

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Fri. February 23 The 902nd Suntory Subscription Concert
Sun. February 25 The 903rd Orchard Subscription Concert
Mon. February 26 The 115th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Symphonic Poem “Finlandia”, op.26

Composed during a period of political turmoil, *Finlandia* came to symbolize the Finnish nation’s desire for freedom from nearly a century of rule by their Russian neighbors. In February of 1899, the “February Manifesto” of Tsar Nicholas II, gave the Russian government complete control over Finland, which included drafting Finnish nationals into the Russian military as well as extreme censorship of the press. It was this latter point that stirred a group of activists in Helsinki to organize an event called the 1899 Press Celebrations, in support of journalists who had been censored. Sibelius was asked to write the incidental music to accompany a series of patriotic historical scenes. The finale for this series featured the first version of this work, at the time entitled *Finland Awakes*.

The following year Sibelius revised this first work into the orchestral version that is known today. It was premiered on July 2, 1900 with his fellow compatriot and colleague, Robert Kajanus conducting the Helsinki Philharmonic Society. Opening with the ominous brass rumblings, the woodwinds and strings soon counter with the now infamous serene hymn-like intonations. Eventually this hymn becomes a strong expression of determination as the work closes with great fanfare. (It would be nearly two decades before Finland gained its independence from Russia.) The composer later revised this section of the piece into its own separate work, *Finlandia Hymn*, and in 1941 words were added by Veikko Antero Koskenniemi. Some refer to this choral version as Finland’s second national anthem.

Work composed: 1899-1900 **World premiere:** 4th November, 1899 at Swedish Theater in Helsinki (Original version) / 2nd July, 1900 in Helsinki (Symphonic Poem version)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, triangle, cymbals), strings

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Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Piano Concerto in A minor, op. 16

Travelling to Denmark in the summer of 1868 with his wife and daughter, this Norwegian composer greatly needed a retreat from an exhausting season of teaching and conducting in Oslo. Ten years earlier, Grieg had first heard Schumann's piano concerto (also in A minor) performed by Clara Schumann, in Leipzig, which had made an "unforgettable impression" on him. The German Romanticism prevalent at the time seems to have played a part in both works, and Schumann's influence can be heard on Grieg's concerto of the same key, as well. However, Grieg's use of nationalistic references gives this work a completely different flavour, with key elements of the folk music of Norway incorporated throughout. The well known opening motif, often referred to as the "Grieg-motif", which uses a descending minor second followed by a major third, can be heard in many of the composers melodies, and originated in many Norwegian folk melodies.

Grieg's wife and daughter stayed in Copenhagen with her parents while he himself retreated to the countryside to compose. By the end of the summer the majority of the piano solo portion of the concerto had been completed, as well as sketches for the orchestration. Grieg dedicated the work to the Norwegian pianist, Edmund Neupert, who premiered the work on April 3rd, 1869 in Copenhagen where audiences were considered more receptive than in Oslo at the time. Neupert wrote to the composer of the resounding successful reception of the work there:

"On Saturday your divine concerto resounded in the great hall.... The triumph I received was tremendous. Even as early as the cadenza in the first movement the public broke into a real storm."

Liszt gave Grieg great encouragement as well, when in 1870, after sight-reading the score from the manuscript copy, remarked to the composer: "Go on, I tell you. You have the stuff!" Liszt's influence can also be heard in the concerto (perhaps especially in the cadenza of the first movement) as well as that of Chopin's, presumably one of Grieg's favorite composers. And in 1923, Rachmaninov, who had played the concerto, observed: "I believe in what might be called indigenous music for the piano, which the Germans would describe as *klaviermässig*." He went on to say: "Grieg had the gift of writing beautifully for the piano and in pure *klaviermässig* style."

The success of this concerto has continued and established it as one of the key works of the repertory for any pianist. From the opening bars of the familiar Schumanesque-like dramatic downward spiraling wave, together with Norwegian folk influences, through to the final grand harmonious sweeping chords, Grieg certainly made his mark, earning his title as "the Chopin of the North."

Work composed: 1868 **World premiere:** 3rd April, 1869 at Casino Copenhagen

Instrumentation: 2 flutes(2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings, solo piano

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Pelléas et Mélisande, op. 46

Sibelius began writing incidental music in the late 1890's as the symbolist movement from Paris made its way to Helsinki. The subject of these initial works had an historical basis, as he composed the incidental music for Adolf Paul's play *King Christian II* (1898), and festival music in 1893, *Karelia Suite*, at which *Finlandia* made its first appearance. As the new century unfolded however, Sibelius found himself composing incidental music for some of the key symbolist dramatic works that portrayed more exotic themes of love, death, mysticism and dreams. One of these works was *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which had been premiered in Paris in 1893 and had sparked musical works by Debussy, Fauré and Schönberg. The Scandanavian premiere was given at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki, in 1905, with incidental music by Sibelius.

The play of *Pelléas et Mélisande* was written in 1882 by the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. The story opens in the vicinity of King Arkel's castle where Mélisande is found in a nearby forest by the grandson of the king, Golaud. They marry, however Mélisande's life in the castle is not a happy one and she eventually becomes friends with Golaud's younger brother Pelléas. Pelléas, realizing he can no longer bear his life in the castle with his true love married to his brother, announces to Mélisande that he must leave. At this meeting, she declares her love for him and upon embracing, Golaud, who had been watching them, appears and kills his brother in a fit of jealousy. Mélisande runs away, but is found and returned to the castle where she dies shortly thereafter, presumably over the heartbreak of losing her love.

