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- CONTENTS -

1. Editorial	4
2. Articles	6
3. Sibelius: Rebel With A Cause by <i>Caroline J Sinclair</i>	6
4. John Carewe at 90 A life full of adventure by <i>Edward Clark</i>	10
5. More Music You Might Like By <i>Simon Coombs</i>	16
6. Orchestral Masterpieces under the Microscope	
Jonathan Del Mar Review by <i>Edward Clark</i>	20
7. Three Critical Editions reviewed by <i>Edward Clark</i>	21
8. A farewell from Ted Adams by <i>Edward Clark</i>	26
9. Irene & Brian Goldsmith – UK Sibelius Society	27
10. Concert Reviews	28
11. Tributes galore at Cadogan Hall by <i>Edward Clark</i>	28
12. Two Nordic giants and Beethoven by <i>Edward Clark</i>	30
13. Rare repertoire from Bromley Symphony Orchestra by <i>Edward Clark</i>	31
14. Heroes and Heroines by <i>Edward Clark</i>	32
15. An invigorating concert programme by <i>Edward Clark</i>	34
16. The Old and the New Review by <i>Alan Taylor</i>	35
17. Life’s angst and other works by <i>Edward Clark</i>	37
18. Music to The Tempest Adès and Sibelius by <i>Edward Clark</i>	38
19. Stop Press <i>A new biography</i> by <i>Ferruccio Tammaro</i>	40

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Three Critical Editions reviewed

By Edward Clark

The Society thanks Breitkopf & Härtel for sending these three publications which are:

The Sixth Symphony – Editor Kai Lindberg

Orchestral Works (Various) – Editor Timo Virtanen

String Quartets – Editors Pekka Helasvuo and Tuija Wickland

The evolution of the Sixth Symphony is arguably the most mysterious of all his symphonies.

This Critical Edition traces, as far as is possible, this evolution which began at the time he was working on his Fifth Symphony in 1915. In fact, Sibelius, was not only composing his Fifth Symphony but was sketching plans for the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies at the same time. An abundance of riches perhaps but also a bewildering task in allocating themes to each.

Sibelius made the first direct reference to the Sixth Symphony in his diary entry of 27 January 1916. "I have worked on symphony VI". However, it may have begun to evolve several years before that date. A distraction occurs in his attempt to write a second violin concerto, material for which appeared later in the Sixth Symphony. *Violin Concert III/ Concerto Lirico*. Life becomes more questionable when knowing he was attracted to writing "a Fantasy 1 for orchestra", this at the end of 1914.

This convolution of ideas for his last three symphonies is thoroughly dealt with in the Edition and it demonstrates the difficulty for any scholar to be precise in evaluating the available sketches, diary entries and writings.

The text is a compelling detective story.

His struggles continued throughout the period up to the 1923 premiere. As late as 14 January 1923 he wrote in his diary: "Oh yes! I, II, III of Symphony 6 completed. I tremble and I am nervous". The premiere of the Sixth Symphony took place on 19 February 1923, five weeks after he still had to complete the finale. The critics generally welcomed the new symphony positively and enthusiastically. They noted the subdued or restrained character of the music. Further praise was placed on Sibelius's technical mastery, and especially his orchestration. The Critical Commentary notes Sibelius writing on 3 June 1948, "When I was composing my Sixth Symphony, I did not realise that I was composing in the Dorian Mode. As the theme happened to be Dorian, it naturally led to a Dorian whole". This sound world is very special and results in a work that stands apart from contemporary works of the time. As such it is a favourite in the minds of advocates of Sibelius's originality in a world rapidly moving towards a completely different conformity.

The Dryad Op.45 No.1

Music for a Scene (Op.45 No.2/1904)

Dance Intermezzo Op.45 No.2

Pohjola's Daughter Op.49

Pan and Echo Op. 53a

As can be spotted these works are clustered together by opus number if not entirely by date of composition. (*The Dryad* comes from 1910 whereas the *Dance Intermezzo* from 1904, rev 1907).

In addition, an extensive fragment illustrating the unrealised plan of a symphonic poem entitled “Luonnotar”, which Sibelius reworked into *Pohjola's Daughter*, appears as a facsimile. *Music for a Scene* is now published for the first time. Except for *Pohjola's Daughter*, all the works were composed with a choreographic purpose, (sub)titled or referred to as “dance intermezzos” or related to opus 45.

The masterpiece is, of course, *Pohjola's Daughter*, sketched between 1901-1906. During 1905, plans were laid for an oratorio based on the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala* reflecting the biblical legend of Mary and the child Jesus. “Marjatta” did not materialise but some of the musical materials planned for it eventually surfaced in *Pohjola's Daughter*. As some did also in the Third Symphony.

It was originally to be called *Luonnotar*. Sibelius wrote to Lienau at the beginning of April 1906: “The new symphonic poem, Luonnotar is ready”. Sibelius then abandoned “Luonnotar” and decided instead to revise the score, which did not take long. In this revised form, the work was eventually known as *Pohjola's Daughter*. The work was published with a programmatic text in the form of Kalevalaic verse, printed in German in the first edition on the page preceding the score.

At its premiere in St Petersburg, conducted by Sibelius, it had mixed reviews. One mentioned “the complexity of the programme”.

