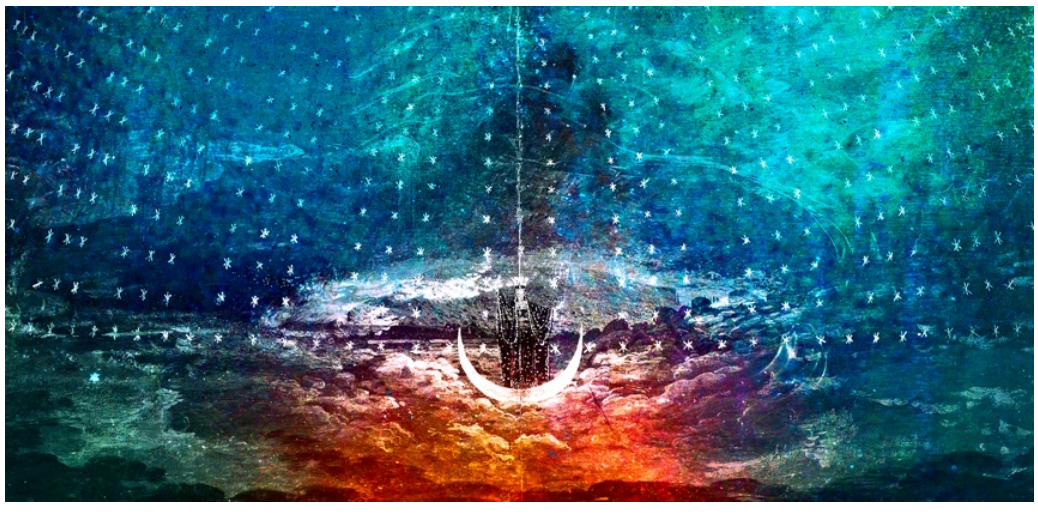


Rituals and the Eternal

Friday, 6 March 2020, 7.30pm
Conservatory Concert Hall

Programme

MOZART	Selections from *Die Zauberflöte*
	Act 1 Quintet
	Act 2 Finale
	- Intermission (20 minutes) -
MESSIAEN	*The Celestial Banquet*
NIELSEN	Symphony No. 4, *"The Inextinguishable"*
	I. Allegro –
	II. Poco allegretto –
	III. Poco adagio quasi andante –
	IV. Allegro

