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Sibelius: Symphony No. 2

Welcome to Lincoln Center, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this afternoon's concert with Osmo Vänskä and the Lahti Symphony from Finland. This concert has two familiar pieces by Sibelius on it: the extraordinary tone poem from 1906, *Pohjola's Daughter* (based on a tale from the Finnish national saga, the *Kalevala*) and, even more well-known, the Second Symphony from just a few years earlier. Even though we probably all know the Second Symphony quite well, I hope in the next few minutes to put that work into a larger context—and perhaps to say a few things about it that might be helpful as reminders as we go into today's concert.

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 1, 0:00—0:45]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Levine, Berlin: Track 3, 0:00-0:41, fade-out]

Sibelius composed the Second Symphony throughout much of 1901 and continued to revise the work in the early months of 1902. These were crucial years for the thirty-six-year-old composer's career. By 1902 Sibelius was just beginning a personal drive to break into the art-music market of larger Europe, beginning to make a splash as a new, exotic—even a “barbaric”—composer from the Far North. This was a daring and risky enterprise in those days of Strauss, Mahler, and the just-emerging Debussy. Before 1900 Sibelius had been only a young, local composer of promise. A reckless, often stunningly irresponsible radical and *bon vivant*, he had spent much of the 1890s literally “inventing” a modern musical style that sought to embody the essence of the Finnish language and character. It strove above all to capture the stern spirit of the quasi-ancient Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*—the poetic definer of Finnish “difference” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And all of it was politicized. The *Kalevala* epic-poem itself—in its rough tone and archaic Finnish—had come to be regarded as a battle-cry of ethnic and linguistic self-assertion against both the prevailing Swedish-language hegemony among

Finland's educated classes and the authoritarianism of an increasingly harsh Russian rule over Finland.

In the 1890s Sibelius had been establishing a reputation for himself within Finland with primitivist works that still remained unpolished...and unpublished: the *Kullervo* Symphony, the tone poem *En saga*, the four Lemminkäinen *Legends*, and so on. In 1898, though, through a stroke of luck, he had managed to land a modest contract with the Leipzig publisher, Breitkopf & Härtel, and some of his lighter music was beginning to trickle into Germany. Perhaps most important, in 1900, one year before he began work on the Second Symphony, the Helsinki Philharmonic had gone on a prolonged European tour, visiting several capitals precisely in order to showcase their young national composer of promise. The orchestra—and Sibelius himself—toured with the composer's newest works, all featuring him at his most “exotic”: revised versions of *The Swan of Tuonela* and *Lemminkäinen's Return*, along with two brand-new works: the “abstract” but *Kalevala*-flavored First Symphony—and, of course, the sure-fire *Finlandia*. With an unmistakably forceful modern-primitiveness, a new voice was trying to break into larger Europe's institution of art music:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 2, 0:00—0:43]

[original: *Finlandia*: Levine, Berlin, (“awaken!”): Track 1, 3:03—3:42, fade-out]

These years, 1898-1902, were the years when Sibelius's music was the most obviously explicit with regard to Finnish politics. As a nominal “autonomous grand duchy” of Russia, Finland was gnashing its teeth under the regimen of newly oppressive Russian laws, dreaming of eventual liberation. The message of *Finlandia* from 1899 is obvious enough, but the ethnic political charge was also very much there in the First Symphony and his other works of that time. The politics of Finnish resistance constituted the main cultural framework within which such pieces were heard. This applies also to Sibelius's Second Symphony from 1901-02. Even while advancing more toward the idea of the “abstract” symphony than had the First Symphony, its very style, content, and structure left it wide-open to a specifically Finnish political interpretation.

Let's back up a bit and get a larger perspective on all this. Young Sibelius was finally confronting the genre of the symphony, far and away the most socially prestigious musical form of his time. But essential main problem was that the symphony, as a genre, had been an unequivocally Austro-Germanic tradition from Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven onward—the symphony, with its stricter formal demands than the freer, more “radical” post-Lisztian symphonic poem or tone poem. For an ethnic “outsider” like Sibelius (or like Borodin, Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, and others)—for an ethnic outsider, the only type of symphony fully available was a nationalistically accented symphony laced generously with “exotic” local-color musical identifiers. And this enterprise was risky. A new content of nationalistic, cultural “arrival” from “outside” the tradition was being intermixed into a prestigious and tradition-bound, urban Austro-Germanic genre. And the Germanic critics were always waiting, always eager to point out perceived flaws, the departures from “approved” symphonic practices. This was the world of “great music,” yes. But these were also shark-infested waters.

Additionally, within any nationalistic symphony, certain connotations were unavoidable. Even if such a work did not seek to illustrate a verbalized program, its tacit implication would still be the musical representation of the self-realization of a folk, the coming-of-age of a remote-language people once dismissed as backward by the cultural centers of elite Western Europe. The multimovement process could not help but imply an ethnic emigration into Western-European urban modernity. Even though the stylistically “mixed” product was in a sense “absolute music,” it also, inevitably, carried a strong political declaration: “Here we are! We have arrived!”

