

## Panel Two (2:00): Sibelius Controversies (Opening Remarks)

In a recent article about a month ago in The New York Times [15 Nov 97], Karl E. Meyer wrote about the ebb and flow of writers' and artists' reputations on a sort of "cultural stock market." The issue was this: in certain periods, for sometimes inexplicable reasons, certain artists' cultural value seems high (a sound investment for writers, critics, and scholars—not to mention for the public purchasing access to their work); at other times, an once-valued artist's or composer's value seems to plummet in later decades, although that value can rise again in a later period of history.

As all of us know, the cultural stock market for twentieth-century composers has been both volatile and heatedly contested. At the center of all these twentieth-century controversies are a few key words with highly charged connotations—rallying cries and banners flown for competitive artistic positions in the market of cultural exchange: among the "hot buttons," for example, is the elusive concept of "modernism." (To categorize a composer as "modern," for instance, is to set up that composer for official approval.) Other terms in play—usually taken as positives—are "innovation" or "shock," "system-building," "authenticity," and socially-grounded "resistance" to ever-expanding marketplace values. At least from around 1920 through 1950, Sibelius's music was at the center of the struggle, especially because it was finding so much favor among British and American audiences. Sibelius was one of the most frequently programmed composers of the 1930s, which meant,

of course, that he was also displacing more aggressively “dissonant” composition from the limited space available on symphonic programs.

That success triggered bitter controversy. Strong, sometimes preposterous statements were made both pro and con, and the Sibelius debate was one of the most prominent features of the musical life of the highly politicized 1930s and 1940s. At times, certain aspects of this acrimonious debate—on both sides--now strike us as both overdone and occasionally distasteful in some of their cultural implications. For some ardent supporters of the 1930s, for example—with Cecil Gray, Constant Lambert, and Olin Downes leading the charge—Sibelius was sometimes cast as the clean, nordic hero who was saving art music from decadence—and single-handedly carrying on the grand tradition of the symphony. (That some of this was cast in implicitly ethnic terms in those politically charged times could not have been more unfortunate for Sibelius’s later reputation.)

On the other hand, Sibelius’s opponents in the 1930s and thereafter were partisan advocates for musical “modernism”—for an emphatic break with the romantic sentiments of the past, for liberated dissonance and complexity, for new compositional systems, for neoclassical irony, and so on. They were often lobbyists either for the Second Viennese School and serialism or for Stravinskian or Coplandesque neoclassicism. This camp—which eventually won the day after the Second World War—sometimes displayed a puritanical or moralistic tinge in their heated rejection of Sibelius and the Sibelians.

For better or worse, the opponents—Theodor W. Adorno, Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, Paul Henry Lang, René Leibowitz, and others—managed to attach their political “spin” to Sibelius’s career and music, and the result was a significant slump in Sibelius’s popularity and regard in the 1950s and thereafter. At least within the academic world,

Sibelius became a largely forgotten or marginalized figure. But the slump was also felt in the concert halls: The First and Second Symphonies and the Violin Concerto continued to hold their own, but the later works, especially, have had a harder time of it.

The main question for our panel today is: how do we view this whole “modernist/’anti-modernist” question today? Sibelius seems to be experiencing a comeback among concert audiences and compact-disc collectors—even among scholars--and it may be that we are all called to re-evaluate his career as a composer. Was he really an anti-modernist? Or was he some sort of “closet modernist?” Or don’t either of those terms matter much in these postmodern decades?

Before pursuing this issue with the panel, though, let me cite five basic charges that have been perennially levelled against Sibelius by those who regarded him as the enemy—or, as René Leibowitz put it in a polemical pamphlet in 1955, as “le plus mauvais compositeur du monde.” Let me lay out the case for the prosecution, as it were—for the “spin” that, at least in academic and avant-garde circles, became generally accepted from the 1950s through the 1980s.

Here are the charges, one by one.