PROGRAMME NOTES

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Die Zauberflöte, K.620

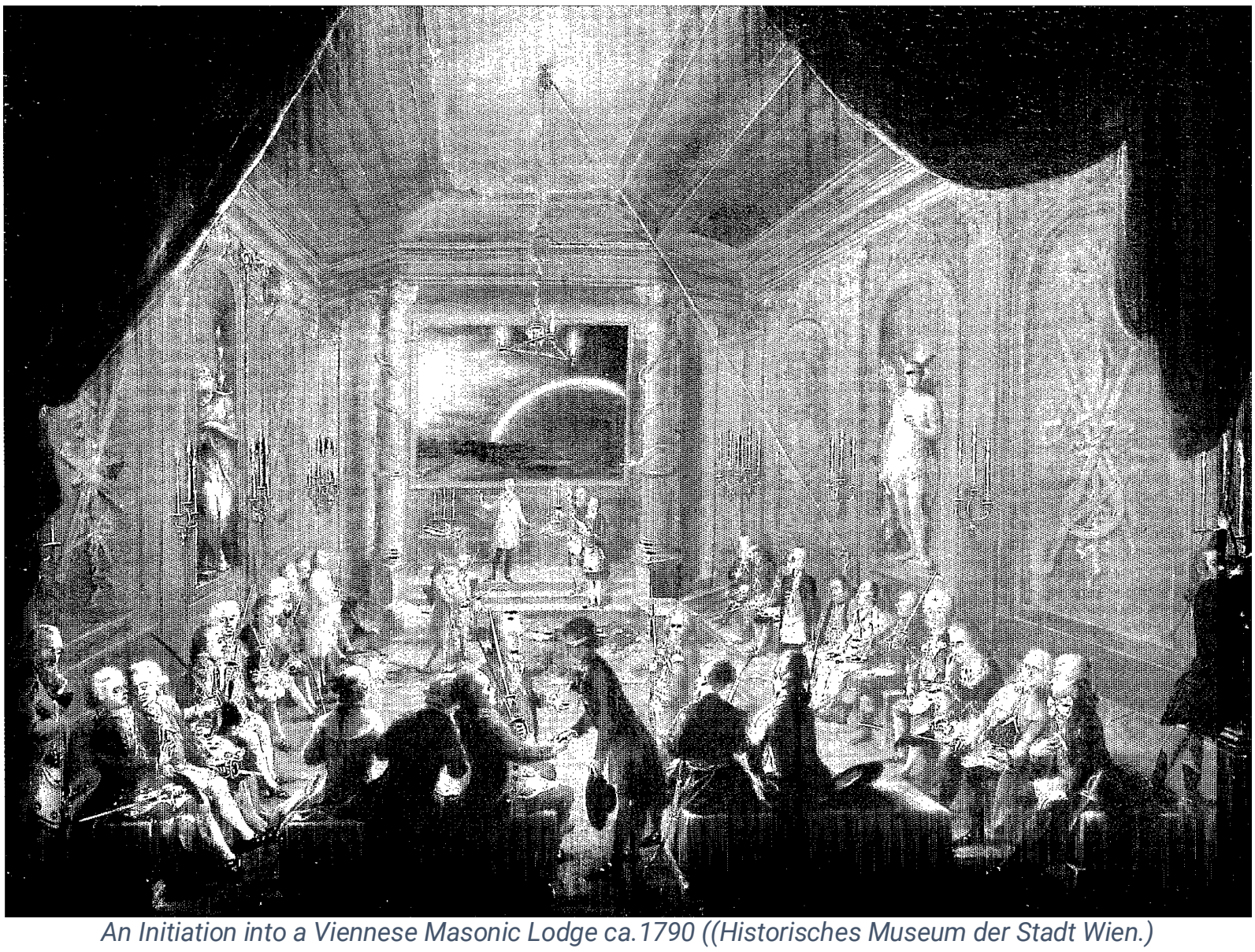
The Ritual

In February 2018 the BBC ran something of an exposé on the secretive organisation known as the Freemasons, describing some of its practices and rituals. The BBC report included an interview with one anonymous Freemason; “Each lodge meets four times a year officially to welcome new members in ceremonies, the contents of which have always been a closely-guarded secret. It's all based on King Solomon's Temple; it's an allegory, slightly grounded in religion. The best way to explain it is that it's like a play, which everyone has a part in. When you go through your three ceremonies there are things you have to learn. The ‘third degree’ is the final stage before becoming a fully-fledged Mason. The ceremony involves close questioning, which is where the expression ‘giving someone the third degree’ originates”.

For the initiation rites, the Masonic lodge becomes a symbolic representation of King Solomon’s Temple, complete with symbols representing its original construction. The person seeking admission knocks three times to gain entry to the temple, and is then put through a series of trials to prove sincerity and character, traditionally involving the elements of earth, air, water and fire. In his article about these initiation rites, David E Stafford has written; “The first trial experienced by the candidate is that of earth and

involves the Chamber of Reflection. The following three trials are known as 'The Journeys' and are made up of circumambulations around the Lodge with various barriers and experiences to encounter. Each journey is accredited with an element; air, water, and fire".

Mozart, Schikaneder and Freemasonry



An Initiation into a Viennese Masonic Lodge ca.1790 ((Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien.)

Mozart had been initiated into the Freemasons on 14th December 1784, joining the "Benevolence" Lodge which itself had been founded just the previous year, Freemasonry having been banned from the Austrian Empire up until the death of Empress Maria Theresa in 1780 (she had objected to the fact that her husband had used lodge meetings overseas as an excuse to carry on a string of extra-marital affairs). As Ferdinand Zörrer wrote in his 1991 book *Recalling Mozart as a Freemason,* "Thanks to announcements, numerous invitations and other masonic documents, we know of Mozart's very frequent masonic activities, which distinguished him from many other famous brethren of the Craft, and continued until his death". Within weeks of being admitted to the third degree (Master Mason), Mozart composed the first of some 10 distinct works specifically for lodge meetings. In the words of the Mozart scholar William Ober, "Mozart's association with Freemasonry brought out many of the best qualities in his character and inspired some of his most touching music, music of high purpose and moral enrichment, to be enjoyed not only for its beauty – as all Mozart's music is – but for its noble values as well."

