# GIL SHAHAM PERFORMS BEETHOVEN'S VIOLIN CONCERTO

**4 & 5 JULY 2026**

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Emirates
Principal Partner

# SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

**PATRON** Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall.

## WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS CONCERT

Expect to enjoy yourself! Maybe your heart will beat a little faster. Maybe your hair will stand on end. It's hard to predict or describe how the vast sound of a symphony orchestra will affect each of us. Just bring an open mind and engage with the music – close your eyes, watch the conductor and the musicians, or just sit back and let the music take you away.

**When do I clap?**

Good question. Most pieces of music are broken up into different movements – usually, people only clap at the end of a piece, so there will be silent pauses between movements. On the next page you will see how many movements the pieces in this concert have, and the duration of each piece. But the simplest thing is to wait until the conductor turns around – or when everyone else starts applauding.

The conductor may leave the stage and come back on a few times, and acknowledge the different sections of the orchestra. You can keep clapping as long as you want to – and feel free to cheer and stomp your feet if you really enjoyed the concert!

**Can I take photos or videos?**

You can take photos and videos on your phone during the applause at the end of a piece of music. **Please switch your phone to silent, make sure the flash is off and dim the brightness of your screen so you don't distract other audience members**. And if you share it to your socials, tag us in your posts! We love seeing what people have captured.

Please leave professional and semi-professional camera gear at home and limit yourself to a phone camera inside the venue.

**What happens at interval?**

The interval will begin when the conductor leaves the stage and the lights go to their full brightness. You can choose to stay in your seat and wait, go to the bathroom, walk around or purchase food or drink from one of the foyer bars.

An announcement will play through the speaker system 10 minutes, 5 minutes and 1 minute before the concert resumes.

2026 CONCERT SEASON

# GIL SHAHAM PERFORMS BEETHOVEN'S VIOLIN CONCERTO

WITH DAVID ROBERTSON

**David Robertson** conductor

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**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)**
**Violin Concerto in D major, Op.61 (1806)**
I. Allegro ma non troppo
II. Larghetto
III. Rondo. Allegro

**Gil Shaham** violin

INTERVAL

**CARL NIELSEN** (1865–1931)
**Symphony No.4, Op.29, FS76, *The Inextinguishable*** (1916)
I. Allegro –
II. Poco allegretto –
III. Poco adagio quasi andante –
IV. Allegro

**Saturday 4 July, 7pm**
**Sunday 5 July, 2pm**

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

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**Pre-concert talk**

By Noah Lawrence in the Northern Foyer at 6.15pm on Saturday, and at 1.15pm on the Lounge Level on Sunday.

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**Estimated durations**

Beethoven – 45 minutes
Interval – 20 minutes
Nielsen – 40 minutes

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**Cover image**

Gil Shaham
Photo by Chris Lee

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**ABC Classic**

Saturday's concert will be recorded for broadcast on 4 August at 1pm, and streaming online.

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We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land and water on which we work and perform. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

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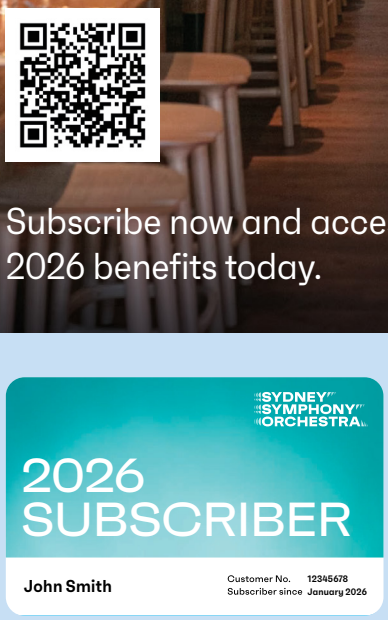


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SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA | Emirates Principal Partner

# YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN** (1770–1827)
**Violin Concerto in D major, Op.61** (1806)

Detail from a c.1804 portrait of Beethoven by German artist Joseph Willibrord Mähler (1778–1860). Source: Archiv für Kunst und Geschichte, Berlin/Wikimedia Commons.

As in the Eroica Symphony and the first Razumovsky Quartet, Beethoven expanded the form and range of the violin concerto in this work, a massive precursor to the epic concertos of Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and others. Playing for over 40 minutes, it remains a three-movement work with a substantive, fast first movement kicked off by distant drum beats, a deeply lyrical slow movement that morphs into a boisterous rondo finale.

