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Sound and Silence

By David Matthews

The beginning of the twentieth century produced two of the finest violin concertos in the repertoire: Sibelius's and Elgar's. Both were written by composers who played the violin and would have liked to become virtuosi, though neither were eventually able to do so. Both concertos can only be played by virtuosi: they are superbly written, though technically very difficult. Listening to Fenella Humphreys brings every note of Sibelius's concerto alive with astonishing clarity and verve in her new recording with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, conducted with superb precision by George Vass, I reflected that just as the best piano music has been written by first-rate pianists – Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Rachmaninov – so almost all the best violin music is by violinists. As a non-string playing composer I never could myself achieve such a sense of absolute rightness.

Elgar's concerto has one of the longest orchestral introductions – 69 bars – before the entry of the soloist, but Sibelius, taking his cue from Mendelssohn, begins his concerto with a few bars of quiet strings, here just the violins in four parts, muted, before the soloist begins a long melody – thirty bars before its varied repeat. And what a melody it is! Although the key is D minor, the first fifteen bars are in the Dorian mode with the G exotically sharpened, and we do not hear a flattened B until bar 22. The solo clarinet which echoes the soloist in bar 11 is an artful intervention. After such a beginning, we hope Sibelius will not disappoint our expectations, and he does not. I cannot praise Fenella Humphreys too highly for her playing of this melody, every part of it articulated and phrased to perfection. She is now one of our finest violinists.

I have recently discovered on YouTube the extraordinary performance of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony by the Munich Philharmonic conducted by Sergiu Celibidache, one of two concert recordings by him (as is

well known, Celibidache did not make studio recordings). The first is with the Swedish Radio Orchestra from 1971; the Munich one, the longer and better of the two, from 1992. Typically, Celibidache's tempi are slower than almost all other conductors: at just over 38 minutes, his Munich performance is almost six minutes longer than Karajan's. At first I thought the first movement was just too slow, but I have become used to it, and it gives the transition to the beginning of the scherzo an unmatched intensity and power. Celibidache's control over the gradual acceleration of tempo throughout the scherzo is masterly and the end of the movement is as splendid as I have ever heard. The middle movement often doesn't have the depth that Celibidache achieves with his slow tempo and the extreme clarity of the Munich Philharmonic's playing. What a wonderfully strange movement this is. As for the finale, I have never heard the last section sound quite so magnificent. This is one of the greatest passages in all music; its harmonic splendour, its grandeur, are awe-inspiring. Celibidache does not observe the *pochettino stretto* at the end - did Sibelius write this because he did not dare to ask conductors to give the six pauses between the six culminating chords their proper length? Certainly few conductors do, notoriously Karajan. Celibidache's pauses must be the longest on record, but the accumulated tension, as four unresolved chords lead to a final cadence into E flat, is so powerful that it can be felt throughout each silence.

I don't think there is any parallel in music to this use of silence. The nearest – though with different intentions – is the end of Haydn's 'Joke' Quartet, Op.33 no.2 (also, as it happens, in E flat major). Haydn not only has the four phrases of his opening theme with silent bars in between each phrase; having reached a cadence into his home key, he then adds on no less than three silent bars before a final *pianissimo* repeat of the first phrase. As he no doubt expected, most audiences are tricked into applauding before the surprise ending. Beethoven exploits the dramatic use of silence in many of his works; perhaps the most

remarkable is the scherzo of the Ninth Symphony, with two silent bars between the initial three phrases and then two bars of silence before the movement begins properly. In his article 'The Rest is Silence', reprinted in his essay collection *The Way We Listen Now*, Bayan Northcott points out the dramatic pauses at the start of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but also notes that "the seven minutes of its opening movement are articulated by no less than forty sudden silences of varying lengths." Sibelius's use of silences is similar to Beethoven's: Edward Clark drew my attention to the two bars of silence at bar 28 of *Tapiola*, and there are many other examples, for instance the three pauses in the six bars before letter B in the first movement of the Second Symphony. Bruckner's symphonies are full of long pauses; his organist's mind imagined the orchestra resonating after climaxes as the organ does in a cathedral acoustic. But there is nothing quite like the ending of Sibelius's Fifth, though Walton's five-bar silence near the end of the scherzo of his Sibelius-influenced First Symphony might be heard as a homage.

In 'The Rest is Silence', Bayan Northcott laments the absence of silence in the music of the Minimalists: "Once the opening phrase pattern of a Steve Reich piece begins its interactions, we know we are in for a span of absolutely unbroken incessantness for the next twenty minutes, forty minutes, hour and a half ..." The same is true of pop, and of much – perhaps most – contemporary classical music. Even when there are pauses, as in Boulez, the pauses are static, in a music that does not move forward. In Beethoven and Sibelius silences are an integral ingredient of a music that constantly moves, whether fast or slowly. We should not lose this resource that can so enrich the language of music.