

UNITED KINGDOM SIBELIUS SOCIETY

www.sibeliusociety.info

No. 90

ISSN 1-473-4206



United Kingdom Sibelius Society
The Journal - Issue 90 (January 2022)

- CONTENTS -

	Page
1. Editorial	4
2. Sibelius at the Seaside <i>By Stephen Lloyd</i>	6
3. Memories of an elderly music lover <i>By Robin Self</i>	15
4. Music you might like (14) <i>By Simon Coombs</i>	20
5. New Edition scores from Breitkopf & Härtel <i>By Edward Clark</i> .	24
6. Foreign Excursions <i>By Edward Clark</i>	25
7. Sibelius Symphonies at the Proms Compiled <i>By Stephen Lloyd</i> ..	30
8. Sibelius and the piano <i>By Edward Clark</i>	36
9. Correspondence	39
10. Concert Reviews	48
11. Book reviews	59
12. CD Reviews	69

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Foreign Excursions

By Edward Clark

I thought it would be interesting to explore the works of Sibelius that did not receive their premieres in Finland.

The results are quite startling if we make the assumption that generally all Sibelius's premieres were given in Finland. This is clearly not so and many of his most important works were premiered outside his native country.

Sibelius was very sensitive as to whom and when premieres were to be undertaken. He particularly fretted when he was not the conductor. The best example comes from his experience of sending the score to New York for the premiere of *Tapiola* to be conducted by Walter Damrosch. This was to be his last and arguably his greatest work composed in 1925/6.

Before he sent the score to New York he told his publisher, Breitkopf & Härtel, in Germany to please return the manuscript for alterations. The publisher replied that it was too late as the score had been set in print and it was impossible to undo this. Sibelius was very worried but merely changed a few dynamic markings. What changes would he have made to this near perfect score we wonder today?

So let's see what scores were premiered outside of Finland.

From her lover's tryst a girl came homeward Op.37, No.5

This is one of Sibelius's most romantic songs and one of his most popular.

First performance was in Berlin, on an evening at the home of Otto Lessman in January 1901, Ida Ekman, soprano, Karl Ekman, piano. Karl Ekman arranged the *Six Humoresques for Violin and Orchestra* Op.87/89 for violin and piano and was an early author on Sibelius.

The Violin Concerto (rev) Op.47

This is the revised version as we hear it today. The first performance was given in Helsinki in 1904 but it was withdrawn by Sibelius for revision.

Richard Strauss conducted the Berlin premiere on October 19, 1905. The soloist was Carl Halir.

Pohjola's Daughter Op.49

This important work was premiered in St Petersburg conducted by Sibelius on December 29, 1906. It is a vibrant work and one that Sibelius hoped would cement his reputation in Germany. It may have been modelled on *Death and Transfiguration* (1894) by Richard Strauss, the most illustrious German composer of tone poems.

Night Ride and Sunrise Op.55

Strangely this work was premiered in St Petersburg on January 23, 1909 and was conducted by Alexander Siloti, who made cuts and the premiere was not successful. It was dedicated to Madam Siloti so presumably Sibelius intended to make a bit of a splash in this Russian city near to Helsinki. In which case he failed and the work has never received the attention it deserves.

String Quartet (Voces intimae) Op.56

This was largely written in London in 1909 and received its premiere in Berlin on January 6, 1910, given by the Cecilquartett (Prague). The house in London where he stayed now has a Blue Plaque!

It is the only mature string quartet of the four he wrote, the earlier three coming from his student days. It shows the worry and concern for his life after many operations to remove a throat tumour. You might say it was a self-inflicted illness bought on by his predilection for cigars and alcohol. He went on to live for another forty years.

In memoriam Op.59

This was premiered in Oslo on October 8, 1910 in its revised score. Sibelius conducted.