The impresario and librettist Emmanuel Schikaneder was also a Freemason, and in 1789 took over the artistic administration of Vienna's Theater auf der Wieden. Mozart regularly wrote music for Schikaneder's productions, and in 1790 collaborated with him on what was to be the last of his 21 operas, *Die Zauberflöte* ("The Magic Flute"). Both men decided that this should incorporate copious references to Masonic symbols and rituals, but apart from this being a shared interest, their desire to convey these generally secretive rituals on stage is only really appreciated when we understand the role of Freemasonry in late 18th century Viennese society. To be admitted the ranks of Freemasons, a man needed to have powerful and influential friends, and once admitted, could regard himself as one of the most important and influential people in society. The Emperor was a Freemason, as were the vast majority of the men attending the opera. So neither Schikaneder nor Mozart were actually spilling secrets; rather they were indulging in a series of in-jokes which they knew the audience would appreciate since they, themselves, had been through these initiation rites. In short, by writing an opera infused with masonic symbols, Mozart was telling the great and good of Vienna he was actually one of them – on an equal footing socially with the Emperor, no less.

Masonic Rituals in The Magic Flute

Schikaneder's libretto for *The Magic Flute* is shot through with Masonic references, his two protagonists (Tamino and Papageno) being put through a series of trials which clearly relate to the three stages of the Masonic initiation. Mozart, too, played his part in incorporating Masonic symbols in the music. The symbolism of the number three in Freemasonry cannot be overstated and it is no coincidence that the Overture is in the key of E flat major (key-signature of three flats), while, after a majestically statuesque opening and scampering string *fugato*, the momentum is suddenly arrested by wind and brass solemnly intoning the rhythmic sign – three groups of three chords - of the Second Degree of Freemasonry, implying that Prince Tamino, who is, as the Overture unfolds, being chased by a snake in a wild and rocky landscape, has yet to undergo the third and final part of the initiation process to become a Master Mason.

But to appreciate The Magic Flute, one does not need any knowledge at all of the Masonic rites or rituals, and, indeed, while they propel the story along, those unacquainted with them will not in any way miss out on the glories of what is, by common consensus, Mozart's finest opera. As the great music scholar H C Robbins Landon has written, "There was something in *The Magic Flute* for everyone: for the connoisseur; for the man or woman in the street; for children, who loved the animal scenes. Its solemn message of 'beauty and wisdom' – the last lines of the text – touched men's and women's hearts. People roared with laughter over Papageno's jokes".

Paid for out of Schikaneder's own pocket, the première of *The Magic Flute,* which took place on 30th September 1791 (a little over two months before Mozart's death) was a resounding success. Mozart wrote to his wife a week later; "I have this moment returned from the opera, which was as full as ever. What always gives me the most pleasure is the silent approval! You can see how this opera is becoming more and more esteemed", Within a month it had been staged to full houses no less than 20 times and, just 14 months later, received its 100th performance.

The Magic Flute

"Mozart and Schikaneder at work on the Magic Flute" – late 19th century cartoon © Rosenberg collection

Tamino has been bitten by a snake and fallen unconscious, but three ladies in the service of the Queen of the Night appear and kill the snake. They go off to inform the Queen of their good deed, but just as Tamino recovers consciousness, Papageno the bird-catcher arrives and boasts that it was he who killed the snake. Unfortunately for him the Queen's women overhear his claim and punish him by padlocking his lips together. They hand Tamino a portrait of Pamina, the Queen's daughter, whom, they say, has been kidnapped by a magician called Sarastro and his evil henchman

Monostatos. Tamino immediately falls in love with the portrait, and the Queen demands that both he and Papageno set off and rescue Pamina.

In the Quintet we hear in today's concert, the Three Ladies remove the padlock from Papageno's lips and present both Tamino and Papageno with a magic flute and a set of silver bells to ensure their safety over the trial ahead, and they call on three spirits to guide them on their journey.

We next hear the opera's finale, at which point the three spirits have safely guided Tamino to the Temple of Light where they find a distraught Pamina about to kill herself with the dagger; she suffered badly when Tamino underwent the trial involving his total silence. The Spirits dissuade her from that course of action and deliver her to Tamino, and the two of them undergo the final trials; proclaimed by the two men in armour guarding the temple, as the ordeals of water and fire. After they have successfully undergone these with the aid of the magic flute, Papageno turns up and half-heartedly attempts to hang himself, upset that he has lost the woman he thought would become his wife. Easily dissuaded from this by the Three Spirits, he is persuaded to play his bells, and she appears. The woman, Papagena, and Papageno pledge undying love to each other and a future life surrounded by their innumerable children. Monostatos, having joined forces with the Queen of the Night and her Three Ladies, attempts to attack the temple, but they are defeated by an earthquake and banished by Sarastro, who is actually the High Priest, and who then blesses the union of Pamina and Tamino and celebrates the victory of light over darkness.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Le Banquet céleste

