

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Jean Sibelius

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

The Swan of Tuonela

The Swan of Tuonela is what Sibelius salvaged from *The Building of the Boat*, his first successful opera—music so striking that one can not help but wonder about the operatic career that Wagner, in effect, cut short. Sibelius conceived this dark and moody music as the prelude to his opera, and, although it makes an unconventional operatic opening, it is close to perfection as a small tone poem. Sibelius realized that at once. In 1896, only two years after the Bayreuth experience, Sibelius had come to terms with the new direction of his career, and introduced *The Swan* and three other tone poems as Four Pieces from the *Kalevala* (sometimes known as the *Lemminkäinen Suite*).

The Four Legends from the *Kalevala* all revolve around the figure of Lemminkäinen, a young and powerful hero—not unlike Wagner’s Siegfried—and something of a Don Juan as well. Each of the four tone poems captures a decisive moment in Lemminkäinen’s adventures—hunting, seducing, fighting, and, through his mother’s magical powers, even surviving his own death. (Her magic powers allow her to stitch together the shreds of his mutilated body and bring him back to life.) Sibelius wasn’t interested in following a straight narrative arc—in fact, particularly in their original sequence, the four pieces don’t attempt to tell the story in “order.”

The first (and the longest) of the pieces, *Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of Saari*, is a brilliant atmosphere piece, from the mysterious opening measures that offer our initial sighting of an ancient, unknown land slowly coming into view. Musically, this is prime Sibelius territory, with its frenetic energy of spinning woodwind melodies and stirring strings, and with its long stretches of dancing activity over low, long-held pedal notes. There are also passionate lyrical themes that suggest Lemminkäinen’s erotic adventures.

The Swan of Tuonela, the first of these four tone poems to be composed, was originally performed as the third piece, and then later moved to second place, when the complete set was published. At the top of the score Sibelius wrote:

“Tuonela, the land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a large river of black waters and a rapid current, in which The Swan of Tuonela glides majestically, singing.”

The music vividly paints the scene: a plaintive English horn melody rides serenely over deep string sonorities. (The strings—*con sordino*, or muted, throughout—are divided into thirteen separate lines; these, in turn, are often further subdivided.) There is a glimpse of sunlight, signaled by the harp, as the music reaches C major. But the swan sails off again into the darkness. Sibelius’s sense of mood and color is keen. His understanding of sonority, even at this early stage in his career, is singular: listen, for example, how the swan’s song fades over a quietly beating drum, as an icy chill sweeps through the strings (playing tremolos *col legno*, or with the wood of the bow).

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