

## Reviews



Katharine Leiska

*Skandinavische Musik in Deutschland um 1900. Symphonien von Christian Sinding, Victor Bendix und Carl Nielsen zwischen Gattungstradition und Nord-Imagines*

Imaginatio borealis: Bilder des Nordens, 22

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‘Wo liegt der Norden?’, asks Katharine Leiska at the beginning of the second chapter of her excellent new account of the German reception of the Scandinavian symphony at the turn of the twentieth century (the published version of her 2010 doctoral dissertation from the Christian-Albrechts-Universität, Kiel). It is an easy question to ask, but, as Leiska’s discussion quickly reveals, the idea of north points to more than simply a geographical location. ‘North’ more properly constitutes a ‘horizon of expectation’, meaning both an orientational point and a constellation or network of metaphorical categories, images, and preconceptions that shapes particular moments of cultural encounter and exchange. For Leiska, it is the desire to dig beneath this more complex and multivalent idea of north (or ‘Nord-Imagines’), and to ground it within a specific material-documentary body of writing (German music criticism *circa* 1900), which provides the foundation for her rich historiographical reading of the Scandinavian symphony. And it further provides the platform for contemplating a series of broader disciplinary issues: the relationship between music and other media (especially literature); the ontological status of the musical work; and the importance of space and place in the generation and transmission of musical meaning.

The starting point for Leiska’s study is the remarkably intense concern with ideas of the north in German-language writing on Scandinavian music at the turn of the twentieth century. The choice of subject is compelling. Scandinavian art, literature, and music enjoyed a particularly prominent profile in German cultural circles, and the symphony was a high-prestige artistic vehicle that had to meet conflicting demands of popular appeal, creative innovation, universalism, and local colour. It is the collision of these competing contexts that determines the framework for Leiska’s project, shuttling back-and-forth, as her title suggests, ‘zwischen Gattungstradition und Nord-Imagines’. The study accordingly falls into two broad halves: the first part is a detailed literature survey, devoted almost exclusively to German-language material and building particularly strongly on the research of the *Imaginatio borealis* group at Kiel; the second part consists of extended analyses of three carefully chosen case studies (Christian Sinding’s Symphony no. 1 in D minor, op. 21; Victor Bendix’s Symphony no. 3 in A minor, op. 25; and Carl Nielsen’s *Sinfonia espansiva*, op. 27), which exemplify contrasting aspects of the Scandinavian symphony and its contemporary German reception. Two notable absences from this list, Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius, can be explained in different ways. Grieg did not compose a mature symphony and therefore stands slightly outside this debate, even though his music was profoundly formative for the idea of a ‘Nordic-discourse’ in German music criticism in the 1890s. The German-language reception of Sibelius’s early symphonic works has been well documented elsewhere, for example in Tomi Mäkelä’s monumental study *Sibelius*:

*Poesie in der Luft* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2007; revised English translation, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2011). Leiska is nevertheless to be applauded for selecting two particularly thought-provoking works alongside the more well-known *Sinfonia espansiva*: Sinding's early symphonic essay, which raises problematic issues of inheritance, modelling, and canonization, and Bendix's formally innovative Third Symphony, which directs much-needed critical attention to an original and neglected figure in early twentieth-century Danish music.