It appeared in 1806, the year that saw the abdication of the last Holy Roman Emperor, the end of the Lewis and Clarke Expedition in North America and the arrival of Captain Bligh as Governor of New South Wales.

Contemporary music included Carl Maria von Weber's Concertino for Horn and Strings, Carl Czerny's Concert Variations on a theme by Krumpholz, and Étienne Méhul's *Uthal*.

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**CARL NIELSEN** (1865–1931)
**Symphony No.4, Op.29, FS76, *The Inextinguishable*** (1916)

1908 photo of Carl Nielsen by Georg Lindstrøm (1866–1923). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The composer write that 'Life is unquenchable and inextinguishable; yesterday, today and tomorrow, life was, is, and will be in struggle, conflict, procreation and destruction; and everything returns.' His Fourth Symphony celebrates existence in all its confused alarms and moments of passion, but does so in a 30-something-minute work of four movements (though linked) that more or less follow classical symphonic design.

It appeared in 1916, the year that saw Bulgaria declare war on Romania, the first birth control clinic in the United States and the first students entered the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

Contemporary music included Debussy's Sonata for flute, viola and harp, Stravinsky's *Renard* and Granados's opera *Goyescas*.

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

**DAVID ROBERTSON** conductor

David Robertson – conductor, artist, composer, thinker, American musical visionary – occupies the most prominent podiums in orchestral and new music, and opera.

He is a champion of contemporary composers, and an ingenious programmer. Robertson has served in numerous leadership positions, including Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, a transformative 13-year tenure as St. Louis Symphony Orchestra Music Director, with Orchestre National de Lyon, BBC Symphony Orchestra, and, as protégé of Pierre Boulez, Ensemble InterContemporain.

In the 2024-25 season, Robertson celebrated the Boulez Centennial on four musical occasions, with The Juilliard Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, at the Aspen Music Festival and Lucerne Festival. He appears with the world's great orchestras such as those of New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Cleveland; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Wiener Philharmoniker, Berliner Philharmoniker, Leipzig Gewandhausorchester; and major ensembles and festivals on five continents.

Since his 1996 Metropolitan Opera debut, Robertson has conducted a breathtaking range of Met projects, including the 2019 production premiere of *Porgy and Bess*, winning the Grammy Award, Best Opera Recording. In 2022, he conducted its Met revival, and made his Rome Opera debut.

In the 2025-26 season, he returns to the St. Louis and Sydney Symphony Orchestras, to the New York Philharmonic, the National Symphony Orchestra, HR-Sinfonieorchester, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic, to the orchestras of Dallas, Leipzig, and Vancouver, and will conduct in Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan.

Robertson is The Juilliard School's Director of Conducting Studies, Distinguished Visiting Faculty, and serves on the Tianjin Juilliard Advisory Council.

He concludes his three-year term this season as the inaugural Utah Symphony and Opera's Creative Partner.

Robertson is a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of France.

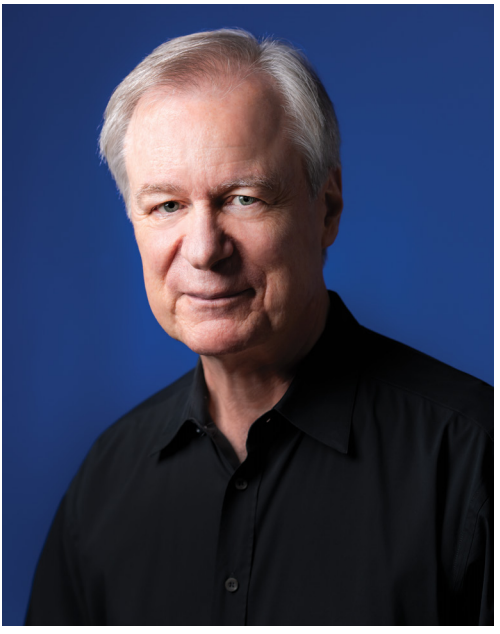

Photo by Chris Lee

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

**GIL SHAHAM** violin

Gil Shaham is one of the foremost violinists of our time; his flawless technique combined with his inimitable warmth and generosity of spirit has solidified his renown as an American master. The Grammy Award-winner, also named *Musical America's* Instrumentalist of the Year, is sought after throughout the world for concerto appearances with leading orchestras and conductors, and regularly gives recitals and appears with ensembles on the world's great concert stages and at the most prestigious festivals.

