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ARTICLES

Sir Henry Wood And Jean Sibelius

If one man bestrode the world of British music in the first half of the twentieth century, that man was surely Sir Henry Wood. As conductor of the Promenade concerts from August 1895 until a few days before his death in August 1944, he single-handedly brought classical music into the mainstream of the nation's life. From humble beginnings but with music in his blood, he rose rapidly to a position of eminence which he maintained throughout his life. It was said of him that he knew everyone and that everyone loved him.

Wood gave encouragement to British composers, programming their new works not only at the Proms (his novelties), but also in Europe and the United States. He encouraged women composers and employed female musicians in his orchestras long before this became normal practice. He was a renowned music teacher and the composer of two symphonies and many choral and chamber works. He was also a skilled arranger of other composers' music, including the ever-popular *Fantasia on British Sea Songs* which was first performed in 1905 as a celebration of the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar.

Wood was devoted to the great composers of Europe, including Bach, Beethoven and Wagner, and he programmed new works by contemporary European composers, encouraging them to come to London to conduct, perform or supervise performances of their music. In this way, he came to know Debussy and Ravel, Schoenberg and Richard Strauss, Stravinsky and Rachmaninov.

The music of Sibelius was first heard at a Promenade Concert on 26 October 1901, when Henry Wood conducted the New Queen's Hall Orchestra in a performance of the suite, *King Christian II*. The programme also included music by Handel, Coleridge-Taylor, Tchaikovsky, Donizetti, August Lindner, Elgar, Norman O'Neill and

Wagner. There were a further five items in the second half! Wood, in his autobiography, *My Life of Music*, claimed that Sibelius attended this concert, but other authorities dispute this.

Two years later, Wood opened a concert of thirteen items with Sibelius's Symphony No 1 – also included were Bruch's *Violin Concerto No 1* and the *1812 Overture*. The *Swan of Tuonela* and the *Song of the Athenians* followed in August 1905 and Sibelius came to England for the first time three months later, according to two of his biographers, Robert Layton and Andrew Barnett. The visit, hosted by Granville Bantock, was a great success. Sibelius met Henry Wood and Rosa Newmarch for the first time. They became two of his greatest supporters in Britain.

1906 saw the British premieres of three more works. These were *En Saga*, *Finlandia* and the *Karelia Suite* – all were well received, particularly *Finlandia*. In 1907, the *Dance Intermezzo No 2* received its one and only Proms performance, to be followed by the *Violin Concerto* for the first of its forty-eight outings. After a blank year in 1908, 1909 saw no less than four performances of *Valse Triste*, reflecting its immediate popularity with audiences. First played as part of a thirteen work Saturday night bonanza on 21 August which also featured *Finlandia*, it was repeated on 14 and 22 September and on 19 October. Recognising that he was onto a winner, Wood played *Valse Triste* twenty-five more times in the six succeeding seasons, including six in 1915. How times have changed!

It is obvious that in the first twenty years of the Promenade Concerts, there was a preference for a preponderance of shorter works. Even so, works such as the *Eroica* and Choral symphonies of Beethoven were played almost every year. The symphonies of Jean Sibelius fared less well, however. After No 1 in 1903, the next to be played in a Promenade concert was No 6 in 1931, followed by No 5 in 1933, No 7 in 1934 and No 2 in 1936. It is hard to explain this neglect of the symphonies, especially as Wood was clearly an admirer of the Finnish composer's music, keeping in regular contact with him and programming the symphonies on many other occasions.

Amends were somewhat made in 1937 when all seven symphonies were played, including the Proms premieres of Nos 3 and 4. In his autobiography, Sir Henry wrote 'I look back with pride and satisfaction when I remember I was the first to have helped popularise the music of this deep and original thinker. Since those days we have been able to devote whole concerts to his works and be sure of large appreciative audiences.'

