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FIRST FRENCH SIBELIUS SYMPHONY CYCLE

Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France

Mikko Franck, Music Director

10/11/12 April 2024

Auditorium, Radio France

Sibelius once wrote that each of his symphonies were psychological expressions of a state of mind. I recalled this while listening to the opening concert of the Sibelius cycle played in order of composition. He was originally writing about the composition of his dark, austere Fourth Symphony but hearing the first two symphonies bought the statement very much to the fore.

The First Symphony opens and closes with unexpected consequences; the first being the quiet solo clarinet heralding the storm tossed music that followed, the second being the very end of the work where two softly plucked strings announced the finality of the whole work.

Determined to display his symphonic credentials to an eager audience, Sibelius rose to the occasion by writing a symphony that can be construed as statement of defiance in the face of Russian obduracy. He , in fact, produced a veritable storm of Mother Nature pouring her tempests throughout each movement. Sibelius produced a symphony that obeyed the mores of symphonic thought but in such a manner that no listener can fail to hear so many overt emotional events that occur in each movement.

Sibelius refuted that it was an open statement of national defiance given the unhappy situation of repression and it is perfectly plausible to consider he generated a work more in tune with his basic concepts of natural forces at work.

Either way Mikko Franck produced a heartfelt, tempestuous performance that generated considerable excitement, with many moments of extraordinary passion. This was a wonderful orchestra playing in a superb acoustic. The timbre has a Gallic flavour in the horns that have a delightful glow about them. The large body of strings were well marshalled by Franck, leading to a warmth of sound that London audiences would die for. Franck was a wonderful guide through the intricacies of Sibelius's fertile imagination in this most National Romantic of the seven symphonies.

The Second Symphony is a big move away from being inspired by Nature. Instead Sibelius is caught up in death and disaster, which I always find it hard to reconcile, with it being the most popular of the cycle. All four movements have a shadow of death about them. Some interpretations seek a pastoral flavour to the first movement, adopting rather ponderous tempi. Franck heard darker thoughts (of which the near death of a daughter while sketching the Second Symphony in Italy caused Sibelius to suffer a near nervous breakdown) and changed the entire complexion of the music by launching the first movement briskly and with real purpose. Signs of anxiety litter the movement in the way tensions are built and released. The orchestra grasped the moment with great intensity, leaving the listener in no doubt about the inner meaning of the musical discourse.

Thereafter the emotional gravity remained in full flow. Franck took his audience into a maelstrom of darkness in the succeeding music towards the sorrowful lament in the finale (Sibelius's tribute to his sister-in-law who had committed suicide). This great climax which gradually emerges into the sunlight demonstrates Sibelius's ability to turn adversity into some kind of triumph, not perfect but certainly genuine. It is surely these final moments that herald hope for the future, leaving behind the tremors of earlier thoughts.

The audience clearly thought so and Franck and his marvellous musicians rightly basked in the adulation.

Sibelius had tried to change his errant and selfish ways by the time of his writing his Third Symphony. He realised he had a growing family to support and, in order to help him expunge his predilection for fast living, he built a handsome villa away from the temptations of Helsinki nightlife where he could compose without distraction. His 3rd Symphony reflects his somewhat chastened behaviour.

The Third Symphony has a straightforward classical outline in the invigorating first movement. Franck adopted a buoyant opening tempo to establish momentum and a sense of happiness and well-being. The calm second subject entered as if a vision of Paradise, and the later internal, soft-grained examination of solitude was well caught.

The sonata form of the first movement gave way to a sense of rumination in the second. Franck captured the elegant tone of the little tune that gradually embraced the main material for the whole movement.

It is the finale that announces a composer set on changing custom and practice. It is in two parts; the first seemingly seeking an exit from self-created chaos which led into the chorale theme that gains momentum to the very end where the work ends abruptly. It was an interesting and highly enjoyable performance.

