
THOMAS SØNDERGÅRD
BBC National Orchestra of Wales

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Sibelius Menu

Tracklist



Credits



Programme Note



Biographies



THOMAS SØNDERGÅRD
BBC National Orchestra of Wales

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

Symphony No. 1 in E minor, Op. 39

1. Andante, ma non troppo – Allegro energico	11:20
2. Andante	9:29
3. Scherzo: Allegro	5:15
4. Finale (Quasi una fantasia): Andante – Allegro molto	12:06

Symphony No. 6, Op. 104

5. Allegro molto moderato	8:05
6. Allegretto moderato	6:10
7. Poco vivace	4:04
8. Allegro molto	10:11

Total Running Time: 66 minutes

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like this type of Nordic Italianate melody – of which Tchaikovsky was also a practitioner – which was a part, and a very attractive part, of St Petersburg culture.’ The quotation comes courtesy of Igor Stravinsky, and the work to which he was referring is by Jean Sibelius, namely his *Canzonetta* for strings of 1911. And yet Stravinsky’s observation could just as easily have applied to lengthy stretches of the Finnish composer’s first numbered symphony, completed some 12 years earlier. It comes as no surprise to learn that Tchaikovsky’s ‘Pathétique’ Symphony was performed in Helsinki during 1894 and again in 1897, and that Sibelius was profoundly affected by what he heard. ‘There is much in that man that I recognize in myself,’ he wrote to his wife, Aino, and there’s no denying that both the slow movement and finale of the First Symphony in particular reveal a strong affinity with the brooding melancholy of Tchaikovsky’s swansong. Moreover, the use of a motto theme – in this instance entrusted (and unforgettably so) to a solo clarinet at the symphony’s outset – finds obvious resonances with the Russian master’s Fourth and (especially) Fifth Symphonies. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to overstress the Tchaikovskian inheritance of Sibelius’s inspiration, and in later years the composer could be quite prickly about the subject: ‘I cannot understand why my symphonies are so often compared with Tchaikovsky’s. His symphonies are very human but they represent the soft parts of human nature. Mine are the hard ones.’

During the 1890s, Sibelius had shown increasingly impressive evidence of a real talent for orchestral writing; works such as the large-scale

Kullervo (1892, the first of his many creations inspired by the Finnish epic poem, the *Kalevala*), the invigorating tone poem *En Saga* (1893), the popular *Karelia Music* (Overture and Suite, 1893), the symphonic ballad *The Wood Nymph* (1894–5) and *Four Legends* (1893–5) undoubtedly proclaim an imaginative and resourceful voice, as well as a rare feeling for atmosphere and texture. More to the point, though, and especially in the case of the last-named work, the emerging composer displays a genuine command of the symphonic process of organic growth, particularly noticeable in the sweeping landscape of the opening legend, *Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of Saari*, and the unruffled progress of *The Swan of Tuonela*. But neither can match the exhilarating cogency of the opening movement of the First Symphony – at that period the most irrefutable testament to Sibelius’s huge symphonic potential.

In February 1898, Sibelius and Aïno travelled to Berlin, where an encounter with Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* (‘O santa ispirazione! O santa dea!’ he wrote in his sketchbook) initially had him toying with the idea of a programme symphony. This notion was soon banished, however, and it was in the German capital that he began work on the symphony in earnest from the end of April 1898. Returning to Finland in June, he stayed at his mother-in-law’s residence in Lohja, around 40 miles to the west of Helsinki – and where he knew he could apply himself to the task in hand without the constant distraction of convivial alcohol-fuelled gatherings in the capital’s fashionable hotels and bars.

In the late autumn, Sibelius and Aino briefly rented a flat in Helsinki with his brother Christian and sister Linda; their third daughter, Kirsti, was born that November. Not long afterwards, the family moved again, this time to Kerava, 15 miles north of Helsinki. By the following spring, the symphony was ready. Sibelius himself conducted the premiere in Helsinki on 26 April 1899. Like *Kullervo*, it met with considerable acclaim: 'The composer speaks the language of all mankind, yet a tongue that is nonetheless his own,' wrote Richard Faltin, music critic of the Swedish-language Helsinki newspaper *Nya Pressen*.

