

# UNITED KINGDOM SIBELIUS SOCIETY

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# United Kingdom Sibelius Society

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## **Sibelius and Foreign Music Festivals**

*A comment by Edward Clark*

I have been reading through the lists of music festivals in the UK, Europe and the United States in the coming months. They are much more ambitious now that the pandemic is largely behind us.

Alas, I am saddened by the continuing trend of ignoring Sibelius in America and in Europe, apart from the Nordic countries. Sibelius can hardly be expected to figure in opera festivals, but even orchestras seem only interested in the Violin Concerto – the symphonies are hard to find anywhere. Instead, audiences are regularly over-dosed with works by Mahler and Shostakovich, together with music by lesser composers whose works used to be described as ‘novelties’ – why is this?

Sibelius is now a lonely figure in many European countries, in either annual concert series or festivals. I detect, however, a gradual trend among some younger conductors performing his music in Spain, France and Germany. Older maestros still avoid Sibelius, as did their earlier colleagues, although it was good to see recently the issuing of broadcasts of Hans Rosbaud’s legendary 1950’s recordings.

It is worth noting that there have been more performances of Symphony No 4 in Germany than in the UK recently! Simon Rattle has talked about his efforts to programme the Sibelius symphony cycle with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. They performed Symphony No 3 for the first time in their history under his baton, yet took to the oblique mysteries of Symphony No 4 with enthusiasm. Germans like complexity it seems!

In general, however, Sibelius makes only the occasional appearance in mainstream festivals on the continent and in the United States. He is neither sufficiently attractive to appeal to audiences in need of novelties or the enduring appeal of Mahler, Richard Strauss and Shostakovich, nor does he appear to festival directors to be sufficiently important in the general development of European music.

This is, of course, nonsense.

So here is my list of six great works by Sibelius which music programmers can rely upon to proclaim him as worthy of a place alongside Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Bartok in the great movement from late Romanticism towards the world of exciting new sounds and forms which have endured into the present century.

### **Lemminkäinen Suite**

National Romanticism par excellence but showing glimmer of new sounds to come. Virtually unknown on the continent or in the USA, but ready to surprise new audiences with what one writer described as being among ‘the best of Sibelius’.

### **Symphony No 4 in A minor**

This Nordic-noir shocker is a worthy companion to Edvard Munch’s painting ‘*The Scream*’ which most people agree is an iconic statement of pure angst. Herbert von Karajan understood that when he said it was one of the two hardest works to rehearse from his entire repertoire.

### **Symphony No 5 in E flat major**

The first movement is as radical and explosive as any composer has ever written. Leonard Bernstein said that it was the most difficult opening movement to play in his complete symphonic repertoire. The finale contains one of the greatest, most beautiful melodies written in the twentieth century. Once heard, it is never forgotten.

### **Symphony No 7 in C major**

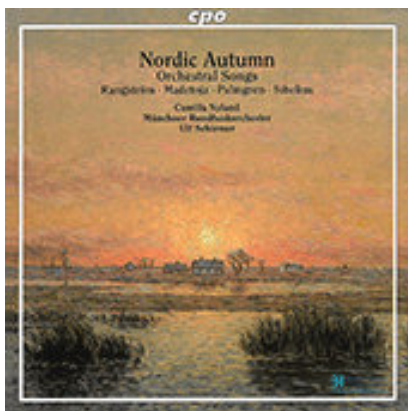
This is a compressed masterpiece, expressing in twenty minutes Sibelius’s final thoughts on ‘the whole world’. He set future generations of composers the challenge of capturing a wealth of material in a single arching span.

## Tapiola

This late work encapsulates the very essence of our natural world, wreaking havoc on mankind from time to time. It poses a warning for the future of our species, one of the great prophecies in all music.

## Luonnotar

A visionary depiction of the *Creation of the World*, described by a Sunday Times critic as containing more music in less than ten minutes than the entire Mahler symphony cycle.



*Luonnotar*



*Tapiola*