Hilary Hahn is a favourite of this orchestra and conductor and no wonder when she performs the Violin Concerto so beautifully and in such wonderful style. It was one of the best interpretations I have heard over many years. Her cadenza outshone all others in my experience.

She is entering her pomp and it showed in her flawless technique put to the sole use of such a popular concerto. There were so many inflections to admire and the witty relationship she had with Franck in the finale conjured up all sorts of delights. Her appearance probably accounted for the opening up of the choir seats. A full house was entranced by this magical performance.

We moved from Sibelius's most performed work on the world stage to the most neglected symphony of the seven. The Fourth Symphony caused alarm at its early appearances because audiences were nonplussed at the change from the optimistic Third to the downright austere Fourth. At the Helsinki premiere Sibelius's wife, Aino said "the mood was sombre. People avoided our gaze". Wider reactions included drunken soldiers booing the work in Sweden and the American conductor, Karl Muck putting down his baton at the end of a rehearsal saying, "I'm blest if I know what he wants".

It was, therefore, a pleasure to hearing it at this concert. Described by the composer, Malcolm Arnold as being "the greatest work of the 20th century" it has gathered a hard core of admirers, hearing something fresh and invigorating among the music of its time (1911). Not least the members of the French avant-garde. Sibelius himself said it was "A protest against the compositions of today, nothing, absolutely nothing of the circus about it". The background centres on his fear of the recurrence of a throat tumour that had been successfully removed a couple of years earlier. His doctor forbad his usual pleasures of alcohol and cigars which caused great distress and foreboding. He had also become interested in modern trends in music through discissions with his friend, Busoni, the composer and champion of Sibelius on the conducting rostrum. Schoenberg's ideas had a certain appeal, not for the breakdown of tonality more for his desire to compress his musical material as heard in Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No.1 composed a few years earlier to the Fourth Symphony. This aspect is very much in evidence in the compact structure and content of the Fourth. It was a far cry from the enlargement of the musical structures being composed by Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler.

Combine these new thoughts with a cancer scare and you can begin to put this work into a new perspective, but audiences seem to prefer the more lyrical, expansive Sibelius that comes before and after the Fourth Symphony. Franck and his players guided us through the labyrinth of this strange and extremely powerful work. There were shadows galore preventing ostentatious displays, allowing the music to make its mark on our imaginations.

The very opening, described by Sibelius as sounding as "harsh as Fate" opened up a sound world of scurrying motives and loud bursts from the brass. The slow movement, *In tempo largo*, was played in the most concentrated manner by Franck, his players being responsive to the mercurial demands in the score. The final summation of a long awaited theme merely disappeared into silence. The finale was full of the ups and downs Sibelius gives his audience until an almighty climax occurs only to retreat into an enigmatic ending. Franck somewhat avoided the intended discipline heard in the score, possibly allowing the audience the extra time to acclimatise to the silence that prevailed. Purists would have been shocked! The performance received much applause.

Sibelius gradually emerged from the shadows of the Fourth Symphony, writing such seminal works as *The Bard*, *Luonnotar* and for his new American benefactor, *The Oceanides*. Approaching his 50th birthday year, 1915, he gave thought to a new symphony. This was completed in some haste for the premiere on his birthday on the 8th December, a concert attended by the Finnish President.

In the course of preparing the symphony he realised a number of themes/ motives were best left to future scores (the last two symphonies).The outcome was a four movement symphony which had not fully discarded all the shadows of the previous one. Although a success in the public's esteem he decided to revise it and this revision was given exactly a year later in 1916. No score exists but there is evidence of Sibelius joining the first two movements. He, again, was not entirely satisfied and spent the next three years struggling to make a final statement of contentment in the third version in 1919.

It is this version we hear today. Franck understands the originality Sibelius created by transferring a slow opening section (the original first movement but greatly changed) into a scherzo-type of affirmation leading to the final huge denouement. He controlled the link passage with genuine panache and allowed the music to make its own inexorable way to the finishing line, gathering momentum en route as required in the score. It led to applause given this magisterial moment of release.

