

Sibelius & Scotch

Friday, March 1 – 7:30 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Ragnhild Hemsing, violin

all music by **Jean SIBELIUS**

Karelia Suite, Op.11

(17')*

Intermezzo

Ballade

Alla Marcia

Kuolema, Op.44 No. 2: Scene with Cranes

(7')*

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op.47

(32')*

Allegro moderato

Adagio di molto

Allegro, ma non tanto

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

Note: There is NO intermission in tonight's performance.

music by **Jean Sibelius**

(b. Hämeenlinna, 1865 / d. Järvenpää, 1957)

In 1892, up and coming composer Jean Sibelius received a scholarship to study runic song in the Karelia region of Finland. Around this time, Finland was still under the oppressive rule of tsarist Russia, and the Finns resisted Russia's efforts to stifle their history and culture. Karelia was a region where ancient folk traditions had been preserved, and "Karelianism," a movement that promoted the cultural heritage of that region, became a force to be reckoned with in response to Russia's heavy hand.

Sibelius was on the radar of the Finnish cultural movement, but was not, at this time, its leading light. Nevertheless, he was known well enough that, in the spring of 1893, he was commissioned by the Viipuri Student Association at Helsinki University to compose the music for what was called a pageant

celebrating Karelian culture, but was in fact a nationalist rally, held on November 13, 1893. As such, it was a rousing success. As for the music Sibelius composed, he complained to friends that the cheering and clapping of the audience made the music all but impossible to hear. Unsatisfied, as he often was, with the complete score, Sibelius extracted three movements into the ***Karelia Suite***, which has proven to be one of his most popular orchestral scores.

Kuolema (“Death”) is a symbolist drama by the Finnish playwright Arvid Järnefelt, who happened to be Jean Sibelius’ brother in law. Sibelius wrote incidental music for theatrical productions throughout his career, and composed eight separate pieces, for string orchestra, to be used throughout the play, which premiered on December 2, 1903.

In Act II, a witch has given the main character, Paavali a ring which has the power to reveal to him his future bride. The scene changes at once to a forest in summer, where Elsa, a young woman, sings to herself, and Paavali meets her. After sleeping beside each other, Paavali wakes to resume his travels, but Elsa wants him to remain. A flock of cranes flies overhead at that point, one of which breaks off from the flock and swoops down, carrying an infant to them. The music accompanying this scene is tonight’s other excerpt from Sibelius’ score.

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op.47

First performance: February 8, 1904 in Helsinki

Revised version first performed October 19, 1905 in Vienna

Last ESO performance: January 2015

Jean Sibelius only managed to write one concerto. But it was for the instrument he knew best. At one time in his formative years, Sibelius had thoughts about becoming a concert violinist, and in fact auditioned for the Vienna Philharmonic – unsuccessfully. Vienna’s loss was posterity’s gain, surely. But it was not Sibelius’ own aspirations that directly prompted him to write a concerto; rather, it was the encouragement of another violinist, Willy Burmester, around 1902, shortly after Sibelius had written his *Second Symphony*. Ironically, Burmester performed neither the concerto’s first performance, nor the premiere of the revised version.

The initial 1904 Helsinki performances proved unsatisfactory to pretty much everyone, including Sibelius. He revised the work extensively before the work as it is known today was presented for the first time in Vienna the following year, with no less than Richard Strauss conducting, and Karel Halíř as soloist. Over a mist of strings, the solo violin sings a lyrical, resigned song that increases in passion and agitation. There is a brief cadenza featuring rapid bow work, then for one of the few times in the work, the violin pauses as the orchestra brings in the first movement’s second subject. A wisp of a theme heard in the opening moments has more of a presence as the solo violin returns to rhapsodize, leading to an orchestral ritornello (“return”), and here the main, romantic theme has even more force. Instead

of a development section, Sibelius gives the violin another long, detailed cadenza, until a bassoon quietly ushers in the coda, again dominated by the soloist. The long movement (almost half the length of the entire concerto) ends with the violin soaring above an orchestral background of rich colour and a strong romantic feel.

The second movement is in ternary (three-part) form, A-B-A. Woodwinds usher in the movement with an air of uncertainty. The violin's entry is with a theme of nobility and sadness, with echoes of the first movement's main motif. The central section is marked by an ominous orchestral texture, over which the violin enters, frequently employing double stops (playing two strings simultaneously) and chromatic harmonies. As well, there are cross-rhythms between the orchestra and soloist. The vigorous, yet still dark-hued finale is dominated by two main subjects. The first, heard in the solo violin, is an agitated, urgently propulsive theme with a slightly off-kilter metre. Sir Donald Tovey's oft-quoted description of it being "a polonaise for polar bears" is cute, if somewhat short-changing. Sibelius' own description is more apt; he thought of it as, "a *danse macabre* across the Finnish wastelands." The second subject is a dance-like theme which alternates a 6/8 rhythm with a 3/4. The work concludes with brilliant solo flashes marked by octave passage leaps.

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