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Sibelius's Bedfellows

By Edward Clark

Over a lifetime I have heard numerous concerts of Sibelius's music beginning with the Proms 1965 centenary tributes, where Sir Malcom Sargent conducted symphonies 3 and 4, the Violin Concerto and *Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of the Island*. The chosen work to accompany the first concert was William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*. This seemed entirely fitting as Walton was a great admirer of Sibelius as can be heard in his pre-war works, especially the First Symphony and the Violin Concerto.

Other centenary concerts programmed Sibelius exclusively, befitting his status as a leading 20th century composer. A long- forgotten critic of that time described Sibelius as "a leading composer of the second rank in 20th century music"! Today concert programmes are often entirely devoted to Sibelius, but I have noticed connections being made with other composers and wondered why there have been so comparatively few.

Back at a Prom in, I think, 1972 Sibelius's Fourth Symphony was chosen with *Pierriot Lunaire* by Schoenberg and *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky to represent the years of composition, 1911, 1912 and 1913. This is probably the most informative concert programme I have ever attended, comparing and underlining the similarities and differences in these three great composers' music. Besides the BBC few concert planners have expounded the idea that Sibelius has been a formative influence in 20th century music. It was certainly a challenge and one of William Glock's best inspirations. In 1978 Peter Maxwell Davies dedicated his First Symphony to William Glock. It was premiered by Simon Rattle and the Philharmonia Orchestra. It caused quite a stir. Even more so when the composer explained at the pre-concert Prom talk later that year how the transition from slow to fast in the first movement of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony was a seminal influence.

The Prom contrasted the new symphony with the Sibelius symphony and, at a stroke, Sibelius was rehabilitated as a composer deserving respect and influence over a generation of composers who had seemingly moved on from the need for analysing and using symphonic form as heard in Sibelius's works. Maxwell Davies proceeded to not only acknowledge Sibelius as an important influence but also to conduct the late masterpieces (symphonies 6 and 7 and Tapiola) in perceptive and informative ways. More recently, the highly regarded Scottish composer Sir James MacMillan has performed Sibelius symphonies in invigorating ways, bringing the insights of a creative artist on to Sibelius's muse.

However few concert planners have followed up the idea that Sibelius is a formative influence in 20th century. The tendency has been to pigeon hole him with the late Romantics as if he belonged in their company exclusively. So, Rachmaninov has been a fairly constant companion. It can work sometimes as heard at Gloucester Cathedral in 2013 when centenary celebrations took place honouring the premiere of *Luonnotar* by Sibelius (held there) and *The Bells* by Rachmaninov.

One reason why Sibelius is often wrongly coupled is that the concert repertoire is so conservative; hence we hear the firm concert favourites most of the time; the two early symphonies and the mighty Fifth as if they exist to maximise pleasure rather than to pour out the darker side of our world. The great *Swan Hymn* of the finale in the Fifth generates enormous steam before rising to a climax that threatens to disintegrate into a disaster similar to the finale cacophony of the Fourth Symphony. By the greatest sleight of hand in almost all music Sibelius recovers in a few bars and proceeds to ultimate triumph but with the catch of deceiving his audience into complacency by dividing the crashing final chords into unequal intervals. Japan is famous for having audiences applauding in between them! I often think there must be better bedfellows for this astonishing work rather than the frequent paleness of late Romanticism.

One concert of which I am pleased to be associated with is twinning the string quartets of Sibelius and Debussy, the only time in my experience when this has happened. Both composers are seminal in exploring ways of developing music outside the German/ Austrian orthodoxy of their era. Both are truly original and both display healthy independence in thought and manner. In doing so they surely wrote music that not only engages but also challenges our senses. Their music also has true depth of expression, avoiding contemporary manners and *isms*. In maturity they avoided the bloated late flowering of central European Romanticism and the exponentially growing movement to deconstruct tonality. Sadly I cannot recall attending a concert that showcased the best of their comparative orchestral work in a single concert. No one has dared programme *Tapiola*/*The Oceanides* with *La Mer* for instance so as to allow us to witness the entirely different approaches both composers adopted to experiencing elemental forces in the natural world. Yet these works are among the most powerful masterpieces of their age. Nor have we had the pleasure of hearing the influence of Schoenberg's early First Chamber Symphony on Sibelius's Fourth. Both composers were moving away from excess towards reduction.

