

# SCANDINAVIAN REVIEW

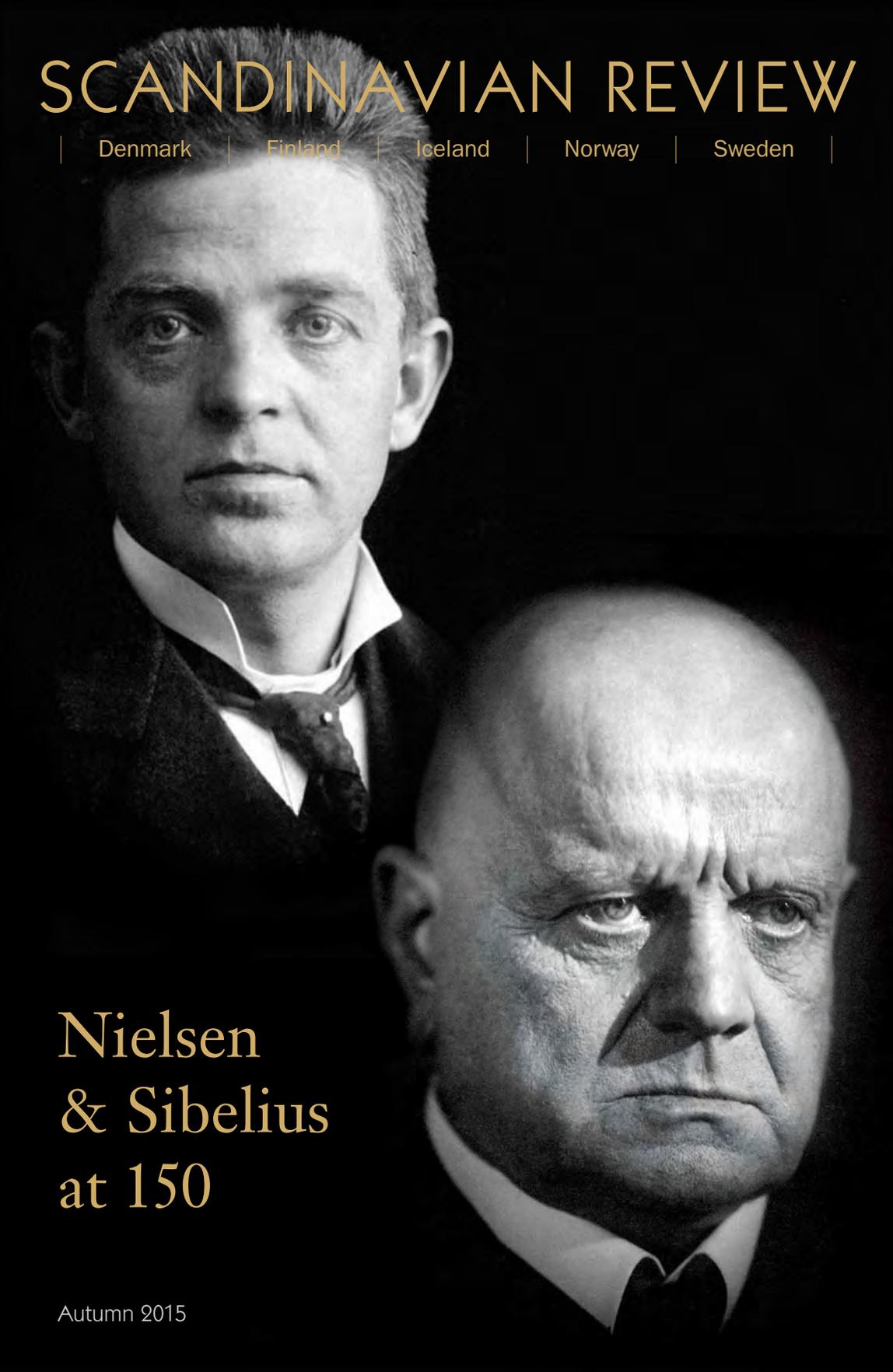
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| Finland

