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## Music and Nature in Sibelius's Fifth Symphony

Good afternoon and welcome to Lincoln Center. We have a wonderful concert this afternoon—by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra. And included on the concert is Sibelius's Fifth Symphony. Certainly in the past decades this symphony has become a kind of elemental statement or emblem of Finnish culture. (I'm sure that it has powerful and personal resonances with the musicians on stage this afternoon—something more than just a piece to perform.) Sibelius composed it some 88 years ago—in 1915—than revised it twice over the next four years. Today it stands as by far the sturdiest monument—the triumphalist monument of affirmation—that is the primary gateway to Sibelius's late style. In it, Sibelius was entering a special world of music, nature, and, as it happens, a kind of nature-mysticism. Most of us are probably familiar with how this final version of the Fifth Symphony starts:

**TAPE: Fifth Symphony, 1919 version (Levine, Berlin): opening 45 seconds – Track 5, 0:00-0:45 [fade-out]**

This is the 1919 version—the only version that Sibelius ever authorized to be published, and the version that's always performed (as it will be this afternoon). When he composed the first version of this music, four years earlier, in 1915, Sibelius was 50 years old. He composed it, in fact, for a fiftieth-birthday gala celebration planned for him in Helsinki, and that's where it was first performed. But in 1915—with Europe now locked in a brutal World War—circumstances around him were changing rapidly—and not always for the better. Above all, it was his view of music and his own career that were being decisively transformed. He was now moving in the direction of extreme introversion. The biggest change in Sibelius's musical attitude had occurred three or four years earlier, around 1911 and 1912. These were the watershed years for Sibelius's career and especially for his own self-image. (Today we'd probably think of it as a mid-life crisis.) By this time larger Europe had grown uninterested in his music—or puzzled by it. His hopes of becoming a major success in Germany, Austria, or France were fading fast. (England and American were beginning to embrace him, but only by miscasting him as a traditionalist.) Sibelius was now becoming eclipsed by

a generation of more radical composers—not only Debussy and Ravel but also (and especially) Stravinsky and Schoenberg—with whose music, pursuit of dissonances, and general way of feeling he had little sympathy. Even the tonal symphony itself, as a genre—the genre on which Sibelius had placed so many hopes for his own career—seemed to many high modernists to be outplayed, outdated. The “symphony” was now, some said, a relic from the past.

So in 1912, in the middle of self-doubt and depression, Sibelius had made a decision to cut loose from the world of compositional fashion—to pull out, to withdraw more completely into his own thought. “Let’s let the world go its own way,” he wrote. “[Let’s not join in any race.] Let’s leave the competition to the others. But let’s grasp our art with a tremendous grip.” Disillusioned, he would now pursue not fashion but (as he put it) the “solitary path” that he “must take.” It is at this time, around and after World War I, that Sibelius’s music—the late style—became deeper, more concentrated, more private. The results were five masterpieces in the decade from 1914 to 1924: the final three symphonies (the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh); and two tone poems *The Oceanides* and *Tapiola*.

What is this Fifth Symphony all about? By way of an answer, I’d like to look at two fundamental ideas regarding the Fifth: First, Music conceived as intuition, not as traditional structure; and second, Music that seeks to be nothing less than a mystical revelation of nature’s essences. Let’s take up each idea in turn.

The first, again, is Sibelius’s new conception that music should be composed intuitively.....rather than by seeking to follow or comment upon traditional practices. By the mid-1910s, Sibelius had come to regard an individual musical idea—a short musical fragment, perhaps, or a set of harmonies—as an outside object with a will of its own. A musical idea was not a neutral thing but a charged particle that wanted to grow in certain directions if only the composer would let it. A particle like this one, which is the first thing that we hear in the original, 1915 version of the symphony (only recently recovered from individual parts and made available)—a tiny fragment consisting of a held chord and a little three-note melodic figure, a step and a leap [SING] ....then the whole re-sounded a step lower....and the entire idea scored only for woodwinds. These are the first sounds of the 1915 version.

**TAPE:** Fifth Symphony, opening, 1915 version (Vänskä, Lahti Symphony) (very short!–13 seconds – Track 1, 0:00-0:13

This is the initial musical droplet, the charged particle, the germinal idea for the opening of the Fifth. Now once a promising musical idea was set into play, Sibelius's job as a composer (or so he believed) was not to apply compositional force to the idea so that it was finally molded into a standard form. No: instead the composer should listen deeply to that idea, ponder it, intuit where the seed itself wanted to grow, how it wanted to expand and proceed. And this task was to be approached with all due reverence and care. It was something like a meditation on sound itself. For example, we read this vow in his diary from May 1912—a now-famous quotation—"I intend to let the musical thoughts and their development determine their own form in my soul." In subsequent years Sibelius would add that he wanted his own pieces to grow by moment-to-moment transformations, as spontaneously and self-assuredly, as naturally, as frost-patterns on a January windowpane, crystal-by-crystal—producing expanded shapes that were unforeseeable in advance, yet close-knit and coherent from tiny point to tiny point. The result was what I have called "content-based forms," unique forms generated from within.

