

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Jean Sibelius

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

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43

Sibelius completed this symphony in 1902 and conducted the first performance on March 8 of that year in Helsinki. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons; four horns; three trumpets; three trombones and tuba; timpani; and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-three minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Sibelius's Second Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on January 1 and 2, 1904, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on January 9, 10, and 12, 2003, with Antonio Pappano conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on August 2, 1936, with Werner Janssen conducting, and most recently on July 26, 1991, with Mariss Jansons conducting.

The spell of Italy often has a salutary effect on artists from the North. Goethe regularly recommended making the trip to Italy—Mendelssohn took his advice and returned with his *Italian* Symphony. Berlioz toured Italy against his better judgment and ended up staying fifteen months, addicted to the countryside (*Harold in Italy* is the souvenir he brought us). Wagner claimed he got the idea for the opening of *Das Rheingold* in La Spezia on the western seacoast. Tchaikovsky later nursed a broken spirit in Italy and took home his *Capriccio italien*, as untroubled as any music he ever wrote.

Jean Sibelius went to Italy in 1901. Even then his name meant fjords and bitter cold to people who had not yet heard his music. To those who had—in particular the overly popular *Finlandia*, first performed at a nationalistic pageant in 1899—Sibelius was the voice of Finland. But in Italy, Sibelius's thoughts turned away from his homeland, and he contemplated a work based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. While staying in the sun-drenched seaside town of Rapallo, he toyed with a four-movement tone poem, *Festival*, based on the same "Stone Guest" theme that Mozart had treated in *Don Giovanni*. Nothing ever came of these ideas, but he did begin his Second Symphony, which he finished once back in Finland.

We should not credit Italy alone with the warmth and ease of Sibelius's Second Symphony, for years later he would return there only to write *Tapiola*, the bleakest of all his works. But Sibelius did love Italy (he later admitted it was second only to his native Finland), and his extended stay there in 1901 certainly had a profound effect on Finland's first great composer. His sketchbooks confirm that ideas conceived in Rapallo turn up throughout the Second Symphony, and even Sibelius himself admitted that Don Juan stalks the second movement.

Sibelius is more interesting as a composer than as a nationalist. Ultimately, the qualities that give his music its own quite singular cast—the bracing sonorities and craggy textures, and the quirky but compelling way his music moves forward—are the product of musical genius, not Finnish heritage. It is true that he developed an abiding interest in the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, as a schoolboy, and that he knew, loved, and sometimes remembered his native folk song when writing music. But he did not even learn Finnish until he was a young man (having grown up in a Swedish-speaking household), and his patriotism was fueled not so much by landscape and congenital pride but by marriage into a powerful and politically active family. It is precisely because Sibelius's music is not outwardly nationalistic (of the picture-postcard variety) that it is so profound—specific and evocative, yet also timeless and universal.

The symphony was the most important genre for Sibelius's musical thoughts at a time when the form didn't seem to suit most composers. Strauss, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartók, for example, all wrote symphonies of various kinds, but their pioneering work was done elsewhere. The one contemporary of Sibelius whose symphonies are played today, Gustav Mahler, took the symphony to mean something quite different. Sibelius and Mahler met in Helsinki in 1907, and their words on the subject, often quoted, suggest that this was the only time their paths would ever cross, literally or figuratively. Sibelius always remembered their encounter:

When our conversation touched on the essence of symphony, I said that I admired its severity and style and the profound logic that created an inner connection between all the motives. This was the experience I had come to in composing. Mahler's opinion was just the reverse. "Nein, die Symphonie muss sein wie die Welt. Sie muss alles umfassen." (No, the symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything.)

Those lines have often been repeated to explain why Mahler's symphonies sprawl and sing, resembling no others ever written, but they are just as useful in seeing Sibelius's point of view. By 1907 Sibelius had fixed his vision on symphonic music of increasing austerity; his Third Symphony, completed that summer, marks the turning point. That same summer, Mahler put the final touches on his Eighth Symphony, scored for eight vocal soloists, chorus, boys' choir, and huge orchestra; taking as its text a medieval hymn and the closing scene from Goethe's *Faust*; and lasting nearly two hours—the work we know as the *Symphony of A Thousand*. Five years earlier, in 1902, the year Sibelius's Second Symphony was first performed, Mahler had unveiled his third, which lasts longer than Sibelius's first two symphonies combined.

Sibelius's Second Symphony is a bold, unconventional work. We know too many of his later works, and too much later music in general, perhaps, to see it that way, but at the time—the time of Schoenberg's luscious *Transfigured Night*, not *Pierrot lunaire*; of Stravinsky's academic E-flat symphony, not *The Rite of Spring*—it staked out new territory to which Sibelius alone would return. The first movement, like much of his most characteristic music, makes something whole and compelling out of bits and pieces. As Sibelius would later write: "It is as if the Almighty had thrown down the pieces of a mosaic for heaven's floor and asked me to put them together." Heaven's floor turns out to be designed in a familiar sonata form, but this isn't readily apparent. (Commentators seldom agree on the beginning of the second theme, for example.) Certainly any symphony that begins in pieces can't afford to dissect things further in a traditional development section. In fact, for Sibelius, development often implies the first step in putting the music back together. (Once, when asked about these technical matters, Sibelius cunningly chose to speak about "a spiritual development" instead.)

There is true, sustained lyricism in the slow second movement, but that is not how it opens. Sibelius begins with a timpani roll and restless pizzicato strings from which a bassoon tune struggles to emerge. Melody eventually does take wing, but what we remember most is the wonderful series of adventures encountered in the process.

The scherzo is brief, hurried (except for a sorrowful woodwind theme inspired not by Finland's fate, as commentators used to insist, but by the suicide of Sibelius's sister-in-law), and expectant. When, after about five minutes, it leads straight into the broad first chords of the finale, we realize that this is what we were waiting for all along. From there the fourth movement unfolds slowly, continuously, and with increasing power and majesty. It rises and soars in ways denied the earlier movements, and that, of course, is Sibelius's way: heaven's floor visible at last.

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