The Ritual

The Eucharist has its roots in the Last Supper where Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples

The Roman Catholic Mass has at its centre the Eucharist. The earliest and most detailed account of the Eucharist is found in the letter written by St. Paul to the Corinthians which dates back to between 52-55 AD. St Paul writes that “on the same night that He was betrayed”, Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples and told them “whosoever shall eat this Bread, or drink the Chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the Body and of the Blood of the Lord”. This transformation of the simple elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ by means of a sacred ritual performed on an altar by a priest, is known as Transubstantiation and is one of the great mysteries of the faith, and one which those who then partake of the sacraments of bread and wine believe to transform their souls into oneness with Jesus. During the rite of the Eucharist, the bread and wine is delivered to the priest by ordinary members of the congregation, the priest then places them on an altar, and the act of transubstantiation then takes place. It has long been a tradition for this moment to be accompanied by music, and for centuries organists have contemplated on this great mystery of faith through reflective improvisations, while composers have provided short pieces for those not blessed with adequate improvisatory skills, variously called “Elevation” or “Communion”.

Messiaen and the Roman Catholic Faith

Messiaen at the organ of Sainte-Trinité in 1940

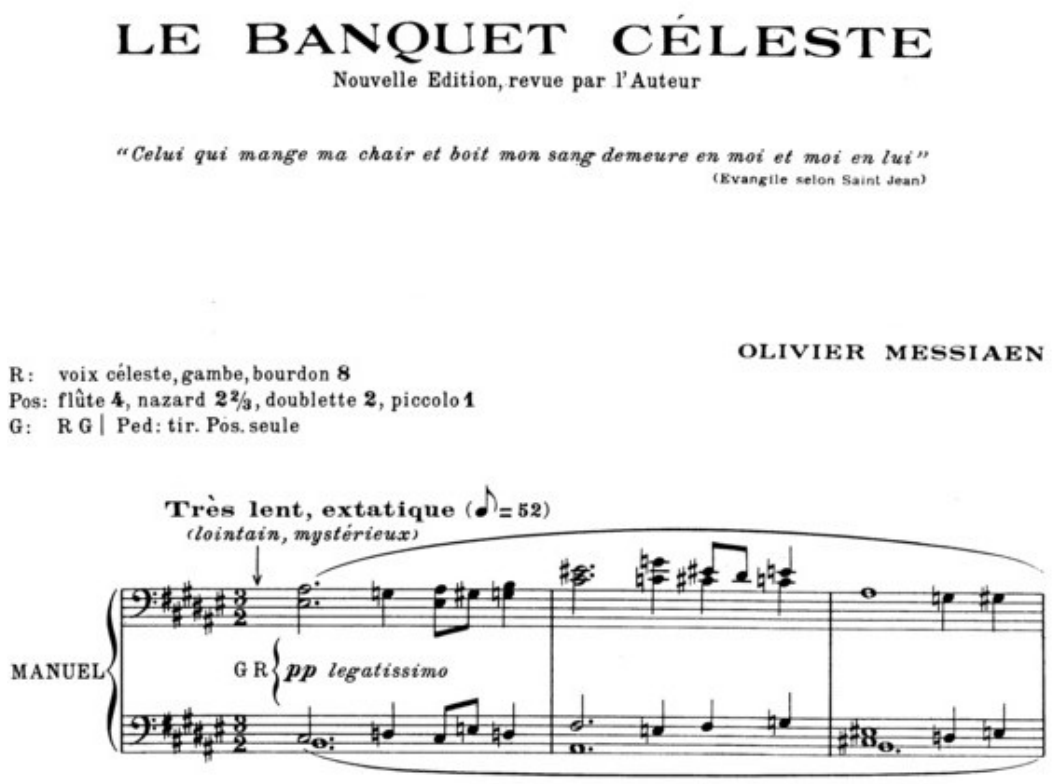
In 1931 Olivier Messiaen was appointed Organist at the church of Sainte-Trinité in Paris, a post he was to retain for a staggering 60 years fulfilling the daily duties of a parish church organist, playing at Sunday Mass, the services of the Office, for weddings, for funerals, and for major festive events. At the same time, he was carving a niche as the 20th century's most distinctive and visionary composer whose music encompassed just about every genre. He wrote 14 works for the organ, all of which are thoroughly permeated with his profound, if unconventional, Catholic faith and visionary zeal. Although Messiaen celebrated his faith through his music, as had so many of his predecessors, his faith was so all-encompassing that he was compelled to devise a wholly new musical style and language to express it. This was to result in the creation of an entirely original and intensely detailed harmonic vocabulary, the introduction of notated birdsong (he famously saw nature, specifically as represented in the songs of birds, as fundamental to his faith) and rhythmic patterns derived from non-Christian Oriental religions. But with his very first published work, while none of those elements had yet permeated his writing, he made it very clear that he was travelling along very new and original paths, harmonically, technically and spiritually. That work was *Le Banquet céleste* ("The Celestial Feast") which he composed in1928 on summer vacation from his studies at the Paris Conservatoire and while staying at an aunt's farm in rural France. It reflects on the sacrament of the Eucharist, and particularly the mysterious process of transubstantiation, and while devised as a traditional organ “Elevation”, is anything but traditional. In short, this is possibly the most revolutionary work ever written in the 2300-year history of the organ.

