

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Jean Sibelius

Born December 8, 1865, Tavastehus, Finland

Died September 20, 1957, Järvenpää, Finland.

Lemminkäinen in Tuonela* and *The Swan of Tuonela* from *Four Legends from the Kalevala

When Jean Sibelius first read the Finnish national epic poem, the *Kalevala*, as a young student, he found the inspiration for much of the music that would one day make him famous and also label him somewhat unfairly as a nationalistic composer. In fact, Sibelius's first major composition, the expansive Kullervo symphony based on the *Kalevala*, was such a success in 1892 that from that point on Finland looked no farther for its greatest composer. (The impact of Sibelius's exposure to the *Kalevala* on the rest of his career is closely paralleled by Bartók's famous discovery of Hungarian folk song a decade later.)

Sibelius's absorption in the *Kalevala* was only possible because his family made the forward-looking decision to transfer him, at the age of seven, from a popular Swedish-language preparatory school to the brand-new, first-ever Finnish-language grammar school. (Until it was founded, Swedish and Latin were the standard languages of the Finnish school system.) Although Sibelius didn't truly master Finnish till he was in his twenties, this exposure to the sounds and rhythms of the language fired his imagination at an early age, and sparked his ongoing project of reading and re-reading the *Kalevala*. By 1891, his interest in the epic was so consuming that he made a special trip to hear Larin Paraske, a well-known runic singer, perform episodes from the *Kalevala*, carefully observing the inflections of her singing in ways that would influence his own musical style.

In 1893 Sibelius began his first opera, *The Building of the Boat*, inspired by the *Kalevala*. The next summer he went to Bayreuth, where he attended more performances of Wagner's operas than he would ever admit, falling entirely under the spell of the profoundly intoxicating music, but also realizing the competition he would face if he pursued an operatic career. He abandoned *The Building of the Boat* almost as soon as he returned home. (This trip to Bayreuth was also motivated by the chance to see how another composer had chosen to deal with a great national epic, the Nibelungenlied.)

The Swan of Tuonela is what Sibelius salvaged from *The Building of the Boat*—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, as it is this week (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).

Lemminkäinen in Tuonela begins with the unforgettable sound of the turbulent, dark waters of the River of Death, which will carry *Lemminkäinen's* body to Tuonela. (The surging strings are especially ominous.) The middle section, primarily scored for strings, is one of the composer's finest effects; eventually it is dominated by long, sinuous melodies (revolving, recitation-like, around just a few pitches)—the runic singing of Larin Palaske brought to life. The end is cold and bleak.

The finale of the set, *Lemminkäinen's Return*, is triumphant music of homecoming. Sibelius quotes from the poem:

Then the lively *Lemminkäinen* started on his homeward journey, saw the lands and saw the beaches. Here the islands, there the channels, saw the ancient landing-stages, saw the former dwelling places.

Sibelius writes music of extraordinary thrust, generated by the galloping rhythm suggested by the bassoon at the outset. Through the use of ostinato patterns and the continual ripple of sixteenth notes, he never lets the momentum flag. Neither of Sibelius's first two symphonies has a finale to match the excitement and suspense of this *Kalevala* music. Within a matter of years he would leave the world of the symphonic poem behind and find ways to achieve comparable effects within the traditional form of the symphony, but he never surpassed the brilliant drama and color of the music he composed under the spell of the *Kalevala*.

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