Minnesota Orchestra

Osmo Vänskä, conductor
Elina Vähälä, violin

Thursday, January 13, 2022, 11 am | Orchestra Hall
Friday, January 14, 2022, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall

Symphony No. 4 in A minor, Opus 63 — ca. 32′
- Tempo molto moderato, quasi adagio
- Allegro molto vivace
- Il tempo largo
- Allegro

I N T E R M I S S I O N — ca. 20′

Symphony No. 3 in C major, Opus 52 — ca. 30′
- Allegro moderato
- Andantino con moto, quasi allegretto
- Moderato – Allegro, ma non tanto

Concerto in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 47 (1905 revision) — ca. 31′
- Allegro moderato
- Adagio di molto
- Allegro, ma non tanto

Elina Vähälä, violin

pre-concert

Concert Preview with Phillip Gainsley
Thursday, January 13, 10:15 am, Auditorium
Friday, January 14, 7 pm, Auditorium

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of YourClassical Minnesota Public Radio, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.

Osmo Vänskä, conductor

Profile appears on page 8.

Elina Vähälä, violin

Born in the U.S. and raised in Finland, Elina Vähälä made her orchestral debut with the Lahti Symphony Orchestra at the age of 12 and was later chosen by Osmo Vänskä as the orchestra's Young Master Soloist. Since then, her career has continued to develop on the international stage, winning praise from audiences and musicians alike. She appears regularly with all of the key Finnish orchestras as well as being a guest of countless high-profile orchestras around the globe such as Houston Symphony, Vancouver Symphony, Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra, Beethoven Orchester Bonn, Dortmund Philharmoniker, Istanbul State Symphony, Malmo Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg and RTVE Spanish Radio Orchestra. She has toured throughout the U.K., Finland, Germany, China, Korea and South America. The 2021-22 season sees her return to Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and Seoul International Music Festival as well as her debuts with Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra and Pannon Philharmonic. She also appears at the festivals in Tampere, Clandeboye and Oulu, where she has recently been appointed artistic director. More: dispeker.com, elinavahala.com.

one-minute notes

Sibelius: Symphony No. 3; Symphony No. 4; Violin Concerto (final version)

Sibelius' Third Symphony has many subtle beauties, strength of purpose and ideas that are developed in imaginative ways. Notable for its lean orchestral textures, it culminates in a broad, majestic theme with a distinctive rhythmic pattern, riding to a grand conclusion.

An enigma from the pre-World War I years, Sibelius' Fourth Symphony is dark music from a dark moment in the composer's life. The beginning question, elaborated by solo cello, is pondered throughout the work. The scherzo emerges as if from nowhere, and the Largo rises slowly, singing, to a Brucknerian climax. Before the finale's brusque ending, it brims with ideas and the bright sonority of bells.

Sibelius' "dearest wish" had been to become a virtuoso violinist, and his love for the instrument is evident in his Violin Concerto. The solo violin speaks dreamily, then with bravura. The Adagio, with a melody of vast breadth, leads to a finale noted for its inventive rhythms and brilliant close.

Jean Sibelius

Born: December 8, 1865, Tavastehus, Finland
Died: September 20, 1957, Järvenpää, Finland

Symphony No. 4 in A minor, Opus 63

Premiered: April 3, 1911

In 1910 and 1911, Jean Sibelius had a rich fund of human and musical experience to draw on. New people he had met (Gustav Mahler was one), an illness he had survived—the removal of a tumor from his throat in 1909—new landscapes he had experienced, his country's political situation: all these went to feed his artistic fantasy. The Fourth Symphony is a monument to a richly lived, deeply considered and by no means easy life. He began work on the work in the spring of 1910 and completed the score early in 1911. He led the premiere in Helsinki on April 3, 1911.

Those things ghosting about the background of this symphony all tend to make one feel small, and so should the Fourth as a whole. Aloneness, a sense of the contrast between human and superhuman, the impact of concentrated experience—these are perhaps the images that, unbidden, lodged in Sibelius' mind as he conceived and began to fix the musical gestures of this unsettling masterwork.

the music: answering a question

tempo molto moderato, quasi adagio. The symphony begins with a question. Basses and cellos, *fortissimo* but muted, together with bassoons sound a huge C, from which two other notes, D and F-sharp, detach themselves. The F-sharp falls back to E, and for a long time we hear only a rocking, back and forth, between these two pitches. It is the kraken's roar.

These four notes—C/D/E/F-sharp—are part of a whole-tone scale, an elusive, ambiguous creation all of whose intervals are alike, which therefore presents no articulation and has neither beginning nor end. This so-called tritone interval between the outer notes, C and F-sharp, is pungent, and medieval theorists called it *diabolus in musica*. It is an uncomfortable dissonance that demands resolution.