Now, as it happens, the multimovement symphony itself, as a pre-established genre, was perfectly suited to convey such an ideological message. One of the standard “plots” of the nineteenth-century symphony was the “victory-through-struggle” narrative, *per aspera ad astra*, moving from oppression, frustration, or suffering in the initial movements to heroic overcoming, emancipation, and celebration in the final movement. The musical archetypes here were Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies—desperately minor-mode symphonies that turn to major-mode victory celebrations in their finales. This basic narrative had been reworked by dozens of composers throughout the nineteenth century. By the time that the nationalist composers came to the symphony, they found this *preformatted* symphonic “plot”

of emancipation to be tailor-made for their own purposes. Literal program or not, Sibelius's Second Symphony is just such a work. It lays out a musical plot of ethnicity and underserved injustice that finally works its way into emancipation and victory.

Sibelius, though, does retell this musical story in a somewhat unusual way. The idea of “oppression”—which in the preformatted symphony-template normally appears right away, in a minor-mode first movement (as with Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth)—does not surface here until the second movement, the slow movement. The first movement of Sibelius's Second is given over instead to a quasi-pastoral, rustic, positive vision, in a sunny D major, of a simple and rural folk—a sketch of native goodness, or of a musical goodness, if you prefer. The first movement shows us a primal innocence that is soon to be placed at risk. Most of us are familiar with this D-major opening, an introductory, rising, rhythmic impulse followed by a chattering theme in the woodwinds, which repeatedly lengthens into a darker shadow in the horns:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 3, 0:00—0:45]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 3, 0:00-0:42---Levine, opening of the first mvmt.]

As has been often remarked, the expositional themes of the first movement of Sibelius's Second—the essential layout of thematic material at the opening—is unusually marked by emphatic discontinuities. It's as if we are hearing a succession of incomplete and sharply differing thematic fragments—breaks, shifts, changes of mind. This jaggedness from idea to idea—similar in effect to abrupt cinematic shifts from one camera-shot to another—stands in stark opposition to the Austro-Germanic “rule” or “ideal” of smooth and logical continuity from moment to moment, from theme to theme. This is one of the aspects of this symphony that sounded so “primitivistic” or “exotic” to its first audiences. In this first movement, it's as if no musical idea is allowed to develop or expand before it is broken off and shifted to something else. So what this opening music seems like is a series of strongly colored, folklike, tableau “chunks,” the sheer strangeness of which contributes to a purposeful, rough-cut ungainliness, an avoidance of nuance and smooth connection in favor of a set of disconnected parts.

Let's listen to a bit more of the first-movement exposition with this in mind. Notice that even the first theme in the woodwinds, a chattering, folklike theme [SING], constantly loses steam and has to be re-started two more times before it is left totally behind. Each time, after each of the three single phrases, its tail-end grows a slower shadow, darkening the idea in the horns—breaking off the just-started forward motion and deepening into a sterner sense of northern Nature—trailing off each phrase into something riper, more reflective. After the third “shadow,” the chattering pastoral theme is abandoned altogether. In a gap of silence, the camera-scene shifts....a panning over to a completely different idea. . . . Well...you'll see: let's continue onward with another minute or so of this music:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 4, 0:00—0:55]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 1, 0:40—1:35, fade-out—not themes but “sketches”]

What we have, then, is a first movement of bold, self-assertive, but unharnessed ideas—raw material, if you will. This unusual procedure suggests a musical and social potential that is not yet realized, not yet fully coordinated. It can suggest an undeveloped self-identity and national promise, lying dormant, waiting there, like different strata of a super-rich ore, to be mined and developed into something more grand, more self-aware.

However we construe it, this kind of positive musical depiction comes to an end with the second movement, the slow movement. Here the bright lights of D major are snuffed out to the parallel minor, the grim “prison-house” of D minor (for its first audiences easily interpretable as an image of the tyrannical Russian oppression of Finland); the quick tempo of the first movement is now choked down to an Andante; the textures darken, become more ominous. Here in the second movement, even melody itself seems extinguished for the disturbingly arid first minute or so—a seemingly interminable set of stalking pizzicatos in the basses and cellos, before the D-minor primary theme proper groans out, *lugubre*, in the bassoons.