As already indicated, the symphony begins with the announcement of a motto theme – a winding tune lasting no fewer than 29 bars from which so much of the subsequent material in the work evolves, and during which the solo clarinet line 'slowly sings like a wounded bird, making several attempts to rise again before taking flight' (in the poetic description of that eminent Sibelius scholar, Erik Tawaststjerna). Soon, though, with the arrival of the *Allegro energico* proper, the movement does indeed take flight: notice the breathtakingly managed sudden transition into the secondary material (whose initial idea, a chirruping theme in thirds, is itself derived from the motto theme). This is music which seems to inhabit a magical parallel world of glistening loveliness, and where Sibelius's delicate use of the harp – *not* an instrument he turned to very often in his symphonic output – really does come into its own. Listen out next for the dramatic dynamic contrasts during the development between those passages

of almost chamber-like lightness and some fearsomely glowering brass tutti's which seem to belong to some lost instalment of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Finally, as the argument is propelled along its compulsive trajectory, who could fail to admire the sheer compactness of the recapitulation and truncated coda? Without doubt this movement represents an exciting achievement: thrillingly scored, truly classical in its proportions, yet with not one wasted note during its tersely driven course.

After the undeniable stature of this opening movement, it might seem a little rude to venture that nothing in the remainder of the work is really of comparable distinction. That, however, does nothing to detract from the considerable allure and emotional range of the slow movement, whose gravely poignant principal melody betrays the unmistakable influence of Tchaikovsky. A moment of particularly seductive beauty occurs some three minutes in, when a solo cello intones the main theme against a gently insistent woodwind accompaniment. An even more ravishing passage for solo horn follows almost immediately (an idea whose roots lie in the secondary material of the first movement); the A flat major tonality here momentarily lifts the pervading gloom, but it is only a fleeting promise. The first theme returns, now throbbing with ever greater intensity, and before long we find ourselves in the middle of an angry squall. The movement's climax is suggestive of two massive crashing waves, before the storm blows itself out and the landscape is once again bathed in a sunset glow.

No complaints about the Scherzo, a splendidly taut and rumbustious affair of Brucknerian gait (thrumming pizzicato lower strings, a jagged violin figure, echoed by pounding timpani); by contrast, the E major trio section transports us to a pastoral world of innocent bliss, exquisitely dappled with some yearning chromatic harmonies. In the Finale – which Sibelius labels ‘Quasi una fantasia’ – there is much that is memorable. Strings theatrically declaim the motto theme, and, after some fretful questioning from violas, cellos and double basses, the turbulent Allegro molto is soon upon us. Before too long, though, the skies clear and violins (playing on their lowest string) intone the noble second subject, a tune of which any of the Slav Romantic masters would have been justifiably proud; its refulgent return in a sunburst of B major towards the close is surely some of the most resplendently luscious music Sibelius ever conceived. The coda offers a show of grim defiance, and at the very end (harking back to the close of the first movement) two muffled, exhausted pizzicatos bring the curtain down on this passionate utterance.

In 1918, while still hard at work on the final revision of his Fifth Symphony, Sibelius boldly predicted the character of his forthcoming Sixth, ideas for which were already beginning to take shape in his mind: ‘wild and impassioned...sombre with passionate contrasts...with the end rising to a sombre roaring of the orchestra in which the main theme is drowned.’ The death, in the following year, of his wealthy patron and dear friend Axel Carpelan came as a bitter blow. ‘Now Axel is laid to rest in the

cold earth,' he wrote on 29 March 1919. 'It feels so immeasurably and profoundly sad. For whom shall I compose now?' He also continued to be affected by the declining mental health of his sister, Linda, who had been admitted into an asylum and whose company always made him pensive. As it turned out, by the time the symphony received its premiere in Helsinki in February 1923, his earlier description could hardly have been wider of the mark; indeed, no work in the Finn's whole output is more purged of rhetoric or outward display than the Sixth, whose pages contain music of a rarefied sensibility, the effect of which chimes precisely in accordance with Sibelius's oft-quoted assertion that, while his contemporaries were serving up cocktails of various colours, he offered nothing less than pure cold spring water.

