



## Galen's Four Wet Humors in Medicine and Music

*The following is reprinted from program notes of a San Francisco Symphony concert earlier this year.*

Symphony No. 2, Opus 10, FS 29

By Carl August Nielsen, 1865-1931

"It was held that physiological imbalance (produced by an excess of one of the humors, for example) would be reflected in bodily illness and in exaggerated personality traits. Thus, if a person had an excess of blood...he was expected to have a sanguine temperament, be optimistic, enthusiastic, and excitable.... Too much of a humor called black bile (congealed blood from the spleen) was believed to produce a melancholic temperament. The term melancholia literally means black bile, and there are literary allusions to venting one's spleen. When someone was oversupplied with yellow bile (the yellow-green gall secreted by the liver and stored in the gall bladder), he was held to become choleric...angry, irritable, and to view his world with a jaundiced eye.... Finally, with an abundance of the humor called phlegm (as secreted in the throat), people were supposed to become stolid, apathetic, and undemonstrative...grow phlegmatic." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Shortly before his death Nielsen wrote the following program notes for his symphony, *The Four Temperaments*, translation by Harald Knudsen:

"The first movement, **Allegro collerico**, starts impetuously with a theme that develops with another little theme on the clarinet and rises to a fanfare leading to the second subject, which sings very expressive, but is soon interrupted again by violently shifting figures and rhythmic jerks. After a pause the second subject, *ff*, unfolds itself with greater breadth and strength which gradually pass away, when the development begins; here the above-mentioned material is worked, now wildly and impetuously, like one who forgets himself, now in softer mood, like one who regrets his irascibility. Lastly comes a coda (*stretto*) with vehement passages in the strings...

"The second movement is meant to be a complete contrast to the first. I don't like programme music, but perhaps it may interest my listeners to know that during the preparatory work I thought of something like the following: I visualized a young fellow [who] was uncommonly lovable.... He was about seventeen or eighteen years old, with sky-blue eyes, confident and big. In school he was loved by all, but...he never knew his lessons. But it was impossible to scold him, for everything idyllic and heavenly in nature was to be found in this young lad.... His...inclination was to lie where the birds sing, where the fish glide noiselessly through the water.... I have never seen him dance; he wasn't active enough for that, though he might easily have got the idea to swing himself in a gentle slow waltz rhythm, so I have used that for the movement, **Allegro comodo e flemmatico**, and tried to stick to one mood, as far away as possible from energy, emotionalism, and such things. Only once is there a forte. What's that? Did a barrel fall into the harbor from a ship, disturbing the young chap lying on the pier dreaming? Maybe. So what? In a moment everything is quiet again: the lad falls asleep, the world dozes, and the water is again smooth as a mirror.

"The third movement tries to express the basic character of a heavy, melancholy man, but

here as always in the domain of music, the title or program is only a pointer. After a bar and a half of introduction, the theme begins, drawn heavily towards a strong outcry of pain (*ff*); then comes, on the oboe, a little plaintive sighing motive, that slowly develops, ending in a climax of lamentation and suffering. After a short transition there is a quieter, resigned episode in E-flat major. A long, somewhat static passage now follows, at the end of which the parts intertwine like the threads of a net, and everything subsides; then suddenly the first theme breaks out with full force, the various motives sing together, and the whole moves to its close, where it sinks to rest.

"In the finale, **Allegro sanguineo**, I have tried to sketch a man who storms thoughtlessly forward in the belief that the whole world belongs to him.... There is, though, a moment in which something scares him, and he gasps all at once for breath in rough syncopations; but this is soon forgotten, and even if the music turns to minor, his cheery, rather superficial nature still asserts itself. All the same...the final march, though joyous and bright, is yet more dignified and not so silly and self-satisfied as in some of the previous parts of his development."

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