It's an interesting exercise to think about. If we heard only that elementary particle [SING], where would we think it wanted to go on its own terms? According to Sibelius, as a composer, we should become something of a creative vessel within which the elemental idea could grow, branch out in transforming patterns. The opening of the Fifth is a perfect illustration of this—the crystal-idea revisited again and again, rocking back and forth, expanding outward, creating new sound-patterns in front of our ears. One instant seems spontaneously to generate the next, then the next, then the next, changing and growing over time. Before long the accumulative moments thicken to a critical mass and suddenly new ideas are triggered, shaken loose—like the wonderful deep and sudden swell of the horns about a minute and a half into this, immediately followed by the shock of the accented entrance of the strings—their first entrance, after some ninety seconds or so of pure woodwind-sound. So here's how Sibelius thought that that first musical particle wanted to expand. Again, this is the early, little-known 1915 version—the version first presented to a Helsinki audience and only pieced together and recorded fairly recently (some of you will notice quite a few differences from the familiar, final version!):

**TAPE: Fifth Symphony: 1915 opening (Vänskä, Lahti) (around two minutes) – Track 1, 0:00-1:53**

Pure late Sibelius—each moment gives rise to the next. Very soon after completing this 1915 version and rehearsing and conducting its premiere, Sibelius began revising the symphony radically. What had been a four-movement work was turned into a three-movement one by taking the original first

and second movements and fusing them together with a new, powerful bridge passage. And by the time of the final, 1919 version—the one always performed today—he had decided to precede the crystal-idea of the opening [SING] with a two-bar preface in the horns—a corridor of passage taking us from our world into the world of the symphony. Here’s the way the work now opened in 1919—with that two-bar horn preface:

**TAPE: Fifth Symphony (Levine, Berlin): 1919 opening – Track 5, 0:00-0:52.**

In the new first movement from 1919 (the one that had originally been two movements), the most impressive moment, surely, is that great and sudden swell upward, connecting the original, slow-moving first movement to the original second, the faster-tempo scherzo—a gear-shifting passage from the 1916 and 1919 revisions that almost seems literally to lift us out of our seats. (Here is that passage, about halfway into the final, 1919 version of the first movement: we’ll begin with what was originally near the end of the “slow” first movement in 1915, and our exit a minute later will be several bars into the faster scherzo—the original second movement in 1915. In between is the great revision of the new bridge—a powerful upsurge of the elementary particle-idea, led by the trumpets)

**TAPE: Fifth Symphony (Levine, Berlin): 1919 version, “bridge,” ca. 2 ½ minutes – Track 5, 5:55 through end of Track 5 and into Track 6, 0:22.**

And of course now we’re midway through the final version’s first movement—some six or seven minutes into it—moving much faster than when we began. This moment, in fact, initiates a larger shift of gears, a process of acceleration that also underpins the entire movement. The first movement is now gaining in tempo. It had started in utter stasis—in non-motion, with that horn-call—and it will now get faster and faster, finally ending in a flurry of rapid activity...so fast that it eventually self-extinguishes in manic energy, as if the frenzy of sound itself is burnt up in a white heat. (Thus the whole first movement enacts, by staged degrees, a larger process of tempo-change—from very slow to very fast.)

We’re now ready to turn to the second major issue in this symphony. Beyond the purely musical process—this “profound logic” of motivic interconnection, as Sibelius called it (his “tremendous grip”)—this music seeks to embody something more. In his personal life, Sibelius had withdrawn almost completely to his pre-modern rustic cottage in Finland, the cottage that he called

“Ainola,” nestled in the Järvenpää forest and isolated from the whirl of city life in Helsinki. Here he and his family were surrounded only by towering, resinous pines, by cold lakes, by Northern plants and wildlife. “Here at Ainola,” he would remark, “this stillness speaks.” Sibelius’s goal was now to unite the radicalized musical principle of particle-growth with the untouched forest’s elemental rawness and wonder. Orchestral sound was to be brought forth in a way that could suggest its alignment with the spontaneity of nature’s cries, rustles, splashes, and storms. The act of composition became a kind of pantheistic musical mysticism. As he put it, composing a symphony was like “wrestling with God.”

