

Carl Nielsen

“Helios” Overture, Opus 17

CARL AUGUST NIELSEN was born in Sortelung, Denmark, on June 9, 1865, and died in Copenhagen on October 3, 1931. He composed his “Helios” Overture in Greece in March and April 1903; it received its first performance on October 8, 1903, in Copenhagen, with Johan Svendsen conducting the Danish Royal Orchestra.

THE SCORE OF THE OVERTURE calls for three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

Carl Nielsen holds an honored place as Denmark’s greatest composer, very like the special distinction of his contemporaries Stenhammar in Sweden and Sibelius in Finland. All three were friends, and all three trod paths in their music that led away from the intense aesthetic battles being fought out in Paris and Vienna in the early years of the twentieth century. None of them was self-consciously nationalist in outlook, and although Nielsen published many Danish folk songs, his finest works are composed in an elevated, personal language heard at its best in his six symphonies and three concertos (for violin, flute, and clarinet) spanning the years 1892 to 1928.

He studied at the Copenhagen Conservatory and earned a living at first as a violinist. From 1889 to 1905 he played second violin in the Danish Royal Orchestra under Johan Svendsen, the Norwegian composer and conductor, a humble position ideal for absorbing a huge repertoire of symphonic music and opera, and also for developing an active career as a composer on the side. He managed to travel to Germany, Italy, and Paris, where he enjoyed seeing the art as much as hearing the music. With Wagner to be played in the opera house and Strauss tone poems to be played in the concert hall in those years, you would expect the young Nielsen to have emulated their supercharged style, but his preference was for a more severe and classical manner, expressed in songs and chamber music and in his successful First Symphony of 1892.

Ten years later there followed the Second Symphony, entitled *The Four Temperaments*, at which time his career was bolstered by the award of a Danish state pension and by a generous contract with the publisher Wilhelm Hansen. He took a leave from the orchestra and went for an extended stay to Greece with his wife Anne Marie, a sculptress who had won a traveling scholarship. After touring western Greece, the Niensens reached Athens on February 20, 1903. They spent two or three weeks sightseeing; then the director of the Athens Conservatory (the richest conservatory in the world, Nielsen noted with amazement) offered him a room with a piano to work in, and on March 10 he began his new overture, *Helios*. He composed there every morning while Anne Marie spent the full day copying ancient statuary in the Acropolis Museum. On March 27 he wrote to a friend in Copenhagen: “It’s really hot here. The Helios [the sun] shines all day and I am headlong into my new sun piece. A long introduction with sunrise and a dawn song is done, and I have started the Allegro.” By the end of April the overture was finished. Both the Athens Conservatory and the city’s Philharmonic Society wanted to give the first performance, but he decided to hold that honor for his own orchestra, which he knew would give a better account of it. After a visit to Constantinople, the Niensens returned to Denmark at the end of July.

So the overture received its first performance by Nielsen’s own orchestra under Svendsen (whom he would later succeed as music director) on October 8, 1903. The critics were not kind about it, but Nielsen was now secure enough in his career not to be troubled by the opinions of others. “What do you think of so-called Program Music?” he wrote to a friend soon after completing the score. “It is of some interest to me, as I have just done a piece: that is to say, not a detailed program. My overture describes the movement of the sun through the heavens from morning to evening, but it is only called *Helios* and no explanation is necessary. What do you say? Such a program title is not a nuisance. Light, Darkness, Sun, and Rain are almost the same as Credo, Crucifixus, Gloria, and so forth.”

This is another way of saying that a descriptive piece without words is just as viable as a setting of the Latin Mass, whose words are familiar to everyone. No one in 1903 questioned the viability of program music; it was the heyday of huge orchestral panoramas in the manner of Richard Strauss. But Nielsen was well aware of the aesthetic issues, all the more since his symphonies wrestle with large abstract ideas and are built on complex musical structures of key and theme without verbal meaning. Many visitors to Greece would have evoked the memory of ancient Greek civilization, but in *Helios* Nielsen allowed himself to portray the lifegiving effects of the sun’s daily round. A country boy by birth, he evidently intended a nature piece, as reflected in a verse he inscribed on the score:

Silence and darkness—
The sun rises with a joyous song of praise,
It wanders on its golden way,
And sinks gently into the sea.

If the opening measures suggest the primeval depths of Wagner's Rhine, especially with horns calling back and forth over a low bass line, Nielsen's sunrise is solemn only for a short while: it quickly illuminates a world of energy and joy, signaled by trumpet fanfares. He helpfully explained the course of the music in a letter from Greece to his friend Julius Borup:

The sun is a truly wonderful thing, and I understand how people can worship it. Traces of sun worship are always being found in Norway. In those narrow valleys which the sun's rays seldom reach it is a day of rejoicing when it finally shines on one's house. The peasants then put butter out on the sill for the sun to melt as an offering. My overture is in praise and honor of the sun. It begins very softly with some low notes in the bass, then joined by several more instruments, and the horns give out a rather solemn morning hymn. Now the sun rises higher in the sky until the midday light is almost blinding and everything is bathed in a sea of light, making almost all living creatures feel sleepy and lazy. Finally it sinks slowly and majestically behind the distant blue mountains, far down in the west. Have I succeeded with it? I simply know that it has given me immense satisfaction to have carried out this idea which is so superbly well suited to musical setting and has an automatically organic shape to it.

The powerful effect of mountain landscape especially impressed Nielsen on his travels through Greece, and he spoke many times as if the sun and the mountains were in a kind of close partnership. This sense of landscape is certainly intended to be felt in the music. Yet the central part of the overture feels like more than an image of the sun's burning light. As it "wanders on its golden way," its rays fall, surely, upon people and activity represented by two forthright themes, the first of which is heard in the violins immediately following the fanfares. This theme is brimming with vitality, the sun's blessing of life, without any sense of the sleepiness and laziness that Nielsen mentions. The second theme, heard first in the cellos, then in the woodwinds, is broader but no less vital, and it leads to a celebration in the full orchestra.

The music suddenly breaks into a busy fugue for the strings. This is quickly pushed aside by the brass, and after the two main themes have been heard again, the energy drains out of the music as twilight begins to fall. The effect is bewitching, and it leads inevitably to the very same horns and low strings that welcomed the dawn. Nielsen has compressed the hours of daylight into ten minutes without distorting the satisfying shape of the music in the least. Musical time has nothing to do with the clock.

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THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA'S ONLY PREVIOUS PERFORMANCES of the "*Helios*" Overture were conducted by *Andrew Davis (at Tanglewood on August 8, 1987) and Esa-Pekka Salonen (subscription concerts in January 1988).*