

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2015-2016 Mellon Grand Classics Season

March 11 and 13, 2016

OSMO VÄNSKÄ, CONDUCTOR
JAMES EHNES, VIOLIN

JEAN SIBELIUS *Finlandia*, Opus 26, No. 7

JEAN SIBELIUS Concerto in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 47
I. Allegro moderato
II. Adagio di molto
III. Allegro, ma non tanto
Mr. Ehnes

Intermission

JEAN SIBELIUS Symphony No. 2 in D major, Opus 43
I. Allegretto
II. Tempo Andante, ma rubato
III. Vivacissimo — Lento e suave — Tempo primo —
Lento e suave —
IV. Finale: Allegro moderato

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

JEAN SIBELIUS

Born 8 December 1865 in Hämeenlinna, Finland; died 20 September 1957 in Järvenpää

Finlandia, Opus 26, No. 7 (1899-1900)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Helsinki, 4 November 1899; Helsinki Philharmonic; Jean Sibelius, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 21 January 1934; Syria Mosque; Antonio Modarelli, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 8 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

In 1809, after more than five centuries of Swedish rule, Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. The country existed for most of the 19th century under the surprisingly benign rule of the Alexanders, but when Nikolai II ascended the Russian throne in 1894, he saw in Finland a potential enemy and subjected the country to an increasingly harsher governance. Nikolai Ivanovich Bobrikov, who had earned a reputation for ruthlessness during his administration of the Baltics, arrived in Helsinki in 1898 as the Tsar's chief representative. A few months later, Bobrikov issued the so-called "February Manifesto," which greatly curtailed the rights of the Finns by restricting their freedom of speech and assembly, conscripting them into the Tsar's army, forcing them to learn Russian as a second language, replacing them in the civil service with Russian appointees, and stifling the press. During the following months, the Finns responded to these outrages by staging "Press Celebrations," ostensibly benefit events to aid the pension fund of the country's hard-hit newspapers, but really thinly veiled displays of patriotic ferment.

For the "Press Celebration" of November 4, 1899, a series of elaborate *tableaux vivants* depicting episodes and heroes from Finnish history was planned for the Swedish Theater in Helsinki. Jean Sibelius, a young composer recently returned from study in Germany and Vienna and already established as one of the country's leading musicians, was enlisted to supply the music: an opening prelude followed by an introduction and incidental music for each of the six tableaux. According to one press report, in the closing tableau (titled "Finland Awakes"), "The Grand Duchy faces a bright future under the enlightened rule of Tsar Alexander II during the 19th century." The opening lines of the scene's text, however, speak not of halcyon colonialism but of incipient revolution: "The powers of darkness menacing Finland have not succeeded in their terrible threat. Finland awakes ..." The orchestral movement that Sibelius provided as preface for this tableau, which he called "Suomi" (the Finns' name for their country), matched its subject in patriotic fervor. The piece was presented with great success a few weeks later by the conductor and life-long champion of Sibelius' music Robert Kajanus at a Helsinki Philharmonic concert, and played in a revised version with the now-familiar title *Finlandia* by those performers at the Paris International Exposition in 1900. Bobrikov sought to suppress Finnish performances of the work under its potentially inflammatory title, so *Finlandia*, when heard at all in its home country during the following years, was given under such innocuous names as "Impromptu" and "Finale." (A piano reduction issued in Helsinki in 1900 with the title *Finlandia* had only a limited circulation.) Concert promoters in other European countries, seeking to avoid embroilment in northern political disputes, billed the piece as *Vaterland* (Germany) or *La Patrie* (France). *Finlandia* was the music that solidified Sibelius' international reputation (Toscanini performed it at La Scala, Milan in 1904; the American premiere occurred in New York the following year), and it became a focus for world-wide sympathy with the plight of the Finns. In 1905, a year after Bobrikov had been assassinated, Caesar-like, in the halls of the Finnish Senate, Nikolai II granted sweeping concessions to the Finns (the country became independent of Russia as a result of the First World War), and *Finlandia* could at last be heard freely in its homeland.

The hymnal theme of *Finlandia* has a directness and simplicity that suggest folksong, yet Sibelius insisted, "I have never used a theme that was not of my own invention. Thus the thematic material of *Finlandia* is entirely my own." (In his biography of the composer, however, Harold E. Johnson stated that the opening measures are nearly identical with those of a then-popular composition for male chorus titled *Arise, Finland!* written by Emil Genetz in 1881.) As a preface to this inspirational melody, Sibelius

provided a portentous introduction of sullen brass chords, which are subsequently appropriated by the full orchestra, and a vivacious passage of soaring optimism. A broad statement of the hymn's opening phrases serves as a grand coda for this timeless document of musical nationalism.

Concerto in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 47 (1903, revised 1905)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Helsinki, 8 February 1904; Helsinki Philharmonic; Jean Sibelius, conductor; Viktor Nováček, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 2 February 1945; Syria Mosque; Fritz Reiner, conductor; Jascha Heifetz, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 31 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings

By 1903, when he was engaged on his Violin Concerto, Sibelius had already composed *Finlandia*, *Kullervo*, *En Saga*, the *Karelia Suite*, the four *Lemminkäinen Legends* (including *The Swan of Tuonela*) and the first two symphonies, the works that established his international reputation. He was composing so easily at that time that his wife, Aino, wrote to a friend that he would stay up far into the night to record the flood of excellent ideas that had come upon him during the day. There were, however, some disturbing personal worries threatening his musical fecundity.

