



Rued Langgaard: Symfoni nr. 16 “Deluge of Sun” (BVN 417)

Critical first edition by Bendt Viinholt Nielsen

Preface

About Symphony no. 16

Symphony no. 16, completed on 16th April 1951, is Rued Langgaard’s last major work, a concluding artistic tour de force from the composer, who was then weakened by illness. Langgaard’s worklist between this work and his death in July 1952 was only increased by a few small organ, piano and choral pieces.

The symphony was written in the course of a month, but not according to a fixed plan. The idea of a new symphony first arose at the end of March 1951 in connection with the sketching of the two latest movements in time, the Scherzo (II) and the Finale (V). Such a formally crucial element as Movement III, which was composed in 1950 as an independent orchestral piece, was not incorporated in the symphony until after the fair-copying of the other four movements had been concluded on 14th April 1951. The dating 16th April 1951, which also features as an end-dating in the sources, may well refer to this concluding expansion and completion of the symphony.

Movement III, which is the oldest part of the symphony, was written between 20th June and 1st August 1950 – in two bouts of activity, since the introductory 62 bars were added after the main body of the movement had been completed in fair copy. The movement constituted an independent composition with the title *Orchestral Prelude to Strindberg’s “Stormy Air”* (‘Oväder’) or simply *Stormy Air* (*Uvejrsluft* in Danish). The programmatic idea of the work is elucidated by a motto, and a preface was associated with the composition under this title. The motto is a quote from Strindberg’s chamber play *Storm* (1907): “Just look up there; they have gone out of the light! When empty rooms are lit, they look more cheerless than when they are dark!”¹ This is clarified in a way by the preface that can be found among the sources: “The music is of the same kind as Bishop Martensen’s quotation from *Jacob Böhme*. It is as follows: ‘After death there are souls that stand ‘in the gateway’, where light and threatening darkness rule. What such souls must endure cannot be explained. The world will not believe it. It is far too wise and understands nothing!’”² Another, probably later title, *Shineth in Darkness* (probably a reference to John 1,5), appears in Langgaard’s correspondence with the Danish Broadcasting Corporation.³ Finally, before its incorporation in Symphony no. 16, the work bore the title *Désastre de soleil* or alternatively *Galt med Solen* (“Disaster Overtakes the Sun”).

The sketches for the other movements of the symphony were written between 14th and 30th March 1951. Between 14th and 17th March Langgaard sketched an *Elegy* for eight strings and timpani. The piece was later included, with expanded instrumentation, as Movement IV in the symphony. The elegy was based on a still-extant sketch from 1917, which in turn can be traced back to 1913, to the summer stay, so significant in Langgaard’s biography, at *Rosengården* in Blekinge (Sweden) and the time just after this. The preserved sketch pages from 1917 contain fragmentary drafts for an orchestral work called *Three Pieces for Orchestra (Towards Winter)* and have the datings *10 Sept 1917*, *In Memory of 10 Sept 1913* and *15 Sept 1917*. The elegy from 1951 is based on the middle one of the three pieces, designated *Intermezzo*. The opening theme of the movement, which was taken from the 1917 sketch, is called *Rued Langgaard’s theme from 1913* in the score of Symphony no. 16. A further two musical elements connect the elegy with the year 1913. Bars 41-43 and 49-51 of the movement comprise what one could call Langgaard’s ‘memory motif’ (both passages can also be found in the 1917 sketch). The motif is a quotation from the song *Vergeblich* (from *Lieder von Goethe*, BVN 60, 1913), and

it appears in innumerable of Langgaard's works as a personal fingerprint with a cryptic significance. Finally, although there is no direct quotation, there is a striking resemblance between passages in the elegy and in the slow movement of Symphony no. 2, likewise from 1913. The elegy thus seems to be a nostalgic recollection of moods and events from Langgaard's youth almost forty years earlier.

Something similar may even be true of the first movement of the symphony. For Langgaard's sketch, done in Ribe at Easter 1951, is furnished with the inscription *Tulseboda! 1951!!!* – Tulseboda Brunn was the name of the spa in Kyrkhult associated with the Langgaard family during their repeated summer stays in Blekinge in the period 1909-13 (Langgaard did not visit Tulseboda in 1951). The movement was sketched with the end-dating 27th March under the designation *Praeludium*. Langgaard's first idea was apparently to combine this movement and the freshly composed *Elegy* with one or more existing choral works under the title *Excelsus, Vigils for solo, choir and orchestra*, but the idea of a new symphony seems to have occurred immediately, such that the next two movements, Scherzo and Finale, sketched respectively on 27th March and 30th March, were written with the symphony in mind.