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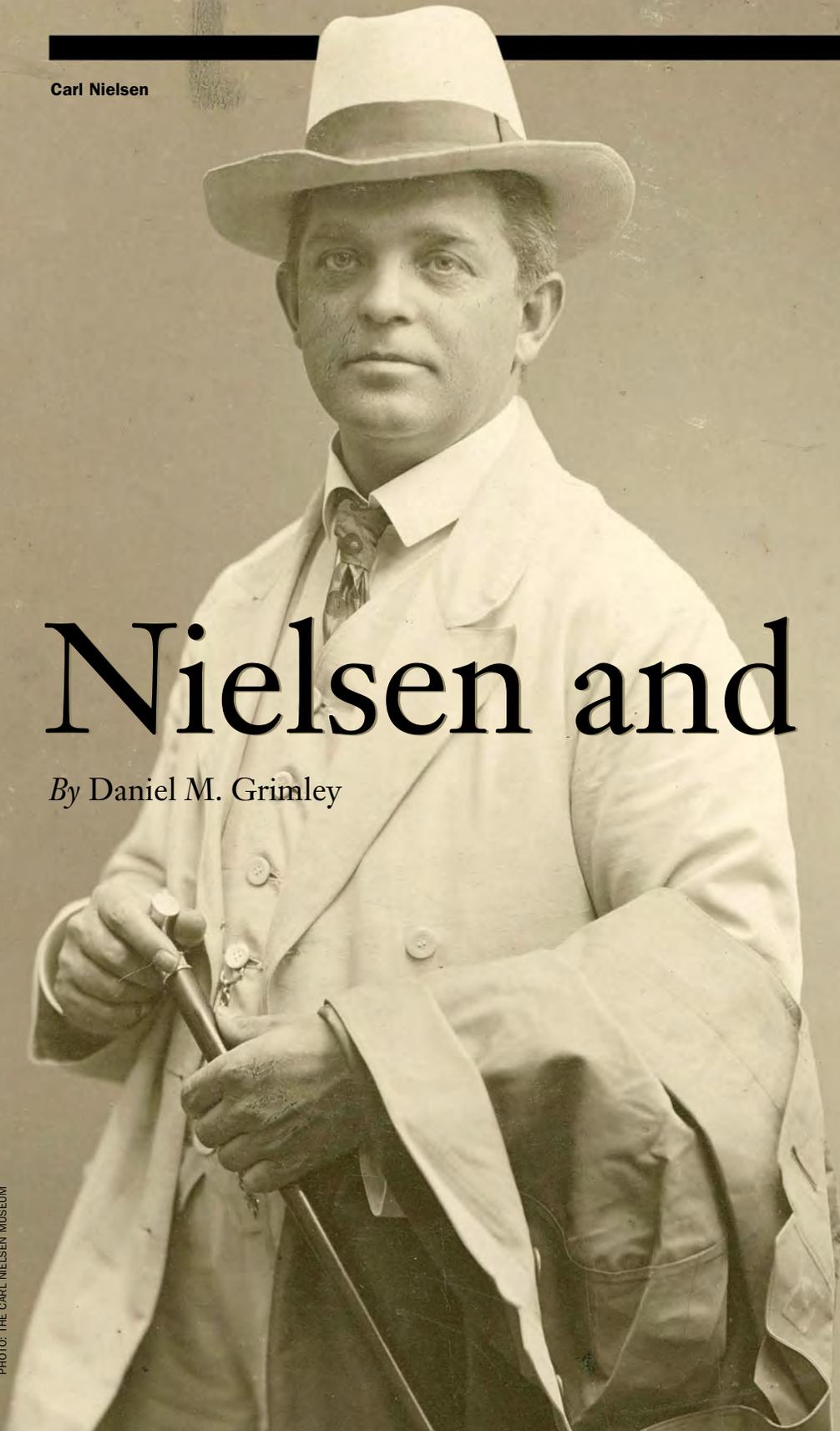
| Sweden

A black and white composite image featuring two portraits. The upper left portrait shows a younger man, Niels Henrik David Nielsen, with short hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark tie. The lower right portrait shows an older man, Jean Sibelius, with a balding head and a serious expression, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark tie. The background is dark.