The initial goal of Leiska's discussion is to identify a series of research questions that can form the basis for further enquiry. These include what position music occupied in relation to the growing German interest in Scandinavian art and literature at the end of the nineteenth century; how Scandinavian music was received in Germany; how important representations of the north were in its reception; which particular images of the north figured prominently in, and were shaped by, the 'Nordic-discourse' in Germany *circa* 1900; and what role Scandinavian music played in contemporary discussions about German national identity (p. 23). A significant starting point, to which Leiska returns at various points in her volume, is Otto Lessmann's review of Sinding's First Symphony in the *Allgemeine Musik-Zeitung* (1895). Lessmann writes evocatively of the symphony's 'großartige Naturbilder aus dem Heimathlande des Komponisten', and celebrates the music's 'Kraft, Erhabenheit, starrer, kühner Trotz, düstere Leidenschaft, schwermuthvolle Klage[,] ... mächtiges Ringen nach Freiheit und endlicher Jubel' (p. 9), recurrent keywords in writing on the Scandinavian symphony throughout the 1890s. As Leiska notes later (p. 39), such terms had been common currency in writing on the German symphony ever since the early nineteenth-century, and stem direct from what she terms the 'idealisierenden Darstellung *der* Symphonie' (emphasis original). Lessmann's review thus indicates the extent to which the symphony was still closely bound up with notions of German cultural identity, and the urgency with which a canon of German masterworks was being actively curated in the 1890s. It also demonstrates the lofty terms against which symphonies by non-German composers in particular would be judged, and all-too-often regarded as having failed to meet convincingly (p. 40), just as Scandinavian music was effectively subsumed within a greater-German cultural practice (one that assumed a common Nordic point of historical-ethnic origin). German writing on the Scandinavian symphony thus serves what Leiska describes as two interrelated models of national identity construction (p. 306), the first built upon the assumption of a North-South dichotomy that elevates the music of the North over and above that of (for example) Italy or France, on the basis of its perceived vigour, force, and originality (*Eigentümlichkeit*), and the second which presupposes the universality of German instrumental music (preeminently the symphony) beyond issues of local, regional, or national identity. These two apparently paradoxical modes of identity formation co-existed simultaneously: the local, in terms of German symphony criticism, swiftly became the universal.

Such categories, as Leiska notes (p. 67), drew upon a rich vein of tourist literature, philology, archaeological research, and romantic poetry, not least in the wake of Wagner's Ring cycle and popular translations of the Icelandic Sagas. The idea of north, for many German writers, served both as a historical fantasy, the trace of a vanished golden age that appealed powerfully at a moment of intensive industrialisation and economic expansion, and also as an alternative world-view, conceived in opposition to familiar Classical models of mediterranean civilization. It is no surprise that such descriptions swiftly led, as the twentieth century progressed, in extreme right-wing political directions. In a necessary excursus, Leiska discusses the influential work of Walter Niemann, one of the most prominent promulgators of an 'idea of north' in writing on German and Scandinavian music, and whose preoccupation with race, environment, and the idea of *Heimatkunst* suggests national socialist sympathies (pp. 76–77). In the absence of conclusive documentary evidence to the contrary, Leiska remains sensibly

equivocal about the question of Niemann's actual relationship with the party, but it is nevertheless difficult to separate his promotion to a full professorship in 1937 from his immediate political environment – a point that Leiska underlines tellingly (*ibid.*). Sinding's unfortunate support for the regime, in the months shortly before his death in 1941, demonstrates how far the politicisation of 'Nordic music' had reached, albeit within the context of an occupied country, and had lasting implications for his critical reception in the second half of the century.

A further legacy of this political trajectory has been the critical resistance (for instance, in the writing of Adorno) to ideas of nature and landscape in Scandinavian music. Leiska nevertheless draws attention to the role that such imagery played in the construction of the 'Nord-imagines', although she does not dwell on specific points of comparison in literature or the visual arts. Lessmann's vividly pictorial account of the second movement of Sinding's symphony, for example, evokes the idea of a Nordic nature space in Sinding's music as an alterior or utopian realm. The rocking arpeggiated figuration on three solo violins over a transfigured return of the opening Allegro's second subject (b. 75) suggested 'geheimnißvollem Wellengemurmel' for Lessmann, locating the music within a nature region that is simultaneously both imaginary and real. '[M]an kann sich den Eindruck, den der mitternächtige Anblick des von silbernem Mondschein überglänzten Fjords hervorbringen muß, wundervoller in Tönen nicht ausgedrückt denken' (p. 9), Lessmann writes, aligning the music with a strongly visual tradition of landscape representation and raising the perennially difficult issue of programme versus absolute music.

