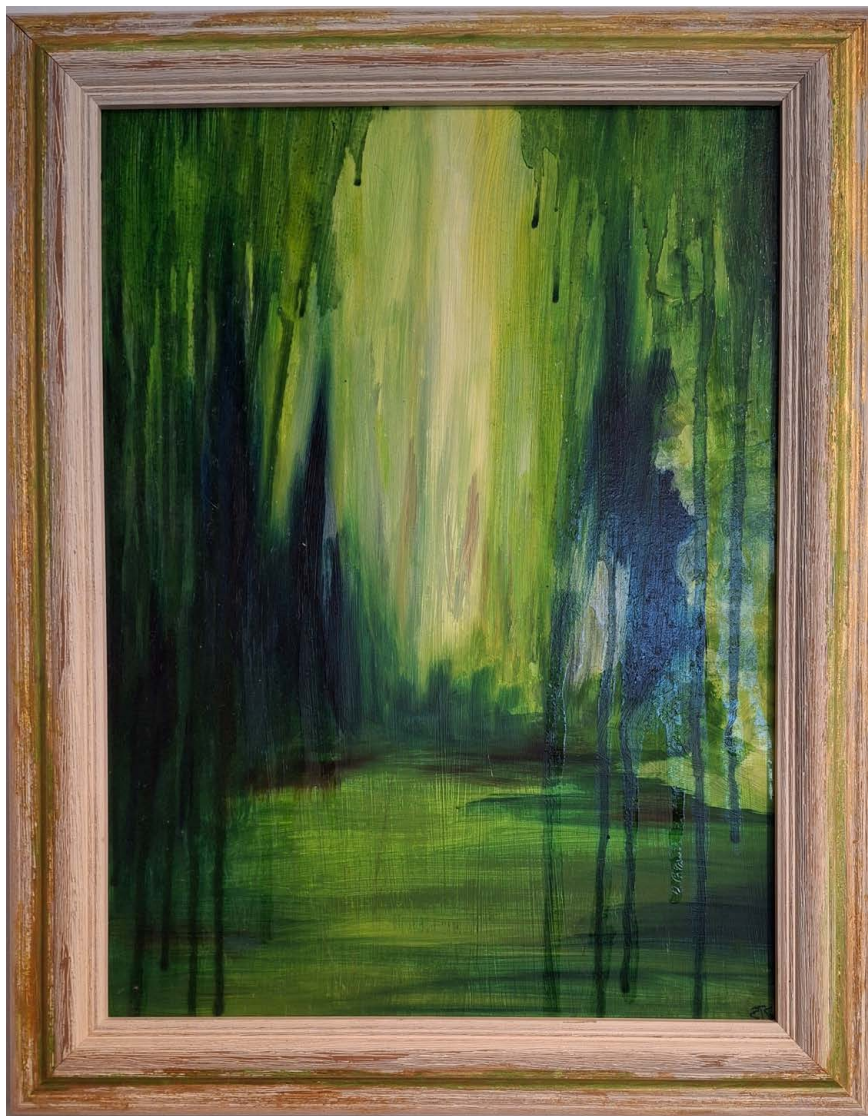


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ARTICLES

How I came to Sibelius

By Robin Self

I attended my first Prom, or any professional concert for that matter, in August 1958, conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent, but two years later, and after even more Proms, I heard my first Sibelius, the fifth symphony, again conducted by Sir Malcolm, and even though it was 64 years ago, I can still remember the impression that the symphony made on me to this day. Then, I was not sure whether I liked it or not and I certainly didn't understand what I had just heard but I knew that I wanted to hear more of this composer and, in the intervening years, I certainly have.

Twelve years later and after hearing more performances of the great Finn's music by other conductors such as Barbirolli, Monteux and Stokowski, I managed to persuade my late wife that perhaps we could have a holiday in Finland and this was what started my love of the country.

