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Dear Mr Clark,

As promised, at long last I enclose a note on my recollections of the maestro. It is an enlargement of a chapter I wrote for a book on my experiences in Finland, whose intending publisher had a change of heart after the work was finished, so it is still unpublished.The title is a plain statement of fact, but please alter it if you wish to change it. Here I must admit to being musically illiterate, as I cannot read music, only enjoy it.

Stefan Szymanski was of Polish extraction, but I have spelt his name in the German way as I think it would be better understood by the average reader. He also called himself Stephen Simmonds, which doesn't sound nearly so exciting. Unfortunately I cannot trace the press cutting from which I quoted, but I imagine the British Library Newspaper Library in Colindale would be able to provide a copy against payment. You might also ask the Cultural Attaché at the Finnish Embassy in London if he can get you a copy of the Fred Runeberg picture of Sibelius, which I mentioned to you over the telephone. It shows him in profile against a black background and is the one the maestro preferred, since he used to order them by the dozen.

Although I cannot take part in any of the Sibelius Society's activities in London, I think it would be appropriate for me to join it, so I enclose a cheque and the supporting form. I would prefer to pay future subscriptions in the first week of January (I pay all my subscriptions then), for which I will make out a banker's order. For this my bank will need the name, address and sorting number of the Society's bank and the number and title of the account to which my subscriptions should be paid.

Lastly, as my wife and I are planning to visit Finland this year, could you please let me know the address of the Finnish Sibelius Society, which I presume must be the parent or umbrella of all the others?

Yours sincerely,
Justin Brooke

I MET SIBELIUS

by Justin Brooke

When I was in my early teens I went with a school-friend to a cinema in the West End. I forget what the film was, but I shall always remember the music played in the interval. The slide projected on the screen told us that the organist had accepted a friend's bet that he couldn't play Finlandia. He did. I sat fascinated, for never in my life had I heard music which spoke to me. It told of frost, of winter, of forests, of the breaking-up of ice in the rivers when the spring thaw came, of the trees bursting into leaf, the wild flowers blooming, and the joy of the countryside at midsummer.

After the war I was appointed assistant press attaché at the British Legation in Helsinki. This was largely because I had learned Finnish and Swedish, the country's two official languages, some six years earlier, while waiting for repatriation after service in the Finnish army. A couple of months after my arrival I was invited to join the Helsinki Camera Club, and here I met Santeri Levas, a banking man and distinguished photographer whom I had met while I was stationed in Copenhagen the year before. He remembered me, and mentioned that he had been Sibelius' secretary before the war, and showed me a book he had written about him at the time, illustrated with his own photographs.

During my five years as a diplomat I was invited to numerous concerts, and went to as many as I could because there was always something by Sibelius at such gatherings. One memorable occasion was the visit to Helsinki of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, when a special concert was put on in the Great Hall of the University, for the whole of the Diplomatic Corps and their wives. Those of us who were there heard a new way of interpreting Finlandia and En Saga (A Fairy-Tale), which were particularly attractive, and quite unlike the Finnish style to which we were all accustomed.

At this time, despite his chosen seclusion, Sibelius was still a prominent and popular figure in the public mind, and his countrymen were justifiably proud of him. His popularity was such that there were many funny stories about him. My favourite holds a grain of truth, for Sibelius had spent a summer between the wars in town, living with one of his daughters. Her flat was newly-built, on the top floor of a block which had been built round a square, with an entrance for vehicles at street level. One day, when he was trying to

compose he was interrupted by the unskilled playing of a hurdy-gurdy down in the yard, from which the noise echoed upwards and around the four walls. He took the lift down, and offered the man money to go away and play somewhere else, and to leave him in peace to get on with his composing. "And while you are at it", he added, "don't jerk the handle of your hurdy-gurdy; turn it steadily and regularly and you will get a much better tune." The man took the money and went away, and, it is alleged, came back at the same time the following day, with a notice on his hurdy-gurdy: "Pupil of Jean Sibelius".