The Rituals in Le Banquet céleste

Stops from the Aristide Cavaillé-Coll organ in Farnborough Abbey (where Marc Rochester was organist from 1970-1972)

When the French organ builder, Aristide Cavaillé-Coll devised his so-called "Symphonic Organs" during the 19th century, he arranged the tone-colours (stops) so that they reflected – in name rather than sound – the instruments of an orchestra. Perhaps the least orchestral-like of all these stops are those described as "strings" (which traditionally go under such names as Viole de Gambe or Salicional), but Cavaillé-Coll was able to imitate one effect of orchestral strings to a particularly impressive effect; vibrato. While organs have, for centuries, possessed actual tremolando effects created by causing undulations in the wind supply going, Cavaillé-Coll's masterstroke was to imitate the effect of a string vibrato by including a stop in which all the pipes are tuned fractionally sharp of the true pitch. In combination with pipes tuned to the true pitch, these pipes set up a subtle but effective beating, and Cavaillé-Coll named the mis-tuned stop, the *Voix céleste* ("Heavenly voice"). 19th and 20th century French organists notably made much use of this effect in their improvisations played at the moment of Transubstantiation, and Messiaen was no different, using this "celestial" effect to create an aura of great calm and mystery through a sequence of ostinato chords played by the hands. The timelessness of God is also reflected in *Le Banquet céleste* by means of an extremely slow, often quite static sense of movement (unusually, Messiaen gave the work a time-signature, but few listening to it would recognise any clear passage of measured time elapsing between the celestial chords). But the real innovation of *Le Banquet céleste* comes not in the harmonies, the choice of stops or the tempo, but in the imagery which lies at the core of the piece.

Ritual in Musical Imagery


LE BANQUET CÉLESTE

Nouvelle Edition, revue par l'Auteur

"Celui qui mange ma chair et boit mon sang demeure en moi et moi en lui"

(Evangile selon Saint Jean)

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

R: voix céleste, gambe, bourdon 8
Pos: flûte 4, nazard 2⅔, doublette 2, piccolo 1
G: R G | Ped: tir. Pos. seule

Très lent, extatique (♩=52)
(lointain, mystérieux)

MANUEL

G R *pp legatissimo*

The score of *Le Banquet céleste* is headed by a quotation from the Biblical Gospel of St John, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me, and I in him" and, as with all such quotations in Messiaen's works, gives the key to the composer's vision in the music. In short, he attempts to provide a musical representation of the transubstantiation.

Under the hands' ostinato, the pedals intone a peculiar figure at a very high pitch. This, in itself, is something quite revolutionary for, while some other composers had tried the idea out in brief passages within larger works, *Le Banquet céleste* is the first major work in the organ repertory to be built entirely around the idea of the pedals playing at a pitch above the hands. Beginning low down, the feet set up an unrelenting staccato pattern which Messiaen suggests should be "like drops of water". But as these get higher in pitch and the hands' ostinato becomes ever more ecstatic, a transformation comes over the work, and the drops of water become the life blood of Christ, not dripping physically (some commentators suggest that the imagery is of the blood dripping from Christ's wounds as he hung on the cross – an image the composer vehemently discounted in his conversations with the present writer) but transforming themselves into long "poetic" (the composer's own word) reflections on the miracle at the heart of the Eucharist.

