5:50 6:18
29 minutes

James Hepokoski
Carnegie Hall 12 March 2008

Sibelius, Symphony No. 7; Strauss, *Four Last Songs*

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome ~~once again~~ to Carnegie Hall and a wonderful program of twentieth-century works—Sibelius, Strauss, Barber, and Shostakovich. What I'd like to do here in the brief time that we have is to say a few words about the first half of tonight's concert, on which we shall be listening to some of the last musical utterances of two great twentieth-century masters, both of whom believed that history itself—and certainly music history—had overtaken them at the time of the compositions in question: Jean Sibelius (the Seventh Symphony from 1924) and Richard Strauss (the *Four Last Songs* from 1948, the year before his death). A perfect coupling: Together, they make an extraordinary and moving pairing as "golden-glow" masterpieces of what is typically regarded, sometimes even venerated, as an artist's "late style," often a deeply reflective summing-up of a career—and of a musical and historical age—now at its end.

Strauss's songs are of course the paradigm here, and yet they are something of a special and very moving case, stemming from the late 1940s, that is, on our *broken* side of the political and cultural devastation of Germany—and Europe—after the period of the Third Reich. The *Last Songs*, in this sense, are "last songs" not only of the very old Richard Strauss himself—written from a now-destroyed Germany still amidst the war rubble—but also of a kind of music, of a humanistic way of thinking about art and culture that had long been struck down—but now, in a moving farewell, rises up to reflect on all that once was but is no more—and cannot ever be again. These four orchestral songs are meditations not only on the politically tainted Strauss's imminent sense of weariness, physical failings, and death but also on postwar European culture's as well—as, famously, in the last lines of the last song, "Im Abendrot," "How tired we are from wandering"---->"Could this perhaps be death?" asks the Eichendorff text—in that typically creamy-golden, Strauss-Adagio-style of exquisite slowness. "Could this…perhaps….be death?"

MUSIC—BURNED CD, TRACK 1: Strauss, "Im Abendrot," (Line--"Ist dies etwa der Tod?" Felicity Lott, Neeme Jarvi, Scottish National orch, track 16, 4:42-5:42 *(on the word, "death," the famous quotation from Death and Transfiguration of over a half-century earlier—the transfiguration motive)*

Strauss's super-ripe final works, especially these from the post-Hitler years, with those deeply reflective, "late-style" slow tempos—and listened to with this kind of conflicted historical awareness—can speak to us directly in ways that hardly require explanation.

On the other hand, Sibelius and his "Symphony No. 7 in One Movement" (as he called it), from two decades earlier, premiering in 1924 after many years of compositional struggle, are different matters entirely—for in order to become immersed in this compelling and wonderful piece, one needs to know some things about the composer, and what he was trying to do in his late-style works. The familiar earlier works of Jean Sibelius—*Finlandia* and the first two symphonies from around 1900, the famous Violin Concerto of 1903-04, and so on—offer us a more optimistic, younger Sibelius—Sibelius in a career-building mode, a composer hoping to establish and solidify a European image—that of an unsmiling and "barbaric" Northern personality. In that earlier Sibelius, we see a creative personality turned outward, turned toward public performance, and toward a bid for continued international success. But by the time of the Seventh Symphony, some two decades later, everything had changed in his own perception of himself, his career, and his music.

Like the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies that immediately preceded it, the 1924 Seventh reflects the post-World-War-I Sibelius at the shattered end of his career, in a mood of self-questioning, loneliness, and resignation. This later Sibelius is a creative personality turned inward, into a brooding isolation, into a *private* musical meditation...and without too many hopes that in the raucous world of the 1920s the Seventh would ever attract large numbers of potential listeners. Here, far from the glitz and glamour and the usual concert-pose, we find instead an invitation to contemplation...... In the Seventh we encounter early on the clasp of a hand inviting us to share a meditation of sustained eloquence, as if to say: "Come with me, in stillness and silence into a world of wonder; put aside the business of the world and think with me on these things.....reflect, reflect deeply on each moment, feel the impress of each chord, each disclosure of sound....."

MUSIC, TRACK 2 (ca. 1'10"): of Seventh (Neeme Järvi, Gothenburg Symhony Orchestra, 2005, track 5, 3:49—4:33)—that reflective, slow, "late-style" pondering.....

The biggest change in Sibelius's musical attitude—from extroversion to extreme introversion—occurred around 1911 and 1912, the watershed years for Sibelius's career and self-image. In those years, in the middle of self-doubt and depression, he decided to cut loose from the world of compositional fashion and to withdraw more completely into his own thought. "Let's let the world go its own way," he wrote, and time and again one reads the vow repeated in his personal diary: He would now clench his teeth and dig in his heels.....pursuing all alone (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 more private and, to some, more cryptic. 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*. Tonight we're concerned with the Seventh Symphony—a single, uninterrupted 25-minute span that itself seems almost timeless—as if clock-time were utterly irrelevant—a single, unbroken movement, a world of transforming experience and change in successive phases covering a huge range of emotional color.