Sibelius wrote a total of ten pieces for the incidental music for this play, including seven interludes (one being the overture) and a song. He later arranged this music into a concert suite with only nine movements, containing all but one of the original pieces, giving each movement a name rather than the original numbers. The first movement (the overture), "**At the Castle Gate**" sets the scene outside of King Arkel's castle. "**Mélisande**" depicts the heroine crying by a stream in a nearby forest when the king's grandson Golaud discovers her there. Here the English horn's melody reflects the sadness of Mélisande and the muted strings perhaps that of the flowing stream.

"**At the Seashore**" portrays Pelléas and Mélisande in their first intimate meeting, the low rumbling in the basses depicting the deep undercurrents of the sea, while the woodwinds' cries above suggest the coastal birds in this dramatic scene. "**By A Spring In the Park**" has the couple meeting again, here in a lighter more cheerful waltz setting, yet still one senses the ominous mood underlying the scene. "**The Three Blind Sisters**", originally sung by Mélisande to express her dwindling hope, is transcribed for woodwinds in the orchestral suite. "**The Pastorale**" was composed at the point where Pelléas and Golaud emerge from the depths of the castle to the open air surrounding it. Sibelius' characteristic thirds can

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be heard in the woodwinds here over a pizzicato figure in the cellos. The violins' melody soaring above as the flutes complete the peaceful scene, birds fluttering in the midst of it all.

“**Mélisande at the Spinning Wheel**” returns to the ominous overtones played by the incessant viola trill suggesting the persistent spinning of the wheel (and perhaps fate). “**Entra’cte**” is said to express the growing love of Pelléas and Mélisande, as well as the difficulties they face in their circumstances. However Sibelius’ biographer, Robert Layton, suggests it may simply have been the composer at his best displaying his ‘sheer joy in music-making.’ In the final tragic scene of the play, “**Mélisande’s Death**”, we find the heroine resigned to sadness and death at losing her true love. Sibelius again depicts the depth of emotions with his adept orchestrations. Harriet Bosse, wife of the Swedish playwright August Strindberg, who once played the role of Mélisande commented on the effects of the music from this last scene: “...lying on my deathbed in the last act, the orchestra played ‘The Death of Mélisande’. I was so moved that I cried at every performance.”

Work composed: 1905 **World premiere:** 17th March, 1905 at Swedish Theater in Helsinki (Incidental music version) / 12th March, 1906 at University of Helsinki (Suite version)

Instrumentation: flute (doubling on piccolo), oboe (doubling on English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, timpani, percussion (bass drum, triangle), strings

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Symphony No.7 in C major, op. 105

Jean Sibelius was considered by many to be the national hero of Finland in the late 19th and early 20th century. His music was composed primarily in a Romantic style, but with his dedication to the national music of his homeland, one can hear many representations of his Finnish culture and heritage. Primarily composing orchestral works, Sibelius wrote seven symphonies as well as several incidental musical works and tone poems. His final symphony was premiered as *Fantasia sinfonica No. 1* in March of 1924 with the composer conducting, initially unsure whether it was to be categorized as a symphony. However, during the following year when the manuscript was going to publication, Sibelius ultimately determined that this work would indeed be part of his symphonic catalogue titling it “Symphony No. 7 (*in einem Satze*; ‘in one movement’)”.

In 1918 the composer referred to his Seventh Symphony in a letter, describing it as follows: “Joy of life and *vitalité* with *appassionata* passages. In three movements – the last a ‘Hellenic Rondo’.” Eventually the three movements would be compressed into one singular movement, similar to what had been explored previously in his Third and Fifth symphonies where two movements were combined into one. This one movement form in his final symphony would prove to be ground-breaking, providing variety through a number of changes in tempi throughout. However a trombone theme appears at key points, labelled “Aino” in homage of his wife. The first appearance of this theme comes following a

hymn-like introduction in the strings. This theme and another labelled “Ruth” for one of his daughters, are key motifs that help unify the work as one continuous movement.

Sibelius himself referred to “an inner connection between all the motifs” in his Seventh Symphony, which displays his life’s work towards ‘formal and motivic compression’ to the highest degree possible. In addition, the challenge of composing a symphony with a home tone of C major (which many composers considered pointless), ultimately became something for which the composer was praised. British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams commented that ‘only Sibelius could make C major sound completely fresh.’ And another scholar, Peter Franklin called the final dramatic closing measures, (with the long drawn out tension between the D above – reminiscent of the ‘Aino’ theme – and B below), as ‘the grandest celebration of C major there ever was.’

Work composed: 2nd March, 1924 **World premiere:** 24th March, 1924 in Stockholm

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (1st & 2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings

April L. Racana / Music Specialist at Nishimachi International School where she has taught since 1992. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (BS/Piano Pedagogy) and her graduate studies at San Francisco State University (MA/Music), as well as a post-graduate fellowship at Northwestern University, and the Japan Studies Program at International Christian University.

Next Subscription Concerts in March

March 7, Wed 19:00 at Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall

The 116th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

March 9, Fri 19:00 at Suntory Hall

The 904th Suntory Subscription Concert

March 11, Sun 15:00 at Bunkamura Orchard Hall

The 905th Orchard Hall Subscription Concert

Conductor: Andrea Battistoni
(the Chief Conductor of the TPO)

Piano: **Makoto Ozone***

Drums: **Clarence Penn***

Electric Bass: **Robert Kubiszyn***



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Gulda: Concerto for Myself *
Rachmaninov: Symphony No.2

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