

Courtesy of [Eric Nelson](#), as posted on Klarinet, 9 and 11 Feb 1997. Eric Nelson is clarinetist with The Lightwood Duo, an actively touring clarinet/guitar duo. Their CDs are available through their website, <http://www.lightwoodduo.com>.

About two weeks ago, there were some questions about Aage Oxenvad on the list. Having studied Nielsen and clarinet at the Royal Conservatory in Copenhagen [in 1979], I would like to pass on some first-hand information on Oxenvad.

There are two major obstacles to acquiring accurate information about Danish music. First, much of the info exists only in the Danish language; not exactly a familiar language to most. Second, the Danes are not inclined to value the sharing of such information. To quote Tage Scharff, the clarinet professor with whom I studied: "You Americans [and English as well] love to get together and give lectures, deliver papers, and hold conferences. Here in Denmark, *vi spiller!* [we PLAY]". He was quite amused that I, a performing clarinetist, would be so interested in such material.

On a posting on this list, Jarle Brosveet wrote:

"In the first place Oxenvad did not inspire Nielsen to write the concerto, although he was the first to perform it. It was written at the request of Nielsen's benefactor and one-time student Carl Johan Michaelsen. Second, Oxenvad, who is described as a choleric, made this unflattering remark about Nielsen and the concerto: "He must be able to play the clarinet himself, otherwise he would hardly have been able to find the worst notes to play." Oxenvad performed it on several occasions with no apparent success although he reportedly did all he could, whatever that is supposed to mean. I am quoting partly from the liner notes written by a Danish authority for BIS CD-321. Of course we shall never know how well Oxenvad performed the concerto, because he never made a recording of it."

Actually, Oxenvad *did* inspire Nielsen to write the Concerto. Nielsen had become intrigued by the playing of the Copenhagen Wind Quintet, and composed his famous Kvintet in 1922. He promised each of the 5 musicians a Concerto. The bassoonist, Knud Lassen, knowing the difficulty of N's music, said "you go ahead and do that, but **I** won't play it!" The flute concerto was composed in 1926, but Nielsen procrastinated writing the others. Carl Johan Michaelsen, mentioned in Brosveet's post, only reminded Nielsen of his promise to Oxenvad; this reminder was the incentive Nielsen needed to get busy w/ it in 1928. The first performance of the Concerto [a private performance] took place on 14 September 28 at the summer villa of the wealthy Michaelsen in Humlebæk, with an orchestra of 22. Oxenvad's comment: "he must be able to play the clarinet himself, otherwise he would hardly have been able to find the most difficult notes to play!" was not an angry, unflattering comment at all...the two men were very close, and this comment was most certainly a bit of dry Danish humor, as was the bassoonist's comment cited above. Oxenvad indeed never recorded the Concerto. According to some of his pupils, [Scharff, mentioned above, was a pupil] Oxenvad professed an accuracy rate of approximately 80 percent in the concerto. Again, probably dry Danish wit and exaggeration, but most certainly he never felt confident enough technically to record it. Those wishing to hear a recording of Oxenvad's playing, however, can find it on a CD recently released by:

Clarinet Classics, 77 St. Albans Ave., London E6 4HH.
The disc is titled: Nielsen, The Historic Recordings. catalog # CC 0002.

Included are Cahuzac's recording of the Concerto, and Oxenvad playing on the Wind Quintet and Serenata in Vano. It is interesting to hear the vast difference between the playing of Cahuzac and that of Oxenvad. The Danes regard Cahuzac's interpretation [and that of Stanley Drucker, by the way] as completely ignorant of the Danish spirit. Too light, entirely devoid of passion.

Now some biographical information on Oxenvad. This comes from several newspaper interviews, the Danish Biographical Lexicon, and personal interviews with people who knew the man.

I apologize for the length of this post, but I don't believe this information is to be had elsewhere, at least not in English.