Writing about excess recalls a recent concert at the Barbican where the Guildhall School of Music performed seventh symphonies by Sibelius and Mahler, ably conducted by Thomas Søndergård. The trouble I have with Sibelius Seventh is I find it hard to warm to average, well intentioned performances as this was; missed details, a lack of true passion and an inclusive end with out the requisite power. On the other hand the Mahler had all the power and passion needed to carry through this gigantic behemoth, which when played, as here, I readily warmed to. Going home I asked two young female violinists which they preferred, "Oh the Mahler" came the expected reply!

One recent concert that did inspire me included *Night Ride and Sunrise* with the composer Thomas Adès conducting the concert with his new Piano Concerto and *The Planets* by Holst. The London Philharmonic

Orchestra experienced problems with the Sibelius more than the other pieces apparently; no one had played the Sibelius and were flummoxed by the strange idiom whereas the players find it straightforward to work out the intricacies in modern works and feel comfortable in a masterpiece such as *The Planets*, possibly the most advanced English music at that time in the 20th century.

I recognise mainstream audiences tend towards the conservative but sharing middle/late Sibelius with modernist composers, many of them admirers of the great Finn, would add a little grit to the occasion and probably show the prophetic content in Sibelius that nowadays inspires new music.

I would love to take the Second Symphony out of its comfort zone and place it next to a work by Brian Ferneyhough, an arch modernist but an early and persistent admirer of Sibelius. It might allow us to hear the anxieties and perplexities often hidden in the Second Symphony by lazy programme planning.

Some works need imaginative couplings to avoid being just part of another Sibelius concert. It strikes me as seeming to be almost impossible for the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies to form separate identities in concerts away from the Sibelius family. I mention the odd coupling for the Sixth below. It is in D minor but essentially conforms to the Dorian mode throughout. So why not build a concert around the Dorian mode? If you include the Dorian dominated *The Lark Ascending* any lack of audience is immediately solved! As for the Fourth Symphony we need another stroke of imaginative thinking as we heard at the 1972 Proms concert mentioned above. The French *Spectralist* School of composers, now famous for their individual approach to the *avant garde* was introduced to Sibelius by their mentor/teacher, Harry Halbreich. I met one of these French composers, Pascal Dusapin, after his Double Concerto was recently played at the Royal Festival Hall and he confirmed his admiration for the Fourth. He had earlier written to the Society, published in our pamphlet, *The Forest's mighty God*. "I

owe it the musicologist, Harry Halbreich, to have initiated me in the mid-70's to this gigantic master. I will never cease to thank him for it. That which struck me the most in the music of Sibelius is without doubt the modern density of its resounding power ..... Because the music neither confuses form with style, nor depth with grammar." So, let's hear these two composers, side by side in concert with the Fourth hopefully ending the evening. As an aside another composer hailing from this French source of influence, Hugues Dufourt, told me his admiration for Sibelius is his ability to write cataclysmic music, something towards which he himself strives and aspires.

With the appointment in 2019 of the gifted Finn, Dalia Stasevska as Principal Guest conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra (and now the Chief Conductor of the Lahti Symphony Orchestra and artistic director of the orchestra's Sibelius Festival), it seems an ideal opportunity for the BBCSO to allow her to play such a concert. She is on record as wanting to promote the Fourth Symphony.