Away from the Proms, Wood conducted many performances of the works of Sibelius, and the composer paid a number of visits to Britain during which he conducted his own music. For example, in February 1908, he was in London to conduct his *Symphony No 3* at the Queen's Hall, with Bantock, Wood and Rosa Newmarch among the appreciative audience. In February 1909, he conducted *En Saga* and *Finlandia* at the same venue and *Valse Triste* and *Spring Song* in Cheltenham. This visit was rather longer than usual and Sibelius found time to work on *Voces Intimae* and to meet Claude Debussy after a concert which included the *Nocturnes* and *Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faun*. In October 1912, Sibelius conducted his *Symphony No 4* at the Birmingham Festival, in a concert which also included the premiere of Elgar's *The Music Makers*. After the long hiatus of World War I, Sibelius returned to England for a concert tour which lasted more than four weeks. He conducted in London, Bournemouth, Birmingham and Manchester, including *Symphonies Nos 3, 4 and 5*, *Finlandia*, *En Saga* and *The Oceanides*, *Valse Triste* and *Valse Lyrique* in a total of eight concerts. All these pieces were greeted with great enthusiasm and Sibelius was especially delighted with the positive response to the fourth symphony.

If one makes allowance for the fact that travel across Europe in the first decades of the last century was arduous and slow, one can accept that Sibelius welcomed the chance to come to England on these occasions. Part of the attraction of this country was the opportunity to meet the three musicians who had befriended him and supported him so loyally – Sir Granville Bantock, Rosa Newmarch and Sir Henry Wood.

Simon Coombs

Two contemporary Symphonies from 1911

By Edward Clark

I wrote an article/presentation on the similarities between the works and aspirations of Sibelius and Elgar in the last decade of the 19th century. It was published in Journal No. 88.

In essence, both composers focused a great deal on myths and legends arising from each other's national histories. I stopped my comparison on the cusp of the 20th century, when Elgar wrote his Enigma Variations and Sibelius his Finlandia and First Symphony.

Thereafter I gave no thought to these two great composers colliding again in their careers.

Until I recently realised the fact that Sibelius's Fourth Symphony was premiered on the 2 April 1911 and Elgar's Second Symphony, a month later, on 3 April. That alone was a curious coincidence perhaps, but what else could be gained through further examination of two seminal works from the pens of, by then two national favourites, being brought to life in front of their adoring audiences.

Well, firstly such adoration expected on both fronts failed to materialise. The early audiences of what became two masterpieces were, if not hostile, bemused by what they heard to the disappointment of the composers. Both felt they had expressed themselves faithfully and honestly. Here we have a new link between the composers' aspirations; audience incomprehension that bring their careers closer together but not, as in the earlier period, in a happy way.

What happened was that both composers had moved on from their earlier styles and failed to prepare their listeners to the new aspirations of both. A new symphony following Sibelius's Third generated keen interest as to what he would write after its generally pellucid tone. What the early audiences got was a shock of the most extreme kind. One American critic described it as "dismal and doleful", probably in common with the general view in Finland.

Elgar had raised expectations after the First Symphony of another grand work with an equally grand finale. What the listeners got was a subdued ending that would have puzzled its listeners, if not annoyed many.

So what happened to conjure up these reaction in 1911?

By 1911 both composers were suffering similar but different malaises, mainly of the mind. Let's take Sibelius first.

Sibelius feared a recurrence of his malignant throat tumour that had been successfully treated a few years earlier. Not only that but he was under strict doctor's orders to abjure his favourite alcohol and cigars. This must have been torment for a man who was already an alcoholic or on the brink of being one. Suffering the effects of cold turkey was hardly conducive to any kind of creativity. Aside from such tribulations he had recently begin discussions with his old friend Ferruccio Busoni as the direction of future music. Busoni had advocated a new approach which he described as "junge Klassizität" (young Classicism – a move away from the programmatic tendencies of the nineteenth century in favour of the melody and absolute music of Bach and Mozart. Both composers took their thoughts beyond this process to include the new tendencies of Schoenberg and his followers and Sibelius admitted he was "interested " in Schoenberg's approach, which at this stage was toward s atonality and not yet serialism. There are clear signs of this in the apparent "modernism" many heard and still hear in the Fourth Symphony. Adopting such a new style caused him to write to his friend Rosa Newmarch soon after the premiere, "My symphony is a protest about the compositions of today. Nothing, absolutely nothing of the circus in it". He was referring to Mahler and Strauss not Schoenberg. His new work was a rebuttal of their giganticism tendencies. He was, no doubt, following his own advice recorded in his conversation with Mahler in Helsinki in 1907. "When our conversation touched on the essence of the symphony, I maintained that I admired its strictness and the profound logic that creates an inner connection between all the motifs. This was my conviction, based on my creative work". Mahler had a wholly opposite opinion, "No, the symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything".

