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Random Thoughts

Edward Clark

I am writing this article in conjunction with my attending the summer London Proms, which seems a long time ago with the country now suffering a universal blanket of snow, which you might think is appropriately Sibelian. But we can surely bask in the glory of the performance of the Sibelius Violin Concerto which opened the Proms season. It was played with panache and sensitivity by the young Georgian virtuoso, Lisa Batiashvili and was conducted by her long-time friend and collaborator, Sakari Oramo.

Sir Mark Elder gave a wonderful interpretation of the majestic *Oceanides* tone poem, premiered in America to a commission from a wealthy industrialist. The programme coupling with Debussy's *La Mer*, allowed an interesting comparison between the two great 20th century pioneers.

Thomas Adès is a life-long lover of Sibelius. In his Proms concert, he performed *The Swan of Tuonela* and the Suite No.1 from *The Tempest*. His own *Five Spells* from *The Tempest* was clearly influenced by Sibelius. Adès is an excellent conductor of his and others' music and this was shown in this concert.

The Sibelius Second Symphony was, somewhat surprisingly, entrusted to the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, conducted by Andris Nelsons. There was not much evidence of a true Sibelian atmosphere and Nelsons seemed unable to capture the very spirit of a work that is drenched in the subject of death leading to the final transcendent glory.

After The Proms came a veritable avalanche of Sibelius concert performances. Reviews are contained in the Journal. Of great interest has been Thomas Adès' performances of Symphonies 3, 4 and 6, the three most neglected in our concert halls. He admits to admiring the Sixth Symphony above the others, as I do on many occasions (!). His conducting was insightful and masterly, if a little idiosyncratic. But

he obtained really spontaneous playing from the London Symphony Orchestra, who are, like all other British orchestras, unused to the peculiar Sibelian rhetoric. But what joy to hear this music performed by a fellow composer who revels in the challenges that Sibelius offers to those who understand the importance of Sibelius's marvellous contribution to 20th century music.

Taking time out from current Sibelius concerts I have rediscovered the many joys of hearing the long neglected symphony cycle conducted by the Swedish maestro, Sixten Ehrling. I heard this fine conductor perform the BBC Centenary Concert at the Royal Festival Hall in 1965, with Campoli in the Violin Concerto. A concert never to be forgotten in my pantheon of similar memorable events in my life.

The Swedish symphony cycle was issued just before the Anthony Collins cycle on Decca in 1952 onwards, so it represents not only the first cycle but one of great interest when contemplating the many issues raised in Sibelius performance history. I have some of the original LPs, which are inferior to the equivalent Decca. But the cycle went through Sound Restoration using digital editing in 1999 and the whole enterprise now offers sound that affords much pleasure.

It must be remembered that Ehrling was conducting the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, which carried personnel who had played this repertoire under Sibelius's baton. This is of insuperable gain when discussions of balance and tone arise. The booklet prints original sleeve notes that also are contemporary in Sibelius's life time. To extend the authenticity I remind myself of the duration of Ehrling's life span. He was born in 1918 and died in 2005. I heard him in London in 1965. Around 2000 I was visiting Florida and noticed he was performing the local orchestra in Sibelius's First Symphony. So his heritage covers early studies in 1936 to his death in 2005. This tells me his interpretive skills in Sibelius are worth hearing. So I recommend tracking down this unique set of the seven symphonies. They have given me enormous pleasure and can now be regarded as of historic significance.

The box set carries

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Ehrling is also remembered for the recording of the Violin Concerto played by the young Camilla Wicks issued in 1952. This was likely to have been the first LP release of the concerto. The LP sells for hundreds of Pounds Sterling in Japan. There is a rare issue in Japan of the concerto on CD.

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Camilla Wicks