

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

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Abstract

In light of his earlier symphonic works, the Humoresque of Carl Nielsen's Symphony No. 6 seems uniquely problematical, primarily because of its highly incongruous thematic materials: an opening modernistic (pointillistic) orchestral texture and a nearly atonal clarinet melody that are juxtaposed to a folkloric peasant dance associated with grotesque trombone glissandi. The references to early 20th-century modernism turn out to be satirical in intent, however, even a parody of the then current musical modernism, while the satire is disguised, recalling a masquerade.

The discontinuity created by the incongruous elements in the Humoresque recalls the slightly earlier Dada performances (Zürich, Berlin) and the subsequent Surrealist movement in painting and poetry (Paris, etc.). A similarly "surrealist" aspect of violent contrasts may also be discovered in Nielsen's subsequent symphonic works, the Flute Concerto (1926) and especially the Clarinet Concerto (1928), as well as in some of the musical works of Ravel, Prokofiev, Honegger and Poulenc, from around 1930.