Nielsen's Inextinguishable

Friday, March 6 – 7:30 pm
Saturday, March 7 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor
Robert Uchida, violin

Afterthoughts, Friday post-performance Main Lobby with Alexander Prior & Robert Uchida
Symphony Prelude, Saturday 7 pm Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with Amanda Banister

SAARIAHO
Ciel d'hiver (12')*

SIBELIUS
Violin Concerto in D minor, Op.47 (31')*
Allegro moderato
Adagio di molto
Allegro ma non tanto

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

NIELSEN
Symphony No. 4 Op.29 "Inextinguishable" (37')*
Allegro –
Poco allegretto –
Poco adagio quasi andante –
Allegro

program subject to change
*indicates approximate performance duration

Ciel d'hiver
Kaija Saariaho
(b. Helsinki, 1952)

First performed: The three-movement work *Orion*, from which tonight's work was taken, premiered in Cleveland in 2002. As a stand-alone, re-scored piece, *Ciel d'hiver* premiered April 7, 2014 in Paris.
This is the ESO premiere of the piece

Kaija Saariaho's 2002 three-movement work *Orion* was scored for a huge orchestra, and took in both the story of Orion from Greek mythology as well as the constellation so well known in the northern sky. In 2013, she took the central movement of the piece and rescored it for standard symphony orchestra, and as it focused on the constellation of Orion, she gave it the French title *Ciel d'hiver* ("Winter Sky").

The work is dominated by a rising and falling melody which seems ever present throughout the work's 10 minutes, while shimmering and glissing elements scattered among the orchestra weave a texture of mystery and beauty around it. Wonder at the breathtaking expanse of space, and both the magic and ominousness of the boundless night sky imbue the work with an energy, even as it ebbs away to silence.

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op.47
Jean Sibelius
(b. Hämeenlinna, 1865 / d. Järvenpää, 1957)

First performance: February 8, 1904 in Helsinki
Revised version first performed October 19, 1905 in Vienna
Last ESO performance: February 2019

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 ¾. The work concludes with brilliant solo flashes marked by octave passage leaps.

Symphony No. 4, Op.29 "Inextinguishable"
Carl Nielsen
(b. Nørre-Lyndelse, 1865 / d. Copenhagen, 1931)

First performance: February 1, 1916 in Copenhagen
Last ESO performance: February 1998

"With the title 'The Inextinguishable' the composer has sought to indicate in one word what only music has the power to express in full: *The elemental Will of Life*. Music *is* Life, and like it, inextinguishable." So wrote Carl Neilsen in the foreword to his Fourth Symphony. A product as much of his turbulent personal life as it was of the war years in which it was conceived, Nielsen gathered together strands of a "philosophy" in which he saw music as (literally) and representative (metaphorically) the same as the life-force as he began work on the symphony just as World War One swept through Europe. At the same time, he separated from his wife, and had spun into a cycle of depression, exacerbated by alcohol.

Yet out of all this, this is a symphony of triumph – life is, as music is, inextinguishable. He insisted, somewhat contradictorily, that this work, "…is not a musical, program-like account of the development of a life within a limited stretch of time and space, but an un-program-like dip right down to the layers of the emotional life that are still half-chaotic and wholly elementary. In other words the opposite of all program music, despite the fact that this sounds like a program."

Contrast and conflict are two concepts that feature prominently throughout the breadth of this large symphony, scored for triple woodwinds and two separately placed sets of timpani. The opening begins in a blaze of conflicting tonalities (D against E), strings emerging from the dense sound to lead into a phrase sung by two clarinets in parallel thirds – a theme which will recur in later movements. It is a gentle theme competing against an almost constant sense of rage and turmoil bubbling underneath, and

exploding out in fits and starts. A full-throated chorale for brass, matched by the same in the full string complement, lend a sense of heroism amid the turbulence. The sense of light against darkness, a struggle between peace and violence, is reflected in the wide-ranging tempos and dynamics of the movement, and it is well to remember that Nielsen's nickname is not meant to say that this symphony itself is "inextinguishable," but that it seeks to describe a life force which, in itself, cannot be extinguished.

The symphony's second movement is its Scherzo – the shortest movement of the work, dominated by the woodwinds playing a genteel and almost prim court dance-like melody in 4/4. It trails away, interrupted brusquely by anguished violins ushering in the third movement, intruded upon by timpani in an almost constant barrage. Nearly halfway through the movement, a flute finally joins the strings, and as if a door has been opened, other woodwinds and brass enter – the timpani silent here – until without warning, trumpets herald a new idea which will eventually sweep into a grand climax. The movement ends with the sense of quiet restored, but uncertainly, until a scurry of strings links without a pause into the final movement.

This movement marks a struggle to return "home," in the case of this symphony, to the key of E. But obstacles remain, as the two opposing timpani (which Nielsen instructs they play, "from here to the end, maintaining a certain threatening character even when they play quietly.") and other musical impediments seem to refuse to let the music resolve to where it needs to go. There are glimmers of light and hope amid the conflict, however, and music's "inextinguishable" life force will eventually bring the work to a jubilant and heroically stated conclusion.