

Masks of Satire, or Surrealism Infiltrates the Symphony: An Interpretation of the Humoresque of Nielsen's Symphony No. 6

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The Humoresque of Carl Nielsen's Symphony No. 6 (*Sinfonia semplice*, 1925) is a unique and puzzling movement – disturbingly different from the composer's earlier works. It seems to cry out for an interpretation; indeed, its outlandishness has been observed repeatedly. One cannot agree with the Danish musicologist Jan Maegaard, who simply dismisses the movement as a scherzo that "can hardly be taken as much more than a joke" (Maegaard 1994: 108). Robert Simpson, in his study (Simpson 1979), and especially Jonathan Kramer, composer and theorist, in an extended analytical chapter in Kramer 1994, have devoted considerable attention to the Humoresque. Simpson finds in it "derision" and "bitter humour," "mock-military rhythms" and a "forced cynicism" (Simpson 1979: 124–126), while Jonathan Kramer hears "imaginatively grotesque touches," "gallows humor" and "fascinating *non sequiturs*" in a "wildly chaotic movement" (Kramer 1994: 324, 327, 329), going as far as to claim that this represents musical "post-modernism," albeit composed in 1925 (Kramer 1994)! Both Simpson and Kramer engage in detailed description and analysis, and it has been worthwhile to consult them – in particular, Kramer – without necessarily always agreeing with him.

My goal here is, first, to outline the crucial junctures in the expressive narrative of the Humoresque, and second, to seek out parallelisms and esthetic affinities between the events in the Humoresque and in the music of other composers of Nielsen's time, as well as the visual arts and theater – not so much to search for influences but to clarify the esthetic position of the Humoresque. My approach is essentially style-historical. My comparative-interpretive attitude exemplifies neither a method nor a technique but an intuitive process of expanding the sphere of appreciation of the work.

The Humoresque is based on three sharply contrasting musical ideas. First, there is an introductory, highly fractured, pointillistic orchestral texture, which is immediately followed by a second idea, an atonal, eleven-note clarinet melody that Simpson calls an "ugly, twisted subject" (Simpson

1979: 124), which at once undergoes a short, dense development. Meanwhile the snare drum utters threatening, scolding commentary, creating a sense of conflict. And third, an unambiguous tonal melody in F \sharp major appears, in the clarinet and bassoons, reminiscent of folkloric music, a peasant dance that Simpson calls a "real tune" (Simpson 1979: 125). Even without the intentionally ludicrous, clowning glissando of the trombone – a "yawn of contempt," evoking a sense of absurdity –, the contrast between the modernist passages and the peasant tune creates an extreme expressive incongruity otherwise quite unheard of in Nielsen. (According to Simpson, the term "yawn of contempt" significantly originated with Nielsen himself; see Simpson 1979: 125.) My initial, tentative reaction to the Humoresque was to consider it, indeed, as a kind of musical "Dada." After all, the Dada movement of absurdist, quasi-theatrical performances in Zurich and Berlin flourished only 5 or 6 years before Nielsen's Sixth Symphony and manifested a violent, desperate reaction of the artists against the horror and insanity of the Great War (Hamilton 1972: 365, 378–380), and it seems that Nielsen tended to share such feelings.

It is in the light of his earlier symphonic works that the Humoresque seems so uniquely problematical. In the twenty years from 1902 to 1922 in his symphonies Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5, Carl Nielsen had extended late Romanticism and established an innovative musical language of modal/tonal pitch materials and occasionally strikingly dissonant chromaticism, expressed through neo-classical forms, engaging vigorous contrasts and elaborate thematic transformation. And in Symphony No. 5, especially in the expansive first movement, Nielsen had even created a scenario of particularly "modern" gestures and expressive attitudes decisively remote from 19th-century traditions. In the immediate context of the Fifth Symphony and the other movements of Symphony No. 6, however, the Humoresque represents an alarming departure.

