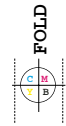


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In the years immediately preceding the composition of his only concerto for violin, Jean Sibelius lived rather self-indulgently – an acquaintance called his behaviour that of a ‘spoilt, overgrown child’ – in spite of the fact that he was rapidly approaching his fortieth birthday. It was not unusual for the composer to avoid his wife and children for days at a time in favour of heavy drinking with his friends in Helsinki’s intellectual circle.

His brother Christian, a psychiatrist who had performed dissection studies on the brains of alcoholics, warned the composer that his excesses were damaging his health, his creativity and his relationship with his family. On one occasion, Sibelius’s long-suffering wife even had to ask conductor and family friend Robert Kajanus to pull her husband out of a men’s club that he frequented so he would come home, pull himself together and finish his concerto.

Several of Sibelius’s major works, including the Fifth Symphony, the tone-poem *En Saga* and the Violin Concerto, were first heard in versions that are significantly different than those that are familiar today. Sibelius began the first version of his Violin Concerto in 1903, completed it in 1904 and premiered it later that year in Helsinki. Originally, he had

promised the first performance to an excellent violinist named Willy Burmeister. However, when Burmeister asked the composer to delay the premiere by a few months because of other engagements, Sibelius declined to wait and gave the concerto to Viktor Nováček, a violinist of lesser skills, probably because of concerns over finances.

Sibelius’s biographer Erik Tawaststjerna writes that Nováček ‘fought a losing battle with a solo part that bristled with even greater difficulties in [the first] version than it does in the definitive score.’ Even with the composer at the podium doing what he could to save the performance, reactions to the work were mixed.

The critics whose opinions meant most to the composer were almost cruel. One wrote that Nováček playing ‘offered up a mass of joyless things’, and was of the opinion that ‘the new Violin Concerto will not form a link in the chain of genuinely significant modern creations in this artistic form,’ and also that ‘the concerto, to be honest, is boring, something which hitherto could not be said of a composition by Jean Sibelius’. Another critic called the work simply ‘a mistake’.

Sibelius shelved the score, further frustrating Burmeister, who thought that a better performance could change critics’ minds, and

professional career, securing his first full-time position with that orchestra in 1931. Seven years later, he became its principal conductor, a post he shared for several years with Willem Mengelberg. The two conductors could not have been more dissimilar. For a while, audiences did not know what to make of the younger man’s less charismatic style, which nevertheless was perhaps more faithful both to the letter and to the spirit of the music that he conducted.

After Mengelberg’s departure in 1945, Van Beinum’s gentle, dedicated musicianship became more generally appreciated, and he solidified his reputation as a perfectionist who remained uncorrupted by excessive egotism. Indeed, in describing his relationship to the members of the orchestra, he referred to himself as ‘first among equals’. Fittingly, it was among those equals that he died, on April 13, 1959, while rehearsing the slow movement of Brahms’s First Symphony.

Van Beinum made many recordings – for both Decca and Philips – and his discography is a varied one, ranging from the Baroque era to Bartók and beyond. His Brahms and Bruckner symphonies in particular remain highly prized by collectors and his 1956 recording of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* is fondly

remembered. The violin solos on that recording are played by the talented Jan Damen, who was the concertmaster of the Concertgebouw Orchestra at the time.

Damen also can be heard in the recording of Sibelius’s Violin Concerto that is included here. He came from a family of musicians, dating back to the 1700s, when forebear Wilhelm Dahmen (the original spelling) raised a large family of horn-players, cellists, composers and teachers. Jan Damen – incidentally, not the only member of his family to hold the post of concertmaster with the Concertgebouw Orchestra – was also associated with orchestras in Berlin, Dresden and Gothenburg, at different points in his career.

Danish conductor Thomas Jensen (1898-1963) was born and died in Copenhagen, and he spent most of his life making music in his homeland. Unsurprisingly, he was associated with the music of his countryman Carl Nielsen. In fact, Jensen studied music theory and composition under Nielsen, and played the cello in the Tivoli Orchestra when Nielsen was on the podium. Jensen left behind several recordings testifying to his affinity for Nielsen’s symphonies. He also made several recordings of music by Jean Sibelius, including the *Karelia*



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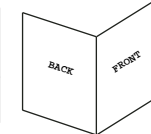


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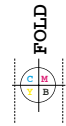


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TITLE: Sibelius Violin Concerto	SEPARATOR:			607		
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Juan, sets sail for the island of Saari to sow his wild oats among the island's willing women. When the men return, they chase him away, much to the women's chagrin. Sibelius builds up considerable harmonic and erotic tension over the movement's fifteen-minute span, and its resolution leaves the music spent – figures in the woodwinds might represent the cries of geese calling Lemminkäinen homeward, or are they the maidens calling to him, 'Wherefore goest thou, Lemminkäinen? Why depart thou, o handsome hero?'