The most natural resolution is outward, to a perfect fifth, and that is eventually accomplished in this symphony—in the finale! For the time being, though, we must be satisfied with gnomic adumbrations of this possibility. We will also gradually discover that the music heard in the first few minutes, including the solo cello melody, provides the stuff from which all the rest of the symphony will be drawn.

allegro molto vivace. When this questioning, almost slow movement finds its end, the scherzo emerges from it at once. The tritone disturbs the calm, the dactyls in duple meter disturb the lilt of the opening tune, and the somber second half of the movement disturbs the architectural and expressive set of the piece as a whole.

il tempo largo. The third movement—and this is truly slow music—is the symphony's center, and here, tentatively at first, then more openly, Sibelius sings. He allows himself one climax, lacerating and laconic at the same time. We might remember that when Sibelius heard the Bruckner Fifth it had moved him to tears. Sibelius' *Largo* ends, like his first movement, in repetitions and a question mark.

allegro. The finale emerges immediately, as the scherzo did from the first movement. The allegro quality—in its literal sense of "cheerful" as well as its musical one, indicating a quick tempo—is instantly compromised by the grinding dissonance that occurs when the second violins join the firsts. The issue of the tritone is still very much alive. In this finale, in striking contrast to the economy of the first three movements, Sibelius almost overwhelms us with a profusion of ideas. That richness sets off the coda, in which all this music is brought down to the irreducible. It falls back from bright major to dark minor, then disintegrates into scarcely audible tremolandi. A flute voices an appeal, to which the oboe makes crowing, heartless response.

Neither affirmative nor pathetic, the end, *mezzo-forte* and rigorously in tempo, is shattering in its matter-of-factness. Sir Colin Davis, a deeply penetrating Sibelius conductor, described this moment as "a brusque hand that smoothes the earth over the grave."

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, bells and strings

*Excerpted from a program note by the late **Michael Steinberg**, used with permission.*

Symphony No. 3 in C major, Opus 52

Premiered: September 26, 1907

Of Sibelius' seven symphonies, the Third may be the least played and least known—the composer himself referred to it as his beloved and least fortunate child. It has many subtle beauties,

an indisputable strength of purpose and ideas that are developed in imaginative ways. But these are rendered less than obvious by Sibelius' use of lean orchestral textures, air of classical restraint (in contrast to the heroic mold of the First and Second Symphonies) and economy rather than expansiveness in overall layout, as well as the absence of memorable, expansive themes.

"where words leave off"

Sibelius' Third must have seemed quaintly anachronistic when it came out—around the same time as works like Mahler's Sixth Symphony, Glière's Third, Strauss' *Salome* and Scriabin's *Divine Poem*, all conceived on a grand scale for oversized orchestra and filled with hyperemotional trauma.

But to Sibelius, there was something almost sacred about writing a symphony. He believed in the purity of the genre, and he believed that all symphonies since Beethoven, with the exception of those of Brahms, had been perverted into symphonic poems. "Music begins where words leave off," he wrote. "A symphony should be music first and last...the essence of a symphony [lies in] severity of style and the profound logic that creates an inner connection among all the motifs." As the late musicologist Michael Steinberg so deliciously said of this work, "there is no imagery and no drama for you to lose yourself in except that of the musical events themselves. This is like Haydn: you can't do anything with it except listen to it, and it is meant for people who really listen."

The composer conducted the premiere of his Third Symphony with the Helsinki Philharmonic on September 26, 1907.

the music: tradition, wistfulness and a "phantasmagoria"

allegro moderato. The first movement is in traditional sonata form, with two contrasting themes in the exposition, a development section and recapitulation. The opening measures bring us the first of those themes, a quiet processional in the lower strings followed a few moments later by a jaunty whistle in the woodwinds. The second theme arrives in the cellos in the key of B minor—a long, forlorn subject marked by syncopations and restless energy. The development section concerns itself almost exclusively with a rhythmic figure that formed a prominent component of the first theme—a grouping of four even 16th-notes, which Sibelius now turns into a continuous flow. The development grows inexorably in strength until it reaches a grand climax where the opening processional theme returns gloriously, now once again in the home key of C major.

andantino con moto, quasi allegretto. The rarely used key of G-sharp minor was Sibelius' choice for the second movement, which consists of a single wistful theme of pastoral character heard in successive entries by pairs of woodwinds (flutes, clarinets) or in the violins. Two episodes interrupt the proceedings, the first a brief woodwind chorale, the second somewhat fitful in its stop-and-go movement and frequent changes of timbres. When the principal theme returns, it is now more richly and subtly colored.

moderato – allegro, ma non tanto. The "finale" is peculiar in that it is actually two movements in one—not two separate movements connected by a bridge passage, but a single movement whose second half grows organically out of the first. The first half contains wisps and tendrils of motifs ("a flickering phantasmagoria of elusive scraps," in the words of Jack Diether) thrown out in seemingly fragmentary form. These eventually coalesce into a broad, majestic theme with a distinctive rhythmic pattern of long-long-short-short-long, on which the symphony rides boldly to its grand, C-major conclusion.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani and strings

Program note by ***Robert Markow****.*

Concerto in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 47 (1905 revision)

Premiered: September 26, 1907

In 1902, the German violinist Willy Burmester asked Sibelius to write him a concerto. When Sibelius sent him the piano reduction of the first two movements in September 1903, Burmester was enthusiastic and suggested the premiere be given in Berlin in March 1904. But Sibelius had other ideas. Due to strained financial circumstances, he wanted the concerto performed as soon as possible, and secretly asked another violinist to give the premiere in Helsinki at an earlier date. What Sibelius got in the end was a far inferior soloist (a local teacher named Victor Nováček, who never did learn the concerto properly), a cool reception at the premiere, mostly negative reviews in the press, and the justifiable resentment of Burmester.

