

Sibelius

Symphonies Nos 3, 6 & 7

Scottish National Orchestra
Sir Alexander Gibson

collect

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

Symphony No. 3, Op. 52 26:13
in C major • C-Dur • en ut majeur

- | | | | |
|---|-----|--------------------------------------|------|
| 1 | I | Allegro moderato | 9:31 |
| 2 | II | Andantino con moto, quasi allegretto | 8:30 |
| 3 | III | Moderato – Allegro (ma non tanto) | 8:01 |

Symphony No. 6, Op. 104 27:21
in D minor • in d-Moll • en ré mineur

- | | | | |
|---|-----|--|------|
| 4 | I | Allegro molto moderato | 7:56 |
| 5 | II | Allegro moderato – Poco con moto – Tempo I | 6:03 |
| 6 | III | Poco vivace | 3:38 |
| 7 | IV | Allegro molto – Allegro assai – Doppio più lento | 9:29 |

8 **Symphony No. 7, Op. 105** 20:35
in C major • in C-Dur • en ut majeur
In one movement

TT 74:29

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Sibelius: Symphonies Nos 3, 6 & 7

Symphony No. 3

Sibelius started work on his Third Symphony in 1904 but finished it in 1907. The premiere (with the composer conducting), promised to the Royal Philharmonic Society for that year, had to be postponed until the following year as the score was not ready. Three years to produce this relatively small-scale symphony seems a long time, even though the composer interrupted work on it to engage in other projects, including the Symphonic Fantasia *Pohjola's Daughter* (1906), incidental music for Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1905) and Procopé's *Belshazzar's Feast* (1906), to quote only the important pieces of the period. Needless to say the symphony, which the composer dedicated to Granville Bantock, shows no trace of its protracted birth. Gone here are all traces of the Russian nationalist school, especially as regards the treatment of the orchestra which is far more restrained than in the First and Second Symphonies. Possibly this is why the work has proved less popular with the public, but another reason could well be that it has received fewer performances because it is difficult to play and interpret to a high standard. Its opening movement is thoroughly classical in both spirit and form,

yet it has an even higher degree of unity than the first movements of the two preceding symphonies. For instance, the second subject, given initially to the cellos, has already been anticipated during the closing stage of the first subject section. To analyse this movement is unnecessary, its logic being readily apparent, but mention must be made of the wonderfully effective overlap of the development and recapitulation sections, as well as of the rather hymn-like coda which uses a theme that has little connection with anything that has gone before.

Still simpler is the central movement, which has been described as a theme and variations serving the function of a slow movement and of a scherzo. A better description would be an intermezzo based on a theme, the charm of which derives largely from the interplay of duple and triple time. There is a contrasting idea but it plays a small role, although it brings the movement to a close. More important is the pendant eventually attached to the main theme by a clarinet; it is later given an independent existence, forming a counterpoint to the theme and thereby becoming responsible for what little development there is.

The third and final movement, far from having the straightforward structural format of its predecessors, is the most complex of Sibelius's symphonies so far. It falls into two strongly contrasting parts of roughly equal length, the first having the character of a scherzo and the second that of a finale. Even so, this is a single structure and not two movements welded together, as in the case of the final pair of the Second Symphony. In 6/8 time, the first part of this final movement is based on short motives, one of which is taken over from the previous movement. The structure, which is by no means readily apparent, has a kinship with sonata form in that two thematic groups are discernible; a brief return of the first is followed by a development section. More important than this (although apparently of little significance at first) is a falling two-note motive given to the woodwind. Its initial appearance occurs fairly early on, shortly after the 'heaving' string passage on which are superimposed the rising figures for woodwind and the falling ones for horns. This little motive is the first hint we get of the theme on which the second part of the movement is based. During the last stage of the first part it is almost fully fledged, and becomes completely so when the 6/8 of the scherzo gives way to the common time of the second part. Thus, in a sense, this theme,

which carries all before it, substitutes for the recapitulation and coda.

Symphony No. 6

Throughout his creative career Sibelius produced slight music, much of it of the salon order, giving no indication of his true genius. He wrote many such pieces and continued to do so after completing the Fifth Symphony, perhaps because he was cut off from his German publisher during the First World War and wished to earn extra money. As a result no composition of major significance separates the Fifth Symphony from its successor, completed early in 1923. Precisely when it began to be formulated in the composer's mind is difficult to say, but we know from one of his letters that he had planned two further symphonies even before completing the final version of No. 5. That one of these eventually became the Sixth cannot be doubted, any more than can the fact that the other did not become the Seventh, for this was to have been in three movements, the last of them an 'Hellenic' rondo.