Not the least part of this music's perpetual fascination lies in its harmonic tension between modality (in this instance the Dorian mode, which corresponds to the white-note scale on a piano starting at D) and tonality – only two minutes in, and D minor and C major are already tussling for supremacy, as a widely-spaced seventh chord underpinned by a startlingly dissonant C sharp is dismissed by the brass's C major triad. (The Sixth, by the way, is commonly listed as being in D minor, but in fact Sibelius doesn't assign it a particular key signature.) The radiant string polyphony that greets the dawn of the symphony's opening Allegro molto moderato reflects in part Sibelius's intensive study of, and keen admiration for, the sacred choral works of those towering Renaissance

figures Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c.1525–94) and Orlande de Lassus (1532–94). This is a movement whose oblique structural properties continue to defy the scholarly analysis of countless commentators. However, there's no denying the gentle eloquence of Sibelius's basic material and unassuming fluency of its subsequent treatment. The enthrallingly transparent orchestration, too, proclaims the composer's identity in every bar – this music sounds like Sibelius and absolutely no one else. What's more, few would guess, given their utterly contrasting demeanours, that the orchestral forces in the Sixth are in fact fractionally larger than those deployed in the mighty Fifth, Sibelius allowing himself the luxury of a bass clarinet and harp, both of which make their presence felt to judicious effect.

The slow movement (if indeed an *Allegretto moderato* can qualify for such a title) radiates a peculiar wistfulness, as exhibited by the touchingly hesitant main theme for divided violins, and leads to a magical 'poco con moto' passage, whose rustling *flautato* strings and lonely woodwind interjections transport the listener in a trice to the Northland's dusky forests. By contrast, the ensuing *Poco vivace* scherzo scampers along purposefully, its dotted rhythms increasingly demonstrative, and with occasional fiercer interjections from brass adding a note of menace to proceedings.

For the finale Sibelius reverts to, and bracingly develops, material used in the first movement. The initial antiphonal exchanges between winds and lower strings soon give way to a mood of greater urgency, eventually building to a furious climax (which brings the only *fff* marking in the entire score). Thereafter D minor yields to its relative F major for a glorious passage (marked 'allegro assai') which positively beams with joy. As the shadows lengthen towards the close, we have come full circle, for the string writing in the coda harks back to the symphony's serene introduction. Words alone cannot convey the almost unbearable poignancy of these bars; suffice to say that, for the present writer at any rate, they represent some of the most visionary pages in all twentieth-century music.

What a boundlessly subtle, fascinating, elusive, haunting and individual masterwork this is, one which invites a multiplicity of deeply personal responses. Sibelius himself was typically laconic about it: 'You may analyze it and explain it theoretically. You may find that there are several interesting things going on. But most people forget that it is, after all, a poem.'

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Photograph by Euan Robertson

THOMAS SØNDERGÅRD

Danish conductor Thomas Søndergård is Principal Conductor of BBC National Orchestra of Wales (BBC NOW) and Principal Guest Conductor of Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO). He was Principal Conductor and Musical Advisor of the Norwegian Radio Orchestra from 2009–12.

Recent engagements include debuts with the London Philharmonic, London Symphony and Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Deutsche Oper Berlin (premiere of Scartazzini's *Edward II*) and Bayerische Staatsoper (*Turandot*). Highlights of the past few seasons include his regular BBC Proms with BBC NOW and strong debuts with, among others, the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Netherlands Philharmonic, Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Philharmonia Orchestra. An acclaimed interpreter of Sibelius and Nielsen, as part of the 2015 anniversary celebrations he conducted a wide variety of repertoire by these two composers with many leading orchestras. He is also a highly regarded interpreter of a broad range of twentieth-century and contemporary music.

In spring 2015 Søndergård and BBC NOW released their first commercial recording: *Sibelius: Symphonies 2 & 7* (Linn). Other noteworthy recordings include Ruders's Second Piano Concerto on Bridge Records, which was nominated for a *Gramophone* Award.



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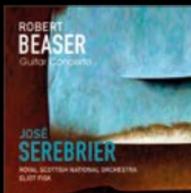
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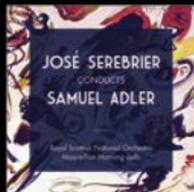
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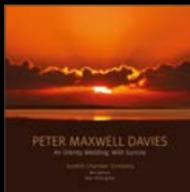
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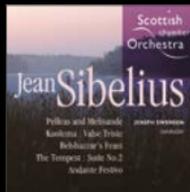
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