

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

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Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra
in D minor, Op. 47

Jean Sibelius was considered by many to be the national hero of Finland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. 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, the latter of which were often based on the Kalevala, the Finnish folk epic. Perhaps the most nationalistic work of all is his *Finlandia*, which was composed in 1899 just a few years before writing his first two symphonies. It was at this time that Finland was once again taking a strong stand for its independence from Russia's rule, so the work became a rallying cry for Finns and an expression of their strong patriotism. The *Concerto for Violin*, his only work of this genre, was composed after he had written his first two symphonies and also contains many nationalistic nuances.

When Sibelius traveled to Berlin in 1902, he met the violin virtuoso, Willy Burmester, and perhaps was inspired at that time to try his hand at a virtuosic piece in his honor. Sibelius, a violinist in his own right, began working on the violin concerto in 1903 with Burmester's support and encouragement. Originally, the work was to be premiered by Burmester in March of 1904 but, apparently out of financial necessity, Sibelius pushed the premiere up by a month, directing the Helsinki Orchestra himself. The premiere was not successful however, since the dedicatee was unavailable, and the alternate soloist, Viktor Novacek, who was then

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professor of violin at Helsinki Musical Academy, apparently was not able to cope with the technical demands of the work.

Not only the performance, but the work itself, was criticized strongly by the respected Helsinki critic Karl Flodin:

“...his [Novacek’s] playing offered a mass of joyless things. From time to time there were terrible sounds and it was impossible to fathom the composer’s meaning, so great was the cacophony....the new Violin Concerto will not form a link in the chain of genuinely significant modern creations in this artistic form...; ...the concerto is, to be honest, boring, something which could not hitherto be said of a composition by Jean Sibelius.”

Sibelius took the criticisms to heart and worked diligently to revise the concerto. And although Burmester was eager to perform the work in its new form, Sibelius’ publisher apparently had another violinist, Karl Halir in mind, who performed the revision in October of 1905 with Richard Strauss conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. The reviews of this performance were less than warm as well. However, in spite of this, the concerto has since become well-loved by violinists and audiences alike, and is now renowned as the most recorded violin concerto from the 20th century.

Work composed: 1903 **World premiere:** first version: February 8, 1904 in Helsinki conducted by the composer with Victor Novacek as the soloist / revised version: October 19, 1905 in Berlin conducted by Richard Strauss with Karel Halir as the soloist

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings, solo violin

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)
Symphony No. 9 in E minor Op. 95,
“From the New World”

Dvořák as a composer is perhaps most renowned for his Ninth Symphony, often dubbed the ‘New World Symphony’. Yet he was capable of composing not only symphonies, but in virtually any genre, including opera, symphonic poems, concert overtures, dances and marches, and concertos and chamber music, as well as works for piano and voice. Many of these works were written as a result of commissions, which led one of his publishers, Simrock, to comment that Dvořák could ‘pull melodies out of his sleeve.’

In spite of this reputation, Dvořák took great pride in working out every idea to its fullest, studying the master composers who preceded him in-depth and setting a high standard for himself:

“To have a fine idea is nothing special. The idea comes of itself, and if it is fine and great, then that is not because of the person who has it. But to develop the idea well and make something great of it, that is the hardest part – that is art!”

For a number of years, many people did not even realize Dvořák had composed any symphonies prior to his last five, as his earlier works remained unpublished until much later. But each of his symphonies displays the developments and explorations of a composer going through various stages as an artist.

Dvořák is also renowned as one of the top composers of the nationalistic movement from Czechoslovakia. However, it was perhaps most through Brahms’ interest in his music (who adjudicated the Austrian State Stipendium to which Dvořák had entered fifteen compositions) that he first achieved international attention. In 1892, Dvořák accepted the invitation of Mrs. Jeannette Thurber, and became director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York. She had requested that he write an

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opera based on *Hiawatha*, and although this never came to fruition, it is said that parts of the Ninth Symphony include musical references to his “projected composition (based) on (Longfellow’s) *The Song of Hiawatha*.”

The first movement begins with a slow introduction, leading into the horns’ announcement of a more rhythmic theme, which foretells the dramatic expression found throughout the work. Some have suggested that with the composer’s interest in spirituals, perhaps his exposure to various melodies of that genre were an inspiration, as one may hear a brief reference to “Swing Low Sweet Chariot”. The *Largo*, well-known among audiences, is said by Dvořák to have been suggested by the Indian “burial in the forest” in *Hiawatha*.

Another scene from *Hiawatha* is said to have inspired the third movement, that of the “festival in the forest” where Pau-Puk-Keewis dances. And the final movement, besides introducing its own strong motto theme, includes a blending and review of the main themes of the previous movements, for which Dvořák has sometimes been criticized. But no matter where his creative influence originated, in his own words, this symphony brings “impressions and greetings from the New World...”, and as such, “...the influence of America can be felt by anyone who has ‘a nose.’”

Work composed: 1893 **World premiere:** December 16, 1893 at Carnegie Hall in New York

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English Horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, cymbals), strings

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