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Thoughts up to and on Symphony No.7

Timothy Dowling

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Symphony No. 7 in C major (in One Movement), Opus 105 (1924)

Adagio – Un pochettino meno adagio – Poco a poco affrettando il tempo I – Vivacissimo – Adagio – Allegro molto moderato – Allegro moderato – Vivace – Presto – Poco a poco rallentando al adagio – Largamente – Affettuoso – Tempo I

'The music flows like a well of life and finds its own way.'

'I have symphonies VI and VII in my head!' So wrote Sibelius in December 1917, the first occasion when he mentioned his Seventh Symphony. At the time he was still making major revisions to his Fifth Symphony, which had originally been premiered in December 1915 at a concert to celebrate his fiftieth birthday. Despite the positive reception at its premiere in Helsinki, he withdrew the work immediately afterwards and revised it in time for its second outing on his fifty-first birthday in December 1916. The composer remained dissatisfied and so set about revising it yet again and it was only in 1919 that the final version was performed in the familiar version that we know today. As a result, there was a period when he was working on all three symphonies, Nos 5, 6 and 7.

By then, Finland was suffering from the privations caused by the First World War; its geographic situation ensured that it was ripe for a proxy war between the major powers of Russia and Germany. The cataclysmic upheavals in Russia in 1917, culminating in the October Revolution and Russia's subsequent withdrawal from the conflict with Germany, led swiftly to Finland's declaration of independence

in December 1917: Lenin, with more urgent matters at home, did not oppose this declaration.

Independence celebrations were put on hold as the fledgling country descended into the brief, but devastating Civil War fought between the White and Red Finns from February to May 1918. The Reds, mainly Russian sympathising proletariats, initially controlled much of southern Finland, including Helsinki. They were eventually defeated by the Whites, who comprised the more German-oriented bourgeoisie. There were brutal massacres on both sides and some 40,000 soldiers and civilians were killed in the three months of conflict, a sizeable proportion of the Finnish population.

'I do not believe I may live so long that what I now have in my head – symphonies V, VI, and VII, could be written down. Oh, these unhappy circumstances!' Sibelius's priority remained the second revision of the Fifth Symphony, although he wrote to his long-term friend and champion, Axel Carpelan, that his planned Seventh Symphony included the 'joy of life and vitality with *appassionato* added'. Sibelius mentioned that the third and final movement of the symphony would be a 'Hellenic rondo'. He also expressed caution: 'With regard to symphonies VI and VII, I may change the plan, depending on the development of the musical ideas. As always, I am a slave to my themes, and I submit to their demands.'

The main revision to the Fifth Symphony was the merging of the first two movements into a single entity, with the original opening movement morphing seamlessly into the faster scherzo-like second movement. He considered the idea of publishing the revised opening movement separately, under the label 'Fantasia sinfonica'. Indeed, Sibelius was considering using this title for all three symphonies. However, he decided to keep the simpler and more traditional name, 'Symphony No. 5' for the final publication of the Fifth Symphony (in its third version). Sibelius had previously merged movements together in his Second and Third Symphonies, which had occupied him from 1901 to 1907. He returned to the traditional four-movement structure for his Fourth Symphony (1911) and his Sixth Symphony (1923).

When Karl Ekman was writing his biography of the composer (published in 1935), Sibelius recalled a discussion with Mahler in 1907: 'When our conversation touched on the essence of the symphony, I said 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!" he exclaimed, "the symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything." '

Sibelius also separately commented: 'A symphony is not a composition in the ordinary sense. Rather, it is a declaration of faith.… A better name for the symphonies would be: 'prayer'. *Preghiera*. Although misleading….'

Some years later he further reflected on his thoughts about the symphony: 'A propos symphonies: for me, they are declarations of faith at different ages. That is why all of mine are so different: *Tempora mutantur et nos illis mutamur* [Times change, and we change with them.].'

Sibelius was particularly sensitive about describing any possible programmatic element to his symphonies. He had composed a significant series of symphonic poems, several inspired by tales from the national Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*. These included the recent *Pohjola's Daughter*, *The Dryad*, and also *Night Ride and Sunrise*, which was performed in the same concert when Symphony No. 4 was premiered. These 'Tone Poems' were musical pictures, depicting very particular stories or moods. As suggested above, Sibelius considered his symphonies to be very different in purpose and whilst they might have been partly inspired by events or milestones in his life ('declarations of faith at different ages'), they remain primarily examples of 'absolute music'. The symphonies adhere to his basic principle, reflecting 'the strictness and the profound logic that creates an inner connection between all the motifs.' He held strictly to his belief in this fundamental difference between his symphonic poems and his numbered symphonies.

Despite the important role of external stimuli for the symphonies, such as the visit to Mount Koli in 1909 before embarking on the Fourth Symphony or the overwhelming sight of sixteen encircling swans in 1915 when he was working on the Fifth Symphony, none of his seven numbered symphonies has acquired a nickname. Whilst he was deeply affected by these external events, it was necessary for him to internalize each experience to create a symphonic masterpiece. Elsewhere, Sibelius compared the planning stage with a puzzle:

'Disposition of themes, this important task with its secret mystery…. as if God the Father had thrown the pieces of mosaic from heaven's floor and asked me to discover how they had been. Perhaps a good definition of "composing". Perhaps not. I don't know.'

