

7-18 minutes of words
about 7 minutes of music

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Sibelius: Sixth Symphony

Tonight's two pieces by ~~Jean~~ Sibelius show us two different faces of the composer, and they stem from two different periods of his life. The earlier work, the famous Violin Concerto of ^{composed betw. 1902-1905} 1903-04, gives us the more optimistic, younger Sibelius in a career-building mode. Now with the First and Second Symphonies and *Finlandia* behind him, Sibelius was hoping to solidify his still-new European image—that of an unsmiling and “barbaric” Northern personality—with a splashy, virtuosic concerto. Here in the concerto we see a careerist side of the earlier Sibelius, a side turned outward, turned toward public performance, toward self-display, and toward continued international success, especially, he hoped, in Germany and Austria. ^{The Violin Concerto is} It's a clear bid for attention:

TAPE: Violin Concerto: opening of finale (Gidon Kremer) (0:06-49; 42 seconds):

note fixed pedal-point... steel girder

The Sixth Symphony from nearly twenty years later—from 1923, in Sibelius's late period—is a totally different matter. It's on this lesser-known piece, the Sixth Symphony, that I would like to focus tonight. The Sixth reflects the post-World-War-I Sibelius at the shattered end of his career, in a mood of self-questioning, loneliness, resignation, and personal withdrawal. Here we see the later Sibelius turned inward, into a brooding isolation, into a *private* musical meditation... and perhaps without too many hopes that in the raucous world of the 1920s the Sixth would 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.....

We encounter at the very outset the clasp of a hand inviting us to share a meditation of sustained eloquence, as if ^{as if Sibelius were saying to us:} to say: “Come with me, in stillness and silence into a ^{realm} world of wonder; put aside the business of the world and think with me on these things.....”

TAPE: opening of Sixth: 35 seconds (Herbert von Karajan, Philharmonia Orchestra, 1956)

Of this ^{most Finnish and idiosyncratic} ~~gentlest~~ of Sibelius's seven symphonies the composer remarked that in a world of 1920s cocktails he was offering the public only "pure cold water." The biggest change in Sibelius's musical attitude, leading from the earlier kind of piece to the later—from extroversion to extreme introversion—occurred just about midway between the Concerto and the Sixth Symphony. It happened around 1911 and 1912. These were the watershed years for Sibelius's career and especially for his own self-image. By this time larger Europe had grown uninterested in his music—or puzzled by it—and he was now becoming eclipsed by a generation of more radical composers—Debussy, Schoenberg, Stravinsky—with whose music and general way of feeling he had little sympathy.

In 1912, in the middle of self-doubt and depression, Sibelius made a decision 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. 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 more private and, to some, far 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 Sixth.

What is this Sixth Symphony all about? How might we best approach this "pure cold water"? By way of an answer, I'd like to mention two fundamental ideas regarding the Sixth: 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 an outside object with a will of its own. Once a promising musical idea had

occurred to him, his job 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. And this task was to be approached with all due reverence and care. 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 February windowpane, crystal-by-crystal—producing shapes that were unforeseeable in advance, yet close-knit and coherent from tiny point to point.

Within the European musical tradition this was a quite new method of composition: instead of the standard shapes of Beethoven and Brahms, a liberated “letting-go,” a willingness to let these initial musical seeds expand on their own—the crystalline multiplication as one idea spontaneously generates another, then another, then another over time. So let’s listen again to the opening of the Sixth from this perspective: moment giving birth to moment in free space, growing with our thoughts: “Come with me, in stillness and silence, into a ^{realm} world of unconstrained wonder . . . And let these ideas grow as they will grow, without forcing them...”

TAPE: Opening of the Sixth, going somewhat further (first 50 seconds)

This is our first fundamental idea: Music as trying to convey the intuitive “rightness” of the free growth of an initial idea in open space.... The second feature of this music deals with even larger matters, with what the whole musical process was meant to represent or embody—for the music’s clear intention was to capture nothing less than the spiritual essences dwelling within the northern Finnish forests. 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 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 rarely let us know which facets of nature-meditation corresponded with which musical passages: he published his later symphonies as "absolute music" without such explanations. 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 ^{diary} 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 grand flight in the finale. On the other hand, other evidence suggests that the Seventh Symphony may be a contemplation of the vastness and mystery of the night-sky, the moon, the stars.

But what about our Sixth Symphony? Is there a hidden nature-connection here? Sibelius left no hints of one in the printed score, but if you visit the Sibelius Archive in Helsinki and look at the sketches for some of its musical ideas, you might find this page from around 1920 and discover that at one point Sibelius gave two of them—two smallish ideas—private nature-labels. **[SKETCH-PAGE]** Here it helps to know how Sibelius composed these things. For the most part, even when sketching over years he jotted down isolated themes, isolated moments. One here... One there... Another over there.....not even certain which ideas would turn up in which completed piece. The act of final composition—years later—was something like assembling the scattered individual ideas into a coherent pattern...having one of them grow into another, and so on. In any event around 1920 he labeled one small idea from this page with a single Finnish word. Above the tiny theme he wrote the word "Talvi"—meaning "Winter." Its eventual home—three years later—would be as a short, focused idea in the first movement of the Sixth Symphony, first heard about a minute and a half into the piece... Here's the kernel of the "Winter" idea—a short scalar ascent in the oboe, answered by a pair of airy flutes.

