

# Rued Langgaard — A Symbolistic Composer?\*

By TINE FRANK

The Danish composer and organist Rued Langgaard (1893-1952) is a figure many musicologists and musicians do not know how to deal with. He fits in neither with the prevailing musical trends in Denmark nor with his contemporaries nor with the values of his time. Because he was a highly sensitive person, was brought up in seclusion, was different from the majority, and was not gifted with diplomatic skills, he soon found himself in a rather isolated position; people ceased to take him seriously.

Even today, we know more about the myth that surrounds Langgaard as a person than about his music. This circumstance is partly due to its being difficult to know how to approach his music. Langgaard's production is rather unhomogeneous, both as far as quality and style is concerned. Besides, mystical titles and programnotes seem to confuse the audience and to confirm the point of view that this man was simply crazy.

Though an isolated figure in Denmark, Langgaard, indeed, can be seen as a late representative of symbolism. There, in the nineties, symbolistic ideas were shared only by a selected group of artists, though none within the field of music.

This article is an introduction to the symbolistic elements in Langgaard's productions. After a short definition of symbolism, Langgaard is compared to the symbolistic poets — in philosophy and in use of symbols — and some of his work's outstanding features are pointed out. Other characteristics of Langgaard's music are mentioned. Finally, the term „symbolism“, as applied to music and to Langgaard in particular, is discussed.

\* This article is a rewritten and somewhat altered version of a paper presented at the Rued Langgaard Symposium, Svanekegården, Bornholm, Denmark July 17th to 22nd 1995. It is a distillation of a dissertation wherefore numerous sources are used. Due to the limited length of an article, it has not been possible neither to refer to them all nor to include examples from scores. For further documentation and more detailed information, see Tine Frank: *Rued Langgaards Symfonier 6-16. En analyse af forholdet mellem den symfoniske stil og det religiøst-symbolistiske indhold i Rued Langgaards symfonier 6-16*, diss., University of Copenhagen 1993. For other major sources of information, see also Bendt Viinholt Nielsen: *Rued Langgaards Kompositioner. Annoteret Verkfortegnelse/Rued Langgaards Compositions. An Annotated Catalogue of Works with an English Introduction*, Odense 1991 and Bendt Viinholt Nielsen: *Rued Langgaard. Biografi*, Copenhagen 1993.

## Symbolism – A Short Definition

Symbolism arose in France in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a post-romantic lyric phenomenon. However, its influence soon spread to the pictorial and plastic arts. It was a protest against realism and naturalism's way of experiencing reality, which the symbolists considered too popular, ordinary, plain, and dull as artistic expression. Being a spiritual movement with roots in romanticism, symbolism was an art that the symbolists were convinced should be full of beauty and atmosphere, should not be concerned with everyday life and barren materialism, but should be pointing at the cosmos behind the objective world.

Symbolism has its spiritual roots in romanticism, but points forward to modernism in means of expression. Symbolism differs from romanticism on three major points: Firstly, romanticism was characterized by a pantheistic outlook with no distinction made between body, soul, and spirit (i.e., the spirit in nature and in the human being is identical), whereas the symbolists did not believe in their identicalness. Rather, the symbolists saw the glimpses of eternity behind phenomena as reflections of the divine within themselves and in their surroundings. Secondly, the symbolists explored the new knowledge of the subconscious and of psychology. And thirdly, the poets experimented with suggestive constellations of words, while the painters used the concepts of perspective, color, and form in a brand-new way.

As the name indicates, symbolists express themselves in symbols. Often, the outer scenario reflects an inner, more profound world. A landscape, for example, could symbolize a state of mind, and a cultural or historical setting could refer to eternity. However, the meaning of symbols is variable and framed by a correlation between the world and the artist's individual soul. In other words: there are no fixed meanings for each symbol. All artists use symbols differently, according to their personalities, tempers, and moods.

Generally, the symbolists felt alien to their time: They lived in memories of the past or in dreams of the future, not in the present. They were lonely and longed for deliverance from this world and to achieve an ideal beauty after death. They seem, therefore, to prefer subjects that are somehow related to yearning. Dreams and visions are predominant in their works.