We booked a two-week holiday in four different locations, Helsinki, Leningrad (by ship from Helsinki and back; not quite Finland), Hameenlinna (by train from Helsinki) and Turku (by coach from Hameenlinna) then back to Helsinki for departure to the UK. The tour company only supplied the travel documents and hotel accommodation but we had to find all the various internal transport connections to and from the train and bus stations etc., which was not all that easy as in 1972 not much English was spoken in Finland.

We visited all the "tourist" locations in Helsinki, including the magnificent Sibelius Monument, and Suomenlinna Island, then when in Hameenlinna we caught a train to Järvenpää and after some difficulty in making ourselves understood, we found a taxi that took us

to “Ainola” which then, was not on the tourist trail. We were unable to enter the house but I recall seeing the Sibelius grave and the sauna block in the garden. I believe we walked back to the rail station from there but I was overjoyed that I had seen the Master’s home where most of his music had been composed.

In Turku, in a hall in the city, another Sibelius moment was hearing the 2nd symphony in a recorded performance by Leonard Bernstein with the New York PO; I still have that recording.

All these places enhanced my love of the music and the country as I could feel and see Finland in a great deal of Sibelius’s music, which apart from Elgar and his “Sweet Borderland”, I had never felt before with any other composer.

Thirty-six years later, another visit to Helsinki on a Baltic cruise and I again visited “Ainola” where I met briefly, for the first time, Vesa Ruotonen. He guided us around “Ainola” and talked to us after the visit and he and I compared notes on British Sibelians.

Then three years later, on my visit to the Sibelius Festival in Lahti, we met again when he was the Finnish tour guide and much to my surprise, he recognised me from three years previously. We struck up a friendship which remained for over ten years with regular correspondence but unfortunately, the link ceased about two years ago and I have had no contact with him since; does anyone from the Society know of his whereabouts now? Some of you may recall that he appeared in one of the BBC’s “Great Continental Railway Journeys” programmes when Michael Portillo interviewed him in Helsinki, talking about Sibelius. It was while I was at the 2011 Sibelius Festival that I was recruited to join the Society by Edward, our President, and I haven’t looked back since.

My love of Sibelius and his country has remained with me ever since that first visit to Finland but apart from the great triumvirate of the mid 1900s, Barbirolli, Beecham and Sargent, and a bit later, Alexander Gibson, plus the demise of Sir Colin Davis eleven years ago, there has, in my opinion, been no other Sibelian of any stature in these islands.

I saw all of the above conductors in the concert hall apart from Beecham.

Of course, there may be some up-and-coming new Sibelian “wunderkind” on the scene but I haven’t heard them and until I do, or one of the major recording labels picks them up, my above observation still stands.

Fortunately, Finland still produces outstanding conductors and I think especially of the late Paavo Berglund, Okku Kamu who conducted the 2011 Sibelius festival (I have heard nothing of him since though) and, of course, Osmo Vanska, who we do still see in this country fairly regularly. My last memory of Vanska was at a 2016 RFH Sibelius/Elgar concert where he conducted the finest performance of the fourth symphony that I have ever heard. The depth of despair in the third movement was extraordinarily moving and it has remained with me ever since.

I believe that the symphonies are at the heart of Sibelius’s output and the rest of his music revolves around them. My three most favoured of these are the 4th, which I believe is his greatest musical utterance, the 5th, which for me is the most uplifting and the 6th, which is the symphony that I love above all others, mainly because I can see aspects of Finland portrayed in practically every bar.

LAHTI SIBELIUS FESTIVAL 2024

A Symphonic Odyssey

A review by Philippe Rosset

Dates: August 29–31, 2024

Venue: Sibelius Hall, Lahti (Finland)

Conductor: Dalia Stasevska

The Lahti Sibelius Festival, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, delivered a thrilling exploration of Jean Sibelius's symphonic universe. Over three evenings, audiences were treated to the complete cycle of his seven symphonies, alongside other iconic works such as *Luonnotar* and *Finlandia*. Under the inspired baton of Dalia Stasevska, and with performances by both the Lahti Symphony Orchestra and the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, this festival highlighted the elemental power and timelessness of Sibelius's music.