Just after the premiere of the Second Symphony in March 1902, Sibelius developed a painful ear infection that did not respond easily to treatment. Thoughts of the deafness of Beethoven and Smetana plagued him, and he feared that he might be losing his hearing. (He was 37 at the time.) In June, he began having trouble with his throat, and he jumped to the conclusion that his health was about to give way, even wondering how much time he might have left to work. Though filled with fatalistic thoughts at that time, he put much energy into the Violin Concerto. The ear and throat ailments continued to plague him until 1908, when a benign tumor was discovered. It took a dozen operations until it was successfully removed, and the anxiety about its return stayed with him for years. (Sibelius, incidentally, enjoyed sterling health for the rest of his days and lived to the ripe age of 91, a testament to the efficacy of his treatment.)

The Violin Concerto's opening movement employs sonata form, modified in that a succinct cadenza for the soloist replaces the usual development section. The exposition consists of three theme groups — a doleful melody announced by the soloist over murmuring strings, a yearning theme initiated by bassoons and cellos with rich accompaniment, and a bold, propulsive strophe in march rhythm. The development-cadenza is built on the opening motive and leads directly into the recapitulation of the exposition themes.

The second movement could well be called a "Romanza," a descendant of the long-limbed lyricism of the *Andantes* of Mozart's violin concertos. It is among the most avowedly Romantic music in any of Sibelius' works for orchestra. The finale launches into a robust dance whose theme the esteemed English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey thought could be "a polonaise for polar bears." A bumptious energy fills the movement, giving it an air reminiscent of the Gypsy finales of many 19th-century violin concertos. The form is sonatina, a sonata without development, here employing two large theme groups.

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Opus 43 (1901-1902)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Helsinki, 8 March 1902; Helsinki Philharmonic; Jean Sibelius, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 10 March 1935; Syria Mosque; Antonio Modarelli

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 47 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: pairs of woodwinds, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani and strings

At the turn of the 20th century, Finland was experiencing a surge of nationalistic pride that called for independence and recognition after eight centuries of domination by Sweden and Russia. Jean Sibelius became imbued with the country's spirit, lore and language, and several of his early works — *En Saga*, *Kullervo*, *Karelia* and *Finlandia* — earned him a hero's reputation among his countrymen. Sibelius became an emblem of his homeland in 1900 when conductor Robert Kajanus and the Helsinki

Philharmonic featured his music on a European tour whose purpose was less artistic recognition than a bid for international sympathy for Finnish political autonomy. The young composer went along on the tour, which proved to be a success for the orchestra and its conductor, for Finland, and especially for Sibelius, whose works it brought before an international audience.

A year later Sibelius was again traveling. Through a financial subscription raised by Axel Carpelan, he was able to spend the early months of 1901 in Italy away from the rigors of the Scandinavian winter. So inspired was he by the culture, history and beauty of the sunny south (as had been Goethe and Brahms) that he envisioned a work based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. However, a second symphony to follow the First of 1899 was gestating, and the Dante work was eventually abandoned. Sibelius was well launched on the new Second Symphony by the time he left for home. He made two important stops before returning to Finland. The first was at Prague, where he met Dvořák and was impressed with the famous musician's humility and friendliness. The second stop was at the June Music Festival in Heidelberg, where the enthusiastic reception given to his compositions enhanced the budding European reputation that he had achieved during the Helsinki Philharmonic tour of the preceding year. Still flush with the success of his 1901 tour when he arrived home, he decided he was secure enough financially (thanks in large part to an annual stipend initiated in 1897 by the Finnish government) to leave his teaching job and devote himself full-time to composition. Though it was to be almost two decades before Finland became independent of Russia as a result of the First World War, Sibelius had come into his creative maturity by the time of the Second Symphony. So successful was the work's premiere on March 8, 1902 that it had to be repeated at three successive concerts in a short time to satisfy the clamor for further performances.

The Second Symphony opens with an introduction in which the strings present a chordal motive that courses through and unifies much of the first movement. A bright, folk-like strain for the woodwinds and a hymnal response from the horns constitute the opening theme. The second theme exhibits one of Sibelius' most characteristic constructions — a long-held note that intensifies to a quick rhythmic flourish. This theme and a complementary one of angular leaps and unsettled tonality close the exposition and figure prominently in the ensuing development. A stentorian brass chorale closes this section and leads to the recapitulation, a compressed restatement of the earlier themes.

The second movement, though closely related to sonatina form (sonata without development), is best heard as a series of dramatic paragraphs whose strengths lie not just in their individual qualities but also in their powerful juxtapositions. The opening statement is given by bassoons in hollow octaves above a bleak accompaniment of timpani with cellos and basses in pizzicato notes. The upper strings and then full orchestra take over the solemn plaint, but soon inject a new, sharply rhythmic idea of their own that calls forth a halting climax from the brass choir. After a silence, the strings intone a mournful motive which soon engenders another climax. A soft timpani roll begins the series of themes again, but in expanded presentations with fuller orchestration and greater emotional impact.

The third movement is a three-part form whose lyrical, unhurried central trio, built on a repeated note theme, provides a strong contrast to the mercurial surrounding scherzo. The slow music of the trio returns as a bridge to the sonata-form closing movement, which has a grand sweep and uplifting spirituality that make it one of the last unadulterated flowerings of the great Romantic tradition.