to build phrases so effectively with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra – it's only his in-and-out-of-focus first movement that keeps his recording from being a top contender.

Bryden Thomson presents a surprisingly non-committal first movement, but the fact that the rest of the recording is so dedicated to revealing Nielsen's specific character makes Thomson one of the few conductors to avoid the hindsight anachronisms often imposed on the music. Yes, those Kurt Weill-ish dissonances of the third movement and the Hindemith-style counterpoint of the finale are pure Nielsen, since the 1911 symphony predates both. The

VOCAL CHOICE

Gothenburg SO / **N Järvi**
DG ③ ④ 477 5514GTR3

Although Järvi isn't one to probe the symphony down to its existential core, he certainly knows



it inside out, and has recording engineers who aid him in revealing that, and vocal soloists (Soile Isokoski and Jorma Hynninen) with opera-size personalities.

QUASI-OPERATIC CHOICE

Odense SO / **Serov**
Kontrapunkt ② 32203

This set doesn't have the most secure orchestra but it has a risk-taking energy and

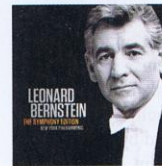


a sense that Nielsen's boldly etched musical ideas are operatic characters on a stage in a four-part drama with complex relationships and unusual stories to tell.

EXTREME CHOICE

Royal Danish Orchestra / **Bernstein**
Sony Classical ③ (60 discs) 88697 68365-2

After listening you may end up feeling as sweaty as Bernstein, and you wouldn't want to



hear this every day – but his bold interpretative imagination creates a performance unlike any other. See also the YouTube video made around the same time.

Das Rheingold brass in the second movement are a legitimate outside reference, but even that is downplayed by Thomson. Letting Nielsen be Nielsen takes many forms, with the wide-roaming music usually allowed off its leash without the worry that it will fall into incoherence. **Ole Schmidt** tests the symphony by going beyond the bounds of good taste with a lot of sonorities that seem brash for their own sake, not to mention the oompah street-band flavour he gives to the first-movement waltz section.

The polar opposite is found in **Herbert Blomstedt**, who recorded the Nielsen Third twice. Robert Simpson writes in his 1952 book *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*: 'One can imagine what a nightmarish problem Nielsen would've posed to a theorist like Schenker, with his static conception of musical form.' Ever-contrarian Blomstedt seems to be saying, 'Try me!' His sense of pacing, tension and release all point to finding traditional sonata form outlines in the first movement. Everywhere in the symphony, the slightest whisper of thematic continuity is highlighted with meticulous clarity. Blomstedt can be quite convincing at times; however, his zeal to organise Nielsen robs the music of its mystery, especially in the San Francisco version, even though there's no reason why the two qualities should be mutually exclusive. Of his two recordings, San Francisco has great heat and marvellous sound; I prefer his earlier Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra recording, however – if only because the occasional untidiness offsets Blomstedt's sense of order, and because, in general, it has long musical paragraphs built with a more strategically coloured dramatic arc.

In the **Douglas Bostock** recording, one wouldn't think that rhythmic precision and vitality would make such a difference, but the headlong momentum of this performance is indeed infectious. Also, whenever there's a tempo change, one strongly feels it and how it colours the music. In the first movement, glints of terror are in the *accelerandos*. The slower but still insistent manner of the second movement actually heightens the music's mystery. Sonorities are lean and compact. The singers feel unusually distant and light voiced, and – with their placement in the recording's sound picture – are some of the most effective on disc.

CHARACTERISATION

Emerging from Blomstedt's cul-de-sac with a clearer idea of the symphony's core personality, I eventually made my top four choices on the basis of how differently that character can be projected



Performance on a grand scale: everything about Bernstein's interpretation is big and bold

– in Edward Serov's operatic drama, in Neeme Järvi's vocal soloists, in Leonard Bernstein's audacious grandeur and in Alan Gilbert's way of speaking volumes through sonority.

The fact that **Leonard Bernstein** never went back to Nielsen in his later DG years perhaps says that he'd gone as far as he could, at least in Symphony No 3 as recorded with the Royal Danish Orchestra.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