Symbolism, which reached Denmark in the 1890s, was initiated by the opening of Den frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition) in Copenhagen in 1891, a protest against established art. In 1893, Gauguin's and van Gogh's paintings were exhibited for the first time, and the effect was enormous on the development of pictorial art. The first major change was the giving up of a central perspective, that is the rule that a motive can be seen from one visual angle only. Instead of perspective, the artists concentrated on creating an entirety of intensity and atmosphere. Thus, perspective was replaced by contours and contrasting blocks of colors.<sup>1</sup>

1. Mogens Ballin's (1871-1914) painting *Landscape, Bretagne* (1891-92) influenced by Gauguin's stylized and richly colored paintings exemplifies this. (The painting is reproduced in Henrik Wivel: *Ny dansk kunsthistorie 5, Symbolisme og impressionisme*, Copenhagen 1994, p.43).

Similarly, a symbolistic portrait does not aim at producing a naturalistic depiction of the person portraied. What interested the symbolistic painter was to create an atmosphere that reflected the state of mind of the model.<sup>2</sup> In Denmark, the major representatives of symbolism in pictorial art are J.F. Willumsen (1863-1958) and Vilh. Hammershøi (1864-1916), whereas Rudolph Tegner (1873-1950) represents symbolism in plastic art.

On the literary scene, a periodical called *Taarnet* (The Tower) appeared in the years 1893-94, edited by the Danish poet Johannes Jørgensen (1866-1956). In that forum, the French symbolistic poets Beaudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine were introduced, and new Danish symbolistic lyricism and painting were presented and reviewed. The most important Danish poets are Sophus Claussen (1865-1931), Johannes Jørgensen, and Viggo Stuckenberg (1863-1905). In literature, symbolism points forward to the modernistic tradition, that in Denmark was initiated by the experimental, metaphysically oriented poetry of Heretica.

The influence of the symbolists lasted till around the First World War. Thereafter, they were almost forgotten, until they were rediscovered by the early modernists in the middle of the 1940s.<sup>3</sup>

### Differences and Resemblances between Langgaard and the Symbolist Poets

There are some resemblances — but also some differences — between Langgaard and the symbolistic poets in philosophy and in use of symbols:

Firstly, Langgaard also felt isolated and alienated from his age and contemporaries. Neither was he concerned about scientific and social problems but was engrossed in metaphysics, the hereafter, and psychology.

Secondly, Langgaard also lived in a fin-de-siècle atmosphere, and he was convinced that the end of the world was approaching. Consequently, he was either looking forward to a better world to come or was dwelling in the past. Like the symbolistic poets, Langgaard was longing for beauty, atmosphere, and an intensity of light in art, and for spiritual/Christian values in life generally.

Thirdly, Langgaard also considered art to be an opening to a more profound metaphysical world. Thus, he was convinced that he was gifted with an instinctive understanding of spirituality and selected by God to share that insight with mankind.

2. Ludvig Find's (1869-1945) portrait of *A Young Man*. The Norwegian Painter Thorvald Erichsen (1897) exemplifies this. (The painting is reproduced in Henrik Wivel: *Ny dansk kunsthistorie 5, Symbolisme og impressionisme*, Copenhagen 1994, p.48).
3. Henrik Jul Hansen (ed.): *Antologi af nordisk litteratur 8, Perioden 1890-1918*, Copenhagen 1973 and Henrik Wivel: *Ny dansk kunsthistorie 5, Symbolisme og impressionisme*, Copenhagen 1994.

However, Langgaard's very personal Christian interpretation of metaphysics distinguishes him from the symbolists. His father, Siegfried Langgaard, taught him that true music had a divine mission: to show the audience the glory of God and to lead them back to Christ. Rued Langgaard's Church Opera, *Antichrist* is an example of that sort of missionary music: The idea of the piece was that, through the synthesis of music, words, and theatre, people would get to know themselves, their selfishness and their evil traits, so they would be prepared to receive Christ.

In order to communicate such ideas to an audience, guidance was necessary. Langgaard's problem was that people tended to overlook the symbolic character of the program. They were listening for a realistic setting — not for an abstract revelation. What Langgaard aimed at was opening their minds to an atmosphere or an abstract idea. That aim explains why he hesitated to publish detailed program notes but limited himself to vivid titles or mottoes of a suggestive character. He was very creative in making new words by using unusual collocations in his titles: *Det Himmelrivende* (The Heaven-storming), *Hin Tordenbolig* (Yon Dwelling of Thunder) and *Syndflod af Sol* (Deluge of Sun).