The second movement, the most famous of the four, is best described in the composer's own words: 'Tuonela, the land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a large river with black waters and a rapid current, on which the Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing.' Its song is represented by the cor anglais. That the river on which she floats is shiveringly cold is made clear by Sibelius's chilly writing for harp and divided strings. By emphasizing the scene's grave nobility, Sibelius keeps 'The Swan of Tuonela' from becoming a simple exercise in morbidity.

In 'Lemminkäinen in Tuonela,' the hero, wishing to impress the Daughter of the Northland, endeavours to shoot the Swan of Tuonela with an arrow. Before he can do so,

he in turn is shot by a herdsman who desires the same prize. His body is hacked to pieces and thrown into the river. His mother, seeing what has happened, collects the pieces with a giant rake, sews them together and restores life to her son. This particular episode is depicted by music that has the quality of a crooning Nordic lullaby. However, Sibelius's writing in this movement has more to do with the creation of atmosphere than with the literal illustration of events.

'Lemminkäinen's return' is the exciting finale. The hero, exhausted by his labours, resolves to return home. His boat having been destroyed, he 'transforms his cares and worries into war-horses' and gallops through various terrains (depicted, perhaps, by the composer's frequent key-changes) to arrive home in triumph. The composer referred to this movement as a reflection of national pride. 'Why should we be ashamed of ourselves?' he asked. 'That is the underlying sentiment throughout "Lemminkäinen's return"'. Lemminkäinen is just as good as the noblest of earls. He is an aristocrat, without question an aristocrat!

Eduard van Beinum (1900-1959) was associated with the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam for most of his

who had proposed three performances in Helsinki later in 1904. Then, when Sibelius drastically revised the score in 1905, the premiere of the revised version was offered to yet another violinist, Karl Halir (with Richard Strauss conducting), at the suggestion of Sibelius's German publisher. It is no wonder that Burmeister, having been left at the altar twice, finally refused to play the work in public!

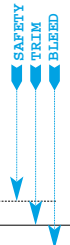
Musicologist Sir Francis Tovey wrote, 'I have not met with a more original, a more masterly, and a more exhilarating work than the Sibelius Violin Concerto.' Nevertheless, some critics found the concerto too sweet and too sentimental, particularly in the second movement. Another complaint is that the solo writing is too extroverted to blend with the tough, introverted writing for the orchestra.

In his assessments of violin concertos by Brahms and Prokofiev, Sibelius criticised both for their failure to give the soloist a more prominent role. In contrast, the writing in his own Violin Concerto suggests that the soloist and the orchestra are independent of each other; there is much less sharing of thematic material than one finds in concertos by Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky, for example.

Viewed in this light, the Violin Concerto may embody a curious psychological crossroads for the composer. As a young man, Sibelius dreamed of becoming an internationally acclaimed violin virtuoso. Sibelius's best mature compositions, however, are free of mere showmanship. This concerto might be the composer's attempt to reconcile the world of the flashy virtuoso with that of the brooding, Nordic ascetic. Whether this reconciliation occurred or not is a matter of opinion, but the reservations of music critics (including Joseph Joachim) have not prevented the work from becoming one of the century's most popular violin concertos.

The soloist occupies centre stage from the beginning of the concerto right up until the end. The first movement, almost as long as the other two combined, is dominated by mystery, even melancholy, although its moods are highly changeable. The frequent shifts in character and tempo give one the impression that the music's structure is quite free. Nevertheless, the movement's melodic material derives largely from fragmentation and development of its opening theme. This creates a satisfying feeling of organic wholeness, even if the listener might not be conscious of how this wholeness has been achieved.

