2888 words

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6 December 1997

Lincoln Center: Introductory Presentation

Welcome to our day of Sibelius at Lincoln Center--our reconsideration of Sibelius and his music. Before we get to the panels, I'd like to start us off with a quick overview of Sibelius's career: a package-tour of sound-snapshots to give us a starting-point and orientation for the day.

Jean Sibelius, 1865 to 1957--a big topic. Sibelius grew up as a Swedish-speaking Finn from the small town of Hämeenlinna, about 70 miles north-northwest of Helsinki. Musically, he was something of a late bloomer: he began violin lessons at the age of fourteen—and started to compose at about the same time. When he was 19 he enrolled in the new Swedish-language Helsinki Music Institute, where he stayed until age 23, until 1889, becoming involved with Helsinki music life, working at the violin, and studying composition.

By his early 20s Sibelius had become a notable talent within Helsinki Music Institute circles. At the time his mainstay was chamber composition: small-scale duets, trios, quartets quintets, suites, and so on—mostly things that in later years he never wished to see published. But of course scholars and performers are ever-curious; In the last twenty years much of this student music—juvenilia—has been resurrected and recorded—chamber music from the time before Sibelius became the Sibelius that we know.

So let's start off our sound-images with a sample of this "pre-Sibelius" Sibelius. Typical of this unpublished music from the Helsinki Music Institute years is the second movement of the so-called "Lovisa" Piano Trio from 1888 (because he composed it in the

seaside Finnish town of Lovisa). Here's Sibelius at age 22—a local talent in the years before more advanced study on the continent proper.

MUSIC: Sibelius, "Lovisa" Piano Trio [1888], opening of second movement (1:10)

There's more than a touch of the Scandinavian drawing-room here, an air of the semi-popular though melancholy solo waltz—straightforward minor-mode melody plus simple accompaniment--elegiac perhaps but hardly profound. There are dozens of pieces of this sort from the 1880s and early 1890s—though a few of the sonata movements are more ambitious.

Once he graduated from the Helsinki Music Institute, the 23-year-old Sibelius was packed off for two more years of study and compositional discipline in larger European capitals: the merely local talent began now to encounter the broader world of music. Crucial years: In 1889-90 he studied academic counterpoint in Berlin with Albert Becker; in 1890-91 he transferred to Vienna and studied composition with Robert Fuchs at the Conservatory and with Karl Goldmark on the side.

Vienna marked the point of Sibelius's artistic transformation, but not in the way that one might have expected. Instead of adopting the standard Viennese "academic classicism" (the style, for example, of Brahms or Goldmark), Sibelius, as a highly-strung, budding "modernist," decided to reject that musical language. Turning decisively toward orchestral composition, he now set out to construct an aesthetic persona of unpolished, elemental bluntness, of "modern primitivism" that would also ride the rising crest of Finnish national consciousness in the 1890s—a broad artistic movement including painting and literature as well.

This self-conscious forging of a modern, individualized style is a complex matter, and I don't want to oversimplify it (we'll be dealing with more of it on the first panel)--there are many different strands in this tapestry. But certainly one important strand was Sibelius's distancing of his music from the orthodox Viennese style.

The best way to perceive this is by way of comparison--say, with Brahms himself. This is the style that he was rejecting:

MUSIC: Brahms, Symphony No. 2 in D [1877], Scherzo, opening (0:55) [Szell]

This is the scherzo of Brahms's Second Symphony, of course, and it is a good example of what scholars refer to as his "linkage" technique—the end of each melodic module sprouts again to become the initial idea of the module that follows it. A central feature here is ongoing change and the linear transformation of an idea. Compare Brahms's sound—in large part defining the Viennese academic style of the time--with this excerpt from the second movement of young Sibelius's Karelia Suite of 1893: it even begins with a melody similar to Brahms's but takes it in very different, and quite repetitive, directions.