You may recall that the first movement of Symphony No. 6, *Tempo giusto*, begins with tinkling toy instruments and jaunty, "simplistic" (child-

like) opening themes, perhaps implying an air of gentle parody; but later, it gives way to an aggressive *fugato* leading to a deeply felt sense of tragedy, culminating in a terrifying climax. The Humoresque, however, intensifies the sense of parody and creates a radical discontinuity. The playful absurdity of the Humoresque also contrasts sharply with the brooding, amazingly Bartókian, slow, third movement, where Nielsen seems to proclaim a 20th-century main-stream style without yielding to the then current avant-garde “modernisms” (that is, Schoenberg, Berg, Edgar Varèse, and others). The two final symphonic works of Nielsen, the wonderful concertos for the flute (1926) and the clarinet (1928), signify further movement in the direction of gradual consolidation of a significantly new, personal language thoroughly at home in its epoch. The concertos contain highly dramatic moments, colorful contrasts and imaginative transformation of ideas continuing along a path of stylistic development familiar from the Fifth and Sixth symphonies.

The Humoresque opens with two references to the modernist music of his day; but Nielsen does not quote particular compositions, instead, two readily recognizable styles. The introductory pointillism recalls, for instance, the orchestral introduction to the Magic Trick of Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* (First Tableau), while the atonal, “ugly twisted melody” of the clarinet and its immediate contrapuntal continuation recall something like the *Peripetie*, the fourth of the Five Pieces for Orchestra, Opus 16, of Schoenberg.

The pointillism of the Humoresque is clearly not that of Debussy or Ravel but something more acerbic, more provocative and ominous, more Stravinskian in view of the sharp clash between the extreme registers of the piccolo and the bassoon. On the other hand, the clarinet melody represents a surprisingly close stylistic-expressive parallel to the soaring contour of the clarinet passage early in the Schoenberg piece, even though Schoenberg's full-bodied orchestration is dramatically different from the chamber-music transparency of the Humoresque. Nielsen's dissonant contrapuntal continuation of the “twisted” clarinet melody at first leads to near-total chaos, at least in comparison with the composer's usual procedures. Only gradually do the woodwinds discover the sobering possibility

of motion in unison-octaves, or later in parallel thirds, which manages to clarify the texture and prepare the way for a harmonic resolution leading towards a cadence.

The telling factor of the atonal clarinet melody and its contrapuntal continuation is a theoretical sloppiness: the “serial technique” here seems clumsy and inadequate in terms of Schoenbergian practice. Notes are freely repeated before an 11-note series has been completed; efforts at complementation are almost absent; major-minor triads abound. It is a distorted, cumbersome splash of atonality, that is, a deliberately awkward pretense of serialism, in effect a parody (or satire!) which could hardly be taken seriously as an attempt to compose “modernist” atonality. Jonathan Kramer appears to take it seriously, however, for he drags forth the analytic arsenal of serial analysis and set theory, etc. (Kramer 1994: 328–329), thus for the moment at least becoming the butt of Nielsen's “bitter humor.” Nielsen himself clearly does not take it seriously; instead, he wears atonality lightly, only temporarily, as a satirical mask and soon enough abandons it. During the remainder of the Humoresque, as well as in the third and fourth movements of the symphony, serialism clearly plays no role whatsoever. Even in the Humoresque, attention shifts to the peasant tune and the deployment of motivic, developmental procedures. Atonality does not signal a serious or permanent turn of Nielsen towards a more aggressively modernistic style. The Humoresque remains a uniquely experimental scherzo.

It is difficult to find another important 20th-century composer whose work might trace a similar path of stylistic development that is interrupted by a moment of extreme experimentation. Only the fourth, final movement of Jean Sibelius's Symphony No. 4 comes to mind. This begins in typical Sibelian fashion, to be sure, but near the end it includes a developmental passage (from rehearsal letter O to S), where the level of dissonance content rises dangerously, and the density of the contrapuntal texture creates a complexity and harshness that remains unique yet rare for Sibelius. This represents a point of furthest advance of Sibelius towards modernism, after which Symphonies Nos. 5, 6, and 7, together with *Tapiola*, mark a return to his established personal musical path, together with touches of Neo-Classicism.