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 5, 0:00—0:48]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 4—0:45—1:30, fade-out---Levine, slow mvmt. theme]

(Curiously, we now know that in early 1901, while in Italy, Sibelius first sketched the stalking pizzicatos and bassoon melody here for what may have been originally planned as a different piece—a representation of the Don Juan story: the icy steps of the avenging statue and Don Juan’s death song.) Within the emancipation-plot context of the whole symphony, though, here is where the enslavement finally arrives. The pastoral spirit of the first movement, that is, existed only to be enchained here in the second. Equally telling is the second theme of the slow movement, some three four minutes into it. In the face of the death-song and the crisis it provokes, this utterly contrasting theme—after a moment of silence (another panning of the musical camera)—swells forth as a musical prayer for deliverance. (In the sketches, Sibelius labeled it as “Christus.”) We hear it initially in the hopeful major-mode, F-sharp major—six sharps!—in the exposition:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 6, 0:00—0:41]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 4, 3:50-4:27, fade-out....Levine]

But several minutes later, in its reappearance in the recapitulation, this theme returns tragically, tellingly defeated and collapsed into the minor mode, the tonic D minor, a representation of utter hopelessness. The once-consolatory, major-mode “Christus” prayer is now bleak, now minor-mode, now draped in dark harmonic grief and pierced with an outcry of pain in the brass:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 7, 0:00—0:38]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 4, 8:26—9:02, fade-out]

As Sibelius’s close associate, the conductor Robert Kajanus, noted in 1902 in his proposed program for the symphony (albeit one objected to by Sibelius for being too literal-minded), the third movement, the B-flat-major scherzo, jolts the implied narrative suddenly forward, with whirlwind motion, suggesting a renewed quickening of action, perhaps the stirring of an inner will to wrest free of the conditions of the second movement—a sudden jolt, a quickening of the political pulse. Whether or not Sibelius intended it so concretely, this is easily interpretable, as Kajanus described it in 1902, as “frenetic

preparation. Everyone piles his hay on the haystack,” wrote Kajanus. “All fibres are strained and every second seems to last an hour.”

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 8, 0:00—0:46]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 5, 0:00-0:45, fade-out]

And of course, the finale—true to the archetypal plot—brings about the fulfillment of this preparation by restoring D major, the original tonic key, in the familiar, now-confident, grand striding toward victory. Following the whirlwind struggles of the scherzo, the main point is that in the finale the first movement’s discontinuities are now unmistakably coordinated into smoother continuities. This is apparent right away, in the opening theme of the fourth movement, the great launch into the finale’s primary-theme of victory-to-come. The once-disconnected parts of the first movement now join together and stride boldly forward. The orchestral texture is now full and rich, now consistent, and one feels a grand, unstoppable current (mostly in the basses) propelling us forward from one measure to the next, from one phrase to the next. Put another way, the material of the first movement—the national potential—has now been coordinated into an image of final self-realization in the present. Moreover, this moment is also coordinated with another metaphorical implication, that of the “outsider” composer, young Sibelius in 1902 just starting his larger career, now beginning the last chapter, the final lap or victory-lap, of his successfully completed Second Symphony. Here the “outsider” Sibelius is claiming to have conquered the traditionally Austro-Germanic genre of the symphony. Once again, “Here we are! We have arrived!”

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 9, 0:00—0:42]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 6, start at 0:44—1:22, fade-out....Levine]

Taken together, the four movements of Sibelius’s Second appropriate a familiar, even shopworn musical template and colorize it vividly to suggest a musical narrative that—if desired—could be readily sutured by listeners in the early 1900s onto Finland’s current political situation and growing self-awareness as a culture. The first movement, rustic pastoral innocence but great potential; the second, the dark night of oppression; the third, the whispered but intense kindling of internal resistance; and the finale, the fulfillment of

promise: full coordination and emancipation into a fully legitimized and autonomous social self.

But even with the emancipation-music of the finale’s opening, the ultimate goal of the four-movement symphonic process is not yet reached. That goal is represented only by the most curious and most characteristic music of the symphony—the point toward which the entire work strives: the finale’s second theme.

As Sibelius surely knew, one frequent feature of a nationalistic symphony was the proclamation of an enhanced ethnicity or “otherness” in the finale. This feature often meant a confident, ringing simplicity, an embrace of the most emphatically “folklike” theme of the symphony as its culmination. As such a symphony grows into victory and self-assertion, that is, the music also grows into a firmer arrival of the cultural identity out of which it springs—as if the nationalistic symphony as a whole were a multistaged process through which, at the end, an “outsider” people could more fully recognize their own sense of difference and selfhood. Curiously, folklike material of this sort—especially in Russian symphonic works—is often circular and repetitive: a short idea is repeated over and over again (not developed but merely repeated). Think of all those passages in Tchaikovsky’s finales—the last movements of the Second Symphony, the Fourth Symphony, the Violin Concerto, and so on—that take a short, folklike idea and repeat it over and over again.