Highlights of recent years include the acclaimed recording and performances of JS Bach's complete sonatas and partitas for solo violin. In the coming seasons in addition to championing these solo works he will join his long-time duo partner, pianist Akira Eguchi, in recitals throughout North America, Europe, and Asia.

Appearances with orchestra regularly include the Berlin Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Israel Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Orchestre de Paris and San Francisco Symphony as well as multi-year residencies with the Orchestras of Montreal, Stuttgart and Singapore. With orchestra, Mr. Shaham continues his exploration of Violin Concertos of the 1930s, including the works of Barber, Bartok, Berg, Korngold, Prokofiev, among many others.

Mr. Shaham has more than two dozen concerto and solo CDs to his name, earning multiple Grammys, a Grand Prix du Disque, Diapason d'Or, and *Gramophone* Editor's Choice. Many of these recordings appear on Canary Classics, the label he founded in 2004. His CDs include *1930s Violin Concertos, Virtuoso Violin Works,* Elgar's Violin Concerto, *Hebrew Melodies, The Butterfly Lovers* and many more. His most recent recording in the series, 1930s Violin Concertos Vol.2, including Prokofiev's Violin Concerto and Bartok's Violin Concerto No.2, was nominated for a Grammy Award. He released a recording of Beethoven and Brahms Concertos with The Knights in 2020.

Mr. Shaham was born in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, in 1971. He moved with his parents to Israel, where he began violin studies with Samuel Bernstein of the Rubin Academy of Music at the age of seven, receiving annual scholarships from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. In 1981, he made debuts with the Jerusalem Symphony and the Israel Philharmonic and the following year, took the first prize in Israel's Claremont Competition. He then became a scholarship student at Juilliard and also studied at Columbia University.

Gil Shaham was awarded an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1990, and in 2008 he received the coveted Avery Fisher Prize. In 2012, he was named Instrumentalist of the Year by *Musical America*. He plays the 1699 "Countess Polignac" Stradivarius and performs on an Antonio Stradivari violin, Cremona c.1719, with the assistance of Rare Violins In Consortium, Artists and Benefactors Collaborative. He lives in New York City with his wife, violinist Adele Anthony, and their three children.

Photo by Chris Lee

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABOUT BEETHOVEN

In the late eighteenth century Germany was a loose grouping of small principalities. The city of Bonn was the seat of the Archbishop Elector of Cologne and Beethoven was born here in 1770. His grandfather was a chief musician in the Elector's household; his father Johann was also a musician employed there. Johann was a violent alcoholic, and family life was far from happy, but young Ludwig nonetheless showed early promise as a musician and soon joined the Archbishop's retinue.

Beethoven almost certainly met Mozart briefly in Vienna in 1787, but in 1792 returned to that city to study with Joseph Haydn. They didn't get on. Late in life, Haydn was suddenly enjoying superstar status throughout Europe. Beethoven could be extremely rude and arrogant and felt that Haydn wasn't paying him enough attention.

Beethoven's status in Vienna was helped by the relative ease with which he was accepted into aristocratic circles. This is partly because he allowed people to think that the 'van' in his name meant he himself was noble (in German, 'von' indicates nobility), and he allowed a rumour to circulate that he was the illegitimate son of the King of Prussia! But it was mostly about the music, and a group of Viennese nobles supported him for the rest of his life (despite appallingly bad behaviour on occasions).

From the later 1790s he had been aware of the deterioration of his hearing, and by the early years of the new century his deafness caused him gradually to retreat from society. His was also chronically unlucky in love. This, along with his deafness, led him to the point of suicide and the heroic resolution to carry on which is documented in a kind of will he wrote at Heiligenstadt, his favourite holiday village, in the summer of 1802. The crisis launched his middle or 'heroic' period.

In May 1809 Napoleon's armies attacked Vienna and bombarded it with considerable violence. Beethoven took shelter with his brother Caspar Carl and his wife Johanna and to protect what was left of his hearing hid with pillows over his ears in the cellar. He wrote to his publisher: 'What a destructive, disorderly life I see and hear around me: nothing but drums, cannons and human misery in every form'. Despite his misery, Beethoven managed to work.