Taking all these events together it is not surprising Sibelius wrote in his diary on the 5th November 1910, “A symphony is not just a “composition in the ordinary sense of the word. It is more of an inner confession at a given stage of one’s life”. Unbeknown to anyone outside his inner circle, mainly his wife, Aino, Sibelius had embarked on a radical overhaul of all past endeavours and produced an enigmatic and challenging work, writing in a style that is resolute in its austerity, concision and concentration.

The reaction after the premiere was embarrassing if not appalling. At the post-concert reception Aino wrote that people averted their eyes. “It was a sad time”. The Fourth bewildered early audiences and to some extent it still does. The critics were non-plussed. The negative critiques seem to have affected Sibelius deeply. One in particular irked him. “Sibelius wrote more impressive finales to his earlier symphonies. This one has - as it seems to me now – a slight tourist-like tang”. In America a noted conductor, at the finish, put his baton down with the words “I am blessed if I know what the fellow wants”. In 1913 it was hissed (albeit by a group of drunken soldiers) when Stenhammar conducted it in Gothenburg.

Elgar was not interested in pursuing a new, radical language but he shared with Sibelius a similar state of mind towards the direction of music with the added proviso of the entire fabric of what he regarded as his rightful place in civilisation as he had got to know it. To quote Alan Saunders, “After the great success of his First Symphony followed by another large-scale work, the Violin Concerto, Elgar seems to have reached the peak of his maturity yet the world he grew up in was crumbling; in England there was a constitutional crisis and from continental Europe came rumblings of change and dissent”.

Elgar was formulating a big new work which on the one hand had the strength and confidence of his maturity, but also expressed his anxiety that old values were becoming less acceptable in a changing world. The result was a work that opens with a great, joyous outburst but, as Alan Saunders writes, “in a sense everything in the work falls away from that starting point”. After 50 or so minutes of flair and sensitivity the end was a severe disappointment.

No grandiosity as heard in the previous major works mentioned earlier. Just a coda which is quiet and reflective, leaving, no doubt a strange silence from the audience with its expectations cruelly denied.

The hall was not full. There was no roaring ovation. Henry Wood was at the side of the platform as Elgar walked off. "Henry, they don't like it", he said, "they don't like it". To the leader, W.H. Reed he said, "What's the matter with them, Billy? They sit there like a lot of stuffed pigs". The critics were more responsive but also divided over the work's merits and stature, the slow movement receiving most criticism. One writer said that "no small amount of it seems to speak of pessimism and rebellion". Beecham would not look at the work. The Manchester Guardian reviewed the later performance conducted by Elgar, "We can hardly say that the work contains any melody in the full sense of the word". As late as 1934, Constant Lambert wrote, "Much of Elgar's music, through no fault of its own, has for the present generation an almost intolerable air of smugness, self-assurance and autocratic benevolence". We can only hope this slight was never read by Elgar in the year he died.

Elgar was despondent after the first performance. Like Sibelius he had the usual money problems, exasperated by his buying a Hampstead mansion. But he knew his vision of the future was not shared by many devotees now.

In the following year, 1912, Sibelius and Elgar conducted their music at the Birmingham Music Festival; Sibelius his Fourth Symphony, Elgar the premiere of *The Music Makers*. Strangely they do appear to have met so we have no idea of what sort of conversation would have been undertaken. Elgar left after the concert "out of sorts" and perhaps it was best to keep the two masters apart. Alas we will never know. What we do know is that both composers suffered acute anxieties after their respective symphony premieres, centred on the reasons for their very existence in a changing world. Both were upset at the way audiences and critics at both premieres could not comprehend the evolving manner of their creative muse and each would wait a long time before eventual comprehension would allow both works their rightful places in the pantheon of their output.