Sibelius rarely let us know much about which facets of nature-meditation corresponded with which musical passages that he was composing. He published his later symphonies (5, 6, and 7) as “absolute music” without such explanations. But his sketches, diaries, and letters—now made available to scholars—give us clues about what kinds of private nature-images Sibelius had in mind for much of this music. For instance, from remarks in his sketches one may infer that the Sixth Symphony is a winter-sketch: “the spirit of the pine-tree and the wind.” On the other hand, the Seventh Symphony may be a contemplation of the vastness and mystery of the night-sky, the moon, the stars. But what about the Fifth Symphony? Is there a tacit nature-connection here? There does appear to be—and it seems to be a musical vision of a solitary and magic forest, charged with inner spiritual energy.

As it turns out, much music in the first two movements of the Fifth recalls passages from Sibelius’s 1908 incidental music—composed seven years earlier—to Strindberg’s fairy-tale play, Swanwhite. Swanwhite (1908) and the Fifth Symphony (1915-1919) often occupy similar sound-worlds. At times it is almost as if in the Fifth, Sibelius were returning to the same central musical ideas that he had written in 1908 and allowing them to grow in different directions—and with far weightier implications. This may have something to do with the content of Strindberg’s play, which must have continued to impress Sibelius after 1908. Strindberg’s Swanwhite had staged a Cinderella/Sleeping-Beauty-like fairy tale of princes, princesses, wicked stepmothers, and eventual marriages, but the key element, surely, was the forest backdrop. In the play Strindberg’s central image was that of the fairy-tale forest as a “magic place”—unlike the ordinary modern world, a place of core-meaning, teeming with fantasy animals, fantasy music, and other supernatural things. Most important among the fantasy-animals were the swans, which pervaded both the magic-forest and the play: Strindberg’s Princess herself was named “Swanwhite”—the title of the play—and her benevolent mother was called the “Swan-Mother,” an angelic force that makes enchanted appearances by flying through the air.

References to the forest-fantasy magic of the 1908 Swanwhite incidental music seem to be everywhere in the 1915-1919 Fifth Symphony. In the Fifth, it seems that music itself—pressed into the service of the elevated genre of the symphony—music itself was to become the forest-like “magic place.” Here’s an example. In the 1908 Swanwhite music, toward the end of Act 2 the Princess Swanwhite’s magic horn-call had blessed her marriage bed. We’ll recognize the three-note motive of this forest-marriage blessing, because Sibelius also invoked as the opening motive—what we’ve been listening to as our elemental particle—of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony—a rising second followed by a rising fifth ([SING]. Here’s how it had appeared in Swanwhite, the marriage-bed blessing, heard right at the very opening of this excerpt in the French horn....like a three-note “ritual” signal that is also an introduction to the main theme:

**TAPE:** Sibelius, Swanwhite, No. 10 [Marriage Blessing], horn, Bb-C-G (30”) (Vänskä) – Track 12, 0:00-0:33.

In the Fifth (as we’ve heard several times) Sibelius would take this motive, place it into a different key, and open that symphony with, in effect, the sprouting of this Swanwhite motive in the woodwinds. Here—at some layer of compositional planning—Sibelius must have imagined that the oscillating wind-cries conjured up a pastoral vision with forest connotations, a “magic-forest” meditation animated especially by the presence of magic swans. And when Sibelius added the horn-call preface, that corridor that we heard earlier in the 1919 version of the Fifth, he only made the forest-allusions clearer. Traditionally the sound of the French horn had long served as a musical entrance-way to represented forests or elemental places, whether magic or not, in the Romantic tradition at least from Weber’s *Der Freischütz* and *Oberon* onward, through the music of Brahms, Wagner, Mahler and others.

Once we get past this first movement of the Fifth and into the second, we find that the second movement’s pizzicatos and light flutes seem also to be evoking the Swanwhite atmosphere and themes from 1908. In the 1908 music, one of the Swan-Mother’s means of bestowing graces on her daughter had been by playing a magic harp. Throughout the incidental music Sibelius had represented this harp with string pizzicatos—sometimes alternating with gentle, triple-time flutes, as in this passage from Swanwhite, Act 3.

**TAPE:** Sibelius, Swanwhite, No. 11 [“The Harp”] (Vänskä) (35”) – Track 13, 0:21-0:56.

This Swanwhite music seems to be explicitly re-invoked in the second movement of the Fifth Symphony. And if this is the case, once again, here in the second movement, we would have another sonic allusion to magic-music and the animated, magic forest—to the fairy tale that somehow, in its naiveté, tells the truth. Here's a characteristic moment from the Fifth's second movement.

