

**Northern (De)lights: The Solo Piano Works of
Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)**

**A Lecture-Demonstration for the
Music Teachers National Association
National Convention, Anaheim, California**

**March 13, 2013, 9:15-10:15 a.m.
Disneyland Hotel Convention Center Monorail Room ABC**

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"I would hope . . . that our art and our teaching may continue to become—and I say this with emphasis to all pedagogues—more inclusive, more well-rounded to the point that we are bored, tired, and downright disgusted with hearing and occupying ourselves with the same pieces of music, the same routine of dreary idols and dead skeletons. We must take a good look at the great literature of music. There are still glorious treasures which lie completely unnoticed, often from the lesser-known masters who in their time were overshadowed by the so-called big names. Yes, these big names have done damage. Many people believe that when they just put the names of Handel, Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart on a program, they are on the safe side. But they forget that even these masters—including my idolized Mozart—have written things that creak with dry boredom." (**Carl Nielsen, in an address to the Society for Music Pedagogy in Denmark, December 18, 1929**)

Biographical Facts about Carl Nielsen

- Born in Nørre Lyndelse, island of Fyn, Denmark on June 9, 1865
- Seventh of twelve children born to Niels Jørgensen, a house painter and country musician, and Maren Kirstine Jørgensen
- Learned to play the violin as a child, later the cornet
- Played in military band in Odense as an early teen
- Studied at the Royal Danish Music Conservatory in Copenhagen from 1884-86
- Studied in Germany, France, and Italy as a grant recipient in 1890-91
- Met and married Anne Marie Brodersen, a sculptor, in Paris in 1891
- Had three children, Anne Marie, Irmelin, and Hans Børge
- Second violinist, Royal Orchestra, Copenhagen, 1889-1915
- Conductor at the Royal Theater, Copenhagen, 1908-1914
- Director of the Royal Danish Music Conservatory, Copenhagen, 1931
- Composed six symphonies, three concerti, chamber music, operas, choral music, songs, and piano music

Collections and Small Pieces (Intermediate Piano Literature)

Available from Masters Music Publications, Associated Board of Royal Schools of Music [ABRSM], and Wilhelm Hansen

Five Piano Pieces op. 3 (1890) 1. *Folk Melody* 2. *Humoreske* 3. *Arabeske* 4. *Mignon* 5. *Elf Dance*

Humorous Bagatelles, op. 11 (1897) 1. *Good day, Good day!* 2. *The Spinning Top* 3. *A Little Slow Waltz* 4. *The Jumping Jack* 5. *Doll March* 6. *The Musical Clock*

Festival Prelude (1901)

The Dream of "Silent Night" (1905)

Piano Music for Young and Old, op. 53 (1930)

Large Works (Advanced Piano Literature)

Available from Masters Music Publications, Wilhelm Hansen, and C. F. Peters

Symphonic Suite Op. 8 (1894)

Chaconne, Op. 32 (1916)

Theme with Variations, Op. 40 (1917)

Suite, Op. 45 (1919-1920)

Three Piano Pieces, Op. 59 Posthumous (1928).

Summaries and Levels of Intermediate Piano Pieces

Five Piano Pieces, Opus 3

Folk Melody, Andante; Level: 5. Somber, "long ago, far away" mood, key of A minor; lyrical melody characterized by falling fourths, harmony enriched by non-chord tones; harmonic variety invites varied pianistic colors with modest technical demands; mode mixture in coda leaves listener with bittersweet feeling.

Humoreske, Allegretto giocoso; Level: 7. Scherzo in A minor with a trio in the parallel major and a brief coda after an abbreviated *da capo*; jocular, rough-hewn character achieved by *subito forte* dotted figures and unexpected chromaticism with second-beat sforzandi; rustic-sounding trio with drone bass and alto grace notes.

Arabeske, Moderato; Level: 8. In D major, introduced with motto "Have you lost your way in the shadowy woods? Do you know Pan?", a line by the Danish writer J. P. Jacobsen; undulating, serpentine melodic line and snaking harmonic progressions; no suggestion of a D Major chord until the final measure; outbursts of cascading diminished seventh arpeggios and provide some technical challenges.

Mignon, Moderato grazioso; Level: 7. Ideal for the young adolescent who experiences occasional inexplicable moodiness; key of Eb minor; melancholy, swinging triplet melody alternates with passionate flurry of multi-octave right-hand broken chords; chromatic tenor melody; final presto codetta with fortissimo chords.