One compared Sibelius to Rimsky-Korsakov, mentioning “both having the same interest in musical nationalism”. Another comment, to my mind much closer to the truth, was “Sibelius is closer to Strauss”. I support this by saying Sibelius had his eye on achieving wider European fame by 1906 and wrote a work that easily stands up to those tone poems by Strauss in flamboyance and romantic fervour. He wanted it to be his breakthrough work in Germany in particular.

Of the four string quartets only the mature one “*Voces intimae*” is widely known. I can write with pride that the United Kingdom Sibelius Society performed all four quartets in its Sibelius Festival held in London on October 1999.

The earliest is the least interesting as can be expected of a work written before beginning his studies at the Helsinki Music Institute in September 1885. As far as is currently known, there were no performances during Sibelius’s lifetime. The first to assess the Eb-major Quartet was Karl Ekman in 1935: “This last composition from his school years reveals a technical ability and handling of form, striking for a novice in music, who had no other teacher than himself.”

The next two quartets, in A minor (1889) and Bb major Op.4 (1890), come from his student years and are large, ambitious works deserving of performance. The Edition traces their fortunes in Helsinki. Flodin writes of the A minor “It astonished us with its matureness, perfection of form, and the richness the young composer displayed in his work.” The next known performance was in April 1984. It had been thought to be lost.

Flodin, writing about the Bb major says, “Perhaps even more astounding is the completely independent tone of his music. It is neither German nor French nor Nordic, but Mr Sibelius’s own.” Fatling opined that the Quartet testifies of “highly significant steps forward.”

In 1894 Sibelius arranged the movement III for a string orchestra adding the double-bass part in his core of the quartet version. There were a handful of performances of the Quartet during Sibelius’s lifetime.

Sibelius began composing his D Minor Op.56 *Voces intimae* string quartet in 1908. In February 1909 he travelled to London and worked hard on the score during his stay during which he conducted *En saga*, *Finlandia* and *Valse triste*. He composed during the day and socialised at night. He moved to Paris in March and became concerned about his throat. Then onto Berlin where his doctor put his mind at ease having relieved Sibelius of a tumour in his throat in 1908. On the 15 April he was able to note in his diary: “The Quartet is ready!”

The premiere is thought to have taken place in Moscow in March 1910. The Finnish premiere was in Helsinki in April 1910. The critics were unanimous in their opinion the work was difficult to understand. One wrote “the great Adagio movement springs up in mind Beethoven’s late quartets.” Once the performances started to take place in 1911, there were plenty of them. It was played again in Helsinki in May 2012. He noted in his diary, “I heard *Voces intimae* and it made an unforgettable impression. I will remember this for a long time.”

It is now in the repertoire of most string quartets and is regarded as one of his most important middle-period works which are characterised by a withdrawal from superficiality of utterance; this resulted in his famous comment about the later Fourth Symphony from 1910/11. “My Fourth Symphony is a protest about the compositions of today. Nothing, absolutely nothing of the circus about it.”



Finnish Landscape by Eero Järnefelt

Rare repertoire from Bromley Symphony Orchestra

Review by *Edward Clark*

This concert was performed by the Bromley Symphony Orchestra conducted by Adrian Brown at Langley Park Centre for the Performing Arts on Saturday 13 May 2023. The violin soloist was Michael Foyle.

Adrian Brown has a long-standing history of planning imaginative programmes and this one was no exception. Dvořák, Delius (just) and Sibelius are all well known composers with various “hits” in their catalogues. At this concert Brown chose to investigate hidden gems and to very good effect.

Dvořák’s *Scherzo Capriccioso* is not really a rarity and it deserves as many outings as possible due to its magnificent music, full of high spirits and occasional inward remembrances. The score sparkled under his baton and the horns distinguished themselves from the very beginning.

Delius received a visit in old age from a famous string quartet; “we have come to play Beethoven”. “Oh no you won’t”, said the irascible composer. His apathy towards Beethoven is well heard in his Violin Concerto, played here by the young virtuoso, Michael Foyle. I cannot think of a concerto for violin from the late Romantic era so different to that of Beethoven’s violin concerto, so full of muscle and symphonic thought. Delius offers us a more episodic traversal, to quote the programme note “diaphanous and fragmentary, technically tricky without a smidgeon of showiness”. It has a real beauty in sound, with hidden strengths in both form and content. These were exposed to our ears by Foyle through his expressive and confident manner and by Brown whose knowledge and experience of Delius’s style is second-to-none. This performance was assisted by the careful guidance to the orchestra from Brown in the many “diaphanous and fragmentary” sections heard in the score.

Like the Delius concerto, Sibelius's Sixth Symphony struggles to receive performances these days, particularly from our professional orchestras. It lacks the powerful impulses heard in its two neighbours, symphonies Five and Seven. But it is, in many ways, Sibelius's most personal and elusive symphony, full of gorgeous sounds that grow seemingly from nowhere. His ability to construct his initial ideas and build them into a cohesive and compelling structure over four separate movements is quite remarkable. Brown's intuitive sense paid dividends in his choice of tempi in each movement so that the logic Sibelius conjures before our ears results in a work that is integrated to such a remarkable degree. The playing was of a high standard and the performance showed great perspicacity on behalf of all concerned.

It was followed by lighter Sibelius, the better known *Karelia Suite*, full of charm and good tunes. It ended the concert in high spirits.