The Finale of the Fourth Symphony, however, does not reveal any satirical intent.

It is ironic that almost at the same time that Nielsen engaged in his satire of modernism in the Humoresque, in 1925, Arnold Schoenberg composed his Three Satires, Opus 28, for vocal soloists, chamber choir and a small instrumental ensemble. Schoenberg deliberately parodies not only Igor Stravinsky, specifically, but neo-classicism in general and thus presumably all composers attempting to persist in pursuing functional tonality. The work consists of two short *a cappella* choral pieces and a longer third movement, essentially a choral cantata. The music does not sound especially satirical, however, except for the opening choral movement, *Tonal oder Atonal?* The parody is unmistakably clarified only in Schoenberg's text, sung in the vocal parts. But it seems unlikely that either Nielsen or Schoenberg knew of each other's satirical efforts. We know that Nielsen met Schoenberg in 1925 (in Beaulieu, near Nice) and found conversation with him pleasant and rewarding, although we also know that while he thought highly of *Verklärte Nacht*, he did not at all care for Schoenberg's Three Piano Pieces, Opus 11 (Maegaard 1994: 106).

The significance of the "mask" in the Humoresque – as a gesture of disguise, as pretense – deserves further reflection.

Masks appeared widely in the earlier 20th-century in the theater as well as visual arts, in painting and sculpture, serving important expressive functions and conveying "modernist" attitudes. The depiction of African masks by Pablo Picasso's in his 1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* is perhaps one of the best-known but only one of many uses of such masks, as the exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984 amply demonstrated. Masks appear in the sculptures of Constantin Brancusi and Jaques Lipchitz, the drawings of Paul Klee as well as the paintings of George Braque, George Rouault and Edvard Munch, among many others. Indeed, as the exhibition of the paintings of the Flemish artist James Ensor, last year at the MoMA, demonstrated, masks could also be found at the end of the 19th century. Ensor's paintings of human skeletons and figures wearing carnival masks create powerfully expressive, fantastic allegories that

are often admired as precursors of 20th-century expressionism.

In 19th-century opera, masked characters figure prominently for example, in several of Verdi's works (and not only in *Un Ballo in Maschera*), and in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, echoing the turn-of-the-century interest in *commedia dell'arte*. Nielsen's own second opera, *Maskarade* (1906), based on an 18th-century play, appears not to have led the composer to an exploration of early-modernist musical techniques, yet it gained considerable popularity as "the Danish national opera." Through its masks, it created a sense of modernity in that it at least temporarily obliterated outmoded class distinctions on stage and permitted some of the characters to escape their oppressed lives within a rigid society and achieve a degree of personal liberty and sense of *joie de vivre* (Rockwell 1983). Nielsen's Symphony No. 2, "The Four Temperaments" (1902), is also relevant here, because in the realm of purely instrumental music it led the composer, as it were, to put on different musical masks in the different movements by turns phlegmatic or sanguine, choleric or melancholy. In Symphony No. 2, one observes Nielsen's sense of humor, especially as he attempts to distinguish between the "sanguine" and the "phlegmatic" character; in the Humoresque of Symphony No. 6, however, the bizarre juxtaposition of pointillism and atonality to the peasant dance seems to be governed by an air of desperation and mockery. The Humoresque may be said to reflect the composer's "disillusionment with his own lack of international success, and bewilderment at the state of modern music [that] clouded his mood" (Fanning 2001: 892); although the masks render Nielsen's satire of high modernism somewhat disguised or indirect, their clumsiness and grotesqueness in turn lends them an added, bitter intensity.

In any interpretation of Nielsen's esthetic outlook, it is important to acknowledge the contribution made by his wife Anne Marie, an important sculptress and artist in her own right. In spite of their occasionally troubled marriage, it was marriage as a true meeting of minds. Anne Marie played a crucial role in Carl Nielsen's formulation of his "central esthetic preoccupations with movement, clarity, boldness and the essential drives of human nature" (Fanning 2001:

890). But Anne Marie's presence also opens an additional avenue of interpretation of Nielsen's Sixth Symphony's reference to the visual arts. I have already suggested this with my references to masks in modern painting; but it is now necessary to move beyond my preliminary characterization of the Humoresque as "Dada" and to move ahead to Surrealism. The goals of Dada were largely negative, even self-destructive, and the movement quickly disintegrated in the 1920's. But in several ways it was extended and superceded by Surrealism, which quickly spread and grew to include not only poetry but also painting as well as theater and the ballet, even politics.