Aage [pronounced Oh-wuh] Oxenvad was born in the small village of Gettrup in Jutland, 16 January 1884. His father was a sharecropper, and the village *spillemand* [town musician]. Aage played the flute for dances with his father and brothers until, at age 12, he decided that it was "boring...with such a cool, uninteresting tone..." and therefore switched to clarinet. During his teen years he travelled every two weeks to Copenhagen to study with Carl Skjerne, the solo clarinetist with the Royal Chapel Orchestra, himself formerly a student of Richard Muhlfield.

Oxenvad studied at the Royal Conservatory from 1903-1905 and thereafter studied briefly in Paris. He was, however, primarily homegrown. Scharff [prof. at the Conservatory in 1979] noted Oxenvad's distrust of foreign clarinetistry. When Cahuzac performed in Copenhagen, Oxenvad's pupils were eager to hear the famous man play. Oxenvad told them to go ahead and go hear him, "but don't listen too closely!"

Oxenvad joined the Royal Chapel Orchestra in 1909. He was the first in that group to use the Boehm clarinet; his teacher and colleague, Skjerne, played a boxwood Oehler clarinet. Oxenvad became solo clarinetist in 1919 and held that post until his death 13 April 1944.

Oxenvad achieved a measure of international notice; Willem Mengelberg invited him to join the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, but he declined. When Stravinsky brought his new *L'histoire du soldat* [trio version] to Copenhagen for its Scandinavian premiere, Oxenvad was the clarinetist, Stravinsky the pianist.

But in spite of his fame and achievements, Oxenvad carefully clung to his rural heritage throughout his life. A newspaper interview published on the occasion of his 60th birthday revealed much about his personality and priorities. The interviewer noted the clarinetist's pronounced Jutlander dialect, a dialect regarded with haughty disdain in cosmopolitan Copenhagen. Oxenvad preferred living in a small house on the city's outskirts to a flat nearer his employment, and enjoyed gardening and discussions of livestock and the weather with his agrarian neighbors.

He 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. His own cameo-portrait of the instrument, though blatantly chauvinistic by

today's standards, is revealing: "...it is a living being, and must be treated like a woman, with a gentle yet firm hand...also unpredictable, like a woman...the clarinet is somber and expressive, and it possesses passion..."

Oxenvad felt great adoration for Carl Nielsen: "I loved Carl Nielsen above all...he is Denmark's greatest composer." The two were bonded by common roots. Nielsen's music constantly harkens back to a childhood that Oxenvad also knew, with its ignorantly blissful poverty, its fairy tales, and its innocent dependence upon the earth. Oxenvad in his playing, though lacking the technical refinement of a Cahuzac, was able to impart the roots of Nielsen's music. The Clarinet Concerto, to quote Svend Christian Felumb, the oboist in the Quintet, "...was not only a concerto for clarinet, it was a concerto for Aage Oxenvad. The composer was so deeply inspired by Oxenvad's immerions 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 vivid than Carl Nielsen's musical one. It tells everything about Aage and his clarinet."

A reviewer of the Danish premiere of the concerto also noted the great debt the work owed Oxenvad: "Hardly a more homogenous interpretation of this work could be imagined. 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."

Scarf put it this way: Even in urbane or royal company, Nielsen and Oxenvad "both had mud on their boots."

I hope this is of interest to those of you who have worked on the Nielsen Concerto. For more specific information on the Danish performance tradition in the work, refer to an article I wrote for the Clarinet Magazine, Winter 1987, vol. 14, nr 2.

Recordings representative of this performance tradition include that by Kjell-Inge Stevansson [I don't know if this is still in print - I haven't seen it on CD] and a more recent one by Hakän Rosengren w/ the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra [Sony Classical SK 53276]. The best performance I've heard of it by far is by the principal clarinetist [in 1979] of the Royal Orchestra in Copenhagen, Niels Thomsen. I taped it from a radio broadcast; I don't believe it is available commercially. It is technically superb, as well as interpretationally sound. To be avoided: Stanley Drucker's recording with New York Phil [technically incredible, emotionally completely cold, it has *nothing* to do with Nielsen!] and of course Cahuzac's brave attempt.