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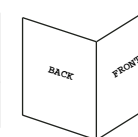
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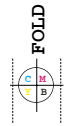
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The middle movement is straightforward. Its unashamedly lyrical nature creates contrast between the first and second movements, which otherwise seem to be dominated by slower tempos. Its climax is a moment of throat-clenching pathos unusual in Sibelius.

The driving third movement has been variously described (by the composer) as a *danse macabre*, and (by Tovey) as a polonaise for polar bears. After an icy passage that takes the soloist into the stratosphere, the music's rough insistence brings the concerto to a thrilling close.

As its name suggests, *En Saga* (1892, revised 1902) is musical story-telling, although it is up to the listener to provide the story! It has been suggested that Sibelius was thinking not of the Finnish national folk epic, the *Kalevala*, which inspired several of his works, but of the Old Norse collection of poems and stories known as the Edda.

However, in the 1940s, Sibelius told his secretary that the work was an expression of his state of mind at the time ('I had undergone several painful experiences'). In other words, perhaps the inspiration behind *En Saga* was more autobiographical than literary. Nevertheless, one can easily hear the dark mystery of Finland's forests in this work.

It was composed at Kajanus's suggestion, following the success of Sibelius's *Kullervo* Symphony earlier in 1892. This is the earliest work presented here, and it did much to establish Sibelius's reputation, at home and abroad, as a major composer.

Finlandia, written in 1899 and revised a year later, finds the composer in a patriotic mood – so patriotic, in fact, that the work could not be performed in Finland for several years while the country was subject to Russian imperialism. Its origin was in a gala evening of historical tableaux intended to support Finland's free press. Sibelius supplied six numbers, the last one titled 'Finland Awakes!' This was renamed *Finlandia* when it was performed at the Paris World Exhibition in 1900.

Without question, it has become Sibelius's most popular work, and it has been enjoyed worldwide by millions of listeners who are unaware of its nationalistic subtext. The menacing opening music seems to represent foreign aggression, while the main anthem-like melody speaks, first quietly, and then powerfully, of the resolve of the Finnish people. The triumphant close leaves no doubt as to the outcome of the conflict.

Valse triste is another example of the composer's incidental music, and another

highly popular one at that. Sibelius wrote it in 1903 for the opening scene of *Kuolema* (Death), a play written by his brother-in-law. In the play, Paavali sits at the bedside of his dying mother, who is dreaming that she has gone to a ball. Later, as Paavali sleeps, his mother rises from her deathbed and imagines herself dancing with her late husband, who turns out to be Death himself. When Paavali awakens, his mother is dead. *Valse triste* begins as a melancholy waltz and accelerates into a panicked *danse macabre*.

Tapiola, composed in 1926, was one of Sibelius's final works, although he was to live for another 30 years. In the *Kalevala*, Tapio is the god of the forest, and Sibelius's tone-poem, even more than *En Saga*, is a consummate depiction of the forces of nature. (Its title may be translated as 'Where the Forest-God Dwells'.) In his biography of the composer, Robert Layton writes, 'Nowhere, except possibly in Debussy's *La mer* and "Nuages" is the feeling for nature so intense as to amount to complete identification.' The music lacks the faintest trace of sentimentality, or anything that is gratuitously picturesque. Instead, it is as uncompromising – one might almost call it 'inhuman' – as the landscape it portrays. In his late works, and particularly in *Tapiola*, the

visionary Sibelius anticipated innovations in timbre, texture and harmony which, for the most part, composers would not delve into for another fifty years.

Sibelius's *Lemminkäinen Suite* is based on the *Kalevala*. The composer, following the example of Wagner's music-dramas, began a nationalistic opera based on this folk epic, first published in 1835, but work ceased when he realised that he 'was no longer a Wagnerian'. He wrote, 'I must be led by my inner voices.' Not a man to waste work or ideas, he transformed some of the opera's material into the purely symphonic *Lemminkäinen Suite* (also known as the *Four Legends from the Kalevala*), which he completed in 1896. However, a scathing critical reception at the suite's premiere caused him to withdraw and revise all four movements. 'The Swan of Tuonela' and 'Lemminkäinen's return' were subsequently published in 1900; final revisions of the other two sections waited until 1937, well after the composer had effectively retired.

'Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of Saari' for all the heroism implied by the music, describes a chauvinistic philanderer. Even though he is the husband of his own young bride, Lemminkäinen, part Siegfried and part Don



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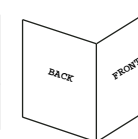
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