Coupling composers who admire Sibelius with their own music has been a cherished ambition of the society since the early 1990's. Both English and Finnish composers have had their works performed side by side with Sibelius, often with assistance from the Finnish Ambassadors in London, whose open pro-active approach cannot be praised highly enough. Once the pandemic is over, we hope to continue this fertile collaboration. Meanwhile I attended a brilliant performance of the Violin Concerto in London with music by Robert Schumann and Dvořák, the result being a new recording of the concerto by the evening's performers. Plans are for this to be commercially available in the New Year and efforts should result in a discount to society members. Details will accompany this article in the Newsletter.

The strangest discordant example of Sibelius programme planning I have encountered has been twinning the glorious Sixth Symphony with *Carmina Burana* by the Nazi sympathiser Carl Orff. This seemed to me an ill-conceived mismatch although I have nothing personal

against Orff. I twinned it with *The Right of Spring* by Stravinsky and sold out the Royal Festival Hall one Saturday evening. Another concert I was involved with included fifth symphonies by Sibelius and Robert Simpson together with the Flute Concerto by Carl Nielsen. I had the honour of hosting Bob Simpson and he was blown away by the sheer noise coming from St John's Smith Square that evening; the same day Wimbledon beat Liverpool in the FA Cup!

For further ideas as to which other composers are feasible bedfellows for Sibelius, you can read with great interest the chapter on the Fourth Symphony in Eric Tawaststjerna's Vol 3 of his magisterial Sibelius biography. He identifies and discusses links with a number of Sibelius's contemporaries at the time of his writing the Fourth Symphony. This is hardly surprising given this work is Sibelius's attempt at identifying with the mainstream developments in modern music. We, therefore, read names such as Mahler, Debussy and Schoenberg. For me the fascination is his connecting the tritone (the foundation, C-D-F sharp-E, of the whole symphony) with Bartók. He writes "We encounter it as early as Kullervo where there is also an interesting parallel with the so-called Bartók scale (the major scale with a sharpened Lydian fourth and flattened Mixolydian seventh)".

In practical terms, aural terms we can hear close similarities between the finale of the Fourth with Bartók's *Music for Strings*, *Percussion and Celeste* (1935), second and fourth movements. Tawaststjerna writes on the Fourth, "Another motive drawn from the opening theme (bar 9) assumes an *impetuous* (my italics) solo, rather like a cellist in an imaginary string quartet, and his urgent pleadings prompt the other strings to join him". (Bar 18 onwards, Fig. A). We hear the same impetuous manner in the Bartók finale, particularly the start. The general disruption Sibelius provides in his finale, where nothing settles down, is a clear manifestation of Bartók's later style where steadiness in the musical pulse is hard to come by. Did Bartók know Sibelius's Fourth I wonder?

A further link between these two important composers can be heard in the dark string tones in *Rakastava* and the opening movement in the Bartók work. The mysteries in both Sibelius's *Ödlan* (*The Lizard*) and this Bartók first movement also highlight expressive and textural connections.

Linking the Finn, Sibelius and the Hungarian, Bartók should come as no surprise as the background of both composers shows them as members of the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic languages which have common roots very different from those of any other European language. It seems quite logical that both Sibelius and Bartók should share common contexts in their music. Taking in a different direction it allows a Hungarian conductor of the quality of Eugene Ormandy to be an outstanding interpreter of both composers. I often wonder why other eminent Hungarian maestros such as Reiner and Solti never showed any interest in Sibelius. It is odd that Sibelius biographies by Andrew Barnett and Guy Rickards make no mention of Bartók.

My single memory of programming both composers was a concert in London where Lorin Maazel completed his Sibelius symphony cycle with the Philharmonia Orchestra in the mid 1970's. I vividly remember the imaginative programme; Sibelius's Seventh Symphony, Delius's *Paris* and Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste*. Here I felt was a concert to get my teeth into. It was wonderful and full praise to Maazel for his interest in such a stimulating programme. If only we had more today!

If members have any ideas for favoured bedfellows please do send them in for publication and discussion. It's fun.