Surrealism proposed, according to the various Manifesto's and other writings of André Breton and Max Ernst, to create art that would be liberated from the control or censorship of rational, logical thought, and from traditional "esthetic and moral preoccupations." And it proposed to accomplish this essentially through psychic automatism, that is, "automatic writing" (or, "automatic drawing" in the visual arts), even though soon enough this turned out to be more a symbolic or ideological program rather than a practical method for creating art. Nevertheless, Surrealism emphasized creative spontaneity and advocated the discovery of the "unconscious" or the "inner child" as artistic motivation (Ades 1974: 124–125). Of course, one might question the novelty of such an idea; inspiration for making art, in the 19th and 20th centuries, often could be said to explore unconscious regions. But Surrealist theory, especially the thinking of André Breton, was frankly indebted to the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud (Chipp 1968: 411–412). Giorgio de Chirico was only briefly a member of the Surrealist group, but he served as one of Surrealism's important forerunners; de Chirico wrote that "[...] the work of art must have neither reason nor logic; in this way it approaches the dream and the mind of the child" (Klingsöhr-Leroy 2006: 32). Art historians also point to an intense interest in children's art in the work of Paul Klee, who often achieved a Surrealist atmosphere of the "uncanny" and the "magical" (Hartt 1985: 914–915).

In formal terms, the structure of Surrealist paintings often presents a conflict of highly incompatible, even arbitrary or contradictory elements that tend to subvert narrative coherence.

The paintings create shocking surprise in order to achieve an increased intensity of expression and propose to move beyond the juxtaposition of incongruous images to a new "super-reality" (*sur-realité*). The poet Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse) had furnished the Surrealists with their "most succinct metaphor for the appearance of the marvelous within the banal: 'As beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella'" (Hamilton 1972: 389). In describing Surrealist collage, Max Ernst evoked images undergoing a "complete transmutation, followed by a pure act, as that of love: [...] the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them" yet melding "into a new absolute value, true and poetic" (Chipp 1968: 427). The more arbitrary the choice of elements, the more incongruous, jolting, jarring, the more it might be possible that the work of art, as it were, through a "loving" act of mutual absorption, might achieve an expression of the "uncanny." One thinks of the paintings of René Magritte and also of Picasso, who exhibited some of his stunning collage sculptures together with the surrealists in Paris in the early 1930's.

The term "Surrealism" was coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917 on the occasion of Erik Satie's ballet "Parade," with sets and costumes by Picasso, reminding us that music played a role in the development of Dada and Surrealism from the beginning (Albright 2004: 319–321). Here the obligatory incongruity that marks a Surrealist work arises in Satie's music through the sounds of street entertainments, a circus sideshow, and some amazing sirens (Erik Satie, *Parade*: III, *Prestidigitateur chinois*).

It is also appropriate at least to cite a ballet of Francis Poulenc, "The Model Animals," 1940, albeit composed about fifteen years after Nielsen's Humoresque yet usually included in the Surrealist camp. The events on stage, including masked dancers representing animals, enact a parody of human foibles, while the music is mostly typical neo-classical Poulenc. At least one scene, a combat between two roosters, is accompanied by orchestration characterized by the writer Colette as particularly "bloodthirsty" (Halbreich 1997: 13).