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

Timing – 34:00

Symphony No.4 - "The Inextinguishable", Op.29
Allegro –
Poco Allegretto –
Poco adagio quasi andante – Con anime –
Allegro

The Eternal

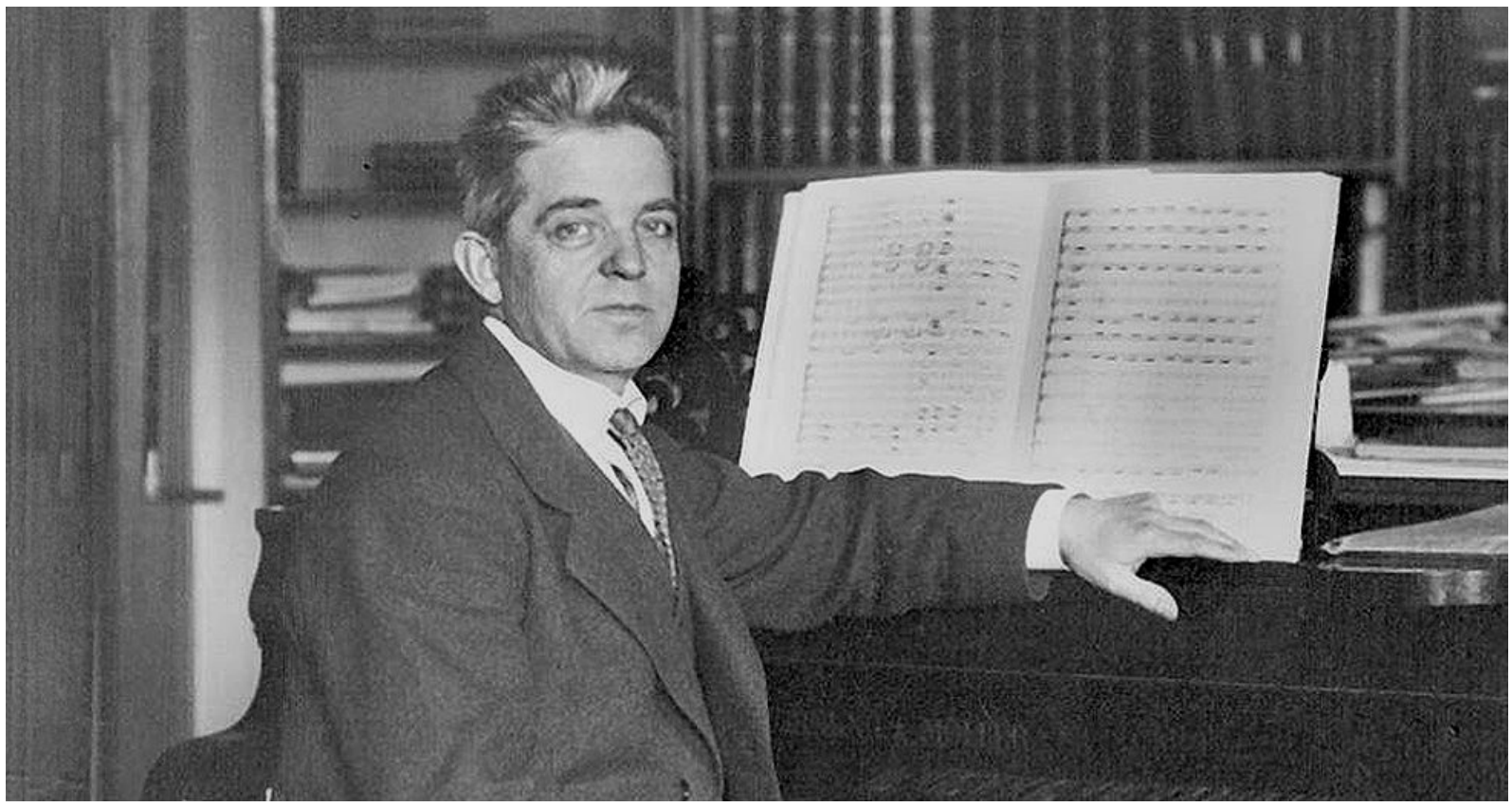
Before the interval, Messiaen's final, long chord, represented the eternity of God. We now hear a work which celebrates the eternal, inextinguishable spirit of life itself. As Carl Nielsen wrote of his Fourth Symphony; "The symphony evokes the most primal sources of life. Music is life, and, like life, inextinguishable". While there might be many in this hall today who would agree with Nielsen's sentiments, given the context of the time in which the work was written, at the very least his words seem wildly optimistic. But as the English writer on music, Tom Service, has suggested, the work is "simultaneously a war symphony, a document of the violence and intensity and emotion of the times in which it was written, and one of the most bracing revelations of what its composer thought as the self-sustaining, organically-generating powers of symphonic discourse". In short, it does not celebrate the eternal nature of God, religion or nature, but of music itself.