Franck gave due attention to the subtleties in the delightful, gentle theme and variations of the middle movement before launching the

finale with dazzling strings creating great expectancy. This led to the horns announcing the theme, surely one of the greatest in 20th century symphonic music, and known today as *The Swan Hymn*, which originated when Sibelius saw a flock of swans flying over his house. "Such beauty" he wrote in his dairy. Franck allowed the music to achieve a final climax where the horns clash with the trumpets in a way that could have ended in artistic disaster reminiscent of the finale of the Fourth Symphony. By a sleight of hand Sibelius saves the day with a moment of genius to eventually move to the final nine bars of unequal space and silence before reaching the very last one. It was a moment of sublime satisfaction and Franck can take fulsome praise for his masterly conducting of this masterpiece.

The interval allowed reflection before the entirely new sound world arrived with the string polyphonic opening announcing Sibelius's most intimate symphony, full of strange noises and nuances. Sibelius said, *"Where others concoct cocktails of various hues, I offer pure spring water.*" Often overlooked by the general public this work deserves close attention for its many varieties in the use of the Dorian mode, a calming, almost elegiac experience in which Sibelius shows his masterly control over his musical material, used over four separate movements. Franck gave a delightful interpretation, displaying Sibelius's ability to produce a meditative masterpiece par excellence.

The last symphony was originally called a *Fantasia sinfonica* but Sibelius acknowledged the work as a symphony by describing it in the score as *Symphony No.7 In einem Satze*. Its performance was the final sign of Franck's intuitive skills in terms of control of musical material spread over a time period during which many episodes occur which require careful integration into the whole enterprise. This constant mobility of the music, under the canopy of the glorious trombone theme, was heard to great effect. Storms gradually engulf the work before it settles for the last hurrah of a massive, climactic cadence of enigmatic hope.

Franck was the hero of the hour, supported by magnificent playing from his orchestra.

Edward Clark

SIBELIUS THE REVISER

Most composers tend to revise their works thoroughly before they set a date for their first performances. Sibelius, on the other hand, had a habit of making changes to his works after they had first been heard. The orchestration would be adjusted, whole sections could be removed and consequently, the final version tended to be somewhat shorter. Thanks to the championship of Robert von Bahr and the BIS label with their complete Sibelius project, it is possible to hear how this process was worked out, enabling us to decide for ourselves whether the composer was right to make so many changes.

I have chosen seven of his works with which to illustrate this point. The first, in chronological order, was *En Saga*, which was written in 1892 and first performed in 1893.

It was not well received by the critics and when Sibelius was invited by Busoni to conduct it with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra ten years later, he decided to revise it. 150 bars shorter, it became much better structured, with fewer awkward pauses and abrupt key changes. On the other hand, Sibelius cut out some passages which might well have been retained, such as the one which begins at 6.40. The revised version, on BIS CD-295, is a more fluent and technically superior work, but I prefer to hear his original thoughts, on BIS CD-800. This must be, of course, a matter of personal taste.

The *Lemminkäinen Suite*, first performed in 1896, is based on extracts from the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, and is one of Sibelius's longest works. He revised it in 1897, in 1900 and again in 1939. One of the four movements, *The Swan of Tuonela,* was only slightly changed, while two of the other three were shortened significantly and one, *Lemminakäinen and the Maidens of the Island (*or *of Saari)* was extended by nearly three minutes.

The final movement, *Lemminkäinen's Homeward Journey (*or *Return)* is shorter by nearly five minutes. Two whole sections of the *Return* were omitted and the ending was shorn of its magnificent counter melody. Fortunately this was re-worked as a choral piece, Op 31 No 1, which is a highlight of BIS CD-1115, with the title of *Laulu Lemminkaiselle*. The original versions from 1896 are spread between BIS CD-1015 and BIS CD-1485, and I strongly recommend the former because it contains the beautiful original ending to *Lemminkäinen's Return*.