Beethoven's deafness was only part of the chronic ill-health which dogged him for most of his life, but it certainly made things worse. He retreated from society, became grumpy and paranoid (occasionally to the point of violence) and despite relative financial security often lived in squalor. His music, though, tells a completely different story. Beethoven's late works encompass a bewildering array of moods and styles.

*Portrait of van Beethoven* (c.1804-05) by German artist Joseph Willibrord Mahler (1778 -1860). Source: Vienna Museum/Wikimedia Commons.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## BEETHOVEN AND VIOLINISTS

Beethoven himself had been a string player when young, but four violinists in particular played important roles in Beethoven's music.

**Ignaz Schuppanzigh** (1776–1830) was the most important quartet leader of the day, responsible for the rise of public performances of chamber music. His regular string quartet, supported for life by Count Razumovsky, functioned almost as Beethoven's personal ensemble and was the testing ground for many of the string quartets.

**George Polgreen Bridgetower** (1778–1860) was the famous mulatto violinist for whom Beethoven composed his Op.47 violin sonata. Possibly a student of Haydn at Eszterháza, he broke into the London musical scene as the 'son of an African prince', and eventually secured the patronage of the Prince of Wales. Bridgetower was introduced to Beethoven on a visit to Vienna and the pair became good friends. Beethoven's 'concertante' sonata was his dazzling tribute to Bridgetower's virtuosity, but a falling out between them deprived Bridgetower of the dedication that surely would have been his. Instead Beethoven honoured French violinist **Rodolphe Kreutzer** (1766–1831), a musician whom he barely knew. (Beethoven would write to Kreutzer once a year but received no replies; Kreutzer never troubled to perform the sonata.)

**Franz Joseph Clement** (1780–1842), an Austrian virtuoso, commissioned the Violin Concerto and gave its first performance. He was renowned for his virtuosity and astonishing memory, and his style was characterised by clarity and elegance. He also enjoyed musical stunts, most famously his trick of playing variations on one string of the violin, held upside down!

Portrait of Ignaz Schuppanzigh, before 1830. Artist unknown.

Portrait of George Bridgetower c.1790, by English painter Henry Edridge (1768–1821).

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABOUT THE VIOLIN CONCERTO

In December 1806, Johann Nepomuk Möser attended a benefit concert which he reviewed for the *Wiener Theaterzeitung*. He wrote that 'the excellent Klement', leader of the orchestra at the Theater an der Wien, 'also played, besides other beautiful pieces, a Violin Concerto by Beethhofen, which on account of its originality and many beautiful parts was received with exceptional applause'. Well, we might say, quite. But Möser went on to note that the 'experts' were unanimous, 'allowing it many beauties, but recognising that its scheme often seems confused and that the unending repetitions of certain commonplace events could easily prove wearisome'. While it was rumoured that the wife of a 20th century virtuoso used quietly to sing 'At last it's over, at last it's over' to the tune of the finale, it is still hard to imagine how the critics back then got it so wrong and why there was only one other documented performance during Beethoven's life. (It was not until Joseph Joachim took the piece up in 1844, that it gained any currency at all.) Beethoven himself may have felt that the work had no future, as he made a version for piano and orchestra for the pianist, composer and publisher Muzio Clementi soon after the premiere. Then again, the soloist at the premiere had played one or two lollipops of his own composition (one, according to legend, with the instrument upside down) between the first and second movements, which, though not unusual practice, must have broken the spell. And to be fair, Beethoven, who had been working at tremendous speed in the latter half of 1806, only delivered the score at the last minute leaving little, if any, time for rehearsal. He had finally completed the first version of his opera *Fidelio* and then in quick succession composed the Fourth Symphony, Fourth Piano Concerto, the three 'Razumovsky' string quartets, the Violin Concerto and one or two other things before the end of the year.

We often describe the early years of the nineteenth century as Beethoven's 'heroic decade' as the music includes works such as the *Eroica* and Fifth Symphonies that dramatise seemingly titanic struggles and epic victories on a scale unimagined by previous composers. It is almost too easy to see this as reflecting Beethoven's own heroic response to the deafness which began to hamper his professional and personal life at the time; it may also reflect radical upheavals in European society: Napoleon's armies occupied Vienna three times in the course of the decade. But the period also produced works of great serenity – especially the Fourth Symphony, Fourth Piano Concerto and the Violin Concerto. They remain large-scale works, but their emotional worlds are far from the violent tensions of the odd-numbered symphonies.