This is a follow-up to my post of last week about Aage Oxenvad. Here Nielsen's life and personality will be briefly examined, and Danish performance tradition will be applied to specific instances in the Concerto. I will attempt to present, as nearly as possible in this severely limiting medium [Email - god help us!], those points of interpretation wherein Danish performance differs most radically from non-Scandinavian readings. The musical interpretations are based upon several extended interviews and instructional sessions given in 1979 by Tage Scharff, clarinet professor at the Royal Conservatory. Scharff was a pupil of Oxenvad 1940-44 and is today considered the authoritative voice for Oxenvad's interpretation.

In addition, Nielsen's manuscripts of the Concerto, which are held by the Royal Library, were examined. These manuscripts are ordered and referred to herein as follows:

- MS I: The earliest known version - a full score
- MS II: Oxenvad's solo part, with his own markings and written notes
- MS III: The final manuscript score, prepared for the engraver

With the manuscripts is also some correspondence between N and O. The discrepancies between the manuscripts and the published version deal mostly with articulation, specifically slurring patterns; N. left most of these out of his earliest copies. The one blatant printer's error [everyone mark this in your music!!!] is on page 9 of the clarinet part, line three, the 21st and 22nd notes [count 'em]. These should both be marked A natural.

In late 1928, Carl Nielsen [1865-1931] wrote his clarinet concerto. The new work proved to be N's final orchestral composition; it was an utterance of a seasoned, accomplished artist [anyone reminded of Mozart and Brahms here?]. It has since established itself as a standard in the clarinetist's repertoire.

Yet a close appraisal of the life and work of Nielsen, and of his musical and aesthetic ideals within the context of the rich and unique Nordic culture, reveals a blatant misunderstanding of the work by most non-Scandinavian performers. Perhaps it is not a misunderstanding, but rather a non-understanding; most clarinetists I think are interpretationally baffled by the piece. The true Nielsen tradition is very much alive today in his pupils and successors. It comprises a beautiful yet harsh, logical yet singular approach to the music. Only such an approach can disclose the essence of the work, and essence which consists of a vigorous declamation of rugged yet elegant optimism.

One of the predominant qualities of N's music is its apparently primitive and rustic constitution. This coarseness emerged directly from his upbringing in circumstances of rural poverty. Torben Meyer, the definitive Nielsen biographer [not available in English], stated:

"When one immerses oneself in the work of Carl Nielsen, one cannot help but notice the strong primitiveness and deep roots which characterize him. A more thorough knowledge of his life and art even more clearly shows that he was not only keenly conscious of his childhood on the island of Funen, but that he frequently returned to the islands and places he had known as a child. ...Not only in his songs, and of course the folk songs in particular, but also in his instrumental music we confront a sound and an outlook on life which testify of their author's plain, rustic origin and way of thinking."

Carl Nielsen was born the son of a poor house painter and village musician. His earliest recollections were of the folk music played by his father. As a teenager he distinguished himself as a violinist and graduated from the Royal Conservatory in 1886. Thereafter he remained at the hub of Denmark's music world, as a conductor, violinist and composer. His compositions include six symphonies, three concertos [violin, flute, clarinet], five string 4tets, several operas, and numerous vocal keyboard, and other chamber works.

Vitality and a continual search for greater potentialities of expression marked Nielsen's final years. During that period, the period of the Clarinet Concerto, his work assumed a demeanor of chamber music in its increased preoccupation with the individual timbres of the instruments. This interest in the instruments as individuals included a new fascination with the classic, heterogeneous woodwind quintet. In 1922, N composed his *Blaeserkvintet*, Op 43, for the Copenhagen Wind Quintet. This chamber music approach carried over into his works for full orchestra; his sixth and last symphony is even subtitled the *Kammersymfoni*; and of course the instrumentation and writing of the clarinet Concerto is chamber in approach; sparse and wide open.

