

It's gurner be celebration of a great Dane

In the year of Danish composer Carl Nielsen's 150th anniversary, one of his best-loved pieces will be played by the Royal Danish Orchestra at Symphony Hall. **RICHARD BRATBY** reports

On the wall of Carl Nielsen's childhood home in Nørre Lyndelse on the Danish island of Funen they don't have just one photo of the teenage composer, they have nine. Dressed in an oversized tweed suit, he looks like he's entered a gurning competition. He furrows his brow and scowls. He crosses his eyes. He winks. He smirks cheekily from under a huge hat. And in the middle shot, he looks seriously, intently ahead; quietly determined, eyes fixed on something that only he can see.

It simply jumps off the wall. 150 years after his birth in June 1865, here's Carl Nielsen himself: playful, impulsive, fiercely intelligent and irresistibly alive. Of course, if you know his Fifth Symphony – which the Royal Danish Orchestra brings to Symphony Hall this month – or his Fourth, "The Inextinguishable", with which the CBSO will launch its 2015-16 season, none of this will come as a surprise.

But still, the clear-eyed freshness of Nielsen's music, with its great surges of energy and fearless, ear-splitting battles against everything that denies life – duelling timpani in the Fourth Symphony, a vindictive side-drum in the Fifth – comes vividly into focus when you visit Funen.

On a summer day, the countryside around the island's main city of Odense – where as a 14-year old bugler in the Danish army, Nielsen astonished his comrades with his ear-splitting high Cs – seems to be alive with that same life-force. Lush green fields roll to meet a brilliant blue sky and outside Nielsen's childhood



■ Composer Carl Nielsen.

cottage, local cyclists gather for the day's ride.

It's a humble place but lovingly cared-for.

For Carl's 150th birthday, the house was decorated with bowls of meadow flowers and grasses. Local children were invited into the garden to sing Nielsen's songs – they're sung in every school in Denmark – and to tap out melodies on the log-pile, just as Nielsen remembered doing in his memoir *My Funen Childhood*. Inside the house you can see the battered violin played by Blind Anders, the fiddle-player in the dance-band led by Carl's father Niels, and you can wonder how Carl's parents managed to bring up 12 children in houses even smaller than this. Three of them died in infancy, and yet Carl looked back on his childhood in "this palace of sun and light and gladness" with intense warmth.

The country cottage, the local

dance-bands, the "music in the air": for any Midlands music-lover it's hard not to be reminded of Elgar – and like Elgar, as an aspiring professional musician Nielsen had little option but to head for the capital. "Everything seemed to swell within me as I crossed the Great Belt," he recalled. "The whole world was like a great bow stretching from north to south and I walked up and down the ferry-deck in high spirits."

Today the sea journey speeds by: an 18km bridge and tunnel, opened in 1998, has taken the place of the ferries.

In Copenhagen itself, the 150th anniversary celebrations have been on a scale befitting Denmark's greatest composer.

And, of course, the Royal Danish Orchestra has been flying the flag for its greatest ex-member. Nielsen played in the orchestra from 1889 to 1905 – famously clambering from his seat in the second violins to take a bow after the premiere of his own First Symphony – and as the orchestra of the Royal Danish Opera, it still plays regularly in the city's 19th century Old Theatre, where the whitewashed backstage corridors and dressing rooms still look much as they did in his day.

But it's an orchestra with a keen sense of the future as well as the past – and when we heard the breathtaking verve with which it accompanied the anniversary production of Nielsen's *Saul and David* in the city's futuristic new waterfront Opera House, it was clear that it has no intention of resting on its laurels. Sven Müller, the Royal Danish Opera's artistic director, agrees: "We



■ The pictures of a teenage Carl Nielsen at his childhood home.

Photo: The Royal Library, Denmark.

don't like chasing after anniversaries because they get in the way of ambitious, visionary programming. But we knew the Nielsen anniversary was coming and we thought 'Well, after all, we are the Danish Royal Opera – if we don't celebrate it, then who will?'. They responded with new productions of Nielsen's operas *Maskarade* and *Saul and David* – the latter in a powerful contemporary staging by Welsh National Opera's David Pountney (let's hope he brings it home – the thought of the WNO Chorus in Nielsen's shattering crowd scenes sends shivers down the spine).

Then, of course, they're taking the orchestra on tour, with music director Michael Boder and music that's pretty much the definition of "ambitious, visionary program-

ming". Nielsen takes pride of place, naturally: the Fifth Symphony, arguably his greatest. But first comes Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and *Iris*, a shimmering, haunted modern classic by one of Denmark's greatest living symphonists, Per Nørgård.

"We're very excited to be coming to Symphony Hall, which I've been to twice, and consider to be the finest concert hall in Britain," says Müller. Nielsen's lust for life seems to have rubbed off on his old orchestra. A challenging concert?

► *The Royal Danish Orchestra performs Nielsen's Symphony no.5 at Symphony Hall on September 16, 7.30pm. 0121 345 0600/www.thsh.co.uk. The CBSO performs Nielsen's Symphony no.4 at Symphony Hall on September 23 (7.30pm) and 24 (2.15pm).*