It is through detailed attention to such passages that Leiska seeks to determine the extent to which individual works by Scandinavian musicians corresponded with ideas of north in the German critical and popular imagination at the turn of the twentieth century, and how deeply they were inscribed within the boundaries of this nordic discourse (p. 87). The second half of her project complements this approach with detailed commentaries on movements from Sinding, Bendix, and Nielsen's symphonies. But if Leiska's detailed grasp of reception history and her literature review in the opening chapters of her dissertation are wholly convincing, the analytical aspects of her discussion, and her attempts to locate these works within a broader symphonic tradition, are somewhat less persuasive. The commentaries themselves are detailed and admirably thorough, but the accompanying formal charts are theoretically underpowered and lack sufficient clarity of cadential function and formal articulation. Pedal points, for example, are labelled simply according to pitch (regardless of their local or large-scale function), and the summary of the underlying tonal structure is frustratingly schematic in the absence of more detailed voice-leading charts or reductions. Greater reference to recent analytical writing on nineteenth-century symphonic music could have provided a richer comparative basis for interpretation. Adopting the theoretical framework developed by Warren Darcy and particularly James Hepokoski, for example, suggests that among the key features of the opening movement of Sinding's First Symphony are not merely the use of modal mixture and thematic *Fortspinnung* (qualities that Leiska aligns broadly with the 'archaic' and 'rhapsodic' tone of the music), but the absence of a clearly defined medial caesura in the exposition: Sinding sets up a medial caesura on a modally unstable secondary dominant in bb. 49–55, and then deflects the music toward the dominant of the relative major in bb. 56–58, which becomes the key of the pastoral second subject group (Leiska confusingly calls this a third theme, but bb. 33–58 are properly a bridge passage or transition). The consequences of this gesture are significant for the remainder of the movement: the exposition, for instance, fails to attain closure, despite the energetic affirmation of the second subject at b. 85 and its subsequent sequential *Steigerung* in bb. 93–100. The result is rather a moment of structural-cadential crisis in bb. 101–2, and a juddering return to the

secondary dominant chord from bb. 49–55 which then launches the development. The return of this passage at the end of the reprise again results in a moment of crisis (b. 295) that in turn provokes an even lengthier build-up after the general pause at b. 314. The movement arguably never achieves full structural closure, despite the perfunctory cadence at bb. 356–57, the final return of the primary subject serving as a framing device rather than as a conclusive point of resolution. The Allegro remains effectively trapped within a seemingly perpetual cycle of energetic assertion and collapse, its basic structural-expressive tensions unresolved until the extended tierce-de-picardie of the finale.

It is possible to elaborate this basis harmonic-analytical summary through more extended narrative exegesis, perhaps as an allegorical account of a tragic Nordic symphonic hero struggling to achieve a stable sense of creative self. An alternative reading might look towards other European symphonic models—Leiska mentions Schumann's Fourth and Dvorak's Seventh Symphonies in passing (the parallels with Dvorak are especially striking), which share the same tonality, but not Beethoven's Ninth (almost a default point of reference for later nineteenth-century symphonies), nor the symphonies of Bruckner that evoked similar images of *Steigerung* and *Kraft* for contemporary German-language theorists such as August Halm. The opening movement of Brahms's First Piano Concerto provides an equally promising point of comparison, especially given the primary subject's prominent trill and their shared 'rhapsodic' character. By attempting to understand Sinding's creative negotiation of these complex sets of generic and topical expectation, a clearer sense of agency might emerge. Such intertextuality aside, however, the critical issue is how to mediate the distance between categories of historical reception and more recent developments in music theory and analysis. At a deeper level, this becomes a question of ontology, identity formation, and subjectivity: issues that Leiska seeks to address in her conclusion and which provide a signpost to further research.