This is one of the few scores still lacking recognition for its gravity and depth of expression. I cannot recall any performance in the last 60 years in the UK. Influenced probably after hearing Mahler's Fifth Symphony it has a magisterial tread about it that is deeply affecting.

I sent it to Sir Colin Davis who replied that he was "intrigued" but he never played it nor recorded it alas. It was played at Sibelius's funeral.

The Dryad Op.45 No.1

This was premiered in Oslo, also on October 8, 1910 conducted by Sibelius.

It is another rather strange tone poem, short and to the point.

Luonnotar Op.70

This was premiered in Gloucester, UK on September 10, 1913. The conductor was Herbert Brewer, Director of Music at Gloucester Cathedral and the soloist was Aino Ackté, soprano.

This is one of Sibelius most visionary scores, requiring a super human effort on the part of the soloist who has to climb up to the highest reaches of her vocal compass. I can only speculate what sort of reaction it made on Brewer! Paul Driver, the Sunday Times Music Critic once wrote that "*Luonnotar* contains more music in it than the entire Mahler symphony cycle"!

I do not know why Sibelius did not travel to give the premiere as it is one of his hardest pieces to perform. He dedicated it to Aino Ackté, one of Finland's finest singers and known for her singing in Richard Strauss operas.

The Oceanides Op.73

This was an occasion when Sibelius did visit the host commissioning country, America. He conducted the premiere on June 4, 1914 at Norfolk at the invitation of the commissioning family, Mr and Mrs Carl Stoeckel. It was a great success and Sibelius enjoyed his stay, travelling into New York and visiting the Niagra Falls. His Fourth Symphony (1911) had already been performed in America and his music was being championed by a number of celebrated maestros.

Scaramouche Op.71

This is described as a tragic pantomime by Poul Knudsen and M.T. Bloch.

The premiere took place in Copenhagen on May 12, 1922 conducted by Georg Høeberg.

This is an overlooked rarity in the Sibelius catalogue. It is a continuous dramatic score lasting over 70 minutes, based on the story of a sinister hunchback dwarf's bewitching musicianship and evil intent taking us from innocent charm to a nightmarish conclusion.

Symphony No.7 Op.105

Sibelius visited Stockholm to conduct the premiere of his last symphony on March 24, 1924.

He originally called it a *Fantasia sinfonica* but after a few subsequent performances he allowed it to be published as a Symphony in one movement.

It caused him a lot of trouble to “forge” the work into one movement. One morning after he had finished the score his wife, Aino, gave him a note saying she would not accompany him to Stockholm after her feeling of disgrace due his to recent intoxication in front of an orchestra. She kept her word and never again attended a concert he conducted, few as they were. This may account for the late Finnish premiere in 1927, when Robert Kajanus conducted the work.

The scandal of Aino's non appearance at what should have been Sibelius local triumph would have been unbearable to Sibelius and his family.

The Tempest Op.109

This is Sibelius's last incidental music score for a play. He had built a reputation for composing atmospheric music for a range of plays and he agreed to this commission from Copenhagen for music to accompany Shakespeare's late play. It is the longest such score and remains his greatest triumph in writing descriptive music of the highest quality.

It was premiered at the Det Kongelige Teater, Copenhagen on March 16, 1926, conducted by Johan Hye-Knudsen.

Tapiola Op.112

This final glory of Sibelius's extensive output was commissioned and premiered by Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphonic Society on December 26, 1926. Despite its austerity of tone and content Damrosch told Sibelius it was well received.

Two more premieres were later given in New York.

Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of the Island Op.22 No.1

Lemminkäinen in Tuonela Op.22 No.2

These were revisions of two movements from the original four movement *Lemminkäinen Suite* composed in 1895.

Sibelius revised them in 1939 and allowed them to be included in a concert conducted by Georg Schnéevoigt in New York with the NBC Symphony Orchestra on 28th September, 1939.

Source: The Works of Jean Sibelius/ Fabian Dahlstrom
Turku, April 30 1987