Finlandia was originally the final movement of the *Press Celebrations Music* which was first performed on 4 November 1899 and repeated by popular demand two days later. A fine new ending to the work was written for a concert on 14 December 1899 and yet another revision was undertaken before the piece was published in 1900. Unfortunately, the glorious counterpoint melody with which the work ended at the December 1899 concert was omitted in the published version. The two versions which date from 1899 are recorded on BIS CD-1115 and the final, published version is on BIS CD-221. A choral version of the so-called *Finlandia Hymn* is on BIS CD-1977 – this was incorporated into

the *Masonic Ritual Music* of 1927. I strongly recommend CD-1115 to any lover of Sibelius's music who has not already acquired it.

Sibelius wrote his *Violin Concerto in D minor* during 1903 and its first performance was given on 8 February 1904. The soloist was a local violin teacher, Viktor Novacek, who proved incapable of mastering the extremely demanding solo part, the orchestra was too small (45 players) and struggled with an equally demanding score. The result was something of a disaster. The leading critic of the time, Karl Flodin, was scathing. 'The new Violin Concerto will not form a link in the chain of genuinely significant modern creations in this artistic form', he said, adding that it was 'boring' and a 'mistake'. The composer's reaction was to withdraw the work and refashion it to make the score shorter and more comfortable for both the soloist and the orchestra to play.

The result was one of the two finest Violin Concertos composed in the twentieth century. Both versions of the Sibelius concerto can be listened to on a single CD, BIS CD-500. The revised version is by far the better of the two, but the original is well worth hearing, especially as played by a modern master, Leonidas Kavakos.

The origins of *The Oceanides* are shrouded in a fair degree of mystery. The available evidence suggests that Sibelius wrote a three movement suite in 1913 and then abandoned it, using the music for two other works. The first movement of the suite probably became *The Bard*, the second was effectively discarded and the third became the material out of which *The Oceanides* gradually emerged. Sibelius wrote out a work which he called *Rondo of the Waves,* in response to an earlier commission from America. In March 1914, he posted the score to America, and subsequently accepted an invitation to visit there in order to conduct the new work. On the voyage, he wrote a revised version of the score and renamed it *The Oceanides*. It was this work which was given its first performance in Norfolk, Connecticut on 4 June. The first performance of the final version in Finland was given at a concert in Helsinki on 8 December 1915, on the occasion of the composer's fiftieth birthday.

Although it is interesting to hear the earlier versions, on BIS CD-1445, they cannot compare with the ethereal beauty of the finished work, on BIS CD-1225.

The birthday concert also included the premiere of Sibelius's *Symphony No 5*. The composer had long struggled with this work, not helped by the fact that he was immersed in writing another symphony at the same time, which would emerge later as his No 6. Some ideas were moved from one symphony to the other and back again. The finances of the Sibelius family were often precarious and they called for a constant flow of minor pieces to generate income, so it is easy to see why *Symphony No 5* did not initially satisfy Sibelius. It was withdrawn after one more performance the following month, after which another four years of redrafting, which included the combining of the first two movements into one, and separating the mighty final chords, entrusting them to the whole orchestra. The orchestration throughout is richer and harmonically less abstruse. Both versions are on BIS CD-863 – the 1919 version is far superior.

Finally, we come to the incidental music for *The Tempest*, which was first performed on 16 March 1926 in Copenhagen. The score consisted of thirty-five items, lasting more than an hour, and is, without doubt, one of Sibelius's finest achievements. In the following year, he condensed the music into two concert suites, together with the Prelude, cutting twenty minutes from the score, including a number of complete items. The most grievous loss was the removal of the middle section of *Prospero*, which is one of the most beautiful melodies that the composer ever wrote. If any readers of the Journal have only the two suites (BIS CD-448), I urge them to acquire the complete score (BIS CD-581). They will not regret it!

Simon Coombs