What is implied in this procedure is, at the end of a linear journey of symphonic forward-motion, the attainment of a circular stasis, the cycling around a central part of one’s ethnic center, a circling around a core ethnic self. Such folklike circularities—since they always involve folk-identifying themes—suggest an ultimate arrival around a centered sense of being. In Sibelius’s Second Symphony this characteristic moment occurs not with the first but with the haunting second theme of the finale. Here it is in the exposition, where it appears in F-sharp minor and is sounded three times, tipping to F-sharp major at the end.

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 10, 0:00—0:57]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 6, 2:31-3:25....fade-out]

Now, Sibelius obviously intended this passage, this theme, to be the most decisive “Finnish stamp” or “Finnish thumbprint” in the symphony. It did nothing less than set the

seal on the whole work. It stood for the emergence of a full Finnish identity by returning to the core, the wellsprings of the ethnic self. Most obviously, the music involves a back-and-forth rocking between two phrases, a kind of statement-and-response. As his Finnish audiences would have known, this kind of melody and this kind of repetitive statement-response pattern conjures up the idea of the rural or “primitive” folk-recitation of line-after-line of the Finnish epic poem, the *Kalevala*—a marker of Finnish identity in those years. In one style of this rural recitation, two seated singers hold hands: Singer No. 1 recites one line to a minor-mode formula, rocking one way; Singer 2 recites the paired second line to a response-formula, rocking the other way. And it’s repeated over and over again, dozens, hundreds of times, moving through the ancient poetry in a kind of incantatory trance. Sometimes two singers are not needed: the back-and-forth effect can be accomplished by a single Singer-Reciter. Here’s a recorded example from the Finnish back-country from the early twentieth century of the sort of “raw” repetitive music that Sibelius was referring to: recitation of the *Kalevala* (in this field-recording, though, with only one singer):

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 11, 0:00—0:57]

[original: NEW CD—“Perinne Lipas,” Track 2, 0:00-0:53, fade-out... *Kalevala* recitation]

In a University of Helsinki lecture from 1896, Sibelius had claimed that one central identifier of the Finnish character consisted of these world-weary, circular *Kalevala* repetitions, back-and-forth, over and over again, endlessly, in the minor mode. The second theme of the Second Symphony’s finale is an idealized, orchestral re-creation of this ethos. On the one hand, it certainly seems static, even hypnotic, in its repetitiveness. On the other hand, the larger cultural point was this: in the finale, now striding toward emancipation, we now have the insight to peer into the core of our ethnic selves, the very essences that have created us to be who we are. In this repetitive theme we might also sense a determined knitting-together of a new national and political identity, a reaching-down into what was believed to be an archetypal self.

But there’s even more to this passage. The process of knitting-together has an emancipatory outcome: the brooding minor mode of these circular repetitions, at the end, is suddenly liberated into the major—a sign of release and breakthrough. In the exposition, you

recall, the back-and-forth Kalevala theme was heard only three times, in F-sharp minor. But when the theme returns later in the recapitulation, and in the tonic key of D—the moment of truth, where the chips are down—it is heard (almost disturbingly) no fewer than eight times (!). Only in its eighth cycle does the brooding D minor turn into the bright-victory illumination of D major. Eight cycles: extraordinary in its persistence—and all building in a determined crescendo. And the way that the eightfold cycle is introduced! A musical curtain suddenly parts. The doors to the past—to the Finnish essence—are again thrown open. And the peasantlike *Kalevala*-reciters suddenly appear again, their ancient rocking back-and-forth returns, hypnotically.... But paradoxically, this sinking-back into the pure past is simultaneously a symbol of present-day arrival—into the symphonic arena—and at the same time it embodies a crescendo into the future. This passage is a complex of the past, present, and future. This is the moment of the “revelation,” and it forms nothing less the climactic moment of the four-movement symphony as a whole:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 12, 0:00—2:18]

[original: LONGER EXCERPT: Sibelius 2nd, Track 6, 8:35-10:50....Recap S, 8 times]

We are near the end of the finale: with that inflection to D major, the victory of the whole symphony is finally attained. And there follows, appropriately enough, as in the first time around, an earnest prayer of thanks, floating heavenward. And after that, of course, the great appended Coda. This is a separate Hymn of Thanks after-the-fact: the formal processes of the piece are already over. What Sibelius has given us here is a coda of public celebration, for the achievement metaphorically enacted, and now-completed, in the preceding four-movement process. This is a triumphant coda, emphasizing especially what we call “plagal” chord-motion, “Amen” cadences—“So be it!”—ratifying and blessing all that has preceded it. As we close with this music, please notice also that the typical ascending third of the finale-theme [SING] is now overshoot in sheer exuberance, extended into a fourth [SING]—a sign of the final breaking-out of the motivic shackles that governed this symphony’s early movements—and of “the outsider” Sibelius’s breaking-in to the exalted prestige-world of the Austro-Germanic urban symphony.

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 13, 0:00—1:12]

[original: Sibelius 2nd, Track 6, 11:20-12:30...CODA---end of the piece]

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