

# Symphony No4 *The Inextinguishable*

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

- 1 *Allegro* –
- 2 *Poco allegretto* –
- 3 *Poco adagio quasi andante* –
- 4 *Allegro*

The 'the' is crucial. *The Inextinguishable* was the title Carl Nielsen gave to his Fourth Symphony, but that title is a noun, not an adjective. It's not the Symphony that the composer is describing as 'inextinguishable' – in the same way that Tchaikovsky's Sixth is 'Pathétique' or Beethoven's Third 'heroic'. (Although with the piece's boundless energy, you'd be forgiven for assuming that was the case.)

No, Nielsen intended the Symphony to encapsulate 'that which is inextinguishable' (*Det uudslukkelige* in the original Danish) – namely life itself. And in the process, he created music that is well-nigh unstoppable, overcoming terrifying conflict – graphically conveyed in the Symphony's infamous timpani battle – to emerge with resilience and vigour.

## Global and personal conflict

It's hardly coincidental that Nielsen wrote the Symphony during the dark days of the First World War – he first conceived it in 1914 and completed it at the start of 1916. His native Denmark remained neutral, but Nielsen watched the conflict's events unfolding with horror, writing to a friend: 'It's as if the world is disintegrating... National feeling, that until now was distinguished as something lofty and beautiful, has become a spiritual syphilis... and it grins hideously through empty eye-sockets with dreadful hatred.'

The Symphony's huge arc of conflict and eventual resolution also reflects Nielsen's personal circumstances. He had separated

from his wife, the sculptor Anne Maria Brodersen, in September 1914 following an affair with their children's governess (they got back together only eight years later), and he also found his plans to secure a lucrative, high-profile conducting post in Germany scuppered by the outbreak of the War.

Nevertheless, *The Inextinguishable* is one of Nielsen's most profoundly positive works, celebrating (as he wrote to his wife in May 1914) 'the spirit of life: everything that moves, that wants to live'. But he was keen to stress that his new Symphony wasn't simply *about* life: it *was* life. 'As soon as even a single note sounds in the air,' he wrote in a note on the completed work, 'it is the result of life and movement. For music is life, whereas the other arts only represent and paraphrase life. Life is indomitable and inextinguishable: the struggle, the wrestling, the generation and the wasting away go on today as yesterday, tomorrow as today, and everything returns. Once more: music is life, and like it inextinguishable.'

## The music

Nielsen's Fourth teems with detail, abrupt transitions and raw contrasts, but it nevertheless follows a fairly traditional symphonic plan, even if its four movements run into each other to create a single, unstoppable entity that seemingly can't tolerate being divided by pauses or breaks.

The **first movement** begins with a blazing call to attention, with the timpani making their presence felt right from the start. Rushing strings and fiery brass nevertheless slowly wind down to the movement's second main theme, a lyrical, falling melody introduced sweetly but

innocuously by two clarinets, but which goes on to become the most important theme in the whole Symphony. It's taken up and transfigured in what grows to a huge climax (marked 'glorioso') for the full orchestra, before a mysterious central development section is kicked off by a strange, stuttering line on flutes and violins. When Nielsen returns to the movement's opening material, he cuts things short and jumps quickly to a rerun of the 'glorioso' music, which subsides gradually into the oddly childlike **second movement**, a kind of folksy *scherzo* based around an elegant melody on clarinets and bassoons.

This light-hearted idyll is rudely interrupted, however, by the scream of anguish from the violins that begins the **third movement**, whose tormented melody is accompanied just by single-note thuds from timpani and the rest of the strings in one of the barest textures imaginable. Things warm up with more sensual music for a quintet of string soloists towards the middle of the movement, but its opening theme soon interrupts things again, this time from a wailing woodwind choir.

It sets the scene for the turbulence and struggles of the **fourth movement**, introduced by a rushing passage for strings. The orchestra's second timpani player, who has remained silent until this point, has two violent battles with his colleague across the stage before they join forces to celebrate the return of the first movement's 'glorioso' music in a broad, confident conclusion. Despite all of the work's turmoil and conflict, Nielsen seems to say, life will endure.

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## Conflict and energy

RSNO VIOLIST KATHERINE WREN EXPLAINS HOW NIELSEN'S FOURTH SYMPHONY FEELS FROM THE INSIDE



Elemental, powerful, emotional – Nielsen's *The Inextinguishable* Symphony is all about the unquenchable human spirit. As a teenager I was bowled over by

the power of this music, and when a piece prints itself so indelibly in your memory, it clearly has something very special to say.

I still find the music utterly compelling. Conflict and energy are evident from the opening bars. Even in the more lyrical moments there is always an unsettling undercurrent, for example the repeated-note outburst from the violas near the beginning. With its uneven rhythms, this passage can be one of those 'edge-of-your-seat' moments to play. Yet these moments of tension are interspersed with peaceful, pastoral interludes.

No one can talk about this piece without mentioning the timpani, though. Sitting between those stereophonic timpani on stage is quite something – they're inextinguishable indeed!