DATE / ARTISTS	RECORD COMPANY (REVIEW DATE)
1948 Royal Stockholm PO / Mann	Danacord Ⓢ ④ DACOCD62730 (11/05)
1949 Danish St RSO / Tuxen	Naxos Ⓢ Ⓜ 9 80539 (7/49*)
1955 Danish St RSO / Frandsen	Dutton Ⓢ CDBP9796; Guild Ⓢ GHCD2340 (4/09)
1959 Danish RSO / Jensen	Danacord Ⓢ ③ DACOCD351/3 (4/95)
1965 Royal Danish Orch / Bernstein	Sony Classical Ⓢ (60 discs) 88697 68365-2 (1/91*)
1970 BBC Northern SO / Horenstein	BBC Legends Ⓢ BBCL4249-2 (5/09)
1973 Danish RSO / Blomstedt	EMI Ⓢ ③ 500829-2 (3/01*)
1973 LSO / Schmidt	Alto Ⓢ ③ ALC2505 (1/75*, 2/81*, 7/87*)
1984 Danish Nat Orch / Ehrling	Audiofon Ⓢ CD72025
1985 Gothenburg SO / Chung	BIS Ⓢ BIS-CD321 (8/86); Ⓢ ④ BIS-CD614/6
1989 Royal Danish Orch / Berglund	RCA Ⓢ ③ 74321 20290-2 (8/95)
1989 San Francisco SO / Blomstedt	Decca Ⓢ ② 460 985-2DF2 (8/90*); Ⓢ ⑤ 478 6787DC15
1989 Swedish RSO / Salonen	Sony Classical Ⓢ SK46500 (10/91 - nla)
1991 Gothenburg SO / N Järvi	DG Ⓢ ③ Ⓜ 477 5514GTR3 (12/93*)
1991 RSN / Thomson	Chandos Ⓢ Ⓜ CHAN9067 (2/93)
1994 Ireland Nat SO / Leaper	Naxos Ⓢ ③ 550825 (11/95)
1994 Royal Stockholm PO / Rozhdestvensky	Chandos Ⓢ ③ CHANI0271 (11/98*)
1994/95 Odense SO / Serov	Kontrapunkt Ⓢ 32203 (11/95)
1999 Finnish RSO / Saraste	Warner Classics Ⓢ 2564 60432-2
1999 Danish Nat SO / Schanwandt	Dacapo Ⓢ Ⓜ 8 224216 (12/99); Naxos Ⓢ ③ 570738;
	Dacapo Ⓢ Ⓜ ② 2 110403/5 (9/06)
2000 RLPO / Bostock	Documents Ⓢ Ⓜ 298341 (11/00*)
2002 BBC Scottish SO / Vänskä	BIS Ⓢ BIS-CD1209 (2/03); Ⓢ ③ BIS-CD1839/40
2005 Janáček PO / Kuchar	Brilliant Ⓢ ③ 94419
2009 Danish Nat SO / Dausgaard	C Major Ⓢ Ⓜ 710508; Ⓢ Ⓜ 710604 (9/12)
2011 American SO / Botstein	American Symphony Orchestra Ⓢ Ⓜ (no cat no)
2011 LSO / C Davis	LSO Live Ⓢ ③ LSO0722 (5/13)
2012 New York PO / Gilbert	Dacapo Ⓢ Ⓜ 6 220623 (12/12)
2013/14 Royal Stockholm PO / Oramo	BIS Ⓢ Ⓜ BIS2048 (3/15)

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Master of flexibility: Alan Gilbert and his New York PO frame Nielsen's melodies with touches of rubato and all manner of nearby harmonies

Nielsen is not only writ large but also writ in red neon. Everything about the performance is bigger than the others – the contrasts, the *rallentandos* and the relentless vigour. No grace note is too small to be piercing. No motif is too small to be given a heightened inflection. How does Bernstein avoid Schmidt's vulgarity? He's simply amplifying what's in the score. The soloists are good, the final tempo is slowish in ways that make the music feel even more eventful, and sometimes the music sounds almost confessional.

Although **Neeme Järvi** has long been an important recording presence, this performance stands above the others as a potential classic. It has all the intelligence and taste of the middle-of-the-road types such as Saraste and Schönwandt, but with more sonic glamour from the Gothenburg strings, and more than just vocal glamour from the singers. Soile Isokoski and Jorma Hynninen are two of the bigger international stars to make the second-movement cameo appearance, but are also accomplished recitalists and thus know how to make their voices speak in detail within miniaturist confines. The vocalises emerge as if referring to a secret text, adding another intriguing layer to the music.

Edward Serov almost feels dangerous. Some of his Nielsen recordings list only

a single recording date, suggesting they're made on the fly, perhaps even live in the studio. From his unusually emphatic treatment of the opening chords, you know that his Nielsen is going to rock and roll – and it does, though not always wisely. Serov rides into thickets of fugal writing as if his Odense forces have all the horsepower in the world, though the execution does become a bit tentative. His forces don't always seem to give him all the weight, hairpin changes and three-dimensional physicality that he's after. But more than in most recordings of this symphony, there's a sense of imperative in the way each phrase follows the other – and that's deeply important. Although his forward-placed vocal soloists don't have as much character as I'd like, the incidental instrumental solos all have a strong sense of individual expression.

With **Alan Gilbert**, the symphony's dinner-table conversation of the first movement is a bit more polite but there's so much more care given to the quality of the sound. Fugal passages are played without audible fear. Woodwind solos are sharper. The trombones accomplish with nuanced phrasing what Serov does with brute strength. Islands of chamber music appear here and there within movements, though the New York Philharmonic's

weighty sonority (extraordinarily well recorded) is put to great use, giving extra visceral impact to the second movement and much-needed rhetorical significance to the third movement. Sonorities that can seem opaque in some recordings have a way of revealing themselves with an evolving iridescence. I love the way that Gilbert frames his melodies with touches of *rubato* and all manner of nearby harmonies – particularly important in the final movement when the thematic content can wear out its welcome, especially with stately tempos. Gilbert is Serov's nicer twin – with many of the same observations but a more genteel way of saying them. This is a recording that repays close and repeated hearings – perhaps the highest compliment of all. **G**

TOP CHOICE

New York Philharmonic / **Gilbert**
Dacapo  6 220623

This recording has just about everything that all the better Nielsen recordings have, but



with an extra-thoughtful use of orchestral colour – something that could perhaps only be accomplished by musicians from a world-class orchestra.