This experience, that everyday language was inadequate to communicate metaphysical acknowledgement, Langgaard shared with the symbolist poets, who tried to get beyond the usual associations of words by combining them in new ways. These poets also expressed themselves in an obscure or blurry manner, but, with effort, it is possible to penetrate that veil, for the words can be figured out with use of common sense. Unfortunately, that is not the case with Langgaard's use of symbols. We have to study his universe more profoundly to get an idea of what he meant.

### Outstanding Features in Langgaard's Use of Symbols

The symbolic in Langgaard's early compositions up to the beginning of the 1920s is a fairly traditional one, with a universal, religiously inspired view of nature, interpreted in a symbolistic way: nature is seen as a reflection of the human soul.

But from the early '20s, a fin-de-siècle atmosphere emerges. Langgaard's interest is now divided between apocalyptic motifs and historic themes, formed as an appraisal of the past (Symphonies no. 7 & no. 9). Being convinced that the time in between 1890 and the First World War was not only the most beautiful and spiritual, but also the peak of all musical creation, he consciously tried to evoke the atmosphere of the late Niels W. Gade and of Wagner:

Som Komponist er jeg ikke specielt religiøs. Og selv om Bibelens Ord har inspireret mig til dette Orgeldrama, er der ogsaa andre Motiver, f. Eks. Tiden indtil Verdenskrigen, fra Gades Død og indtil Verdenskrigen, som jeg mener er Høstens Tid. Musiken naaede paa dette Tidspunkt en Pragt,

en Glans, en Skønhedsrigdom, der paralleliserer det med Høstens Tid i bibelsk Forstand. Nu følger Opløsningen, Forfladigelsen.<sup>4</sup>

Langgaard deals with the apocalypse in two different ways: positively, in which he visualizes the glory and beauty in the world to come (Symphonies no. 13 and no. 14) and more dramatically in which he deals with,

kampen mellem lyset og mørket, mellem Gud og Satan, som den udfolder sig i universet og i det enkelte menneske.<sup>5</sup>

ending with God's judgement and the destruction of evil. This theme is especially found in the compositions from the beginning of the 1920s: in *Antichrist*, in the Third String Quartet, in the Fourth Violin Sonata, and in the Piano Sonata *Afgrunds-musik* (Abyss-music). However, a related theme is found in the later Symphonies no. 10 and no. 11 as well. The Organ Drama *Messis* contains both parts of the apocalypse: the battle and the victory.

Obviously, Langgaard's interest in the apocalypse is a fin-de-siècle phenomenon. His enormous anger and bitterness over of the lack of understanding that he met everywhere probably only added fuel to the fire. Woven into the apocalyptic complex is Langgaard's longing for acknowledgement and his hope for reinstatement in a better world where beauty and justice would reign.

People have often wondered about the lack of coherence in style within some of Langgaard's music, and especially, the reason that, in 1925, he suddenly returned from a modernistic to a rather conservative romantic style that seems to lack the originality of his earlier works. However, being completely engrossed in metaphysics and the ideas behind the music, Langgaard did not look at it that way:

Hele mit Liv har været en Krise. En *paastrunget* Krise. Men i min Musik kender jeg ikke til Kriser, der kender jeg kun til en klar og fremadgaaende Linie.<sup>6</sup>

4. „As a composer, I'm not especially religious. And even though the words of the Bible have inspired me to this Organ Drama, there are also other motifs, for instance the time up to the World War, from the death of Gade and until the World War, which I believe is The Time of Reaping. The music reached at this time a splendor, a radiance, that parallels The Time of Reaping in a biblical sense. Now follows the dissolution, the vulgarization.“ - From an interview with Rued Langgaard: „Et Drama paa Orglet i Frue Kirke. Rued Langgaard taler om Hostens Tid og om Forfladigelsen, der fulgte efter“, *Berlingske Aftenavis* April 21 1936.
5. „The battle between light and darkness, between God and Satan, as it takes place in the universe and in the individual“ - From Jens Brinker: „Langgaards sjette symfoni - et forsøg på eksegese“, *Dansk Musik Tidsskrift* 43, 7-8 (1968) pp. 183-89.
6. „My entire life has been in crisis. An crisis forced upon me. But in my music, I do not recognize a crisis; there I only recognize a clear and progressive line.“ - From an interview with Rued Langgaard: „Hvad der er aandløst og moderne. Danmarks Musikliv er demokratiseret. Aabenhjertige Udtalelser af Komponisten Rud Langgaard“, *B.T.* April 22 1936.