As noted in my previous post, both N and O were essentially peasants; both had "mud on their boots". Oxenvad's performances of the Concerto were rife with the nuances of rubato and with passionate phrasing. It is through the correct application of rubato and phrasing that the performer elucidates N's intentions regarding motivic relationships, intervallic significance, musical conflict, peculiarities of the clarinet's character and its dependence upon other instruments in some matters of style. The remainder of this posting will cite specific examples of these musical characteristics from the Concerto and suggest ways of applying rubato and phrasing aberrations to achieve the spirit of the Danish/Nielsen tradition. Though this set does not comprise all of the important elements of the composer's work, it does represent those elements which most readily submit to and require the Oxenvad brand of personal touch. Refer to the clarinet solo part of the concerto as published by Samfundet til Udgivelse af Dansk Musik for correct page, line and measure numbers in the examples.

Melodic motives, and their related rhythmic motives, are fundamental to Nielsen's achievement of unity. Jan Maegaard, an eminent Danish musicologist, states that "it is the intensification of the thematic-motivic work which alone bears the form of the Concerto and defines its sections". The performer must identify and emphasize the most important motives as each occurs and recurs. This is done primarily by the application of rubato, but also by the variance of dynamics and articulation. 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. [rehearsal nr 1] 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. It often appears as only two notes slurred together, a clearly related variant which preserves the long - short articulation and heavy downbeat of the motive. The performer must enunciate every recurrence of this motive. Examples of this motive are found on page 3 line 4; page 4 line 4; page 4 line 12, last measure; page 5 rehearsal numbers 13 and 17; and page 9 line 2. Among others - watch for them. In Oxenvad's manuscript, he often marked phrasing breaks after the second eighth note, as at rehearsal number 13.

A stark contrast to the vigor of the opening motive is the *grazioso* of the secondary theme [page 2 line 7, after the fermata]. The initial 32nd notes are flung, like a handful of rice, even with some rushing into the next measure. The remainder is a straightforward exploration of pure intervals, sans rubato. This motive, or fragments thereof, recurs frequently, in the first cadenza [page 3 line 8 ff.] as well as in the scherzo [rehearsal nrs. 21-22]. It is a rhythmic motive and as such is common throughout the snare drum part as well. By slightly rushing it each time, the motive retains an innocent, almost impetuous flavor.

Other important motives too numerous or complex to treat here abound. They are fascinating melodically but lose their identity in a thoughtless, merely virtuosic reading. [Compare, f.ex., the motive at rehearsal nr 23 with its permutations at nrs 38-41. brilliant writing here!].

It is impossible to discuss N's music without confronting his veneration of the intervals as the very substance of music. Scharff stated that, for Nielsen, "the interval was *everything* Music in which "melody is reduced to little more than a product of complex harmonies, more or less a chance series of the uppermost notes of the chord progression . . . filled hide with disgust." [quoting the musicologist E. Jacobsen] The music of the late Romantics, such as Strauss and Wagner, with their lush and profligate emotional exudations, seemed to N far inferior to the elegant architectures of Palestrina, Bach and Mozart. He determined that the problem lay in the neglect of melody and lack of respect for the inherent beauty of simple intervals. In an essay on Wagner, N. wrote:

"There is only one remedy for this man's musical taste, and that is a cultivation of the most basic intervals. The glutton must be taught to regard a melodic third as a gift of God, a fourth as an experience, and a perfect fifth as the most sublime joy. Careless crapulence undermines one's health. Thus we see how essential it is to maintain an association with the original."