Nielsen  
& Sibelius  
at 150

Autumn 2015

Carl Nielsen



# Nielsen and

By Daniel M. Grimley

Jean Sibelius

*Together with Norway's  
Edvard Grieg,  
Carl Nielsen and Jean  
Sibelius are the  
foremost composers the  
Nordic countries  
have ever produced.  
The two are very  
different, but they at  
least share the same  
year of birth—  
1865.*

# Sibelius at 150





Both Nielsen (above) and Sibelius excelled in the field of large-scale orchestral music, but were equally adept in other genres.

THERE ARE MANY REASONS TO ADMIRE THE LIVES AND WORKS of the two great Nordic composers, Jean Sibelius and Carl Nielsen, well beyond celebrating the historical coincidence of their anniversary year. Few composers can evoke an equivalent sense of time and place with such vivid intensity. It is difficult to name comparable figures that have been so intimately bound up with the formation and promotion of their countries' musical identities, even if both Nielsen and Sibelius struggled at times with the burden that the role of "national composer" inevitably imposed. Such is their appeal today that school children in Scandinavia still sing their tunes on a regular basis without necessarily realizing the identity of the composer. At the same time, their most difficult and stylistically adventurous works (Sibelius's *Fourth Symphony*, Nielsen's *Sixth*) remain formidable propositions for audiences and performers alike. More remarkable still is the sheer diversity and range of their achievement.

Both Nielsen and Sibelius excelled in the field of large-scale orchestral music, but were equally adept in other genres such as song (Sibelius) and opera (Nielsen). They confronted the same set of aesthetic imperatives: in essence, how to define a distinctive musical voice independent from post-Wagnerian romanticism without wholly embracing the more aggressively radical modernism of Schoenberg and Stravinsky (though they were more sympathetic to such developments than some later writers have believed).

PHOTO: THE CARL NIELSEN MUSEUM



Sibelius (above) and Nielsen first met as students in Berlin in the early 1890s, and remained friends and colleagues for much of their professional careers.

Their strikingly divergent responses to this musical challenge, however, point not only to profound differences of political context and cultural geography, but also to their respective characters and temperaments. Casting even a cursory glance at the music of Sibelius and Nielsen is to acknowledge their role in a remarkable wave of artistic and intellectual talent in the Nordic region—the "breakthrough" decades of Munch, Strindberg, Gallen-Kallela, Schjerfbeck, Lagerlöf, Bohr, and others—and to signal their essential importance for the musicians that followed. But more than anything else it attests to the dazzling richness and creativity of Nordic music: a legacy that remains very much alive today.

Nielsen and Sibelius first met as students in Berlin in the early 1890s, and remained friends and colleagues for much of their professional careers. They nevertheless came from very different backgrounds. Though as a young man in the 1890s he would play a pivotal part in Finland's struggle to escape Russian rule (a goal that was not fully achieved until 1917), Sibelius's origins were surprisingly modest. He was born into a provincial Swedish-speaking family in Hämeenlinna, a small town 60 miles north of the capital. Following the early death of his father, a medical doctor, he was sent to university to read law, but soon enrolled at the Helsinki Music Institute (now renamed the Sibelius Academy), where his contemporaries included the brilliant Italian-German pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni. Sibelius won a postgraduate