Elf Dance, Tempo di Valse; Level: 7. E minor/E major; left hand stretches to a broken tenth and beyond; shapely melody filled with double-sharps, mordants, and the sharp-fourth scale degree provide decidedly Nordic, Grieg-like sound; useful preparation for more difficult Chopin or Schubert Waltzes.

Humorous Bagatelles, Opus 11

Good Day, Good Day! Allegretto; Level: 5. Upbeat personality; "drop-lift" articulation indicated in 16 measures of two-note slurs in the right and left hand with accents and staccatos; legato left-hand parallel thirds on white keys; contrasting lyrical section with expressive chromatic turns of harmony; Mozartian coda requires buoyant clarity.

The Spinning Top, Presto; Level: 9. A technical *tour-de-force* for the early-advanced pianist; sixteenth notes in nearly perpetual motion; filled with vigor and excitement that motivates technical progress; an excellent etude in velocity and endurance; humorous conclusion with descending glissando and staccato hemiola.

A Little Slow Waltz, Valse lento; Level: 7. Simple but exquisite lyricism in two-voice texture; startling harmonic variety, frequently chromatic melody invites cantabile and rubato; abundance of accidentals provides reading and memory challenge.

The Jumping Jack, Poco Allegretto; Level: 6. Clever depiction of a wooden doll with arms and legs that dangle limply until the attached string that hangs below the body is pulled; staccato, sixteenth notes marked *f* represent string pulling, eighth notes marked *p* suggest arms and legs settling back down again; handfuls of thirty-second notes in the right hand; ideal for imagery-based interpretation.

Doll March, Allegro moderato; Level: 6. *Leggiero* triadic melody derived from the notion of the miniature; slender texture, light articulation, soft dynamic markings, mostly diatonic; excellent piece for teaching rhythmic control and classical clarity; feeds the creativity of the student who loves small things.

The Musical Clock, Allegretto scherzando; Level: 8. Imitation of a machine similar to a music box; requires clarity and a quasi-mechanical regularity; occasional *espressivo* markings provides contrast from consistent rhythmic uniformity and evokes *scherzando* character; Alberti bass similar to requirements of classical sonatas.

Festival Prelude, Tempo giusto; Level: 9. Ceremonial musical character similar to Schumann's "Important Event" from *Kinderszenen*; dense chordal texture with unrelenting *pesante ff* and accents; wide palate of harmonic colors keeps the aural interest vibrant despite nearly constant dynamic intensity; invites young pianists to increase their powers in sound production with chords and octaves.

The Dream of "Silent Night", Poco adagio; Level: 10. A fantasy inspired by the familiar Christmas hymn; lyrical and elegant right-hand counterpoint; somewhat complex rhythmic subtleties, including two-against-three; better suited to musically mature student; ideal for Christmas programs of any type.

Piano Music for Young and Old, Opus 53

No. 1, C Major, Allegretto; Level: 3. Two-voice texture, imitation between hands; moderate tempo, basically legato; two-note slurs with grace notes in right hand; major-minor mode mixture, flat supertonic gives harmonic color; genial and innocent character.

No. 2, A minor, Allegretto; Level: 3. Two-voice texture; lilting compound meter; lyrical and legato; melodic response in left hand in second phrase; major-minor mode mixture; sharp subdominant gives harmonic interest; somber and reflective character.

No. 3a, G Major, Allegro scherzoso; Level: 5. Two- to three-voice texture; articulation varies between legato, staccato, tenuto, accents; harmony colored by major-minor mode mixture, flat supertonic, and sharp subdominant; accidentals provide some reading challenge; a brief *tranquillo* gives quasi-patetico "crocodile tears" contrast to basically energetic, robust character.

No. 3b, G Major, Grazioso; Level: 5. Four-voice texture; excellent exercise for "drop-lift" slurred connection between two chords; various accents, mostly weak beat; *pesante* two-voice interjections reminiscent of Bartók; major-minor mode mixture, flat-supertonic sound; many dynamic changes; refined character alternates with more primitive sound.

No. 4, E minor, Andantino; Level: 3. Very brief; three-voice texture; lyrical, frequent tenuto markings; active left-hand counterpoint; minor mode prevails with some flat-supertonic, sharp subdominant; Picardy third in final cadence; decidedly melancholy mood.

No. 5, D Major, Allegro giocoso; Level: 6. Two-voice texture; active counterpoint throughout; excellent reading exercise for handling different intervals in both hands at once; touches on a remarkable range of keys: A, a, C, C#, f#, b, e, and of course, D; cheerful personality with occasional hints of more pathos as various keys crop up.

No. 6, B minor, Poco lamentoso; Level: 4. Two-voice texture; slow and lyrical; melodic shift from right hand to left hand halfway through; chromatic coloring before reprise gives reading challenge; sad personality in the spirit of Schumann's "First Loss."