One Saturday afternoon in April 1948, when my boss Don Roper was on holiday, the telephone in my flat rang. The caller was Stefan Schimanski of the Manchester Guardian. He said he was in Helsinki until Monday, and wanted to deliver a box of cigars to Sibelius from one of his admirers in England. I replied that Sibelius did not receive visitors, and certainly not journalists, but, as always with a negative answer, I gave him some hope and suggested that if he rang back about an hour later I might have some news for him. I then rang Santeri Levas and told him of the call. He told me that the maestro did not receive visitors, but that he would ring back in half an hour. He did so, and said that the maestro would be delighted to see the two of us the following day. "Take the 13.30 train for Järvenpää, and ask the station-master to direct you. Unless you mention my name no-one will tell you where the great man lives, because everyone respects his wish not to be troubled with casual visitors."

Schimanski and I met the following day and took the train. The weather was warm and sunny, the snow had melted, and the countryside was already green. At Järvenpää I approached the station-master, resplendent in a bright red uniform, and explained our mission to him. He replied that the maestro did not receive visitors, so I told him that Mr Levas had arranged for us to see him. He gave a broad and welcoming smile, and precise directions how to find Ainola, which lay a short way out of town on the road to the capital. The wood anemonies in the birch thicket were in bloom as we walked up the drive to the house. A servant admitted us, and showed us into the living-room. Here Schimanski takes up the story:

"His entry was like his music: sombre and massive and unannounced. I had been waiting in the spacious living-room of his house near Järvenpää and expected Sibelius to come in through the door behind me, when suddenly

I noticed him at the far end of the room which leads into a small study. He stood there immobile, as if rooted to the ground, and the expression on his face was tense and grim. But the moment he advanced the heaviness vanished, and the man stood detached from his background. His great figure moved lightly; his enormous forehead with its vertical frowns rising above each brow, became smooth; his eyes flashed and sparkled like those of a young man; and his features changed continually as he relaxed in his chair."

First of all Schimanski dealt with the language question. He found that Sibelius preferred to discuss matters in German. This settled, he presented the maestro with a large box of Havana cigars, which one of his admirers in England had sent him. He was greatly moved to hear that it had come from a man who, as a schoolboy, had sent cigars to him before the war. But let Schimanski continue:

"The man who sat there was not the man one sees in his portraits. In front of the camera he is usually stern and rigid. But in the flesh he is almost gay, with a childlike contentment in his face; and with a twinkle in his eyes he prescribed his recipe for happiness: 'Above all you must have a sense of humour. It is the greatest gift a man can have.' And for the artist he had some more advice: 'Forget about politics. My wife reads the papers and knows what is going on. But I have cut myself off from politics: they do not concern me. It is true I have friends among politicians, but among them I am just like an idiot.'" His struggle, Schimanski felt, was much more personal, but beyond the conflict there was the great exuberance of a life fulfilled. "Yes, I, too, can never speak of my innermost struggles", Sibelius confessed.

The talk turned to Mozart, "the greatest musical genius" when he made that comparison, and it was most significant. For, like Mozart, his own strength seemed to lie in his silence. It must reveal itself, in his own music. That is why no-one outside his household has ever been allowed into the upstairs study where he is said to compose at night, and why no-one, after twenty-seven years, has ever penetrated the mystery of the Eighth Symphony. Schimanski realised suddenly how foolish it would be to probe the secret, and stopped half-way in a sentence: "No, I'd better not ask you that one", he

said, "it concerns your music". Sibelius smiled and said very quietly "No, you'd better not ask me that". Then he turned his face to one side, and his huge ears seemed to grow bigger, as if they were falling on to the jacket of his chalk-striped suit, and he added: "Tell me; I need not answer, of course, but I would like to know what you wanted to know." And at this he laughed himself.

The sun streamed through the wide windows. Lake Tuusula slept peacefully in the distance, and the cluster of trees around the house guarded the maestro's seclusion. Schimanski could not help comparing this Sunday atmosphere with the mood he had encountered only a few days before in the home of Sigrid Undset in Lillehammar in Norway. Sibelius grew serious when Schimanski pointed out this difference to him. "She has visions of the past; I believe in the future". He continued: "There is a good deal of tragedy in the world, and in art, but I believe everything moves in a spiral. It always goes up. Our period is just a temporary state." To underline his faith he quoted a Finnish poem about man's will to conquer, then suddenly he stopped, and said, half jokingly and half earnestly: "You know, I do not like talking about myself. I shall regret it tomorrow."