Langgaard states that the symphony was “composed and orchestrated at the organ of Ribe Cathedral”. The instrumentation and fair-copying of the score of four movements I, II, IV and V took place in one and the same working process, which was begun on 4th or 5th April. The score is end-dated 14th April 1951. Two days later the score was sent off by registered mail from Ribe to the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. But at that time the symphony had a further movement, inasmuch as the orchestral piece *Galt med Solen* had been interpolated as Movement III under the title *Straffedans* (“Dance of Retribution”) (Langgaard had first considered the title *Nemesis*).

As a gesture of acknowledgement Langgaard put a dedication to the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra on the title page of the score. But for the time being there was no performance, and the score ended up, like so many others, in the music library of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. The conductor Launy Grøndahl did write to Langgaard that he would “of course” accept the symphony, “but certainly *not* with the title with which you have garnished it – away with these confounded titles and let the music speak for itself”.⁴ The title *Sun Deluge* is said to have given rise to some amusement among the staff of the Danish broadcasting house. About the genesis of the odd title there is some information in the Danmarks Radio archives, written down by Sven Lunn, head of the music department of the Royal Library:

Mrs R.L. [Constance Langgaard] has explained to me that when the symphony had been written, it had to have a name. – It's about the sun, said Mrs Rued L. – Yes, he [RL] answered, it's the sun, sun and sun again. – It's a whole deluge of sun, she said. And so the symphony came to be called “Deluge of Sun”.⁵

Among the sketches for the work there is an early, now crossed-out title proposal: *Sinfonia irata* (“irate symphony”). On the title page of the score the designation “Symfoni di punta” is written, i.e. more properly *Sinfonia di punta*, which has no very clear meaning in Italian. *Punta* means ‘point’ or ‘peak’ and Langgaard must be assumed to have meant that this was a symphony where everything was concentrated and “taken to a peak”. This is confirmed by the fact that Rued Langgaard is said to have told Constance Langgaard at the hospital in June 1952, speaking of Symphonies 11 and 16, that in these works “everything is so much taken to extremes [literally ‘taken to the peak’]”.⁶ In the last note written by Langgaard, from the same time, he also mentions Symphonies 11 and 16 together and says that these works mark “the end of music's mission in the world”.⁷ There are incidentally musical affinities between the opening themes in the two symphonies.

In the mid-1960s, when Danmarks Radio wished, at the instigation of the head of the music department Mogens Andersen, to present one of Langgaard's many unperformed symphonies in a Thursday Concert, the choice fell on Symphony no. 16, prompted by among other things the dedication to the Radio Symphony Orchestra. The first performance was given on 17th March 1966 under the baton of Francesco Cristofoli.

The present critical edition was first performed 28th October 2004 in Copenhagen by the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Thomas Dausgaard.

Notes

¹ August Strindberg: *Værker. I oversættelse ved Sven Lange*. Copenhagen. 1928. Vol. VIII, p. 241 (from Scene 3 of the play).

² After a passage, pp. 259-260 in H.L. Martensen: *Jacob Bøhme. Theosophiske Studier*. Copenhagen. 1881. – The motto is in the manuscript RLS 75,1 [folio 1, p. 1], but has been pasted over. RL furnished it with the heading “ad libitum” and an addition says “O, nuances!”.

³ RL to the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, 9.9.1950 (DR archives, Box no. 78)

⁴ Letter of 30.10.1951, The Royal Library, Copenhagen, Dept. of Manuscripts. Utilg. 554,6.

⁵ Sven Lunn to DR, 4.2.1965; DR archives, Box no. 78, Constance Langgaard’s correspondence (earlier under the signature 816).

⁶ CL in a letter of 11.10.1965 to Hans Riis-Vestergaard, DR. Draft or copy in The Royal Library, Copenhagen. Dept. of Manuscripts, Utilg. 554,9.

⁷ Note pasted into the score of Symphony no. 11, RLS 27,1.

Bendt Viinholt Nielsen, Sept. 2003 (2004)

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