No. 7, A Major, Marziale; Level: 5. Three- and four-voice texture; march-like regularity in meter and rhythm, useful for learning rhythmic control; alternating staccato, legato, and tenuto; accents and subito dynamic changes, diminuendo to *ppp*, *senza rallentando* at end; straightforward, quasi-military character.

No. 8, F# minor, Cantabile; Level: 4. Relatively brief; two-voice texture; slow and lyrical; consistently legato; general absence of leading tone in melody lends folk quality; stark and sad character.

No. 9, E Major, Allegretto civettuolo; Level: 6. Two- to four-voice texture; basically lyrical and legato, with occasional staccato phrase endings; leading tone alternates between flat and raised position; many accidentals, mode mixture; alternating optimism and anxiety in character.

No. 10, C# minor, Lugubre; Level: 5. Three-voice texture; slow and lyrical, consistently legato; first phrase *f*, repeated *pp*; modulation to relative major, among other keys; *molto agitato e rubato* marking for last phrase useful for teaching such concepts; tragic and dramatic character in the spirit of Tchaikovsky's "The Doll's Funeral."

No. 11, B Major, Andantino poco tiepido; Level: 5. Two-voice texture; singing melody, consistent legato; migrates easily to relative minor; one incident of two against three; some accidentals; innocent character.

No. 12, G# minor, Adagio drammatico; Level: 6. Four-voice texture; stately tempo and double-dotted rhythms like French overture; thirty-second note triplets in right hand; frequent double sharps; *pp* echo of first phrase; excellent pre-Bach study; grave, purposeful character.

No. 13, F Major, Andantino carino; Level: 4. Two- to three-voice texture; patterned left hand; basically legato and lyrical, interspersed with repeated staccato tritones and thirds; some mild syncopation in right hand; sweet, innocent character throughout, easily understood.

No. 14, D minor, Capriccioso; Level: 7. Two-voice texture; dotted figure alternates with running triplet figure; excellent exercise in alternating legato and staccato at a quick tempo; accents create occasional hemiola; touches on Bb Major; mischievous, almost malevolent character.

No. 15, B^b Major, Adagio espressivo; Level: 6. Two-voice texture; slow tempo, cantabile; alternating subdivision of quarter note into eighths, sixteenths, triples, and dotted triplets make it an uncommonly fine exercise in rhythm; swinging Sicilian rhythm pervades as it switches to 12/8 time halfway through; occasional left-hand imitation.

No. 16, G minor, Alla Contadino; Level: 7. Two- to three voice texture; quick tempo, staccato opening, mostly legato remainder; active, sometimes imitative left-hand; hemiola near beginning and end; lengthy foray into Gb major; brisk, no-nonsense character.

No. 17, E^b Major, Largo con fantasia; Level: 10. Two- to three-voice texture; slow and lyrical; alternating duple and triple rhythmic subdivisions; ambiguous, wandering harmony; mature musical content; enigmatic, elusive musical character.

No. 18, C minor, Preludio; Level: 7. Two-voice texture; unique single-line notation; fascinating Bach-like harmonic series;

could present interesting pedaling questions; *sempre pp e mistico* marking suggests almost eerie character.

No. 19, A^b Major, "Alla Bach"; Level: 8. Two- to three-voice texture; moderately quick tempo, essentially lyrical; invokes Bach Invention style; Bach-like sequences and figurations; double flats provide momentary "wrong turn" harmonies; serious, but not austere character.

No. 20, F minor, Con sentimento; Level: 8. Three-voice texture; slow and lyrical; left-hand melodic response; includes rhythmic subdivisions into two, three, four, six, and eight; highly chromatic, spends time in G major; romantic, indulgent character.

No. 21, D^b Major, Marcia di goffo; Level: 7. Three-voice texture; moderate march tempo; heavy accents, staccato bass line; narrow melodic range, consistent, relatively straightforward rhythmic patterns; special mention of the subdominant; unrefined, good-natured personality.

No. 22, B^b minor, Allegretto pastorale; Level: 8. Three-voice texture; moderate rocking pastoral meter; slightly lengthier than others; melody characterized by ascending horn-call fourths; imitative interaction between right and left hand; uncomplicated rhythmic patterns; spends less time in B^b minor than in other keys; gentle, unstrained character.

No. 23, G^b Major, Etude; Level: 10. Two-voice texture; fast tempo, oscillating sixteenth-note figure pervades right hand; *leggiero* in both hands, though sometimes marked *f*; snakes through many keys; ends with written-out ritard of five-note scale; title describes character.