The entire opening section of the Concerto and much of the entire work draw their vigor from the perfect fifth, that "most sublime joy." This perfect interval is a rock, an anchor amid turbulence. N. intended it to be enjoyed and clung to at each opportunity. Other intervals were to N. hierarchically less stable, and at the other end of the scale, as in the augmented 4th, even virulent. It is the performer's *duty* to demonstrate these intervallic qualities in some way. Consider the rhythmically monotonous exposition of intervals in the passage at page 6 line 4 mm 2-5. The performer must determine the intervallic shape of the phrase, that is, which intervals demand more stress. Until the high D at the end of the 2nd measure cited, all of the slurred intervals are [within this context] stable ones. At the descending major 7th [D down to E flat], the clarinetist must brake and linger [unstable interval!!!]. The following diminished fifth and minor 2nd are additional instabilities which must foreshadow the approaching rallentando. The unstable intervals pile up in the rallentando; they must be distorted and strained as malevolent yet fascinating beings.

A characteristic Nielsen melody is one which hovers around a very few notes, with no apparent sense of direction. Such a melody metaphorically is a labyrinth in which the soloist searches fruitlessly for escape. Its point is its *pointlessness*. The labyrinth depends upon interval placement for the little direction it possesses, as is evident at page 5 line 1 mm 3-4 through line 2 mm 1-2. Here, the 1st measure wanders despondently through meaningless intervals, a neurotic repetition of pitches all within a range of only a 5th. But in the next measure, the soloist discovers a lighted tunnel: a major triad, two gifts of God in succession! There is a brighter *piu mosso*; perhaps this is the escape from the labyrinth. But the augmented fourth into the next measure dashes all hope; another blind passageway, another blank wall. The mood darkens, the tempo slackens at that interval. Chromaticism [confusion] abounds as the prisoner resumes his search. The following measures never do find escape, just a heartless change of subject at reh. nr. 14. A performer who treats this passage as a mere technical display misses its essence, for, as N. explained:

"We must first acquire respect for the simplest intervals, live with them, listen to them, learn from them and love them. The composer must do this for the sake of the intervals themselves, the singer for the sake of his song, and the instrumentalist perhaps most of all, because he by way of his technical advantage runs the risk of losing the sense of expressive simplicity."

Nielsen's approach to music was one of conflict and, occasionally, resolution. As was life and survival in the old North, his music is a struggle, a great battle of uncertain outcome [think of the Norse myths and *Götterdämmerung*; Ragnarok] -- Nielsen, according to Scharff, "hated virtuosity" with its often attendant superficiality. He hated the music of Ravel and others of what to him was the shallow and foppish French persuasion. With Nielsen, the performer struggles with the intervals, searches them for their own primordial virility.

Struggle with the notes and intervals is evident *visually* at page 7 line 7 last measure and the first two measures in line 8. The abundance of double flats [quite unnecessary, theoretically] lends an

intentionally forbidding look, and so it must sound. Each note is intense and pushes directly to the next with NO decay or hurrying at all. [Quite the opposite of Drucker's flippant virtuosity here...] Denny, in the Harvard Dictionary of Music, states that the clarinet "lends itself to the expression of love and passion as well as fury and parody." The clarinet works of Brahms, Schumann, Mozart and von Weber all explored the passion and love inherent in the instrument, but it was Nielsen who unveiled the terrible alter ego, the fury and rage of a Mr. Hyde. Nielsen noted that the clarinet "can be at once warm-hearted and completely hysterical, gentle as balm and screaming as a streetcar on poorly lubricated rails". [quoted in Meyer]

He also called the clarinet "an hysterical woman". Scharff drew attention to the interest inherent in ugliness: "There is nothing more dull than a 'cute' girl!" [Scharff's words, **not** mine!!] Harshness and ugliness rage unchecked, there are no cosmetics here! The instrumentation itself is often brutally stark, as in those sections where the soloist is accompanied only by snare drum [top of page 2]. In the earliest manuscript, N. penciled in directly above this particular passage "Wildly confused in the intimate exchange and the snare drum drives it forward" [Nielsen, MS I]. This interpretation demands rhythmic freedom of the clarinetist; the chromatic are rushed, the severe intervals, such as the augmented 4th and augmented 8vs, are lengthened and freely distorted.