Beethoven had toyed with the idea of a Violin Concerto in the early 1790s: there exists a fragmentary first movement in C, and it is possible that one of the Romances in F or G was intended as a slow movement for the uncompleted work. While he may have abandoned the early concerto, by the time of the D major work he had nonetheless composed nine of his ten sonatas for piano and violin. From the 1802 Op.30 set on, he invested these with the same complexity of emotion and expanded scale that we have noted in the symphonies and string quartets. But Beethoven's interest in the concerto medium was, until 1806, primarily in composing works for himself as soloist – the first four piano concertos; after that time his hearing loss made concerto playing too risky.

At one remove, as it were, in this work he could concentrate on the problem of reconciling the principles of symphonic composition – which stress dramatic contention and ultimate integration of contrasting thematic material – and concerto composition, which adds the complication of pitting the individual against the mass.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

In the Violin Concerto Beethoven uses a number of gambits to bring about this synthesis. As in a number of works of this period, the Violin Concerto often makes music out of next to no material: the opening five drum taps, for instance, are a simple reiteration in crotchets of the key note (D). This gesture, seemingly blank at the start, returns several times during the movement, most strikingly when the main material is recapitulated: there the whole orchestra takes up the motif. Similarly, the *larghetto* slow movement has been famously described by Donald Tovey as an example of 'sublime inaction' – nothing *seems* to be happening, though in fact subtle changes and variations of material stop the piece from becoming monotonous. The seemingly improvised transition into the last movement was not so much to preclude Clement from playing something with his teeth or behind his back, but to dramatise the gradual change from that immobility to the release of energy in the finale. Throughout the work Beethoven expertly creates and frustrates our expectations: the soloist only enters after a fully symphonic introduction, and only then with an ornamental flourish, rather than any thematic material. The beautiful second theme is, as Maynard Solomon notes, perfectly composed to exploit the richness of the lowest string of the instrument, but the soloist only gets that theme at the movement's end. This large-scale plotting of the work allowed Beethoven to expand the dimensions of the violin concerto beyond all expectations, and lay the foundation for the great concertos of Brahms and Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius.

**Notes by Gordon Kerry © 2008**

Beethoven's Violin Concerto is scored for 1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings and violin soloist.

It was premiered on 23 December 1806 in the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, with Franz Clement as soloist.

The Sydney Symphony first performed the work in May 1938, with soloist Tossy Spivakovsky conducted by Georg Szell.

Many of the great violinists have performed the work in Sydney, including Szymon Goldberg conducted by Joseph Post (1946), Ricardo Odnoposoff/Post (1951), Wolfgang Schneiderhan/Eugene Goossens (1953), Isaac Stern/Alceo Galliera (1954), Ruggiero Ricci/Kurt Wöss (1957), David Oistrakh/Nicolai Malko (1958), Yehudi Menuhin/Malko (1962), Leonid Kogan/Jascha Horenstein (1962), Igor Oistrakh/Vladimir Cosma (1963), Henryk Szeryng/Fritz Rieger (1968), Ruggiero Ricci/Peter Erős (1969), Stern/Moshe Atzmon (1971), Pinchas Zukerman/Willem van Otterloo (1972), Dene Olding/Gunther Herbig (1987), Gil Shaham/Christopher Seaman (1998), Joshua Bell/Tuomas Hannikainen (1999), Nigel Kennedy play-directing (2008), Renaud Capuçon/Kristjan Järvi (2010), Anne-Sophie Mutter/Vladimir Ashkenazy (2012), James Ehnes/Ashkenazy (2016), Simone Lamsma/Alexander Shelley (2019) and Ehnes/Simone Young (2022).

We also performed the concerto in Tokyo, Nagoya and Nishinomiya on our 2011 International Tour, with Sayaka Shoji conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazy.

Our most recent performances were in 2025, with Harry Bennetts conducted by Umberto Clerici.

**Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson**

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABOUT NIELSEN'S FOURTH SYMPHONY

*Anthony Cane writes:*

Carl Nielsen's private correspondence reveals the extent to which he was devastated by the horrors of the great European war that erupted in 1914, how the conflict influenced the new symphony he began writing in that year: 'I have an idea about a duel between two kettledrums, something about the war.'