What is this Seventh Symphony all about? How might we best approach this musical introversion and sustained meditation? By way of an answer, I'd like to mention two fundamental ideas regarding the Seventh: 1) Music conceived as intuition, not as traditional structure; 2) 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 late Sibelius's conception that music should be composed intuitively......rather than by slavishly following traditional practice. Late Sibelius had come to regard an individual musical idea, a seed idea for a work—a short theme, perhaps, or a set of harmonies—as a living entity with a will of its own. Once a promising musical idea had occurred to him, his task as a composer was not to force the idea into a standard form but rather to intuit where the material itself wanted to go, how it wanted to expand and proceed. 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 transformation—as spontaneously and self-assuredly, as naturally, as frost-patterns on a February windowpane, crystal-by-crystal—producing shapes that were unforeseeable in

advance, yet close-knit and coherent from tiny point to point. One idea spontaneously generates another, then another, then another and another over time. Consider the opening minute-and-a-half of the Seventh from this perspective: and as we listen try to sense each moment giving birth to the next moment in free space. "Let these ideas grow as they will grow, without forcing them…" Appropriately enough, the very first sounds that we hear are rising scales—suggesting something of a *generative spawning ground,* an initial burgeoning matrix or "beginning" impulse for growth, and these "generative" rising scales will recur several times in the piece as rebirths, new seedbeds of generation.

> **MUSIC, CD, TRACK 3 [STARTS 0:06 IN]**: Opening of the Seventh (0:00-1:20)
> *spawning scales (42")—as if rising from "some deep place of consciousness"—to flutes (crystalline growth)—clar.—fl—clar—to more accumulating and growth, moment-to-moment. Etc.*

This is our first fundamental idea: Music conveying the intuitive "rightness" of the free growth of an initial idea in open space—growth in phased cycles of birth, decay, and rebirth. The second feature of this music deals with even larger matters, with what the whole 25-minute musical process was meant to represent or embody——for the music's clear intention was to capture the spiritual essences dwelling within the northern Finnish forests. By this point in his personal life, Sibelius had withdrawn almost completely to his pre-modern rustic cottage, which he called "Ainola," nestled in the Järvenpää forest and completely 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 his music with the untouched forest's elemental rawness and wonder. Musical sound itself—in a kind of *mystical pantheism*—was to be brought into alignment with the spontaneity of nature's cries, rustles, splashes, and storms. The act of composition became a spiritual exercise. He now called his symphonies private "confessions of faith,"—a "wrestling with God."

Sibelius of course published his later symphonies as "absolute music" without any explicit nature-associations. But his sketches, diaries, and letters 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 letters one may infer that the Fifth Symphony is a forest-sketch, one teeming with animal life…and especially with the graceful migrating swans that take flight in the finale. Similarly, other evidence suggests that the Sixth Symphony may be a contemplation of the dark, winter season and snow-laden forests of an unpeopled Finland.

But what about the Seventh? Is there a hidden nature-connection here? Sibelius left no hints of one in the printed score, but from only a few years earlier we find musical sketches related to the three cornerstone-arrivals of the noble, C-major "trombone theme" that lies at the heart of the Seventh—the grand, culminating theme that we first hear some six minutes into the work—we'll just hear a small excerpt as a reminder here:

MUSIC (ca. 30''), TRACK 4, trombone theme 1, track 5, 5:59—6:30

And at least in the sketches Sibelius associated earlier versions of this idea with images from nature, labeling it in one spot, "Where the Stars Dwell" (*Tähtölä*), and in another "Feminine Moon Spirit" ("*Kuutar*"). These labels suggest that somewhere in the background Sibelius might have been conceiving what turned out to be the Seventh Symphony as a musical parallel to the vastness and mystery of the night-sky, the moon, the eternity of the stars. And yet at the same time, this was a purely musical evocation that also invites us to experience the mystery of symphonic sound— the physical palpability of basic chords, blended sonorities, consonance and dissonance—the spiritual-exercise of the sheer contemplation of "musical sound." Bringing the two together, the symphony sought to fuse raw musical "sound" with elemental nature, as if the essential Being of both were called forth in an ever-transforming, cyclical set of sonic revelations.

To grasp the Seventh, then, is to attend to the three—perhaps four—central appearances of this trombone theme—which, again, function as anchoring cornerstones inside the symphony, fixed points of arrival within the ongoing transformational flux of the entire piece. And as we think about this, we find that that each separated appearance of the expansive theme projects a different mood, a different implication. Like the night-sky, while still "the same" in some sense, it also changes with time, as time passes. This means that what we experience is also "the history of a theme"—the trombone-theme—as if Sibelius were also cycling the theme through differing "life-stages," from the healthy and radiant confidence of an initial maturity, to a dark,

inverse image of threat and menace, and finally, toward the very end, to an "old-age" farewell to a once-grand idea that now approaches death and extinction. Let's pursue this by hearing some examples of what I mean.