It is the failure to negotiate these competing demands convincingly, and to develop a hermeneutic reading of Scandinavian music sufficiently grounded in historical evidence, which Leiska finds frustrating in my own work, particularly my essay 'Horn Calls and Flattened Sevenths: Nielsen and the Construction of Danish Musical Style' (p. 34). I am happy to acknowledge the weaknesses of my early writing on Scandinavian music, and hope I have met the challenges identified by Leiska more convincingly in recent works, especially my monograph *Carl Nielsen and the Idea of Modernism* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), which Leiska does not cite. But my aim in this earlier piece was rather different (if no less problematic): firstly, to try and create a critical space for hearing early twentieth-century Scandinavian music that reflects the instabilities inherent within the notion of identity in music more generally (the idea of Danishness which I attempted to advance in this essay was deliberately open and contingent, and anything but essentialist); and secondly, to operate within a referential framework that took as its starting point contemporary Scandinavian debates in art, literature, and music, rather than the more familiar themes of German music criticism. Indeed, a striking absence in Leiska's work is any sustained discussion of Scandinavian writing, including the composers' own correspondence. Omissions from the bibliography include John Fellow's fine edition of Nielsen's writings, *Carl Nielsen til sin Samtid*, and the relevant volumes of the *Carl Nielsen Brevudgaven*, edited by Fellow, or even Torben Schousboe's edition of his diaries and correspondence with his wife, the sculptor Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen. Yet a cursory survey of this material demonstrates how keenly engaged Nielsen became in responding to the German reception of his work, both positively and negatively, and how this was at times bound up with a sense of difference or alterity. The *Dresdener Nachrichten* may have written, after a performance of Nielsen's First Symphony in 1896, of the music's 'Schwermuth und melancholische Träumen' (p. 257), but in a letter to his wife, Nielsen wrote

that the symphony's 'concise form and precise mode of expression will, I believe, simultaneously astonish and entice people here, and I am certain that such a piece will only do some good and open people's ears and eyes to all that German sauce and fat that one finds among Wagner's followers' (Torben Schousboe, ed. *Carl Nielsen. Dagbøger og Brevveksling med Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1983), p. 128, my translation). To silence the Scandinavian voice inadvertently, in this way, is to risk reinforcing the patterns of centre and periphery that many recent scholarly studies have sought to deconstruct, and it means that there is little genuine sense of dialogue underpinning the otherwise admirably dialectical framework of Leiska's project. Any discussion of music reception, my own included, would benefit from a greater sense of international cultural engagement and exchange, and the history of Scandinavian music in Germany is surely a two-way process.

That is not to end on a negative note. Leiska's study is consistently sophisticated, thought-provoking, and refined, and sets an impressively high standard for critical-documentary study of the German reception of Scandinavian music at a crucial phase in its development. By building further on Leiska's foundations, we can be confident that the Scandinavian symphony will attain the scholarly status it richly deserves.

Daniel M. Grimley



Ulrik Volgsten

*Musiken, medierna och lagarna. Musikverkets idéhistoria och etablerandet av en idealistisk upphovsrätt*

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'(Copy-)rights have become a commodity to be bought and sold' (p. 11). This statement can be found in the first chapter of Ulrik Volgsten's book on the relations between music, media, and the laws in contemporary Western societies. The problematic everyday confusion of *copyrights*<sup>1</sup> with *property rights* implied in the statement is one of the main focal points of the book. Another one is: how does copyright legislation affect our understanding of music?

Volgsten's main thesis is that the *idealistic* view on music, which (in his argumentation) is informing modern copyright legislation, a) emerged as late as the 20th century, while it b) builds on concepts from antique philosophy. The catalyst to bring a) and b) together is the reification of the musical work made possible by the phonogram and encouraged by legislation.

Who owns music? Can sound be owned at all in a world where everything can be copied digitally? And what and where is the *work* really in modern musical production?

Those are not new questions, but Volgsten seeks to actualize them by rolling out the full history behind their presence in our time. This is evident in the fact that the progression of the book is more or less chronological, starting with Plato and ending with the MP3-player, so to speak. The author presents his interpretation of the evolving Western view(s) on the musical work, covering the Antique, the Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, etc., in chapters 2 through 11, ending with the breakthrough of digitally distributed music.

1 The English word *copyright* does not entirely cover the Swedish *upphovsrätt*, which literally means 'rights of the begetter' or, more vernacularly, 'rights of the father'. The word *upphovsrätt* is a widely used legal term in Nordic countries, notwithstanding its patriarchal connotations.