Carl Nielsen's Humoresque, from Symphony No. 6, presents an expressive narrative alarmingly

faithful to Surrealism in the music itself in its blunt juxtaposition of textures and thematic materials, of rhythmic scenarios and timbres, which at a crucial junction clash with the incongruous peasant dance and which, in turn, is ridiculed by the “yawn of contempt” of the trombone. But the Humoresque also concludes with an additional Coda, constructed above a quietly hysterical pedal point in the bassoon, while fragments of previous thematic materials are combined in a slowly descending, diminishing wave of energy, melding in a gesture of conflict resolution and reaching a poetic transformation of images, a “gesture of love,” as it were, recalling the admonition of Max Ernst to discover the “uncanny.”

The fourth movement *Finale* of *Symphony No. 6*, a theme-and-variations form, casts several backward glances towards the Humoresque’s experiment with Surrealism. Sharp contrasts, of course, are often found even in Classical-Romantic variation forms, yet Nielsen’s *Finale* seems to reach beyond the traditional (Maegaard 1994: 108–110). Especially the sixth and seventh variations assume a quasi-Surrealist stance. Both variations are based on the same transformation of the melody of the theme into a waltz! – at first, suddenly silly, but in the seventh variation quite threatening, rhythmically conflicted and texturally broken up, altogether explosive. The ninth variation, primarily for percussion instruments, includes utterly incongruous, murky croaking and groaning of the tuba (in its lowest register). The unity of the movement as a whole is certainly radically disrupted but not destroyed.

As might be expected, Nielsen’s stylistic explorations in the Humoresque appear to have left palpable traces in his subsequent orchestral compositions, especially the *Clarinet Concerto* (1928), defining his particular kind of “neo-classical” musical modernism. Engaging the

liberties of improvisatory virtuosity typical of the genre, the *Clarinet Concerto* employs sharply contrasting, occasionally even incongruous materials in different episodes, as well as disruptive interjections and outbursts that sometimes lead to a sense of fragmentation of the musical discourse. Pitting lyric, intimate, cantabile or playful materials against ominous, threatening, even violent gestures and militarist music, it occasionally leads to a sense of despair. But it also evokes parody or grotesquerie, transforming familiar traditional elements; occasionally this results in a clownery leading to a sense of the absurd. The concerto also includes chromatic episodes and boldly, stridently dissonant passages, briefly approaching free atonality.

Similar features appear, yet even somewhat more emphatically, in the symphonic music of a number of composers only a few years after Nielsen’s *Symphony No. 6* or his *Clarinet Concerto*, in works composed in 1928–1932 mostly in Paris; for example: Maurice Ravel, *Piano Concerto in G* (first and third movements); Sergey Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 3, Op. 44* (first and third movements, based on music from the opera “*The Fiery Angel*”); Arthur Honegger, *Symphony No. 1* (first and second movements); Francis Poulenc, *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra* (first movement).

It may not be appropriate to go as far as to identify a definite Surrealist movement or phase within twentieth-century musical history, but a “surrealist attitude” nevertheless seems to have left strong traces within the modernism of the first half of the century: a musical surrealism functions very near the central core of musical modernism. And it is not a question of Surrealist painters, or the manifestoes of André Breton, having exercised a direct influence on the composers, but a more general question of a kinship of aesthetic principles and of style and technique.¹

¹ The original presentation of this paper at the Sixth International Conference on Music Theory, Tallinn, October 15, 2010, concluded with a display of the reproductions of the two paintings cited below. I do not claim that these paintings look the way the Humoresque sounds but merely wish point to the juxtaposition of visually incongruous images that are the source of the surrealist sense of the “uncanny.” In the Salvador Dalí painting “*The Persistence of Memory*” (1931) it is the several limp, dangling watches that contrast with the sharply outlined cliffs of the distant, rocky sea shore; and one observes a rather unlikely marine organism, a snail perhaps, in the center of the picture. In the Max Ernst painting “*Approaching Puberty, or The Pleiades*” (1921), the nude figure of a headless young woman seems hovering in the air above the blue of the waves, while in the upper right-hand corner, the brown, blurred smudges represent perhaps a flock of doves in flight. You may recall, that Orion pursued the Pleiades seven young maidens until Zeus came to their aid, transformed them into doves and finally installed them as a constellation in the heavens.