The Eternal Optimist

Carl Nielsen was 14 when he joined an army band where his ability to pick up and play instruments without any instruction was quickly recognised. Five years later he was admitted to the Copenhagen Conservatory with all fees waived, and followed this with a spell of study in Berlin before returning to Copenhagen in 1891 and joining the Royal Danish Opera Orchestra as a second violinist. He had already produced a number of compositions and it was during his time with the orchestra (he eventually resigned in order to concentrate on composition) that he produced the first of the six symphonies which remain his most enduring legacy. In the summer of 1914, with serious financial worries and the outbreak of the First World War causing him deep distress, he set to work on his Fourth.

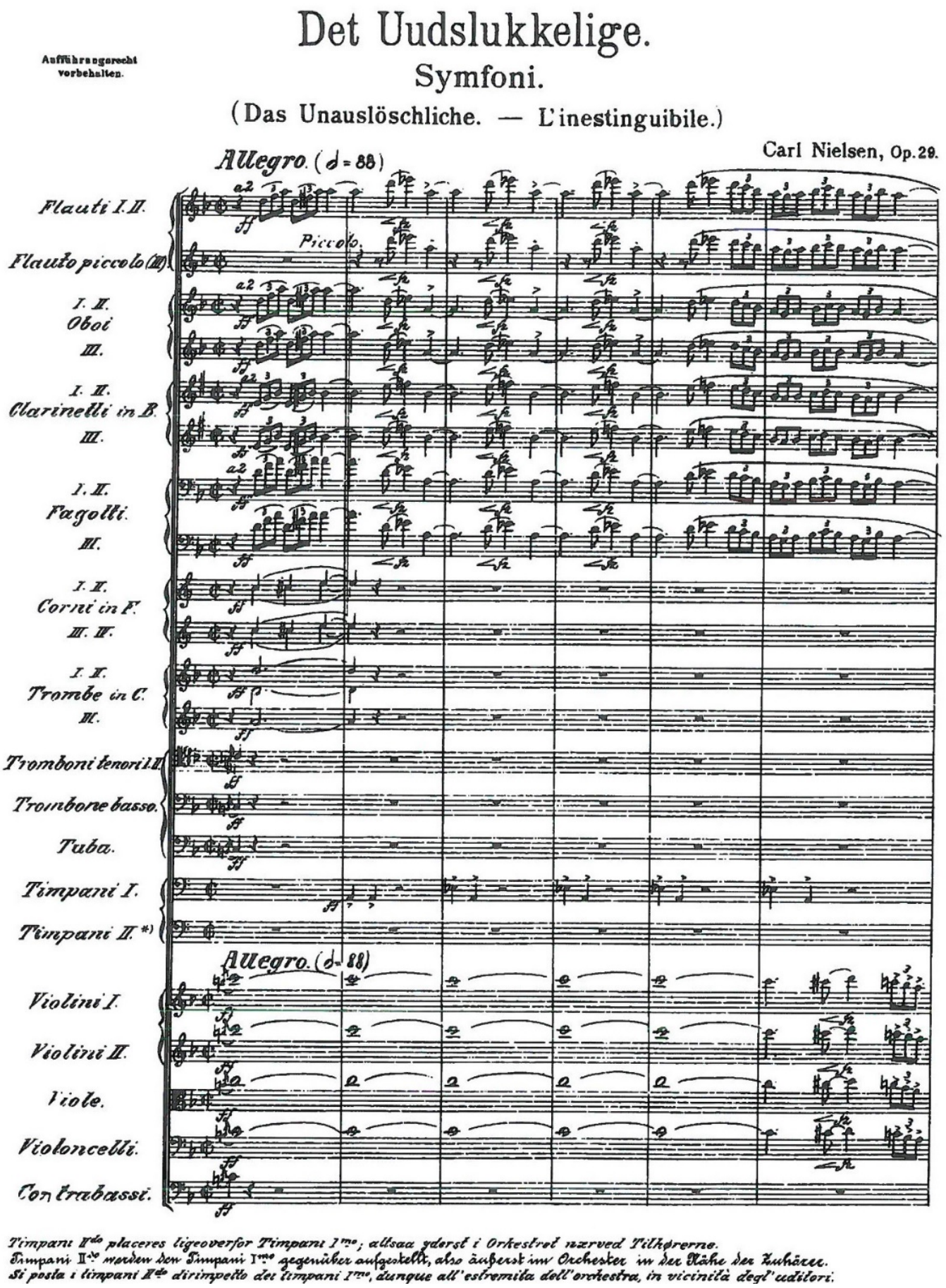
While it might seem only to be expected that the Fourth Symphony should reflect some sense of apprehension, not to say dread, at what the future had in store, it reflects far more Nielsen's insatiable optimism. Hence the title which, as Nielsen himself pointed out, "We can say in case all the world was devastated by fire, deluge or volcanoes and all things were destroyed and dead, then nature would still begin to breed new life. Soon plants would begin to multiply, birds would breed and man's aspiration and yearning would be felt. These are the forces which are truly inextinguishable".