MUSIC: Sibelius, Karelia Suite [1893], 2nd mvmt. (2:00) [Järvi]

While Brahms's music stated a melodic idea and led it into immediate diversification (from initial statement to developing difference), Sibelius's Karelia music proceeds from initial statement to restatement and essential sameness—to only slightly varied, reiterations of a fixed sound-object. What's more, it's clear that Sibelius was asking his Finnish audience to hear the

sound-object as a fragment of ethnic "truth," as though he were picking up a piece of his identity and pondering it from all angles.

What Sibelius was beginning to explore in the early 1890s was the sound-world of Finnish-language folk music, and in particular the hypnotic, circular recitation formulas used by folk performers to tell the tales that had been woven into the Finnish folk epic, the Kalevala, Finland's massive epic song of pre-Christian gods and heroes, with such names as Väinämöinen, Lemminkäinen, and Kullervo. In the 1890s the "magic place" where these things were still preserved was the pre-industrial region of Karelia, much of which was located in the southeast corner of Finland (sometimes referred to as "Old Finland"), though other parts of Karelia lay to the east of Finland's borders proper.

In the 1880s and 1890s this Kalevala folk-recitation came to be regarded as the touchstone of Finnish-language ethnic authenticity. Its most telling aspect is the circular repetition of small, minor-mode cells—a continuous recycling of a quasi-fatalistic formula of paired lines [SING]. Carried on at length, the effect is hypnotic, incantatory, minimalistic, shot through with mystical resonances…[SING]…and for the Finns of the 1890s, it was taken as the sonorous mark of their own cultural difference. The earliest archival recordings that we have of these folk singers date from 1905. Here's an excerpt from one of them: this is a folk-recitation of the "Birth of the World" from the Kalevala, recited by a Karelian folk-performer named Iivana Onoila from the town of Suistamo. This was recorded in 1905:

MUSIC: From 1905, Kalevala Recitation (Iivana Onoila): "The Birth of the World" [1:30]

This sense of circularity, sameness, and minor-mode stasis became a central part of the Finnish-nationalist style—the "modern primitivism"--that Sibelius was constructing in the 1890s (in such works as the Kullervo Symphony, En saga, the Karelia music, the Four Legends). What we heard from 1905 was one singer reciting the Kalevala epic, which was common enough, but perhaps the most memorable mode of delivery was to have the line-pairs recited by two male singers, with hands joined, rocking back and forth, ceremonially trancelike and transfixed in their own epic worlds, the first singer providing the fixed statement [SING], the second providing a complementary response [SING]--back and forth, back and forth. Thus arose another archetypal image for Finland in the 1890s--that of the two ancient bards rocking back and forth, alternating line-pairs in an endless circularity.

From time to time in the 1890s and beyond Sibelius dramatized and idealized this image of paired Kalevala-singers (repeated Kalevala-statements and responses). A clear example occurs in the first movement of the First Symphony (1899-1900)--in its secondary theme, about three minutes into the piece. One way of hearing this theme is to interpret it as representing a pilgrimage to pre-modern Karelia--to "Old Finland"--for the 1890s Finn a pilgrimage to the heart of one's essential identity. This secondary theme from the First Symphony unfolds in three phases: first, we hear something a sparkling, wintry journey to the place of magic; second, we stop short with our sudden arrival there and encounter the moment of revelation--the parting of the curtains of time, so to speak, to reveal the two ancient bardic singers in the process of singing their endless complementary recitations (suddenly--in the middle of the second theme--they are there…the flute doubled by clarinet represents the first singer, the oboe the second); in the third phase of the theme, Sibelius presents a pizzicato affirming of the revelation and a gathering acceleration toward the moment of cadential

closure. Let's listen to the three phases--journey, epiphany, cadential response—Sibelius's First Symphony, first movement (1899-1900):

MUSIC: Sibelius, Symphony No. 1 in E Minor [1899], first movement, secondary theme excerpt [length: 1:45……3:45-5:22] Davis, BSO

In the years around 1900 two additional elements were also filtering through all of this. The first was the potentially explosive situation of Finland's dream of independence from Russian rule—leveraged upward by recent Finnish protest to Russian governance and political resistance to the harsh decrees of Russification in the late 1890s. Sibelius gave voice to this proto-revolutionary drive, of course, in such works as Finlandia from 1899, but it was also a clear quasi-heroic subtext in the First and Second Symphonies.

