Carl Nielsen
Born June 9, 1865, Sortelung, Denmark.
Died October 3, 1931, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Symphony No. 5, Op. 50

Nielsen began work on his Fifth Symphony in 1920, completed the score on January 15, 1922, and led the premiere in Copenhagen on January 24. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, cymbals, triangle, snare drum, tambourine, celesta, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-seven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Nielsen’s Fifth Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on December 14 and 15, 1967, with Sixten Ehrling conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on February 17, 18, 19, and 22, 2000, with Osmo Vänskä conducting. The Orchestra has performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival only once, on June 19, 1965, with Seiji Ozawa conducting.

Carl Nielsen's father, a house painter, played the violin. As a young boy, Carl worked earnestly to master his father’s three-quarter size fiddle until the day he spotted an upright mahogany piano in his uncle's house. He marveled at the individual notes, set “in a long shining row before my eyes. Not only could I hear them, I could see them,” he later remembered. His romance with the violin cooled temporarily in favor of the piano, with its long expanse of keys. But by the time he entered the Copenhagen Conservatory in 1884 as a scholarship student, the violin was his chosen instrument. After graduating two years later, he supported himself by playing violin at the Tivoli Gardens, and in 1899 he joined the Royal Orchestra.

Nielsen's earliest known composition—other than those he made up as a three-year-old by playing melodies on different sizes of logs from the woodpile outside his house—was a polka for violin. (His father, never suspecting the direction his son's music would take, complained that it was too syncopated.) Most of his first works were scored for string instruments; even before entering the conservatory, he composed several string quartets, a violin sonata, and a duet for two violins (all still unpublished). His official op. 1 is a Little Suite for strings written in 1888; that same year he also composed a string quintet.

Then, in 1892, with hardly any experience writing for orchestra, Nielsen completed his first symphony. (He had tried to compose a symphony in 1888, but gave up after one movement.) Although the work is wild and uneven (one reviewer compared Nielsen to “a child playing with dynamite”), it reveals many of the hallmarks of the composer's mature and highly individual style—a driving rhythmic energy and an original sense of harmonic progression—and suggests that Nielsen was a born symphonist. For the next three decades, as he slowly turned out five more symphonies, this appeared to be his ideal medium.

It was Nielsen’s Third Symphony (the so-called Sinfonia expansiva), written in 1910 and 1911, that was the breakthrough—his first work that reveals greatness rather than promise. And it was his Fourth (The Inextinguishable), composed during WWI, that came the closest to giving him a runaway success (it’s still the most often performed of the six symphonies). His Fifth Symphony, premiered six years after the Fourth, is arguably his greatest work in the form.

The Fifth Symphony has no subtitle, but its “subject” is familiar Nielsen territory. As Nielsen said in a newspaper interview published the day of the premiere,

My first symphony was nameless too. But then came The Four Temperaments, Espansiva, and The Inextinguishable, actually just different names for the same thing, the only thing that
music can express when all is said and done: the resting powers as opposed to the active ones. If I were to find a name for this, my new fifth symphony, it would express something similar.

Although Nielsen failed to find a suitable title—“the one word that is at the same time characteristic and not too pretentious”—the music itself clearly defines a drama of energy and release. (When pressed, Nielsen suggested the image of a stone being rolled up a hill, where it lies still—“the energy is tied up in it”—and then kicked down the other side.) After writing four symphonies divided into the four standard movements, here Nielsen opts for a two-part design—“the first, which begins slowly and calmly, and the second, more active.” (Nielsen wasn’t yet done with traditional symphonic form—his sixth and final symphony reverts to a four-movement layout.)

Both of Nielsen’s two movements are further subdivided into contrasting sections. The first movement begins uncertainly, with wandering wind melodies over static, obsessive string figures; turns more sinister (pounding timpani and an insistent snare drum add to the Hitchcock-like suspense); and then dissolves into a spacious, heartfelt adagio. The snare drum returns, with even greater force, at the climax of the Adagio, nearly upstaging the entire orchestra—it’s one of Nielsen’s signature confrontations, like the battle of the timpani in The Inextinguishable. The second movement is more impetuous, with a number of gear shifts along the way; it never loses momentum, even when it slows down for a gentle andante episode, and it never lacks energy.

In Nielsen’s works, the conflict between keys and the ultimate journey away from home base creates the drama of each piece. Many of his symphonies, like some of Mahler’s, don’t end in the key with which they begin. As Robert Simpson, the composer’s biographer, writes, Nielsen believed “that a sense of achievement is best conveyed by the firm establishment of a new key”—in contrast to the policy of composers from Bach to Shostakovich. In the Fifth Symphony, the harmonic itinerary is unusually ambitious. The piece begins ambiguously, and Nielsen takes his time settling on F major as his starting point. The second movement opens in B major, the opposite side of the harmonic world—technically, it’s as far removed from F major as possible—and ends in E-flat major, a key scarcely touched in the opening movement. The entire symphony is a grand adventure—a drama of glimpsed horizons, circuitous routes, and unexpected destinations.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.