Devoid of the heroic qualities that characterise its predecessor as well as its successor, the Sixth Symphony is rightly regarded as a work for connoisseurs. Slow to reveal its secrets, it is immensely rewarding once these have been penetrated. The score includes parts for a bass-clarinete and a harp –

the first does not appear in any other symphony by Sibelius and the second only in No. 1 – but these additions are not the result of a return to the more luxuriant and romantic textures of the early symphonies. Although the work is normally described as being in D minor, the composer (uniquely among the symphonies) did not specify a key on his title page. In point of fact the only time one flat appears as a key signature in the opening movement it denotes F major and not D minor. Elsewhere, B natural (as opposed to B flat) persists, as does C natural in place of the leading note, C sharp. Consequently the symphony would be described more accurately as being in the Dorian mode on D. The constituents of this scale, consisting of the 'white' notes, are identical with C major, and indeed this key plays such an important role that C rivals D as the symphony's tonal centre. The closing bars of the first movement, where D unexpectedly replaces C, provide an obvious case in point.

Since key relationships are such an important factor in analysis, it is not surprising that those attempting to dissect the Sixth Symphony have reached conflicting conclusions. Not all agree that the opening movement is in sonata form, but those who are of this opinion oppose each other when it comes to labelling the sections and subjects. That the arguments put forward are valid

shows that the formal structure is open to more than one interpretation. Indeed, academic analysis is unlikely to concur with the impression received by the listener. While it can be said that Sibelius in his Sixth Symphony continued to acknowledge classical forms, he also left them far behind, creating his own logic deriving from the content. This last is unified by what the Finnish conductor Simon Parmet, a close friend of the composer, called the 'kernel motive' – a downward stepwise succession of four notes that can be reduced to three or extended to five. It can also, of course, be inverted to produce an upward succession, and indeed does so when the oboes make their initial entry with what many regard as the first subject, but others consider to be part of the introduction. Since there is equal support for both views it could be argued that there is a huge overlap between introduction and exposition, the tempo change coinciding with the entry of the second subject. While both the first and last movements pose severe problems for the analyst, the slowish second one, which is in two distinct parts, and the third (a scherzo without a contrasting central section) are more straightforward, even if they do not conform to established patterns. As to the 'kernel motive', it casts its unifying influence strongly over all four movements, appearing in a wide variety of speeds and rhythms.

Symphony No. 7

No work of any kind separates the Sixth Symphony from the Seventh, which was completed early in 1924. It was to become regarded as the culmination of the process, begun in the last movement of the Third Symphony and continued in the first of the Fifth, whereby a single movement served the purpose of two. In the Seventh the content of a normal four-movement symphony is compressed into one movement. Such a conception was not new, of course – nineteenth century precedents include Schubert's *Wandererfantasie* and Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor – but never before had it been carried out to such a degree. With sections merging imperceptibly into each other and development continuous from the opening bars to the end, labels here mean even less than they did in the Sixth Symphony. This in itself should cause no surprise, for Sibelius did not set out to compose a one-movement symphony. Instead he thought of the composition as a fantasy, and at its first performance, which he conducted himself in March 1924, it bore the title 'Fantasia Sinfonica'. Only later, at the time of publication, did the composer decide to number the work among his symphonies.

Almost inevitably this afterthought caused a few to doubt the work's status as a fully-fledged symphony, but a single hearing is sufficient to convince all but the most bigoted listener. There is, after all, no mistaking the presence of a slow movement, the progress of which is interrupted by two scherzos and an *Allegro*. While there is no question of Sibelius being influenced by Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony of 1906, there is nonetheless a marked parallel between the two works. With Schoenberg the progress of a normal sonata-form *Allegro* is interrupted by a scherzo and a slow movement. Sibelius's structure is more complex and closely-knit, with almost the entire content deriving from the opening pages. Yet, despite the complexity of form and sometimes of texture, the impact of the Seventh Symphony is far more immediate than that of the Sixth. Although the logic of its construction may not be perceived consciously in any great detail, it is unquestionably felt, and there is certainly no mistaking the returns of the majestic trombone solo that, in different but easily recognisable forms set against complex textures, punctuate the work like three great pillars.

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In 1978 Sir Alexander Gibson became one of the few recipients of the Sibelius Medal 'for his outstanding contribution to the appreciation of Sibelius's music throughout the world'.

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