The talk turned to Oxford, "which in moonlight is just like Venice," and about the Queen's Hall in London: "It was as if I had been bombed myself when I heard the news of its destruction by a bomb during the war;" and about Horace, and about cigars and the difficulty of obtaining them. Schimanski told him that Mr Churchill was still getting his from Havana. "Ah, yes," sighed Sibelius, "but you must be a Churchill to get them."

And there was that other note, that of undivided praise. Shostakovitch's last Symphony, of which he had the recordings, was invigorating; Vaughan Williams's Sixth, especially the last movement, was so impressive, so powerful, and, Sibelius added, "he is not a young man any more, after all." Contemporary British music, with a number of young composers he named, was for these troubled times surprisingly vigorous. It was, in fact, "coming back in a circle to the golden era of Purcell and Byrd."

Time stood still as Sibelius spoke, wrote Schimanski, and there was one other recurring note, that of old age. "There will be no more

(songs).
lieder. To write songs you must be young." And he spoke of his youth, how he had started composing at the age of ten; how the law books he was supposed to study turned yellow in the sun because he did not touch them; how his grandmother brought him up and eventually allowed him to devote himself to music; and how he composed his Quartet in London. "In such a big place?" asked Schimanski. "There are only two places where you can be at peace and compose," replied Sibelius, "a big city and a forest: in both you are alone." And he talked of London and of his walks to the East End, and how he had enjoyed travelling in the past. The old note had crept in again. Schimanski told him of the disappointment felt in England when he did not appear at the Edinburgh Festival. He replied that his doctor had not allowed him to go. But almost immediately he offered another explanation: "I do not want to leave Järvenpää. I built this house forty-five years ago. I have not been away for the last ten, not even to go to Helsinki. Now I shall stay." The master had come to rest among the stark pine trees, the discordant winds, and the mists rising over the dark lakes, which are his music. Schimanski then asked him whether its brooding vigour accounted for his popularity in England. "Maybe. Perhaps. But I think the influence is to be found in the Finnish forests."

The sound of his music, Schimanski concluded, has become distant, like an invisible Northern myth. The secret of his strength, however, remains unbroken: the forests in their solitude, speak their own monumental language, and he himself remains a solitary and monumental figure full of grace and vitality, like his creations.

The great man entertained us to coffee, and I had the chance to chat with him in his own language. He posed for a photograph, and I took several more surreptitiously with the camera in my lap. It had a noisy shutter, so I clicked it whenever he and Schimanski laughed. Then we took our leave, and made our way back to town by train. Schimanski was as excited as a dog with two tails, for he knew that he had a very unusual scoop, and started writing his notes while we waited for the train and on the journey south. At home I developed the photographs and made enlargements for him to take home. Then I telephoned our joint thanks to Santeri Levas and told him of the photographs. As all but one had been taken without the maestro's knowledge I suggested that their existence should not be revealed to anyone in Finland as long as their subject was alive. He agreed. But the news finally leaked out.

A year or so later the head of the official Finnish News Bureau told me he had heard that I had a recent picture of Sibelius and asked me if I could let him have one for a colleague in the Netherlands, to which I agreed after getting Santeri Levas's permission.

Meanwhile, my boss returned from holiday the following week and asked if anything had happened while he was away. I replied in as off-hand a manner as I could that a chap from the Manchester Guardian had telephoned me the previous Saturday and said he wanted to see Sibelius, so I took him out. My boss' jaw dropped. "You what?" I repeated my remark. He replied "Don't you know Sibelius never receives visitors, and that the only Englishman he has seen since the war has been the head of the British Council?" "Yes," I said, "but I happened to know the right person, and he arranged the visit." My boss understandably kept quiet about the whole affair, but before his next trip to the provinces to visit newspaper editors he told our Minister (the late Sir Oswald Scott) that he was leaving me in charge of the department as I seemed to be well able to look after myself.

On Sibelius' 83rd birthday Schimanski's article appeared in the Manchester Guardian. It is said to relate that a year or so later it was reported that, with twenty-two other journalists, one Schimanski had been killed in an air crash in Korea, where he was covering the war. My boss died some years ago, and I doubt whether the head of the British Council in Finland has survived him. It is thus a sobering thought that I may now be the last Englishman to have had the privilege of meeting the maestro and of enjoying his hospitality.

JB.