

The Sibelius of Light and Hope

Friday, February 22 – 7:30 pm

Saturday, February 23 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Rafael Hoekman, cello

Afterthoughts, Friday post-performance in Main Lobby with Alexander Prior & Rafael Hoekman

Symphony Prelude, Saturday 7 pm, Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with Alexander Prior & D.T. Baker

all music by Jean SIBELIUS

Andante festivo (4')*

Two Serious Melodies, Op.77 (11')*

Laetare anima mea ("Rejoice my soul")

Ab imo pectore ("From the depths of my heart")

Symphony No. 4 in A minor, Op.63 (37')*

Tempo molto moderato, quasi adagio

Allegro molto vivace

Il tempo largo

Allegro

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

Symphony No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op.82 (45')*

Tempo molto moderato – Largamente

Allegro moderato – Presto

Andante mosso, quasi allegretto

Allegro molto – Misterioso – Un pochettino largamente – Largamente assai

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

The Sibelius of Light and Hope

At about the age of 27, Jean Sibelius finally decided to abandon his long-held hope that he would become an internationally recognized violin virtuoso. While certainly a talented musician, Sibelius felt he had simply started too late in life to make a real go of it. Fortunately, several of his early compositions had begun to attract attention, particularly those based on Finnish folklore and traditions. Finland, still under the oppressive rule of Tsarist Russia, was still struggling to form a strong enough political framework to become an independent nation.

All the works on tonight's program date from after Sibelius' decision to devote himself to composing.

Andante festivo

First performance of version for string quartet: December 28, 1922 in Säynätsalo

Last ESO performance: May 2015

Jean Sibelius wrote the *Andante festivo* originally for string quartet in 1922, and later rescored it for string orchestra and timpani for a 1939 shortwave radio transmission which he conducted – his last public appearance as a conductor. There is certainly a hymn-like fervour to the brief work; its measured phrases each seem to end without a clear resolution, so the music seems constantly to be searching for a place at which to finally come to rest. It is only as the work concludes, and the timpani joins in the swelling sound, that, with a final and prominent major-key cadence, the work resolves with an almost unexpected finality.

Two Serious Melodies, Op.77

First performed: March 30, 1916 in Helsinki

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

During the years of the First World War, Jean Sibelius expended his creative energies in formulating both the *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies*, and in writing works that would feed his family. While Finland was not directly affected by the war as were the major combatants, many of the places where his music could be performed or published were unavailable to him. So he concentrated on miniatures and other pieces for which there would be a market close to home.

He was not especially happy about feeling obliged to write works best suited for amateur players, but Sibelius was pragmatic about it. "I know that they have some future," he wrote to his secretary. He showed further pragmatism with the *Two Serious Melodies, Op. 77*, which exist in versions featuring both a violin or a cello as a solo instrument, and further, in versions (for each solo instrument) with either piano or orchestral accompaniment. The *Cantique* was the first to be written, completed December 1914, originally titled *Lofsången* ("Song of Praise"), to which Sibelius would later add the

subtitle “Laetare anima mea” (“Rejoice my soul”). Not one to write a lot of religious music, perhaps Sibelius thought this work suitable if adapted to a church service, with organ accompaniment.

The second of the pieces, the dramatic *Devotion*, followed in June 1915. It, too, received a Latin subtitle, “Ab imo pectore” (“From the depths of my heart”). The first performance of the two together was given on March 30, 1916 with cellist Ossian Fohström, to whom the works are dedicated.

Symphony No. 4 in A minor. Op.63

First performed: April 3, 1911

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

It is perhaps not surprising that Jean Sibelius preceded his most crowd-pleasing symphony, the *Fifth* (see below) with one that audiences of the day found most troubling and difficult. Yet for a composer who was ready enough to revise many of his pieces, Sibelius was content with this work, choosing not to alter it in spite of its tepid first reception.

The Finnish landscape is certainly at the heart of this work, which was inspired by visits the composer made in 1909 to Koli, in the northern part of Karelia, and to Vyborg and Imatra, also in Karelia, the following year. Sibelius sought out the sounds of nature on these visits, and a friend wrote how the composer strained to hear the “pedal points” in a rumbling waterfall, and was keen to find a more natural counterpoint in his music, one which would liberate harmony in a more modern way.

There is a sense of menace in the rising four-note motif with which the basses and bassoon launch the work. Having announced their presence, they clear the field, making way for a quiet, restless introduction. Sibelius himself said that the beginning of the symphony should always be played as “fate, with all sentimentality excluded.”