The second factor, especially after 1900, was Sibelius's concern to broaden and deepen his style--to mature, to build both outward and inward from this "modern-primitive" base of the 1890s. After about 1903 we might speak very generally of a split of two general tendencies in the growth of his post-Second-Symphony style and in his drive for a wider, pan-European recognition. We might refer to them as conflicting drives for musical assimilation and for musical separatism--though these two opposites were often blended in unsettling ways.

On the one hand, we have the moderately assimilationist side: in some works Sibelius sought to adapt his neo-primitivist language and mode of thought to some of the standard concert expectations of Europe. Such concerns dominate the Violin Concerto of 1903-1905 and the Third Symphony of 1907. This assimilationist side was particularly concerned with creating what has been referred to as "modern classicism"--a sternly disciplined

anti-sensationalism, a classical tightening and compression of folk-oriented motives, a drive for what he called the "profound logic" of subtle motivic interrelationships.

The opening of the Third Symphony (1907) is a perfect example. In the context of hugely expansive works by Strauss and Mahler, here Sibelius gives us an efficient, pocket-sized exposition, completed in around three minutes--folk-resonant motives presented with the lean tautness of a late-eighteenth-century classical sonata exposition: "modern classicism." Let's listen to the first two minutes of this exposition—the primary and secondary themes:

MUSIC: Sibelius, Symphony No. 3 in C [1907], opening (exposition) (2:00) [Ashkenazy]

On the other hand was the separatist tendency: Sibelius's compulsion to make his musical language even more idiosyncratic, to cultivate and push further its strangeness and difference, as if to spurn the urge toward assimilation. (And indeed, for the most part its effect was to baffle audiences, who were hoping for more Finlandias, more "Valse tristes," more symphonies like the First and the Second.) This separatist line was pursued in the tone poem Night-Ride and Sunrise of 1908, in the string quartet, "Voces intimae" of 1909, and, above all, in the Fourth Symphony of 1911, surely one of Sibelius's most somber, acerbic, and "extreme" utterances. The Fourth was also a reaction to the rapidly changing musical world -- a statement of separation from the aesthetics and world-views of such composers as Stravinsky and Schoenberg: the Fourth was, as he put it, a "protest" against the musical tendencies of his time. Here's a sample of this separatist protest--from the exposition of the first movement, about two minutes into the piece. Notice that the normally fast tempo of first movements has

been shattered here into slow stasis. And in that slow bleakness float isolated fragments with little will or momentum to push forward—until forced to do so by the brass.

MUSIC: Sibelius, Symphony No. 4 in A Minor [1911], first movement, center of exposition) (2:00) [Levine]

After about 1912 it was this separatist side that carried the day. Around 1912 Sibelius decided to cut free from the bureaucratically administered world of musical careerism and to cross the line into a purer, even more uncompromised style built on musical necessity. There were at least four factors in this decision. First, Sibelius became less concerned about his position in the musical marketplace; he accepted the fact that his music would appeal to a more limited sector of the audience, those attuned to his way of experiencing things. Second, he further deepened his style, in more structurally radical, more "intuitive" ways. In particular, he embraced new principles of musical form, freeing his works even more from the outer imprint of orthodox models and devising fantasy-like "content-based forms" grounded in even more intense motivic transformation. Third, he linked his new formal project with his own spiritual world view of Nature Mysticism or archetypal animism. Now largely withdrawn into his rustic forest-reteat, Ainola, outside of Järvenpää, he crafted his music to become a contemplative devotion, striving to draw forth the secrets of nature: water, wind, skies, unpeopled northern forests, seasonal changes, birds and other animals, and so on. Fourth, Sibelius, as a unique and master orchestrator, sought more compelling, more revelatory orchestral texture--and he was particularly concerned with the concept of slow, inexorable textural transformations.