**First charge:** Sibelius was a tired holdover from the attitudes and aesthetics of the late nineteenth century. The heyday for that sort of nationalism was long past in our century, especially after the First World War. His ultra-serious, non-ironized idealization of Kalevala mythology now seems old-fashioned or unsophisticated—easily heard as a Finnish recycling of the aesthetics of the Ring and its mythic world. True, this may have appealed to Finnish culture at a time when it needed it (as a political protest against the Russians in a struggle for

independence), but surely today we can't expect other cultures to take this latter-day mythology business very seriously.

**Second charge:** In the crucial “heroic years” of twentieth-century musical modernism, about 1907-1914, Sibelius did not respond to changing times and changing conceptions of music, when “history” demanded it (in the context of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and others). Instead of welcoming the emancipation of the dissonance, he withdrew into older styles—as a musical reactionary. Hence “real” history” passed him by, and as a consequence Sibelius’s works (especially the later ones, the ones after 1912) fly the banner of anti-modernism, whether or not Sibelius consciously intended them to do so. For those who have wished to support the causes of modernism and contemporary music, Sibelius has proven to be unsavory—or even embarrassing--company to keep.

**Third charge:** Late Sibelius’s self-identification not only with his own ethnic roots but also with nature and nature mysticism—his claim of seeking to uncover powerful “pagan” forces in nature (forces stronger than civilization and modern “progress”)--also seemed ominous, especially in the European fascist years, with the negative flourishing of the doctrines of what Adorno called “blood and soil,” and so on. Further, Sibelius’s own life was marked by his retreat to the forest villa of Ainola, outside of Järvenpää—so the charge goes. And in that retreat we see his fundamental phobia of the modern: his flight from the urban. Finland’s relationship with Germany in the Second World War doubtless also had its role to play in subsequent Sibelius reception.

**Fourth charge:** Sibelius's musical practices fail the test of compositional excellence. This was a favorite charge of Adorno's. One famous remark, for example, was this: "If Sibelius is good, then the standards of musical quality that return perennially from Bach to Schoenberg--such as the abundance of associations, articulation, unity in diversity, variety in unity--are invalid." Or again, "[In Sibelius] any completely unmalleable and trivial sequence of notes becomes set up as a theme, mostly not even harmonized, rather played in unison with pedal points and sustained harmonies . . . in order to avoid a logical chordal progression." (Similarly, Virgil Thomson described Sibelius's Second Symphony as "vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond description.")

**Fifth and final charge:** Sibelius's music is not a music of appropriate "resistance" to a troublingly self-replicating "official" culture and the all-debasing marketplace of art music. But it did resist the claims of the dissonant new music (as in the Fourth Symphony's "protest"—Sibelius's own discomfort with the New Music was well known and publicized by his proponents). As such, it appeals only to a deceived or gullible public eager to hold onto past values long after they have elapsed in reality. In sum, Sibelius's music is all too comfortable with the much-criticized "culture industry." Adorno, for example, compared the marketing of Sibelius to the marketing of an automobile.

Well, those are the charges—and pretty heated stuff they are; At this point, I'd like to turn to Alex Ross and ask for his reaction and if he has anything to add to this rather grim litany of criticism. Is there a defense appropriate to the 1990s? [Etc.]

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I shall start the discussion by turning to Alex Ross and

Robert Layton and asking if they have anything to add--and what their reaction in general is to these charges. Are these criticisms "fair"--in the sense of being perennially relevant to any discussion of Sibelius--or are they ideological ploys that now seem outdated to us at the end of the century? Is Sibelius's reputation today really caught up in questions of this sort? (In the unlikely [?] case that we all say "not any more," then the question shifts to why it ever was.)

In the "cultural stock market" of reputation, does it currently seem as though Sibelius's hour might be coming around again? If Sibelius's reputation does indeed experience a rise, is it clear that Schoenberg's or Stravinsky's has to go down (as implied in the polemics of the 1930s and 1940s), and/or vice versa? If the answer is "no," does this mean that in the 1990s everything simply lapses into a bland, all-accepting pluralism? What has happened to the great "modernist" questions of the past century?