Because his native Denmark was not involved in the war, Nielsen had a neutral's clear view of the humanitarian issues, unclouded by what he saw as the diseased loyalties of nationalism. 'It is as if the whole world is disintegrating,' he wrote, 'life seems to be worth nothing…But I do wish for one thing: that this war may not end until the whole of the civilised world lies in ruins! Now we must go to the bitter end!…This must never happen again…'

He seems to be saying that only through destruction of the old order – a total 'Götterdämmerung' as it were – could humanity be resurrected, purified, from its ashes. And, in terms of his new symphony, that there is implicit in evolution an 'elemental will to life' which ensures the survival of life in the face of almost any catastrophe. This was the pantheistic outlook of a man of some 50 summers, a man of the soil from the rural island of Funen who never ceased to wonder at the vast panoply of life in all its forms, all constantly struggling for existence yet all, in the last resort, protected by some master-plan of evolution.

Nielsen expressed this 'elemental will to life' in the title of his symphony, *The Inextinguishable*. He explained it in a brief published note: 'Life is unquenchable and inextinguishable; yesterday, today and tomorrow, life was, is, and will be in struggle, conflict, procreation and destruction; and everything returns.' And he argued that music, of all the arts, was peculiarly suited to the direct expression of such a concept: 'Music *is* life and, like life, inextinguishable.'

1908 photo of Carl Nielsen by Georg Lindstrøm (1866–1923). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

If Nielsen's previous symphony, the *Sinfonia espansiva*, was the apotheosis of joy in living and the culmination of the untroubled optimism of his first three symphonies, the *Inextinguishable* introduces a new note of elemental conflict which would persist through this and both his subsequent symphonies, the mighty Fifth and the enigmatic *Sinfonia semplice*. Where the Third Symphony had at last silenced all criticism of his music at home, the Fourth was to make the first, albeit limited, breakthrough in the international arena, with performances in Stockholm, Warsaw, London, Bournemouth, Paris and St Louis (though true international recognition of Nielsen, alongside his contemporary Sibelius, as one of the great symphonic composers of the 20th century would not come until the 1950s).

In the Fourth, Nielsen significantly advances his characteristic 'organic' style of composition – music growing out of itself during the process of composition – to the extent that the four movements, although distinct in themselves, are not self-sufficient and are linked into a continuous whole.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

Nielsen gave his symphony a title but not a program. The work stands as music, not on his published explanation of the title. Indeed, perhaps regretting his earlier efforts at putting his ideas into words, he once subsequently told an interviewer that this title and those of his two immediately preceding symphonies, *The Four Temperaments* and *Espansiva,* 'were actually just different names for the same thing.' In other words, a generalised faith in the human spirit, not programmatic ideas.

Unlike any of his preceding symphonies, the *Inextinguishable* begins with violence. And there will be more before it ends. In the seething turmoil of the opening, there is already conflict between the winds and strings, while the timpani hammer out a traditionally 'diabolic' tritone (the interval of an augmented fourth). As the chaos subsides, clarinets introduce a serenely pastoral-sounding melody which will ultimately prove the vehicle for achieving order out of the opening chaos, though it seems an unlikely prospect on its first appearance, in the key of A major and somewhat naively marked *espressivo*. This is the only occasion throughout the symphony's increasingly strenuous journey where the theme is allowed the luxury of being expressive.

The theme returns briefly, and assertively, in the recapitulation, after a big and turbulent development section. It is now in E major, which will prove to be the key symbolising the principle of evolution and the inextinguishability of the will for life. But the achievement is short-lived and the movement gives way to a pair of central movements which take us away from war to a realm of relative peace. The *Allegretto,* in the key of G, is a delicate intermezzo in which the winds seem to foreshadow the delights of Nielsen's much-loved Wind Quintet of 1922. But the strings, anxious to press on to the key of E, eventually break in with great intensity and establish the slow movement, *Poco adagio,* on a plateau which is, indeed, E major, with a melody on solo violin both beautiful and unsentimental. It builds to a climax, supported powerfully by trumpets and drums. But though this is the right key, it is not the right melody (the originally demure second subject of the first movement), and the music fades into limbo.