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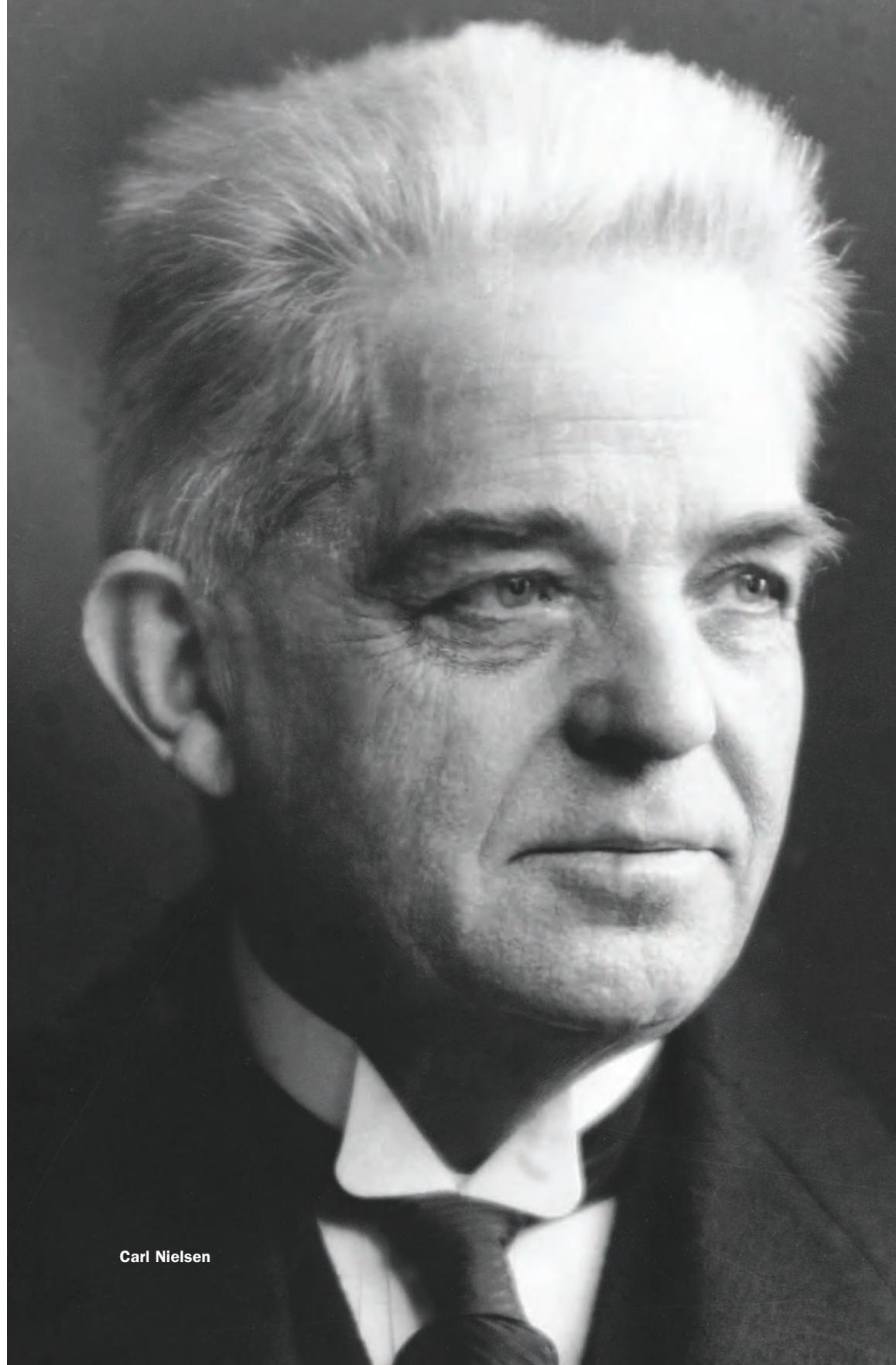
scholarship to Berlin and Vienna, where he attended a compelling performance of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, but his first real breakthrough came with the premiere of his *Kullervo* symphony in 1892, based on a story from the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, and inspired by the recitations of the folk singer Larin Paraske. It was this piece, and the series of works that followed, including the tone poem *Finlandia* (originally written for an evening of theatrical *tableaux vivants*) that definitively established his place as the leading Finnish composer of his generation. When his *First Symphony* was showcased at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900, Sibelius’s (potentially contentious) role as a powerful cultural and political figurehead was seemingly secure.

**C**ARL NIELSEN’S EARLIEST YEARS WERE VERY DIFFERENT from those of his Finnish contemporary. He was the seventh child of twelve, brought up in a working-class agricultural district on the island of Funen in mid-Denmark. Though Nielsen later wrote eulogistically about his upbringing in his 1927 autobiography *My Childhood on Funen*, and recalled to a friend how he used to accompany his father, a village painter and amateur musician, on their trips to perform at weddings and country parties, his family must have experienced periods of genuine hardship. One of Nielsen’s first jobs was at the local brickworks, and he maintained a profound respect for working life throughout his career, celebrating the need for greater social justice in pieces such as the popular song *Jens Vejmand* (“*Jens the Roadmender*”), a setting of a text by the left-wing poet Jeppe Aakjaer that become one of his greatest hits. Nielsen’s exceptional musical ability was soon spotted, however, and he was awarded a scholarship to study at the Royal Danish Conservatory, where his teachers included the venerable Danish composer Niels Gade. After graduating, he traveled to Paris, where he met his wife, the sculptor Anne-Marie Brodersen. Together, they became one of the most path-breaking artistic couples in Danish life—even if their marriage was pushed to breaking point in the mid-1910s. Following the acclaimed premiere of his *First Symphony* in 1894, Nielsen gained a reputation as the young firebrand of Danish music. “I was always a bone of contention,” he later recalled in a newspaper interview. “It was because I wanted to protest against this soft Danish smoothing-over. I wanted stronger rhythms, more advanced harmony.”