The movement is nominally in Sonata form, but as with other Sibelius symphonic movements, it comes across as episodic, and to try to pin down what qualifies as the main and secondary themes is as elusive as it is unnecessary. There is a chamber music-like nature to the sparse instrumentation accorded each of the movement’s episodes, and a stark modernism which certainly does evoke an unsentimental, icy landscape. The Recapitulation brings back the horn motif, and the low rumble of the opening. Each movement of the symphony, in fact, ends on a whisper.

There is a restlessness at the start of the Scherzo second movement – but this one is much more playful. That diminishes, and indeed, much of the movement is a pitting of light against shadow. A real sense of contrast is produced when the opening playful theme is heard, first as a waltz, but soon, is stripped down to a bare essence that Sibelius stated should be played “brutally.” The quiet ending to this movement is three brief notes from the timpani.

The third movement is a triumph of the gradual unfolding of a theme for which Sibelius is well known. It is a Largo, unhurried and patient, beginning with woodwinds hinting at a theme. Horns and strings join in, presenting their own variation on the motif. Cellos eventually expand on this idea, but it is with the pace of a flower coming to bloom it seems, that the fully realized theme is coaxed further and further into the light of day. Once revealed in all its splendour, and with all the resources of the full orchestra at last, the movement has nowhere left to go, and once again, fades away.

The fourth movement has the second movement's sense of playfulness at first, a solo violin lending a folk-like quality, and shimmering percussion effects adding to the sense of lightness. There are unsettling touches here and there – almost sarcastic woodwind interjections, and an undercurrent of a disquieting energy. Increasingly, it is these elements which seem to gain dominance as the movement progresses, as if there is hope that the merriment can go on, but a gradual realization that it cannot. As the A Major of the movement's beginning yields to an ambiguous ending in A minor, we are taken down, as Finnish musicologist Erik Tawaststjerna puts it, "a path into nothingness," and an ending we are not sure of at all.

Symphony No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op.82

Jean Sibelius

(b. Tavestehus, Finland, 1865 / d. Järvenpää, 1957)

First version premiered in Helsinki on December 8, 1915. First revision premiered on December 8, 1916, in Turku, Finland. Final version premiered on November 24, 1919 in Helsinki
Last ESO performance: January 2003

Composers often wrestle with their works, but the *Fifth Symphony* confounded Sibelius for years. Time and again, in his diary, he referred to the long slow process of the work's creative process as a "struggle with God."

Already a national hero, Jean Sibelius was to be feted at a fiftieth birthday concert in December 1915. Part of the celebratory event was the premiere of the first version of his *Fifth Symphony*. The party was a success; the symphony, less so – to Sibelius. Dissatisfied with a work in which he knew contained a greatness he hadn't quite wrested from it, Sibelius revised it extensively in time for a concert marking his 51st birthday. But it still wasn't what he wanted.

These were the years of the First World War, and the Bolshevik Revolution, which threatened to spill over, even if only politically, into neighbouring Finland. It is therefore not surprising that when the symphony finally achieved the form Sibelius wanted, near the end of 1919 and following the war, the spirit of the work has a sense of moving from darkness to light.

Gone is the symphony's original four-movement design. Instead the long first movement, a melding of the original design's first two movements, begins with a lone horn above a sense of expectancy. The

music broadens out almost immediately; woodwind calls, rustling timpani – but this is no mere introduction. Elements contained in this opening passage will return throughout the work. A sense almost of foreboding rises to a trumpet-tinged climax, which quiets almost immediately, then begins to build again. Contrasts of light and shadow, of wind figures against undulating strings press the music on to another radiant brass passage, which propels the music, now in triple time, into the second part of the movement (what would have been the original score's second movement). It is an ingenious bridge, so organically achieved it appears seamless. The brisk, buoyant Presto section seems like a dance in broad sunlight after clouds have broken – and the sudden ending is very unexpected.

The second movement is a set of variations on a theme presented in the woodwinds. It is calm and bucolic, with a gentle lilt. A brisker, more playful central section emerges gradually, but it ebbs away as the main tempo is reestablished.

The famous finale, with its “swinging” theme for horns in thirds, was inspired, Sibelius wrote, by something he saw while on a walk. “Just before ten to eleven I saw sixteen swans. One of the greatest experiences in my life. Oh God, what beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into the hazy sun like a glittering, silver ribbon. Their cries were of the same woodwind timbre as those of cranes, but without any tremolo...Nature's mystery and life's melancholy! The *Fifth Symphony's* finale theme.” The movement begins with bristling, nervous energy in the strings, over which the winds begin to stir. Rising and falling, the horns' call is somehow tinged with both triumph and pathos. Listen also for the horn theme in tremolo strings, beneath the woodwinds – then how the roles are reversed. As we near the conclusion, the theme becomes clothed in more dramatic colours, then bursts out heroically once again. The bigger-than-life coda, capped off by six grand, emphatically stated chords, has tricked many a concert-goer's applause before the work is actually done.

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