On a sudden crescendo the violins leap into action and launch the finale purposefully in A major. But there are disruptions, dissonances: further conflict must precede the eventual resolution. A ferocious battle breaks out between two sets of timpani, hurling diabolic tritones at each other from opposite sides of the orchestra. Just as the cross confounds the devil, so intervals of the perfect fourth and fifth combat the so-called 'devil in music'. Thus Nielsen's orchestra overcomes the crisis and the first-movement theme is freed to charge on, with ever-increasing intensity and momentum, to its destiny of unchallenged supremacy in E major.

At the same time as he was composing this cataclysmic symphony, Nielsen was also working on a collection of simple song-settings drawn from popular Danish poetry, in collaboration with his friend Thomas Laub. Nielsen has always been loved by the great Danish public more for his unpretentious Danish songs than for the symphonies which have secured his fame abroad. Ironically, his friend Laub likewise: he declared openly after hearing the Fourth Symphony when it appeared in 1916: 'Your music is hellish, and I will not go to Hell!'

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## NIELSEN AND THE LIFE FORCE

*Anthony Cane further examines the social and spiritual background to Carl Nielsen's music.*

With a mixture of surprise and delight, Defence Minister Klaus Berntsen recognised the tune the band was playing as he reviewed the Copenhagen troops. It was a march composed for him years previously, as chairman of the Højby Rifle Club on the rural island of Funen, by his friend Niels Jørgensen, a painter by trade who played violin and cornet at social events all over the island. The military band arrangement of the march, played for the first time that day, was by none other than Niels Jørgensen's son (whose surname, according to contemporary custom, identified him as 'Niels' son') – the rising young conductor and composer Carl Nielsen.

Nielsen's almost laconic mention of the occasion in his remarkable memoirs, *My Childhood on Funen,* scarcely conceals his pleasure in this act of homage: 'This little composition reveals real talent... My father's old friend enjoyed hearing the familiar strains of his youth, and was much moved.' Thus Nielsen honoured not only his aging father and his father's friend, but also acknowledged that he found in Berntsen (who was later to become Prime Minister) a source of inspiration for his own personal and spiritual life.

Berntsen had been a teacher, who spoke from time to time in the parish hall. There Nielsen discovered his 'most extraordinary gift for infusing warmth and feeling into people's minds, now by emotional stories, now by humour, and now by religious and political argument...I loved and admired this man who in my youth stirred my mental life...by his whole personality and by the remarkable blend of seriousness and humour, beauty and tolerance, life and warmth, which animated the man.'

This could have been a description of Nielsen himself. The people in Nielsen's life were ever a source of spiritual sustenance. There was Kresten Hendriksen, a farmer of Nørre-Lyndelse, for whom Nielsen as a boy herded cows one summer. Though the work was demanding, any shortcomings never drew complaints – only quiet encouragement to do better next time. The man's whole nature was 'gentleness, thoughtfulness and religious devotion itself'. In his memoirs, Nielsen wondered why, in the six months he worked for Hendriksen, he was filled with a 'strange desire for something higher'.

Nielsen had a country man's clear-sightedness. He was sensitive to those around him, even animals, such as the noble local farm-horse Samson, whom he saw as the epitome of strength and steadfastness. He saw beauty in the tragic accident of Samson's broken leg – a pantheistic vision of life, vibrant and indestructible, as the injured horse stood, apparently unconcerned, while a gun was fetched to end his suffering: 'The whole world was wonderfully beautiful: the swallows flitted happily to and fro, and their young screamed for joy in the nests each time they were fed.'

Carl Nielsen's spiritual life both embraced and transcended conventional religion. The church was part of life, no more nor less than farm work, family, village festivities, music and poverty. The practitioners of religion were men like any others, equally demonstrating the virtues and foibles, the goodness and Godliness, of all humanity's creatures. Most loved was the clergyman Briand, who never forgot to bring small gifts to brighten the family Christmas tree.

There was the inept schoolmaster, responsible for seeing to the music in church. He led the singing of one hymn in his lowest register, in an indeterminate key. But he made reckless and cumulative upward modulations in every verse so that after three or four verses he was some 12 to 15 notes too high and could go no further. As Nielsen recalled: 'He frowned, paused, swallowed deeply so we saw his Adam's apple slide up and down, and started afresh with the very deepest note he was capable of producing.' (Was this, perhaps, the unacknowledged inspiration of the progressive tonality which was to become Nielsen's symphonic hallmark?)