If Nielsen struggled with the expectations of the more conservative members of his Copenhagen audience, Sibelius quickly realized the limitations of being perceived as merely a “national figure” of purely local interest (especially in Continental Europe). After the expansive heroism of his *Second*

PHOTO: THE CARL NIELSEN MUSEUM

Carl Nielsen



He could look back confidently on what was the most successful moment of his whole career.

*Symphony*, completed in 1902, Sibelius sought a leaner, more streamlined musical style, initiated in his *Third Symphony* of 1907. This shift of aesthetic emphasis coincided partly with his relocation to a secluded villa, Ainola (named after his wife, Aino), in the woods north of Helsinki, which was partly an attempt to gain creative distance away from the metropolitan distractions of the city. Yet it also paralleled his first visits to the United Kingdom, later to become an important center of artistic interest in his music (Sibelius was an inspirational model for a generation of English composers including Arnold Bax and Ralph Vaughan Williams), and his growing interest in the German musical market. Sibelius's austere, modern-sounding idiom reached its apogee in the *Fourth Symphony* of 1911—a work which some of his contemporary Finnish critics described as “cubist music.” His 1913 commission for the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival, *Luonnotar*, written for the acclaimed Finnish diva Aino Ackté, was no less striking: a setting of the creation myth from the opening chapter of the *Kalevala*, its strange and haunting final pages seemingly unveil a bleak and lifeless new musical world. Despite the apparent inaccessibility of his latest works, Sibelius's international reputation was rising swiftly: in June 1914 he was guest of honor at the Norfolk Music Festival in Connecticut, and was awarded an honorary doctorate at Yale University. As he sailed back home across the Atlantic, he could look back confidently on what was perhaps the most successful professional moment of his whole career.

SIBELIUS'S PROFILE OUTSIDE FINLAND WAS SIGNIFICANTLY enhanced by the championship of superstar conductors such as Arturo Toscanini and Thomas Beecham. Nielsen's work did not enjoy the same level of patronage and his music has been much slower to gain international recognition. He nevertheless achieved his most sustained and influential domestic success in 1906 with the premiere of his second opera, *Maskarade* (*Masquerade*), based on an adaptation of a play by the eighteenth-century Norwegian-Danish playwright Ludvig Holberg. Partly a tale of young love conquering the stuffy social conformism of an older generation, and partly a brilliant series of operatic *mise-en-scenes*, *Maskarade*'s life-affirming vitalism struck an immediate chord with its contemporary audience. In the same year that Sibelius completed his brooding *Fourth Symphony* (1911), Nielsen finished his most outward-looking and optimistic score, the *Sinfonia Espansiva*, whose title alone points to the music's underlying expressive trajectory. Beginning with one of the most memorable openings in all symphonic music—a series of sharp unison chords that accelerate in seemingly unstoppable fashion—the symphony concludes with a broad striding theme that elevates the democratic spirit of community celebrated in both *Maskarade* and his