We first hear the C-major trombone-theme some six minutes into the work—and the entire first six minutes of the piece have been a growing toward this moment, a slow process of accumulation toward this theme. In other words, when this theme is first sounded, it is experienced as a sonic revelation, an attainment ("Here it is!"), and every aspect of it is grand and positive. And the attainment is not only that of a theme, but also of a key—and the "purity" of "C major" to boot!—for the trombone theme emerges precisely at the point of the first strong grasping-onto C major with a magnificent swell into a strong, now-inevitable cadence—suggesting, at last, the arrival of a point of revelatory clearing, a disclosure of the very essence of "C major sound." Let's hear that big crescendo-push into the big C-major cadence, which immediately releases the first appearance of the trombone-theme itself.

MUSIC (1'10''), TRACK 5: track 5, 5:29—6:47—chordal anacrusis and trombone theme 1
(transforming soon into a scherzo-like section of contrast)

While this first statement of the theme is noble and spaciously affirmative, the opposite is true of its second appearance, some five or six minutes later—at the near-exact midpoint of the 25-minute work. By now the initial C major has decayed into a cold and menacing C minor—as if twisting storm-winds had set in, chilling the surroundings with threats of aging. Here we experience the dark-underside version of the trombone theme—and yet, under such different surroundings, a threatening and bleak C minor, the stars are still eternal, still there, experienced now under very different life-conditions. Here's the second version of the trombone-theme, its "cold," minor-mode entrance, our second anchor-point within the flux.

MUSIC (1'25'), TRACK 6: track 6 1:05—1:42—chilling triplet-windings and trombone-theme 2
(transforming soon, through a cyclical, generative rebeginning—the rising scales— into yet another a scherzo-like section of contrast)

So we have the sturdy and spacious first version of the trombone-theme, some six minutes in, in C major—and now the second, chilled, darker version in C Minor, twelve minutes in. The third appearance—and the last complete appearance—takes us another seven minutes or so into the work, and now getting near its end (twenty minutes into the eventual twenty-five), very much winding down in a late-autumnal glow. As if reviewing where we have been, we hear once again the spawning rising-scale idea—the generative matrix. And it leads at once to a C-major "recovery" of the trombone-theme, sounded now, though, as a memory, a recall of a once-sturdy and affirmative idea now past its prime—a valedictory summing-up of the experience of the whole work (or, in a sense, of a whole life—that melancholy, "late-style" quality now creeping in more and more explicitly). Here the once-confident C major flowers one last time, in one last embrace of the "grand view," before the inevitable decline and end. And do notice: all around this third version of the trombone-theme one senses the rest of the orchestra suggesting a potential spinning-apart into collapse. Here one's earlier confidence is lost—all is retrospective, wistful. (But again, we start with those spawning-scales—then right into this late-autumnal variant of the theme.)

MUSIC (1'00''), TRACK 7: track 8. 0:42—1:54—spawning scales and C-major trombone theme *(collapsing, now, into exhaustion and decline—a high-strain….until it finally* ***SNAPS)***

And with that fateful "snap," now two or three minutes before the end, everything falls apart into stray fragments—the collapse of a once-flourishing world, of a once-thriving lifespan, into that characteristic late-style sound of decline and regret.

And now, amidst the scattered and floating fragments we hear—one last time!—the opening, only, of the trombone-theme, as a memory-fragment, of something once-splendid that can no longer survive here at the end. This last evocation is valedictory—a farewell to the theme, to the experiences coursed through in this astonishing symphonic work (like the experiences of a life, now at its end)—one last time….a farewell, touched upon and almost as quickly lost,

dissolving into utter resignation and disconnected musical sobs. "This is what it means to be alone; to be, *literally* 'at the end.'"

MUSIC (1'45''), TRACK 8: track 8, 3:04-4:15—fleeting valediction—last trombone reference….

"Late Style" indeed! Along with Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, Sibelius's Seventh Symphony represents its very quintessence—conveying in a mere 25 minutes a whole world view of transformation and change—of intuitively growing crystals of sound—of eternal night-sky and starry-heavens contemplation. Sibelius's one-movement Seventh Symphony is unique in the repertory—nothing else is quite like it—a single poetic statement from spawning birth to resigned death, a "symphonic fantasia," as Sibelius originally considered calling it . . . . . a "late-style" symphony that Sibelius himself—that ultra-severe self-critic, filled with gnawing and debilitating self-doubts—probably never thought would be his own last symphony—but that in fact turned out to be his own perfect statement of valediction, his own perfect farewell, to the genre to which he had contributed so much.

[END]