No. 24, E^b minor, Molto adagio/Allegretto commodo; Level: 10. Two-voice texture; slow and lyrical, giving way to moderate dance feel in second half; basically legato; highly chromatic in first half, shift to parallel major, more diatonic in second half; many expressive markings; tragic and dark character in first half, gentle and unaffected mood in second half.

Summaries of Large Works (Advanced Piano Literature)

Symphonic Suite Op. 8 (1894) I. Intonation - Maestoso. This work begins with a fanfare with a decidedly thick chordal texture, filled with heavy accents, possessing a pompous, solemn character. ***II. Quasi allegretto.*** Here a gentler, flowing personality defines the outer sections, whereas the climactic middle section returns to the heavy octaves and accents of the first movement. ***III. Andante.*** In the opening, Nielsen makes an unmistakable reference to slow movement of Brahms F minor Sonata with its descending thirds and overall character, though this movement is clearly more modern in harmony; again, it contains decidedly long periods of thick textures. ***IV. Finale.*** this energetic, contrapuntal movement makes references to second movement rhythmic motives. Consistent with all the other movements, it consists of more Brahmsian textures in middle section, especially the octaves plus a third.

Chaconne, Op. 32 (1916) Inspired by the chaconne the Bach D minor solo violin partita, Nielsen's Chaconne opens with an 8-bar bass theme that serves as the basis for 20 variations. Each variation adds various pianistic embellishments completely unlike Nielsen's earlier piano writing with a wide range of personalities. In fact, Nielsen's pianistic devices are entirely his own, although a dramatic and stately climax is followed by right hand figuration and emotional content not unlike later Beethoven. The piece ends in complete calm and serenity.

Theme with Variations, Op. 40 (1917) While cut of the same cloth as the Chaconne in some cosmetic ways, the ferocious energy at the center of this piece is utterly different. The theme begins in B minor but ends in G minor, a device which Nielsen believed prevented some of the monotony inherent in variation structures. Fifteen variations follow in every imaginable style and character. The climax in the final variation is cataclysmic, suggesting, according to Nielsen in a letter, "a man fighting for his life with his back to an iceberg."

Suite, Op. 45 (The Luciferian) (1919-1920) Nielsen's largest work for piano, and arguably his keyboard masterpiece. ***I. Allegretto un pochettino.*** Nielsen's own words suggest that a performance of this movement should be "a little cold and brittle in tone and in a calmly, flowing tempo." It sets the stage for the tension between the tonal centers of F-

sharp and B-flat which pervade the work. **II. Poco moderato.** This ethereal movement seems influenced by the Impressionists, though to point as directly to Ravel's *Ondine* as some critics have suggested goes too far both in terms of musical content and conceptual philosophy. **III. Molto adagio e patetico.** Here is the emotional center of the work, devastating in its relentless harmonic tensions. Nielsen wrote that it should be played with "a supreme calm and strength and at some places, with a certain brutal temper." **IV. Allegretto innocente.** Nothing could be further away emotionally from the previous movement than this slight contrapuntal piece in F-sharp major. If the third movement represents the full range of human pathos, the fourth represents the placid world of a child quietly alone at play. **V. Allegretto vivo.** The emotional pendulum swings back toward the darker side of the human psyche in this movement, if not quite to the point of tragedy. An uneasy movement full of more questions than answers. **VI. Allegro non troppo ma vigoroso.** Even if the subtitle "Luciferian" wasn't intended as a direct reference to the devil, this movement has a diabolical theme expressed immediately in the bass which is somewhat reminiscent of the devilish repeated-note theme in the Liszt Sonata. Also Lisztian is the pianistic force, energy, and virtuosity that Nielsen calls for with sweeping glissandos and crashing fortissimos. A fitting, grand conclusion to a substantial work.

Three Piano Pieces, Op. 59 Posthumous (1928). Not published until 1937, six years after Nielsen's death. **I. Impromptu.** This movement is decidedly improvisatory in the outer sections which surround a short Bartók-like contrapuntal passage at the center. **II. Adagio.** This Adagio is somewhat reminiscent of the Adagio from the *Suite*, though in a harsher, more modern language. Nielsen experiments with an Ives-like juxtaposition of angular dissonance against simple tonal chords. **III. Allegro non troppo.** Whirling with energy from the start, this final movement calls for sturdy pianism and emotional power. After a near-dodecaphonic fughetta, the piece climaxes with an enormous brass-choir fanfare solidly in E-flat major. All in all, some of Nielsen's most challenging piano music both for performer and listener.