Day 1: Earth and Water – Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2

The festival opened with the First Symphony, a work deeply rooted in the Romantic tradition yet already hinting at the unique voice Sibelius would develop. Dalia Stasevska brought out the earthy, telluric energy of the work, from the clarinet's introspective opening to the stormy, heroic surges of the finale. Her masterful use of silence added a contemplative dimension, allowing the music to breathe and resonate.

The Second Symphony shifted the focus to water, with its fluid, shimmering textures evoking the lakes and rivers of Finland. The second movement, a poignant elegy with pizzicato strings and epic crescendos, captured the grief Sibelius transformed into majestic beauty after personal tragedy. Stasevska balanced its mournful depths with the buoyant rhythms of the third movement, leading to a triumphant finale that was both grand and introspective.

The brass and high violins soared, evoking not just Wagnerian grandeur but also the mythical Finnish Sampo, leaving the audience spellbound.

Day 2: Fire and Air – Symphonies Nos. 3 and 5, *Luonnotar*

The second evening began with the Third Symphony, a masterpiece of classical restraint. Stasevska emphasized its rhythmic clarity and grounded energy, while the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra delivered a luminous performance. The second movement's lyrical grace stood out, offering moments of intimate reflection, while the finale's vibrant momentum captured the audience with its dynamism.

The centerpiece of the evening, *Luonnotar*, showcased soprano Golda Schultz in a virtuosic performance. Her crystalline voice brought Sibelius's cosmic creation myth to life, while Stasevska sculpted an orchestral landscape of haunting beauty. From its primordial whispers to its apocalyptic climax, the performance was a breathtaking fusion of vision and virtuosity.

The Fifth Symphony closed the night with its exploration of the air element. Inspired by the vision of swans in flight, the first movement soared with expansive grandeur, while the iconic "swan theme" finale delivered an exhilarating sense of triumph. Though the tempo occasionally felt rushed, Stasevska's interpretation captured the symphony's transcendental essence, blending elemental struggle with radiant resolution.

Day 3: The Eternal Cycle – Symphonies Nos. 4, 6, and 7

The final concert brought the festival full circle, delving into Sibelius's most enigmatic works. The Fourth Symphony, stark and introspective, unfolded as a psychological journey through desolation and existential despair. Stasevska emphasized its dissonances and silences, creating a barren soundscape that resonated with profound emotional weight.

In contrast, the Sixth Symphony evoked the purity of “first snow,” with its ethereal textures and pastoral clarity. Stasevska drew out its crystalline beauty, crafting a performance that felt both expansive and intimate, with moments of dance-like vitality and serene resolution.

The Seventh Symphony concluded the festival with a fusion of fire and ether, its single-movement structure blending mystical and epic qualities. Stasevska’s interpretation highlighted its elemental contrasts, from the rustling winds of *Tapiola* to the climactic “swan flight,” culminating in a moment of serene transcendence. Though lacking some of the mystery found in other interpretations, the performance was deeply satisfying, leaving the audience in awe.

A Triumphant Finale

Each evening ended with rapturous applause, and the encore performance of Finlandia on the final night brought an emotional close to the festival. Stasevska’s brisk yet lyrical approach imbued the piece with fresh urgency, while the audience, waving Finnish and Ukrainian flags, celebrated the universal power of Sibelius’s music.

The Lahti Sibelius Festival 2024 was not just a celebration of Sibelius’s legacy but a testament to the enduring relevance of his music. Under Stasevska’s passionate direction, these performances brought new life to his symphonies, reaffirming their place as timeless masterpieces in the symphonic repertoire.

Editor’s Note

For Philippe’s full Festival concert coverage visit

<https://pulsations.art/en/>