**TAPE: Sibelius, Fifth Symphony, second movement, excerpt near opening (Levine, Berlin) (55") – Track 7, 0:11-1:08.**

Most famously, though, Sibelius's "private" swan-connotations (remember, none of this was made public to any of his audiences—he'd be very surprised that we're talking about it here) recur as the climactic vision of the finale of the Fifth, its third and last movement. I refer now to one of the most celebrated and unforgettable passages of music that Sibelius ever wrote, the majestic second theme of the Fifth Symphony's finale:

**TAPE: Sibelius, Fifth Symphony, finale, Swan Hymn, first rotation (1' 20") (Levine, Berlin) – Track 8, 1:07-2:28.**

This finale-theme—or a variant of it—was the among the first ideas that Sibelius had sketched for the symphony in 1914 and 1915. We can say even more: The sketches suggest that this theme—including its cresting and ultimate dissolution at the end of the movement—was the core idea of the entire work and that he composed the earlier movements of the Fifth Symphony to grow into it. In other words, all that crystal-by-crystal expansion, all those transformations of the opening particles, through the first movement, then through the second, had a goal that they were seeking—an end-point that they were striving to attain. That goal is this finale theme, the culmination-point of the whole three-movement process. Now if we prefer, we could of course understand this theme in only an "absolute-music" sense—as a product of "pure and abstract music"—exemplifying the outcome of a satisfying musical logic on its own terms. And yet this theme, too, did have "private" nature-connotations for Sibelius—ones involving swans and other majestic migrating birds seen high above, through the canopy of the pine-forest.

How do we know this? The key piece of information comes from an entry in Sibelius's diary from April 1915, a season of winter-thaw and fast-approaching spring, and a time when he was still in the planning stages for the Fifth Symphony. In that diary, written in his rustic forest-cottage, he dashed down a version of this finale-theme and surrounded it with ecstatic words. I quote from the diary:

Today at ten to eleven I saw sixteen swans. One of my greatest experiences! Lord God, that beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into the solar haze like a gleaming silver ribbon. Their call the same woodwind type as that of cranes, but without tremolo. . . . A low-pitched refrain reminiscent of a small child crying. Nature mysticism and life's Angst! The Fifth Symphony's finale theme

[and here Sibelius wrote the version that would appear near the very end of the finale:]

**TAPE: Sibelius, Fifth Symphony, finale, Swan Hymn, near end (37")**  
**(Levine, Berlin) – Track 8, 6:01-6:38.**

Legato in the trumpets! . . . That this should have happened to me, who have so long been the outsider. Have thus been in the sanctuary, today, 21 April 1915.

The implication is clear: At least privately, Sibelius was thinking of the vast “swinging” of the theme—its back and forthness, even surely in its first appearances—as connected with his own sense of the spiritual radiance of the noble, migrating swans, for which the unpopulated late-winter forest was a “sanctuary.” As the diaries reveal, for Sibelius they served as a divine affirmation or announcement of spring and returning life, a life-force streaming from their huge, widespread wings viewed from the distance. Three days later (on the 24th of April 1915), Sibelius was still ecstatic about the experience: “The swans are always in my thoughts and give splendor to [my] life. [It's] strange to learn that nothing in the whole world affects me—nothing in art, literature, or music—in the same way as do these swans and cranes and wild geese. Their voices and being. Apropos of [my] symphonies. To me they are confessions of faith from the different periods of my life.”

So the central image of the Fifth-Symphony's finale-theme concerns the majestic flight of the huge birds in the thaw of springtime—especially the swans—as a symbol of the life-impulse of cyclical nature itself. This suggestion was confirmed a year and a half later in a letter from Sibelius's friend Axel Carpelan to the composer on the 15th of December 1916, following the only performance of the second version of the symphony. Here Carpelan singled out for praise that finale theme, calling it “that Swan Hymn beyond compare.” Surely the term Swan Hymn could have come only from Sibelius himself.

“Swan Hymn..... ..” The primal concept behind this image is a palpable resistance (the weight of the animal, the friction of the air) overcome by an exhilarating, airy buoyancy—coupled



with a sense of the spiritual importance of this grand and mighty motion through wind: for Sibelius it was the musical symbol of the swans, with muscular wings pushing gracefully against the rushing winds and serving as a sign of life's renewal in spring.