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Jean Sibelius

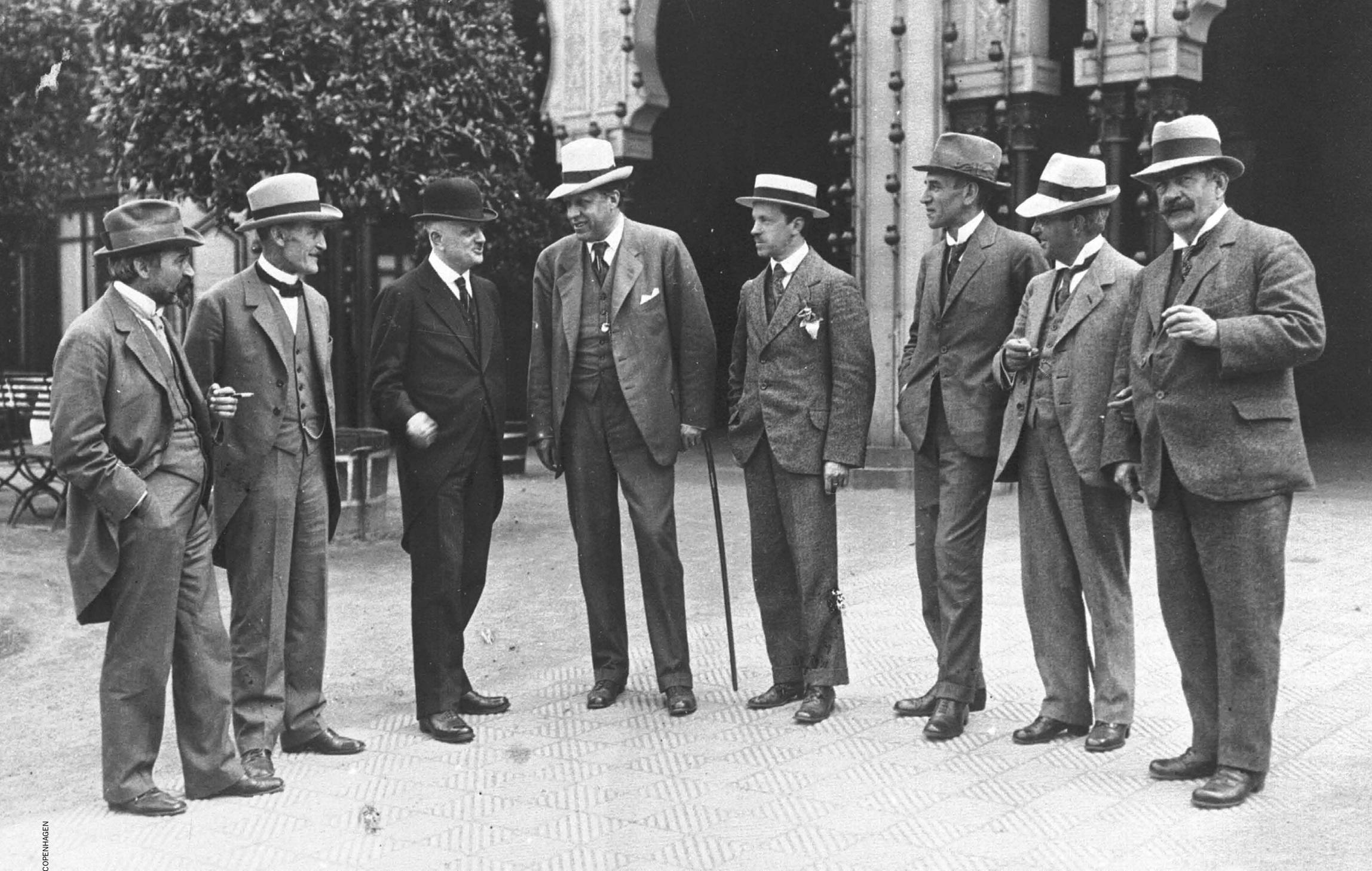


PHOTO: THE ROYAL LIBRARY, COPENHAGEN

**These gentlemen are not gathered to show off gentlemen's late 19th-century hat styles.** Rather, they are some of the elite figures in the history of Nordic music, and they are attending an unspecified concert at an undisclosed venue on June 20, 1919. From left to right,

they are Danish conductor Frederik Schnedler-Petersen, Finnish composer Robert Kajanus, Jean Sibelius, Danish conductor Georg Høeberg, Finnish composer Erkki Melartin, Swedish composer Wilhelm Stenhammer, Carl Nielsen and Norwegian composer Johan Halvorsen.

**I** . . . Or else he simply felt that he had outlived his artistic time and place, a cruel irony.

popular song “Jens Vejmand.”