In terms of music, this declaration does not make any sense, when one considers his sudden change in compositional style in 1925 from a rather advanced modernistic way of composing to a fairly traditional romantic one. Consequently, in the quotation above, Langgaard must be speaking about the symbolistic content of the works rather than their musical style. For Langgaard, the terms „romantic“ and „modern“ seemed to have a, respectively, positive and negative meaning; the terms were paired very closely to the ideas behind the music. Thus romantic music symbolizes the past, Christ, beauty, and the world to come, whereas modern music is associated with his own time, Antichrist, everything that is evil, and the Day of Judgement. To make people understand the polarization between good and evil, the struggle between Christ and Antichrist in the universe and within the individual, he sometimes contrasted the two styles, even within the same piece. This contrast can be heard, for instance, in the Third String Quartet where a chorale follows modernistic dissonance, symbolizing the defeat of evil.

### Other Characteristics about Langgaard's Music

Langgaard does seem to be very concerned about musical form, though not in the ordinary sense of the word. He mostly composed in ecstasy. In order to preserve a strong, authentic expression, he did not make major changes afterwards. Sudden changes — in style, character, light or atmosphere — are very typical of Langgaard's impulsive way of working. Consequently, the forms are rarely complicated. There are very few traditional forms like sonata and scherzo. Instead, we find a variety of more personal forms in which the lied-form seems to form the basis of a considerable part. For Langgaard, musical form was probably mainly constituted by instrumentation, harmony, and sonority. What he aimed at was striking the same tone throughout a passage, creating an atmosphere that abolished time and place, expanding our consciousness, and taking us into a cosmic and „spacial“ state of mind. That endeavor explains his predilection for slightly varied repetitions instead of highly complex musical forms. That predilection can be heard, for instance, in the second of his *Rosengaardsviser* (Rosengaard Songs) for mixed choir, „Bag Muren“ (Behind the Wall) from 1919.

### Conclusion

To avoid any misunderstandings, it should be said that symbolism is not a musical style — no general musical characteristics can be ascribed to symbolism. When the term is applied, for example, to Debussy, it refers to the associations and, in some cases, the literary inspiration that underlies his music. This explains the rather different musical version of such a work as *Pelleas et Melisande*.

Nevertheless, in the case of Rued Langgaard, it is possible to point to several symbolistic features: its philosophy is reflected in his attitude toward life and in

the ideas behind his music. The poets' approach to language can be found in his titles and program notes. And idiomatic similarities between symbolistic painting and Langgaard's music can be pointed out:

There seems to be a connection between the symbolistic painter's interest in introspective, stationary motifs that, in a stylized way, reflect states of minds and Langgaard's love of contemplative atmospheres of a „spacial“ character, for instance in the second of his Rosengaard Songs and in *Sfærenes Musik* (Music of the Spheres).

And there is but a short way from the painters' brightly and strongly contrasting colors to Langgaard's highly developed sense of sonority and sudden changes in expression and style, for example in his Symphonies no. 10, 13, and 15.

Equally, from the painters' disregard of former generations' strong demand for perspective to Langgaard's treatment of form and melodic themes in which thematic development is set aside for a sonority caused by subtle changes in instrumentation and harmony, which can be heard, for instance, in his Symphonies no. 11 and 13.

Finally, one could say that the monumental element, which is present, for example in his Symphonies no. 8 and no. 11, is a common denominator for many symbolistic painters and for several of Langgaard's compositions.

## SUMMARY

### *Rued Langgaard – A Symbolistic Composer?*

The Danish composer and organist Rued Langgaard (1893-1952) fits in neither with the prevailing musical trends in Denmark nor with his contemporaries nor with the values of his time. He can, however, be seen as a late representative of the symbolistic movement in Denmark which arose in the 1890s.

This article is an introduction to the symbolistic elements in Langgaard's productions. After a short definition of symbolism, Langgaard is compared to the symbolistic poets — in philosophy and in use of symbols — and some of his work's outstanding features are pointed out. Other characteristics of Langgaard's music are mentioned. Finally, the term „symbolism“, as applied to music and to Langgaard in particular, is discussed.