The Eternal Music



But that is only part of the story, Nielsen also wrote; “Music is Life. As soon as even a single note sounds in the air or through space, its result is life and movement; that is why music (and the dance) are the more immediate expressions of the will to live. This is not a musical, programme-like account of the development of a life within a limited stretch of time and space, but an un-programme-like dip right down to the layers of the emotional life that are still half-chaotic and wholly elementary. In other words, the opposite of all programme music, despite the fact that this sounds like a programme. The symphony is not something with a thought-content, except insofar as the structuring of the various sections and the ordering of the musical material are the fruit of deliberation by the composer in the same way as when an engineer sets up dykes and sluices for the water during a flood. It is in a way a completely thoughtless expression of what make the birds cry, the animals roar, bleat, run and fight, and humans moan, groan exult and shout without any explanation. The symphony does not describe all this, but the basic emotion that lies beneath all this. Music can do just this, it is its most profound quality, its true domain … because, by simply being itself, it has performed its task. For it is life, whereas the other arts only represent and paraphrase life. Life is indomitable and inextinguishable; the struggle, the wrestling, the generation and the wasting away go on today as yesterday, tomorrow as today, and everything returns. Once more: music is life, and like it inextinguishable”.

The Inextinguishable Symphony



The Fourth Symphony's première took place in the Oddfellows' Hall, Copenhagen on 1st February 1916. Although formally organised into the conventional four movements, Nielsen wanted the movements to merge into each other mirroring the continuous process of life ("where one encounters overlapping episodes rather than abrupt breaks"). The work opens, as Service has written, "with one of the most electrifying jolts of energy in symphonic history", or, as the English composer Robert Simpson put it, "two simultaneous streams of fire, one aimed at D the other at C". Here the forces of evil (possibly indicated by the thunderous claps from the timpani and by the frequent appearance of two notes a tritone apart – an interval once described as "the devil in music") are set against the inextinguishable forces of nature, introduced as a

calm woodwind theme. It all comes across as a wild hotchpotch of ideas, seemingly thrown together with great exuberance and, at the same time, presenting every single section of the orchestra with its own moment in the limelight.

The second movement of the Symphony takes the form of an elegant mock-courtly dance played by the woodwind, occasionally veering off into rather bitter territory, but always reverting to its innate charm. As Simpson suggests, "Life is not all conflict", although human conflict seems to be at the very root of the third section, which corresponds to the Symphony's slow movement. This opens with an impassioned passage for violins underpinned by powerful timpani strokes. Here is Nielsen's depiction of the horrors of war, but it soon subsides and, the inextinguishable optimism of life is restored, the section ends with the brass leading the orchestra in a celebratory hymn of praise.

A Zeppelin over London in 1915

The mood relaxes until the violins explode into action for the final section. After a brief, frantic opening, the entire orchestra bursts out with a jubilant, life-affirming dance. The forces of evil and destruction again put in an appearance when two competing sets of timpani battle it out from opposite sides of the stage, in music of such terrifying violence that the English music critic, Ernest Newman, writing in 1923 not long after the German Zeppelin raids which had terrified Londoners during the First World War, thought that it "made us think the air raids had come again". But nothing can now extinguish the indomitable spirit of life itself, and the timpani, along with the entire orchestra, bring the Symphony to its powerfully optimistic conclusion. Like Mozart, where light triumphed over darkness, and Messiaen, where the celestial triumphed over the earthly, Nielsen celebrates life's triumph over death.