Each of Nielsen’s final three symphonies, from the *Fourth* (written in 1914–6), to the *Sixth* (1925), concludes with an outwardly positive gesture. But any sense of resolution is increasingly hard-won and contested. Even if Denmark was not directly involved in the upheaval and devastation caused by the First World War, it was impossible to remain isolated from the wider impact of such events. The timpani duel which threatens to destabilize the final movement of Nielsen’s *Fourth* (subtitled *The Inextinguishable*) might be heard as a direct response to the war, although the composer himself disdained such literal programmaticism. Similarly, the side drum cadenza in the Fifth Symphony (premiered in 1922) is directed as though “at all costs to try and stop the progress of the orchestra.” Nielsen’s great British biographer, Robert Simpson, compared the wistful clarinet epilogue that closes the first part of the work to the sound of the last post echoing across a war-torn battlefield.

**F**OR SIBELIUS, THE OUTBREAK OF CONFLICT IN 1914 WRECKED his immediate hopes of building on the success of his American tour and led to a sense of acute isolation. It was followed by the bitter experience of the Finnish civil war in 1918, pitting Bolshevik (Red) forces against nationalists (the so-called White army), a time during which Sibelius and his family were in genuine danger. The differences between the first version of his *Fifth Symphony* (written for his fiftieth birthday celebrations in 1915) and the third and final version (1919) might seem to run counter to this historical narrative, but that would be to misread his music’s increasingly elliptical and telegraphic mode and means of expression. The *Sixth* (1923) is even more restrained, but ultimate compression is reached in the *Seventh* (1924), which stages a Prospero-like farewell to the world within an overall playing time of barely twenty minutes (Sibelius wrote incidental music for Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in 1925). Sibelius struggled with an *Eighth Symphony* for much of the 1930s, but crippling self-criticism (and perhaps the darkening shadows of those events from 1918) meant that he was ultimately unable to sign off the score, and he most likely burned the manuscript. After the premiere of his final tone poem, *Tapiola* (usually heard as an acoustic portrait of the northern forest) by the New York Philharmonic in 1926, no further large-scale works appeared before his death at the age of 91 in 1957. As his biographer Glenda Dawn Goss has suggested, Sibelius perhaps felt that he had already become a monument—stony-faced and silent—during his own lifetime. Or else he simply felt that he had outlived his artistic time and place, a cruel irony given that his music has become one of the richest and most productive sources of inspiration for our current generation of composers.



The Sibelius home north of Helsinki is named Ainola after his wife Aino.

There is little comparative sense of retrospection or withdrawal in Carl Nielsen’s later works. His sudden death in 1931, from heart problems he had first suffered as a young man, left him no time to arrange or “curate” his oeuvre in the same way as Sibelius, or to try and shape his legacy and critical reception. It is wholly characteristic of Nielsen’s inventive spirit, however, that his music from the late 1920s contains some of his most challengingly original scores. His *Sixth Symphony*, written for his sixtieth birthday celebrations in 1925, is misleadingly subtitled *Sinfonia Semplice*. It is, in fact, one of the most difficult scores in the repertoire, and a work that was effectively omitted from the “Nielsen canon” for many years. Though commentators continue to debate its real meaning and significance, the symphony is nevertheless among his most profound and most genial works: childlike, wistful, brutal and sardonic, apparently at the same time. The two late wind concertos, for flute and clarinet, are no less inventive, and are among the finest examples of their genre since Mozart (a composer whom Nielsen greatly admired). In his very final large-scale work, the great organ fantasy *Commotio* (whose title refers both the idea of a “commotion” or great sound, and also the sense of “co-motion,” or counterpoint, that animates much of the piece), Nielsen looked back to the great figures of baroque organ writing in northern Europe: J. S. Bach and his senior colleague Diderik Buxtehude. In its innate feeling for music-architectural space, and the sense of constant harmonic movement that propels the music irresistibly forward, *Commotio* is as fitting a point as any with which to conclude this survey of Nielsen and Sibelius’s works. Their creative reach and imagination extends far beyond the Nordic region, but Denmark and Finland can rightly take immense pride in the spirit of musical originality and independence that they helped to foster. It is a vivid legacy that continues to inspire, enrich and innovate, wherever we hear their works.

**Daniel M. Grimley** is a tutorial fellow in music at Merton College and a senior lecturer in music at University College (both colleges of Oxford University, Oxford, England). He is also associate editor of *The Music Quarterly* and has written books on both Nielsen and Sibelius.

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