TAPE: Sixth Symphony, first movement "Talvi" passage (1:19-1:45) (25 seconds)

We may conclude, then, that this Sixth Symphony may be something of a “Winter” Symphony—evoking the ^{absoluteness} ~~purity~~ of winter in the isolated pine forests near Järvenpää. But more than that... What you just heard is not the idea that begins the symphony. It is led into by that crystalline-growth idea we heard earlier. So the overall shape of the first 90 seconds or so of the piece is, first, gently to establish contact with the listener (“Come with me, in stillness and silence; put aside the business of the worldLet these ideas grow as they will grow...”) and slowly to guide your and my ears and mind to the actual object of contemplation—the idea that he once labeled “Winter” (“And this is what we shall dwell on...”)

-- Absolute Winter in the North Woods --
The human world shut down.

TAPE: Sixth Symphony, opening of the first movement (0:00—1:45—to “Talvi”)

For Sibelius, then, the Sixth was a winter landscape symphony... ..a ~~melancholy~~,
^{Absolute} devotional exercise reflecting on winter in the forest—^{in this excerpt} seeking a oneness with still, fallen snow among the pines. ^{in other passages suggesting underlying presences of force, exhilaration, or dark disturbance.} Once we have our basic clue ~~to the musical sketch marked “Winter”~~ it’s easy to suppose—even if we lack specific evidence in the other sketches—that there are similar winter images in the second and third movements. For example, the second movement may suggest slow-shifting drifts of snow or the nearly immobile stillness of the cold itself:

TAPE: Sixth Symphony, second movement, track 2, 0:25-0:50 (25 seconds)

While the more active third movement, the scherzo, might be recognized as a more vigorous winter mood—the driving march of the icy elements, shot through with snow-sparkle. Here the main theme, a few seconds in, is clearly a recasting of the “Winter” idea from the first movement:

TAPE: Sixth Symphony, third movement, track 3, 0:00-0:38 (40 seconds)

So far all of this has been suggested from the single small clue in the sketches for the first movement: the word “Talvi,” “Winter.” But on this sketch page we also come across another theme and another label. **(SKETCH PAGE)** This one is labeled “Hongatar ja tuuli,” “The Spirit of the Pine Tree and the Wind”. This second idea turns up toward the end of the Sixth Symphony—from very close to the center of the fourth and final movement, the finale, about three minutes into the movement—and it lasts only about twenty seconds. This is what it sounds like: “Spirit of the Pine Tree and the Wind”

TAPE: Sixth Symphony, finale, track 4, 2:30-2:51

Now this gets very interesting. As it happens, this musical idea from the last movement was the very first idea that Sibelius ^{had} conceived with regard to the Sixth Symphony. This was a musical idea that Sibelius, over a period of about eight years, returned to, shaping and reshaping it. Over and over the idea resurfaces in his sketch-pages, as if he were struggling “to get it right,” to find the perfect home for it. It was an obsession...a musical idea whose potential power he realized, but one with which he wrestled for years—what, exactly, could he do with this theme? From such “hidden” evidence it seems clear that in the early 1920s Sibelius built the entire Sixth Symphony—all four movements—precisely in order to lead to this climactic musical moment, finally to situate it properly at a grand point capping the entire work. This musical passage ^{we now know} is nothing less than the ^{goal-point toward} keystone around which the entire symphony was constructed: ^{the processes of the symphony seek to generate THIS idea} its goal and purpose...the central forte in the middle of the finale as the moment of full winter-disclosure. Let’s hear it once again—and this time we’ll precede it with its impressive, ^{short} ~~fifteen-second~~ musical lead-in:

TAPE: Sixth Symphony, finale (slightly longer), track 4, 2:16-2:51.

“The spirit of the pine tree and the wind.” The intended image could not be clearer—the power of the wind contending with the sturdy pine. And not merely is the pine bending under the force of the wind, but Sibelius’s words tell us that he wishes to capture the very spirit

of these forces, something elemental and primitive beneath it all. (“Hongatar” is literally a “feminine spirit of the pine,” as if conjuring up an ancient goddess.) “Spirit of the Pine and the Wind”..... But this is also a winter symphony...which means that in this context, these antagonistic spirits—pine and wind—confront each other within the context of primitive and bitter winter in the isolated forest. With these clues we can hear the sweep and shift of this music as analogous to the sweeping winter wind, the pitiless and majestic bending of the towering pines, the massive swaying and shifts of nature itself. Let’s listen this time to the varied ^{repetition} repeat of the finale’s “Pine Tree and Wind” idea—again, with its lead-in passage—and now, in this varied repeat, the music is even more howlingly intense:

TAPE: Sixth Symphony, finale, track 4, 3:09-3:53

This is a musical sweeping and bending that is now on its way to spinning out of control and leading down the road to crisis, wreckage, and eventual decay. Before too long the finale’s music will recede back to the quiet pastoral flavor of the symphony’s opening...which is where the Sixth ends...at the very place where it began...with the persistence of the melancholy, pastoral snows. But all that is what we’ll hear in tonight’s concert.

To conclude, then, very briefly.... This evening we have two very different works by Sibelius. First we have the Violin Concerto from ¹⁹⁰²⁻¹⁹⁰⁵ ~~1903-04~~. This is the younger Sibelius squarely addressing the competitive world of the European artistic marketplace—the flashy public utterance seeking a large audience, the public work aligned with the virtuoso-concerto traditions of Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Wieniawski, and others. And then we come to the lonely Sixth Symphony from 1923—the older Sibelius in retreat and withdrawal; the ^{“Absolute”} ~~Winter Pastoral~~ Symphony of utterly honest, private devotion from one who has given up hope of competing in the marketplace of fashion. Here in the Sixth we have one of Sibelius’s last offerings to the public: not 1920s cocktails, but “pure cold water.” It’s a treat to hear both works—and to hear them together. Let’s go and enjoy the concert.

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