Following the premiere, the concerto was put aside for over a year until Sibelius got around to revising it. He toned down some of the overtly virtuosic episodes, tightened the structure of the outer movements and altered the orchestration of numerous passages. The revisions amount to far more than mere window dressing, and the results are fascinating to compare with the original.

On October 19, 1905, the concerto received its premiere in the final form in Berlin, with Karl Halir as soloist and none other than Richard Strauss on the podium. Shortly afterwards, Sibelius' friend Rosa Newmarch told him that "in fifty years' time, your concerto will be as much a classic as those of Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky." How right she was!

a "preference for the violin"

Sibelius' affinity for the violin stemmed from his youth, when he aspired to become a great violinist. "My tragedy," he wrote, "was that I wanted to be a celebrated violinist at any price. From the age of fifteen, I played my violin for ten years, practicing from morning to night. I hated pen and ink....My preference for the violin lasted quite long, and it was a very painful awakening when I had to admit that I had begun my training for the exacting career of an eminent performer too late." His very first composition (*Vattendroppar*), written at the age of 8 or 9, was a piece for violin and cello. Although he left just one violin concerto, he also composed numerous short pieces for the instrument, mostly with piano.

The solo part is one of the most difficult in the entire repertory. Virtuosic passages abound, but they are welded to disciplined musical thought; there is no empty display material here. The orchestral writing bears much evidence of Sibelius' deep interest in this medium, and serves a far greater purpose than a mere backdrop for the soloist. Dark, somber colors predominate, as is this composer's tendency, lending an air of passionate urgency to the music. Note particularly the third theme in B-flat minor in the first movement, played by the unison violins, or the second theme of the finale, again played by the violins, with its interplay of 6/8 and 3/4 meters.

the concerto in brief

allegro moderato. Attention to the formalities of sonata form is largely avoided in favor of originality of thought. In the first movement, there is no development section as such; instead, each of the three main themes is fully elaborated and developed upon initial presentation. A cadenza occurs at the point where a full development would normally stand, followed by a recapitulation of the three themes, each of which is subjected to further expansion.

adagio di molto. In the *Adagio* movement, Sibelius contrasts the long, dreamy and reflective opening theme with a turbulent and darkly passionate section in the minor mode.

allegro, ma non tanto. The finale, in rondo form, calls to the fore the full technical prowess of the soloist. Energetic rhythms suggestive of the polonaise and gypsy dances offer further elements of excitement to this exuberant movement.

Instrumentation: solo violin with orchestra comprising 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani and strings

Program note by ***Robert Markow****.*

fun facts

Jean Sibelius, the Minnesota Orchestra and Osmo Vänskä

- The Minnesota Orchestra, founded as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, first performed Sibelius' music on November 21, 1909, when founding music director Emil Oberhoffer conducted *Valse Triste*. Its first performance of a Sibelius symphony, the First, came in December of 1910.

- The Minnesota Orchestra's first Sibelius recording was made in 1935: the First Symphony, conducted by Eugene Ormandy, who later said it was "perhaps… the first Sibelius symphony to be recorded outside of Scandinavia."

- On the day Sibelius died, September 20, 1957, the Minnesota Orchestra was performing a concert in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of a Middle Eastern tour.

- Sibelius' birthplace of Hämeenlinna, Finland, is just 40 miles from Lahti, Finland, where Osmo Vänskä was music director of the Lahti Symphony from 1988 to 2008.

- In his first-ever guest appearance with the Minnesota Orchestra in October 2000, Osmo Vänskä conducted Sibelius' Violin Concerto, with Joshua Bell as soloist.

- Osmo Vänskä has conducted more than 300 performances of Sibelius' music with the Minnesota Orchestra—more than any previous music director. In all, the Orchestra has given more than 1,100 performances of Sibelius' music.

- After the Minnesota Orchestra performed Sibelius' *Kullervo* at Carnegie Hall in March 2010, *The New Yorker*'s Alex Ross wrote that on that evening, "the Minnesota Orchestra sounded, to my ears, like the greatest orchestra in the world."

- The Minnesota Orchestra and Osmo Vänskä received their first-ever Grammy Award for Best Orchestral Performance in January 2014 for the second disc in their Sibelius symphonies cycle. A year earlier, their first Sibelius album was nominated in the same category.