The opening of the second cadenza displays some of the most acrimonious passage work in all of Nielsen [page 8 line 7 m 3 and following lines]. The ascending scale, according to Scharff, is the only virtuosic place in the entire piece. The 32nd note E following the second fermata is played as short and accented as possible. The ensuing triplets are "satanically slow," to quote Scharff, like "hammer blows"; the slurred triplets are *sempre con forza* with a *molto accelerando e crescendo* into the low B flat [3rd note from the end of line 8]. In MS III, there is a luftpause with a fermata indicated after this first B flat. The pause is noticeably long, and the following triplets continue the acceleration where it was left, though with much more accent and anger [agitato...]. The fermata in line 9 is brief; the following two 32nd notes are in the same tempo as those preceding the fermata, with identical articulation and volume. The next 10 notes are calm and reassuring and quite slow, but are interrupted by the two accented notes, played exactly like their predecessors. The volatile exchange continues and intensifies throughout the cadenza [into page 9], it ends w/ the clarinet's lowest note repeated rapidly and percussively before easing into a placid *adagio*.

To the aggressive austerities which abound are added several welcome stretches of repose. These contrasting sections are as limpid as the others are severe. No example is necessary; they are presented with simplicity and directness, and rely upon the power of the intervals for their sustenance.

Nielsen's writing occasionally discloses his orientation as a violinist. He admired the unaccompanied works for string by Bach and patterned his counterpoint for monophonic instruments after that ideal. The first cadenza contains a cello-like passage which behaves as such a passage in Bach might [page 3 line 6 after the first quarter note]. The low G is a pedal point; together with the note which follows each G, it creates an independent voice. That Nielsen was thinking in two voices here is confirmed by the notation used in MS I. In the MS, the first two notes have the stems down, the next two have stems up, the next two down, etc. etc. Independent voices....

Other passages are found in the work which more closely resemble violin music than clarinet music. In such instances, the clarinetist music phrase as a violinist would, with long bowings and time allowed to cross strings in the very large leaps [as on page 2 line 6 last measure - note the peculiar notation here!]

A glance through my study copy of this Concerto, into which Scharff's directions, metaphors and expletives have been copied, emphasizes the highly emotional character of the work. I read: "ugly! manic-depressive, improvisational, contemplative, satanic, innocently, hanging in the air, frantic, searching, square, light and shadow, disappointed, struggle, mercilessly, caress, flow, bite in!, pale,

knife - - raw!, shining . . ." This truly is music not for a clarinetist, but for a *musician* who also happens to be a master clarinetist.

And that describes Aage Oxenvad, though his facility was no match for the blazing pyrotechnics of the French. Nor did he strive for such. To him the need for musical effect transcended any need for rapid-fire, pre-programmed accuracy. Scharff said that Oxenvad himself professed an accuracy rate of about 80 percent for the notes in the Concerto. Yet the intense emotional outpouring was apparently overwhelming. Any performance lacking this hones and earthy commitment, without "mud on the boots," is merely a cursory technical display, without meaning.

Anyone interested in some deeper musicology on this may Email me directly and I will send documents in which I have measure-by-measure noted all of the discrepancies between the published solo part and the three manuscripts. I have not done this for the full score, only for the clarinet part.

Also, some of you who have performed this have probably been inconvenienced [or at least your drummer has been] by trying to read the drum part from the piano reduction. I would be happy to send photocopies [via fax or snailmail] of the snare drum part from the orchestra parts. It is more legible and more complete. Send fax nr and/or postal address.

A full bibliography for this essay is also available.

I hope all of this is useful to some of you.

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