Sibelius also described his compositional practice as offering 'pure spring water', rather than the 'exotic cocktails' being concocted through the rest of the European continent in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The symphonic orchestra had greatly expanded through the second half of the nineteenth century and this trend gathered pace during the quarter-century when Sibelius contributed to the symphonic repertoire (1899-1924).

Sibelius shunned the enlarged orchestral forces. Consequently, his orchestral forces were very little different from those employed by Beethoven and Schubert in the 1820s. For the Seventh Symphony Sibelius employed: pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons; four horns, three trumpets and three trombones; timpani and strings.

Right up until publication in 1925, including the first performance, Sibelius referred to the work as 'Fantasia Sinfonia', only settling on the more conventional title, 'Symphony No. 7 (in One Movement)' at the time of publication. Lasting approximately 22 minutes, it is by far the shortest of his seven symphonies. However, the timescale seems meaningless given the journey that we travel: this is Sibelius-concentrate, requiring close and focused attention throughout.

Although composed as a single movement, the tempo markings, as listed at the heading of this programme note, include the traditional

tempo markings that can be found in most symphonic works. Most of the themes that will comprise the single movement are presented in the opening *Adagio* section – 'the pieces of mosaic from heaven's floor'. Violas and cellos later present a deeply felt hymnal passage, linking the work with its predecessor, Symphony No. 6, completed the previous year. Sibelius commented that this passage was 'as if before the face of God'. Although not overtly a religious person, his recent study of Palestrina's music appears to have had a deep impact on both the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies. We can also hear this in the short *Andante Festivo*, originally composed for string quartet, but in 1922 he rescored it for string orchestra with timpani. Sibelius chose to conduct this work for a special broadcast to the world by Finnish Radio on New Year's Day 1939.

The conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Sergei Koussevitzky, exclaimed that this passage was Sibelius's *Parsifal* when he was rehearsing the Seventh for the American premiere.

This passage builds towards the solo for first trombone which will feature twice more during the work, the only sure foundation stone that holds the structure together. Significantly, Sibelius labelled the trombone solo, 'Aino' in his initial sketches for the 'Fantasia sinfonia', perhaps as a private recognition of his wife's role in holding the family together through thick and thin. Alternatively, the musicologist Andrew Barnett points out that the trombone theme also appeared in sketches for an earlier symphonic poem, *Kuutar* (The Moon Goddess), which was never completed. However, it is very possible that the two suggestions are not mutually incompatible.

After this presentation of the main themes, Sibelius gradually increases the tempo in preparation for the first of two faster sections, both of which are interrupted by the dramatic return of the solo trombone theme. The trombone stands steadfast and rock-like in the home key of C, the only theme that remains largely unchanged through the course of the work. However, the second occurrence of the trombone theme is forebodingly presented in a stormy C minor. The mood soon lifts, leading to a longer section, *Allegro moderato*, which might possibly be the 'Hellenic rondo' which Sibelius mentioned in his letter of

encouragement to Axel Carpelan. Again, the tempo increases, and an expectant dominant pedal-point takes us to the final presentation of the trombone theme, now back in a triumphant C major.

The Symphony began some twenty minutes ago with a simple scale, although not a straightforward scale in C major. Now the journey is complete; Sibelius emphasizes the finality of C major, with the final C being approached both from below (the leading note B) and above, falling from the super-tonic (D) to a resplendent C major (only in the very final bar).

His symphonic journey is complete. There was only one masterpiece left, the Symphonic Poem, *Tapiola*. The contrast between Symphonic Poem and Symphony could not be more clearly illustrated. Whereas the Seventh Symphony comprises several different themes and motifs, *Tapiola* rigorously sticks to a single theme, heard in the opening three bars. *Tapiola* embodies Finland's endless forests and lakes.

Coincidentally, the composer was commissioned in 1925 to write incidental music for a production of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Sadly, the music, apart from a couple of numbers, is not on the exalted level as either the Seventh Symphony or *Tapiola*, but Sibelius could no doubt have identified with the words of Prospero:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,

As I foretold you, were all spirits, and

Are melted into air, into thin air:

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,

The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,

And like this insubstantial pageant faded,

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff

As dreams are made on; and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep. Sir, I am vexed;

Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled:

Be not disturbed with my infirmity:

If you be pleased, retire into my cell,

And there repose: a turn or two I'll walk,

To still my beating mind.

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV, scene 1

(And also Prospero's farewell, 'Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves….' (Act V, scene 1)

Perhaps these prophetic words go some way to explain the composer's virtual silence for the following thirty years. He rarely ventured from his beloved homeland and lived in the family retreat, 'Ainola', in the heart of Finland's seemingly infinite forests and lakes.

November 2024

Prospero and Miranda