Let's hear a spectacular example of color-transformation in late-style Sibelius. This is an excerpt from the tone poem, The Oceanides, from 1914 (written for a trip to the United States)—a kind of colder, nordic La mer. We'll begin about seven minutes into what has been a sparkling evocation of the northern sea and splashing waves, when suddenly, things begin to darken, the waves grow heavier, and ultimately a storm is unleashed. The gradual darkening and thickening effect produced here is astonishing in terms of the mastery of orchestral color—the growing sense of gathering storm clouds, sea-winds, and looming menace.

MUSIC: Sibelius, The Oceanides [1914], darkening and sea-storm (2:10) [Dorati, track 9, 7:00-9:10]

By the 1920s—after the First World War and Finnish independence--Sibelius's withdrawal into contemplative asceticism, into stubborn musical separatism, and into nature mysticism was virtually complete. In a post-war world that was moving toward Stravinskian neoclassicism and the poignant impudence of the French Les six, toward Schoebergian serialism, toward Hindemith and Kurt Weill-- in short, in an ironic, technologically administered world alien to Sibelius, he carried on his musical quest ever more despairingly throughout the mid-1920s. These are his final works--the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies from 1923 and 1924, the great tone poem Tapiola from 1926--before he found himself unable to produce anything more, before his self-criticism and despair, his retreat and alienation from the outside world became overwhelming.

One side of this late style of the 1920s is the most profound serenity--modal contemplation with the purity of Renaissance composition, a sound of separatism from the

world and its concerns, a retention of the purity of triads--distilled into the cleanest sounds, as if seeking ome essential truth in their resonances. The opening of the Sixth Symphony is the perfect example of this late-style, glowing eloquence: Sibelius called it "pure cold water" offered up in place of the cocktails being offered by other contemporary composers. Was this anti-modernism? Or more a statement of moral asceticism and artistic separatism?

MUSIC: Sibelius, Symphony No. 6 [1923], first movement, opening (1:30) [Ashkenazy]

One side of late Sibelius, then, is this pure-triad contemplation. With it he produced a series of grand farewells, or valedictory meditations--and its eloquence pervades most of the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies and much of the proto-minimalist tone poem Tapiola as well. But from time to time-- most notably in the cold, impersonal, and deeply impressive Tapiola-- Sibelius shows us a darker, more violent side of things. Tapiola, from 1926, was his last major work (one that again seeks to release the animist forces hidden in the northern forests. As a whole, it moves from a quiet, brooding, oscillation, and sway to a tremendous accumulation and discharge of primal energy. Here, at the climax of Tapiola, we find Sibelius revisiting the Oceanides storm with a vengeance--no longer a sea-storm, but the alarming violence of the winds tearing through the pines, culminating finally in the triple-fortissimo calling-forth of the pagan forest god himself, Tapio--the rarely-glimpsed, terrifying being that underlies and animates the natural world.

MUSIC: Sibelius, Tapiola [1926], storm and appearance of Tapio (1:50) [Berglund, track 7, 12:04-14:50]

Following Tapiola—and I, too, am concluding here--Sibelius's separatism, his depression, his mounting self-criticism and alienation from current musical life, seems to have been overwhelming, and he produced no more major works for the next thirty years--the silence from Järvenpää persisted to the point of his death in 1957. There was much talk in the 1930s about an Eighth Symphony, and indeed, he seems, with great effort, to have composed all or most of one by the early 1930s. But in the end he could not bring himself to release it, andhe is said to have destroyed the manuscript in the mid-1940s--burning it in the stove of his villa "Ainola."

But these are all topics that we can revisit in more detail on this morning's panel. For the moment, we'll call an end to our tour of sound-snapshots. We'll take a short breask now, and regroup at 11:00 with the first panel proper. (Thank you for your attention.)