

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Helios Overture, Op. 17

Carl Nielsen

Born into a large family of slender means, Carl Nielsen rose to become the most honored of Denmark's composers. He studied at the Copenhagen Conservatory and, thanks to a traveling fellowship, experienced firsthand the musical worlds of Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin. After returning to Denmark he embarked on a career as an orchestral violinist and then a conductor both at home and abroad. In 1915 he was named to a professorship at the Copenhagen Conservatory, where for some years he taught music theory and composition. He was named the school's director in 1930, and his death the following year qualified as an occasion of national mourning. At his funeral, the Free Church in Copenhagen was filled with wreaths and floral tributes not only from the King and Queen of Denmark but also from the various academies of art and orders of distinction to which he had been inducted over the years in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Germany, France, and Italy.

Whether or not his elegantly crafted *Helios Overture* should be considered a symphonic poem is more than a matter of classification and nomenclature. It goes to the heart of a challenge Nielsen grappled with over many years: the question of program music. He was uneasy with the idea that instrumental music might be crafted to "narrate" a literary story. That was the concept behind the genre of the symphonic poem, which Franz Liszt had developed in the 1840s and 1850s and which at the turn of the 20th century was flourishing in the works of Richard Strauss. Nielsen was more of a purist in his outlook,

believing that music must narrate its own story — that the structure of a composition should arise from the internal logic of the music rather than from any external plot or imagery. On the other hand, he was willing to recognize that some degree of inspiration might derive from external stimuli.

In the winter of 1903 he found himself in Athens, where his wife, the sculptor Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, was benefiting from a study grant and the local conservatory had provided him a studio in which to work. For a Danish composer, a warm winter on the shores of the Aegean proved inspiring indeed.

When the work was published, Nielsen attached brief descriptive verbiage: "Stillness and darkness — Then the sun rises to joyous songs of praise — Wanders its golden way —"

IN SHORT

Born: June 9, 1865, in Sortelung, near Nørre Lyndelse, Funen, Denmark

Died: October 3, 1931, in Copenhagen

Work composed: March 10–April 23, 1903, in Athens, Greece, dedicated to the German-Dutch composer Julius Röntgen

World premiere: October 8, 1903, at the Odd Fellows Hall in Copenhagen, by the Danish Royal Orchestra, Johan Svendsen, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 12, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 26, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor, at the Annual Free Memorial Day Concert

Estimated duration: ca. 13 minutes

quietly sinks in the sea.” Clearly, a depictive element was central to the piece. Only two days after he finished composing it, he sent a long, chatty letter to Thomas Laub, a fellow Danish composer with whom he acknowledged aesthetic differences, writing:

If you would like to write a little something to me, I would be very pleased ... and you can give me your opinion of so-called Program Music, to what extent you think a program is permissible, and so forth. It is of some interest to me, as I have just done such a piece: that is to say, not a detailed program. My overture describes the movement of the sun through the heavens from morning to evening, but it is only called *Helios* and no explanation is necessary. What do you say? Such a program title is not

a nuisance. Light, Darkness, Sun, and Rain are almost the same as Credo, Crucifixus, Gloria, and so forth.

In this piece, Nielsen finds his comfort level at a point where some non-musical idea can provide general inspiration while stopping short of a detailed narrative. In this, the *Helios Overture* mirrors the balance of inspiration also found in Nielsen’s Symphony No. 2 (*The Four Temperaments*), in which the movements reflect four different aspects of human personality, and Symphony No. 4 (*The Inextinguishable*), which reflects in a general way the indomitable spirit of life.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

Sources and Inspirations



Helios drives his chariot in a depiction from the Temple of Athena at Troy, 4th century BCE

Carl Nielsen composed the *Helios Overture* during a winter spent in Greece, on the shores of the Aegean. He wrote to a friend:

Now it is scorchingly hot. Helios burns all day and I am writing away at my new solar system: a long introduction with sunrise and morning song is finished, and I have begun on the allegro.

As evidenced in his correspondence, Nielsen had found inspiration in Helios, the Greek god who drove the chariot of the sun across the sky each day. Appearing at the helm of his team of fire-darting steeds — Pyrois, Aeos, Aethon, and Phlegon — Helios was often depicted with a sunburst crowning his head.

— The Editors