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Satiirilised maskid ehk sürrealism sümfoonia: Nielsen 6. sümfoonia „Humoreski” tõlgendus

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Carl Nielsen 6. sümfoonia (1925) teine osa, „Humoreski”, asetab hermeneutiliste kalduvustega kuulaja enneolematute tõlgendusprobleemide ette – seda vähemalt helilooja eelnevates sümfooniates (nr. 3, 4, 5) ilmnunud stiiliarengu taustal. Varasemates helitöödes avalduv 19. sajandi lõpu helikeele sammsammuline laienemine katkeb „Humoreski” alguses plahvatuslikult, paisates esile provokatiivselt modernistlikud atonaalsed ja puäntillistlikud, Schönbergile (*op.* 16) ja Stravinskile („Petruška”) viitavad stiilivõtted. Veelgi hämmastavam aga on nendele vastanduv rahvapärane külatantsuviis – kuigi tonaalne ja rütmiliselt sümmeetriline, kuid antud olukorras siiski dadaistlikult absurdne, ja seda eriti trombooni-*glissando* tõttu.

See aga, et Nielsen modernistlikust poosist siiski kiiresti loobub, näitab, et helilooja pole sooritanud mingit olulist hüpet 1920. aastate avangardi suunas; heliteos pöördub tagasi tuttavale, autori stiiliarengu rahulikult kulgevale rajale. Mõned muusikateadlased on küll püüdnud analüüsida „Humoreski” atonaalsust hulgateooria alusel, kuid see tundub olevat viljatu; parimal juhul on „Humoreski” atonaalsus vaid lohakas või oskamatult kohmakas katse luua dodekafoonilist helistruktuuri. Selgub aga, et Nielsen kasutab sellist atonaalsust sihilikult kui satiirilist maski, otsekui pilgates modernistlikke võtteid ja üksnes teeseldes modernismi. Nielsen võtted meenutavad maskide laialdast kasutust 19. sajandi lõpul, eriti ooperis, sealhulgas Nielsen enda ooperis „Maskeraad” (1906), aga ka kujutavas kunstis, näiteks inimkujude ja skelettide satiirilisi maske James Ensori maalides. Kunstilooliselt eriti tähendusrikkad on Aafrika ja Okeania maskid varasemates Picasso, Bracque’i, Klee, Munchi ja teiste modernistide teostes. Maskid saavutavad kunstiteoses intensiivsema väljenduslikkuse, kuid samas avavad nad tee modernismis eriti olulisele kibedale ironiale.

Nielsen „Humoreskis” sisalduvad teravad kontrastid meenutavad 20. aastate sürrealistlike maale – mitte ainult nendes peituvat mõtte- või tundeelu, vaid isegi nende kujundite ja vormide loomust ja suhteid. Sürrealistid, rõhutades kunstiteose ja loometegevuse vabanemist mõistuse ja loogika kütkeist, püüdsid väljendada subjektiivse alateadvuse ajendeid ja suundumusi. Samas ilmnesid nende maalides teravalt ühtimatud või kohatud kujundite vastandumised. Nad rõhutasid korduvalt: mida kohatum on mingi kontrast, seda tõetruum ja haaravam on teose väljenduslikkus.

Eriti avaldub sürrealistlik mõtlemine Nielsen „Humoreskis” rahvapärase, mahlaka külatantsu äkilises vastandumises – koos absurdse trombooni-*glissando*’ga! – osa modernistlikult teravale puäntillistlikule ja atonaalsele alguslõigule. Peaaegu samalaadseid kontraste leidub aga ka sümfoonia viimases osas ning eriti markantselt helilooja hilisemas klarnetikontserdis (1928). Nielsenit meenutav sürrealistlik suundumus aga ilmneb ehk veelgi teravamal kujul mitmetes aastail 1928–1932 Pariisis loodud Raveli, Prokofjevi, Honeggeri ja Poulenci heliteostes. Isegi kui pole põhjust kõnelda teatud kindlast sürrealistlikust perioodist 20. sajandi muusikaloos, on ilmne, et sürrealism kui esteetiline suund mängis modernismi kujunemisel siiski olulist osa.