

# Violin Concerto

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)



*1 Praeludium: Largo – Allegro cavalleresco*  
*2 Poco adagio – Rondo: Allegretto*  
*scherzando*

It's generally accepted that Carl Nielsen is Denmark's finest composer. But it wasn't until the 1960s, and the championing of his music by conductors including Bernstein and Barbirolli, that his music was even heard much outside his homeland. It's far more firmly established now, of course, but it's still fitting that the 150th anniversary of Nielsen's birth this year (which coincides with the 150th birthday of that other Nordic giant, Sibelius) should provide the opportunity to explore his rugged, lyrical music in more depth.

Nielsen was born into a poor family on the Danish island of Funen, but was nevertheless determined to pursue his musical passions, gaining a scholarship to travel and study music throughout Europe in 1890-91, later taking a post as conductor at the Royal Danish Opera in 1908, and teaching at the Royal Danish Academy of Music from 1916. He even received modest

state support from 1901, in recognition of his musical talents, to allow him more time for composition.

Best known for his six dramatic symphonies (the RSN0 performs the powerful Fourth Symphony, *The Inextinguishable*, later in the season on 30 Apr-2 May), Nielsen also wrote three concertos – for flute, clarinet and, the earliest of the three, the Violin Concerto of 1911.

## A lengthy genesis

Nielsen was a violinist himself, and had played second violin in the orchestra of Copenhagen's Royal Theatre from 1889 to 1905. He'd wanted to write a violin concerto for some time, but did nothing about it until he met the Danish violinist Peder Møller, who had recently returned to Denmark following several years in Paris. Inspired by Møller's playing, Nielsen put his plan into action.

But when it came to composing the work, Nielsen found it a struggle – not least because he set himself such lofty aims. 'It has to be good music and yet always show regard for the development of the solo instrument, putting it in the best possible light,' he wrote. 'The piece must have substance and be popular and dazzling without being superficial. These conflicting elements must and shall meet and form a higher unity.' Nielsen's talk of 'conflicting elements' is right on the button – as we'll see shortly.

He began writing the Concerto in the summer of 1911 in Bergen, Norway, where he'd been invited by Edvard Grieg's widow Nina to spend some time at Troidhaugen, the Norwegian composer's famous lakeside composing retreat. Nielsen had completed the Concerto by December, and it was

premiered on 28 February 1912 – in the same concert as the first performance of his Third Symphony – with Nielsen conducting the Royal Danish Orchestra and Møller as soloist. Critics and audiences received it warmly, and it was performed throughout Europe – in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Paris and Berlin – over the following few years.

### Unity in diversity

There's no getting away from the fact, though, that Nielsen's Violin Concerto is a strange beast. It's charming, affable, shot through with memorable melodies and an elegant neo-Classicism, but it has a somewhat severe, uncompromising beauty, and it juxtaposes disparate themes and moods – those 'conflicting elements' Nielsen himself mentioned – with little attempt to iron out the differences between them. Maybe that's what gives it such a unique place in the violin concerto repertoire.

The Concerto is in either two or four movements, depending on how you look at it. Certainly there are two big movements, separated by a pause, but each of those is itself in two parts, an introspective slow section followed by more assertive, faster material.

### The music

The **first movement** starts with an explosive chord from the orchestra, followed immediately by an intense, serious-sounding violin solo that puts the soloist squarely in the spotlight from the very start. It's full of angst and drama, but is nevertheless just the introduction to the very different musical world of the movement's first main section – a restrained, noble tune on the first violins, soon picked up by the soloist right at the top of his range.

After a few virtuoso flourishes from the violinist, the music seems about to fade to a serene conclusion before the sudden eruption of the first movement's second big section, a stomping *Allegro cavalleresco* (or 'chivalrous Allegro'). The soloist and orchestra share the same propulsive, energetic theme, with a contrasting stuttering, repeated-note melody becoming increasingly prominent as the movement progresses. After a few quieter, more thoughtful interludes, the violinist has a second big solo, based on the movement's main themes, and then leads the orchestra to a bright, affirmative conclusion.

It's back to a quieter, more introspective sound world for the opening of the **second movement**, where the orchestral oboe spells out BACH (as, using German notation conventions, B flat-A-C-B natural) in a winding, melancholy tune soon picked up by the violin soloist in a more decorated version. Again, the music seems about to wind down to stillness, but this time it's the soloist who interrupts things with the cheeky melody of the movement's *scherzo*-like second section. This perky tune returns time and time again, separated by contrasting interludes (sometimes sad, sometimes folksy), before another virtuosic *cadenza* from the soloist takes the theme in unexpectedly serious directions, and a surprisingly low-key ending.

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