Let's listen to this passage again, this time beginning with the preceding music of the finale as well. In this two-and-a-half minutes we'll experience a phased set of intensifications. First, at the opening: the musical creation of the air—the background medium within which the swans may appear—a bustling, a fluttering, a tremolo rushing of wind... growing in intensity (via multiple musical entrances). After about a minute of this airy preparation—self-replicating, instant-to-instant—we come to the musical materialization of the swans and what can only be called their aerodynamic lift-off.

In purely musical terms, there is something else quite marvelous that is happening in all of this. The symphonic convention was to assign the two themes of a finale—here, the air and the swans—to two different, contrasting keys. But here the second-theme swans take off in the original key, E-flat major: in that sense the entire first theme is a kind of prolonged E-flat preparation or upbeat for the swans' E-flat appearance. The real revelation, however, occurs mid-flight, about forty seconds later: with the swans musically aloft and soaring in the original E-flat major, we suddenly experience the epiphany, the grand and sudden (and long-delayed) shift of tonality from the ever-intensifying E-flat to a glorious C major (as if the shell of E-flat had finally burst open to disclose a higher reality). Let's listen to the whole experience: about two-and-a-half minutes of music:

**TAPE: Sibelius, Fifth Symphony, finale, from beginning - - - opening 2' 30" (Levine, Berlin) – Track 8, 0:00-2:28.**

We would be wrong, I think, to regard music like this as naive pictorialism (a simple world in which music equals swan and wind, and there is nothing more to be said). Beyond mere extramusical representation, Sibelius sought in his later works to capture something with larger claims—to call forth in “spontaneous sound” (as he called it) the Being of Nature itself. Behind it all was the aim of dissolving the modern conventions of rational control and the Western religious traditions in order to bring us in touch with these elemental and archetypal forces once again. This was a kind of spiritual, neo-pagan animism—the concept of reawakening the long-sleeping, hidden gods of nature from pre-Christian times, a characteristic “primitivist” concern of certain strains of European artists and intellectuals in the early twentieth century—Yeats, Jung, Heidegger, and several others. For Sibelius, aligning his music in the finale with the concept of migrating swans in flight

was ultimately a spiritual deed. The whole symphony, along with its purely musical meaning, was a process of moment-to-moment growth leading up to this epiphany in the finale—and specifically embodied in the symphony in sound. (From this perspective, sound itself is the epiphany—finally hearing the inner materiality and heft of symphonic sound as an elemental force.)

In retrospect, we can realize that hints and fragments of the finale’s Swan Theme had been pushing here and there, embryonically, in the preceding first and second movements. The main musical task of the middle movement of the Fifth, for instance, is to generate and nurture the Swan Hymn of the finale. (In fact, that Swan Hymn first appears as a hidden bass-line in the slow movement—in other words, the Swan Hymn is a kind of implied bass that comes to be more and more fully realized throughout the second movement until it is ready to stand “on its own” in the finale.) In short, the point of the entire symphony—from the magic-forest first movement through the “magic harp” of the second—is to prepare for the grandest disclosure of all: the Swan Hymn lifting off, airborne, in the finale: “Nature mysticism and life’s Angst,” as Sibelius put it in 1915.

Finally—and in conclusion—in the finale, this expressive deepening or spiritual essence is reinforced in many ways—but perhaps especially by the bass line—which some listeners might well overlook. For underneath the melody of the Swan hymn, supporting it in the double-basses below, is nothing other than the same Swan Hymn played three times as slowly [SING]. (In musical-technical terms this is called a canon in augmentation). Let’s hear this just one more time....only now focus your attention on the basses:

**TAPE: Sibelius, Fifth Symphony, finale, Swan Hymn (Levine, Berlin) (1’ 20”) – Track 8, 1: 07- 2: 28.**

The musical image at this point is not one only of the graceful beating of mighty wings against rushing wind. Rather, the Swan Hymn is underpinned by itself in slow motion. What we hear underneath is a huge set of spiritual arms, as it were, embracing and sustaining the swan wing-cycles above: wheels within wheels—for Sibelius, a vision of the oneness of the seasonal cycle and the spiritual renewal that it brings.

Such interpretive considerations are not unique to the Fifth Symphony. Similar intentions, “Nature Mysticism and Life’s Angst,” the revelatory “spontaneity of sound,” and so on, are the bedrock concerns of most of Sibelius’s interrelated late works—calling forth the underpinning presence (call it what you will) that he believed was concealed in the core of Nature. On this afternoon’s concert, then, we have not merely a grand and famous symphony from the past century, but something more. Perhaps not for us, but for Sibelius, it was a confession of faith.