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

Just as the church for Nielsen was part of life, so was music. In fact, music *was* life. As he prefaced his Fourth Symphony, composed during the grim years of World War I, 'Music is life and, like life, inextinguishable.' A vital energy, an irresistible life-force, imbues his music, whether it be in an explosive outburst as at the beginning of the Fourth Symphony, or in the striding, carefree swagger of the finale of the Third, the battle for survival against a destructive side-drum in the Fifth, or the joy of tranquil rusticity in the cantata *Springtime on Funen*.

Nielsen's faith in people as the living expression of a spiritual truth is revealed in his curiosity about human character (Symphony No. 2, *The Four Temperaments*) and in the supremely personal works composed near the end of his life for five special friends who comprised the Copenhagen Wind Quintet. These works included the gracefully Mozartian, yet hearty and good-humoured, Wind Quintet itself, and two concertos (all that he wrote of an intended set of five). Each concerto was composed as a musical portrait of its dedicatee – the Flute Concerto, inspired by the endearingly Gallic elegance of Holger Gilbert Jespersen, and the angry Clarinet Concerto composed for Aage Oxenvad. Claiming the Clarinet Concerto as the finest since Mozart's masterpiece, Robert Simpson avers that 'the problems it raises will have powerful significance while there is trouble in the world'.

So clear-eyed and open-hearted is Nielsen's invigorating First Symphony that conductors habitually ignore it in favour of his more complex, later works; likewise the delectably sunny – and therefore usually snubbed – Violin Concerto. His enigmatic final symphony (the Sixth, composed under the shadow of an eventually fatal heart condition) is generally ignored, on the other hand, for its apparent bitterness and disillusionment, but it nevertheless works a spell of compelling power.

So broad was Nielsen's love of life and humankind that in his two operas (*Saul and David* and *Masquerade*) he could deal as readily on one hand with the Old Testament struggle between an aging king and the youthful conqueror of Goliath, as on the other hand, the generation gap reflected in an effervescent comedy of society and masked balls.

Throughout Nielsen's music runs a thread of humanity and life-affirmation – a spiritual view of the world which acknowledges religion without directly springing from it. For Nielsen, the spiritual life was to be found all around him.

**Notes by Anthony Cane © 2002 (Nielsen Symphony) © 1998 (Nielsen article)**

Nielsen's Fourth Symphony is scored for 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 3 oboes, 3 clarinets and 3 bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon); 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; 2 sets of timpani and strings.

It was premiered in Copenhagen on 1 February, 1916, with Nielsen conducting the Music Society Orchestra.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra gave the first Australian performance of the symphony on 30 August 1952, conducted by Joseph Post.

It has not been heard very often since, with the only other performances since then led by Leif Segerstam (1979), Hiroyuki Iwaki (1987) and David Robertson (2003), in the first concerts he ever conducted with the Sydney Symphony.

Our most recent performances were in 2019, in the concert marking the retirement of our Principal Trumpet Paul Goodchild, led by Jessica Cottis.

**Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson**

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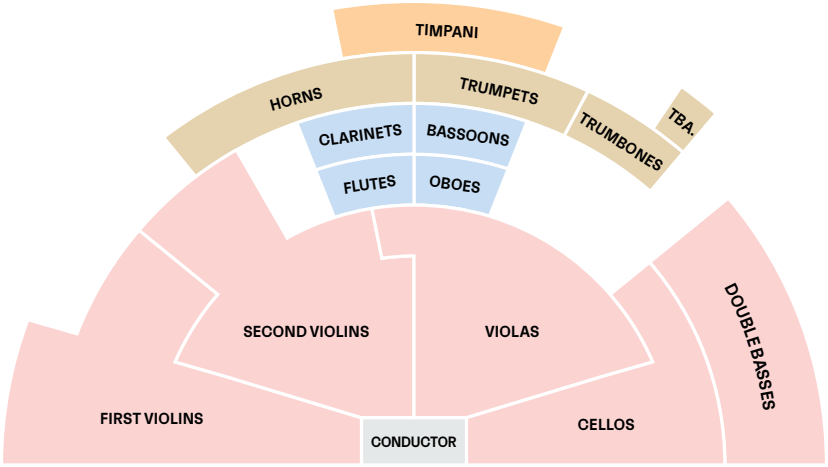


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Sercan Danis
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Georges Lentz
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